

DON RETSON

Charles Fred Bentley
1914-2008



Long before "climate change" and "sustainable development" became buzzwords, Fred Bentley warned that planet Earth faced perilous times. A former dean at the University of Alberta, a pioneer in the green revolution of agriculture and a humanitarian, Charles Fred Bentley died on April 12. He was 94. "He was very much ahead of the times in his concern for the human condition on planet Earth, the rapidly expanding population and the decreasing availability of essential resources, particularly for food production," says friend and former U of A colleague Jim Robertson. Born in 1914 to Canadian parents in Cambridge, Mass., Dr. Bentley grew up on a small farm near Beaumont.

He attended a one-room school. The family later moved to Edmonton, where at 14 he was sent to work on a road crew to provide services in lieu of taxes for the family farm. During summer breaks at the U of A, Dr. Bentley worked on an economic study of the arid farm region from Hanna to Medicine Hat. Louise Bentley said her father-in-law was "overwhelmed" by the poverty the farmers faced. "This experience," she said, "formed his lifelong belief that government projects to put people on unsuitable land were unfair to the people and a poor use of funds."

From humble beginnings, Dr. Bentley went on to earn international stature. Among his dozens of awards and honours, he was an officer of the Order of Canada, a fellow of the Royal Society and an inductee of the Alberta Order of Excellence and the Alberta Agriculture Hall of Fame. After graduating with an economics and soils degree in 1939, Dr. Bentley took his doctorate in soil science at the University of Minnesota. During his three years in Minnesota, Dr. Bentley met Helen Peterson. They fell in love and were married for 56 years.

Seena Handel said her grandfather encouraged her and other women in the family to pursue education and careers that often took them far from home. "He had the ability to influence those around him to believe in the success of women by believing in it himself," she said. At the U of A, Dr. Bentley quickly moved up the ladder. His 32-year teaching career included a decade as the dean of agriculture from 1958 to 1967. International work in developing countries became an important part of his work. A respected expert in soil science, Dr. Bentley was the first chairman of the board of governors for the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics in Hyderabad, India, and played a major role in its development as one of the world's major international agriculture research centres.

In tribal communities overseas, where the only resources were wooden hoes used by ancestors centuries ago, Dr. Bentley explained the merits of fertilizer and crop rotation. Closer to home, he often criticized governments and prairie farmers for the mismanagement of land. He also hit out at harmful farm practices. "Unless dramatic efforts are made to right the food shortage, or there are massive deaths or the birthrate is substantially lowered, many people face catastrophe," he told *The Journal* in 1990. Dr. Bentley travelled the world helping farmers get the most from their land. He led Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) teams to India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, China and sub-Saharan Africa.

As well as his work as a consultant with government agencies, the United Nations and World Bank, Dr. Bentley served as past president of such organizations as the International Society for Soil Science. A passionate proponent of population control, Dr. Bentley in 1950 earned the nickname "Birth Control" Bentley for cautioning that world population pressure would lead to environmental degradation.

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"To his last breath, Fred was convinced that having a sustainable population size is key to human well-being," his on Ted said. "And we are above that size."

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Written by Don Retson

"Life & Times: Professor sounded alarm over environment while helping farmers"

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