

## Distillery Workers Jack Bentley, carpenter



**Corner Cabinet today**



**Corner Cabinet in Coopers' Room *H Linton***

Carpenter John Arthur (Jack) Bentley joined Gooderham & Worts just after the Second World War and before the corporate offices for the distillery were moved from the [Gooderham "Flatiron" Building](#) at Front & Wellington back to the distillery in 1949. He clearly had a prominent role in reestablishing Head Office in style at the historic distillery after an absence of nearly 60 years.

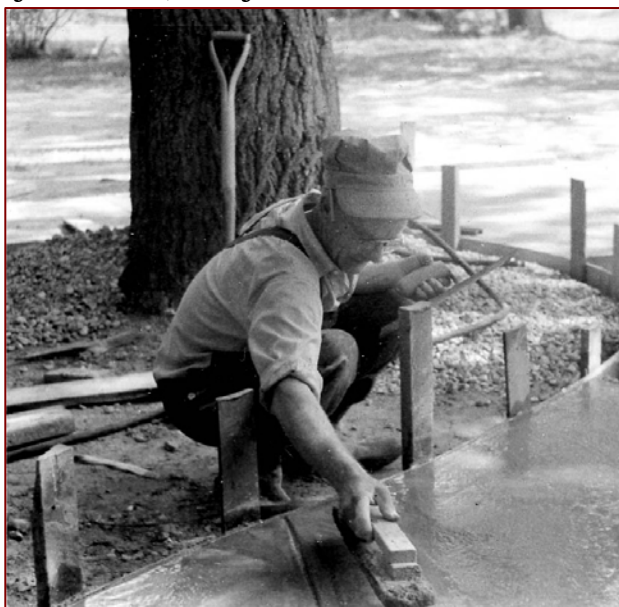
Jack was born in Toronto in August 1906, the sixth of eleven children. His father had a grocery business on north Yonge Street where he sold fruit and vegetables from local farmers in King Township. Jack started school at the age of six, but less than a year later, the family moved into "the bush" north of Cochrane where land was being sold for 50-cents per acre. Clearing the land was tough work, so Jack and his older brothers were kept at home to help. He never returned to school or learned to read and write fluently. Despite that handicap, he lived a rewarding life, becoming a master carpenter, contributing to the war effort, looking after his growing family, maintaining and improving Gooderham & Worts.

At the age of 14, he began working with a carpenter hired to build a sheep pen and shed. This was the beginning of a fifty-year carpentry career that took him all around the province, from the remotest corners to the largest city.

Jack married teacher Evelyn Gallagher at the beginning of the Depression in 1930. During this period he went where the work was. He joined a surveyors' team putting a railway through northern Ontario, returned to Toronto where he helped build the magnificently art deco R.C. Harris Waterworks, and then moved to Palmerston where he lost part of his left thumb while working at a lumber mill.

When the Second World War erupted in September 1939, Jack turned his thoughts to the war effort. His dream of joining the RCAF had been shattered by the mill accident, so he headed for Ajax where carpenters were needed to build a munitions plant and workers' homes. He boarded until he had saved enough money to bring his family down from Timmins and provide a home in a small cottage that he renovated and improved over the coming years.

In 1945, the war ended and carpenters were no longer needed in Ajax. Fortunately, Jack's neighbour, Mr. Brimbecom was head carpenter at Gooderham & Worts in Toronto and recommended him for a job. He started in general maintenance and commuted to Toronto with other distillery workers. "When Mr. Brimbecom gave him a job to do, he just told him what he wanted done and it was done without any



**Jack Bentley in his multi-pocketed coveralls, laying concrete in his leisure time, ca.1956**

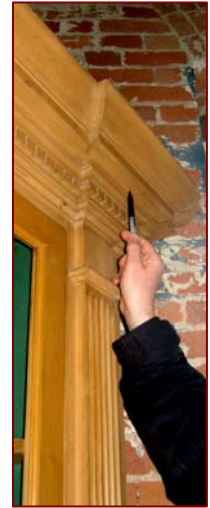
further instruction," according to Jack Bentley's children in a loving biography of their father. Clearly, Jack's initiative and competence were duly noted. When Mr. Brimbecom retired, Jack took over as head carpenter, a job he held until he retired in 1971. "The workers at G&W were like members of an extended family," Helen, Jacqueline and Bob Bentley have observed. "Employees shared in the great camaraderie, often playing jokes on one another," enjoying the annual Christmas party and Loblaw's vouchers, occasionally draining off whisky left in the bottom of the barrels, and generally looking after one another.

Undoubtedly, Jack Bentley's wood-working skills were used for everything from small repairs to major new construction, and were applied all around the site. The only item that can definitely be identified as his work is the lovely, intricate but understated, corner cabinet in Building 32, now the library at Voice Intermediate School. Once used to display G&W bottles, it now displays school items.

Probably created in the early 1950s, Jack's display cabinet features intricate fluting and mouldings, and high-quality hardware. Even the backs of the doors used tiny brass screws, rather than nails, and brass soss hinges that are only found in fine furniture. The cabinet was originally located in the Coopers' Room of the new corporate headquarters, which had complementary wooden wainscoting abutting it. At some point it was moved to its present location.



The neoclassical cabinet was entirely handmade and probably took about a month to craft. Undoubtedly, Jack used his prized Stanley No. 55 combination plane to carve out the flutes (five to a side), shape the mouldings, create the dentils and other elements to the crown. Carpenter James Becker pointed out significant details and noted that each of the five flutes required several passes of the plane to create, and if a mistake was made, the carpenter had to start all over again. Today, such decorative pieces are either manufactured or created with power tools.



**Cutaway for wainscoting**

**Dentils and other details pointed out by fellow-carpenter James Becker**

According to the MacLachlin Woodworking Museum in Kingston, “The Stanley planes were by far the most successful due to their ease of operation and elegance of their design.” They weren’t *that* easy to use, which is why many “mint condition” #55s have ended up in the hands of dealers like Larry Meeker. “Some carpenters loved and understood them, and those show a lot of use. Their use was beyond the scope of some buyers’ abilities and that is when you find them mint in their boxes 50 -100 years later.” But wielded by a master carpenter like Jack Bentley, the #55 could work magic. Understandably, Jack’s plane is now cherished by his descendants ... and his corner cabinet can be admired by future generations of visitors to the Distillery District.



**Jack Bentley’s prized Stanley No. 55 universal plane and cutters**

According the [MacLachlin Woodworking Museum](#) in Kingston, the Stanley 55 plane was introduced in 1897 and remained in production until 1962. It was named “the universal” because it was designed to do both symmetrical and asymmetrical cuts. Even when the plane was introduced in the late nineteenth century, most architectural mouldings were manufactured. But carpenters in the field and doing small repairs or small jobs relied on the hand plane. The plane was associated with a wide range of “cutters,” up to a hundred. And, as Larry Meeker of [patented-antiques](#) quipped, “55’s were simply Stanley’s answer to not having to carry 40 different planes around.”

Many thanks to the children of Jack Bentley, Helen Linton, Jacqueline Hird and Bob Bentley, who contacted the Distillery District looking for their father's corner cabinet and then supplied photographs and a collective memoir about him.

Thanks also to James Becker of Woodbecker, Inc. for providing a carpenter's perspective on Jack Bentley's corner cabinet.

Please send your comments or questions to Manager of Heritage Services, Sally Gibson, [sg@thedistillerydistrict.com](mailto:sg@thedistillerydistrict.com).

For more about the history of the Distillery District, visit [www.distilleryheritage.com](http://www.distilleryheritage.com).