

## **1998 GENERAL TOOLS AWARD - Helena Wright**

At the conclusion of the Norton Prize ceremony, President Quivik invited Emory Kemp, chair of the General Tools Award Committee, to present this year's award. Mr. Kemp commented that as a founding member of the SIA, he had to recall that this is the 27th annual meeting. It has been a long time. The General Tools Award is intended to recognize individuals for sustained and committed service to the field of industrial archeology. He invited Gerry Weinstein to come the podium, identifying him as the Chairman of General Tools Company. Mr. Kemp said that the General Tools Award is important because the officers of the SIA are "very poorly paid." He announced that this year's award has been given to Helena E. Wright.

"Helena Wright's numerous contributions to industrial archeology exemplify the tradition of sustained, distinguished service that is honored through the General Tools Award. As an active member of SIA and a former president, she has been constantly involved in formulating policies and guiding operations for two decades. She was instrumental in fostering relationships with our international counterparts through such networks as TICCIH, thereby introducing many SIA members to industrial heritage documentation and conservation on a global level. In addition to her organizational and diplomatic efforts on behalf of IA, Helena has also enriched current practice within the discipline. SH has been a strong advocate for incorporating visual evidence into the study of material culture; many investigations of industrial sites and processes have benefitted from her suggestions. Throughout her professional career she has been an accessible and reliable source of information and advice, acting as mentor and friend to the legions of grizzled veterans as well as wide-eyed neophytes who have sought her expertise or shared her interests.

"During her tenure at the former Merrimack Valley Textile Museum between 1968 and 1983 Helena occupied a key position at what was then a premier center for industrial history research. A blitzkrieg survey of endangered New England textile mills first brought her attention to the new field of industrial archeology. The comprehensive analysis of industrial sites later found expression in the collections policies that Helena implemented; she built up MVTM's holdings of manuscript and iconographic materials so that they could address a wide range of issues related to the textile industry and the communities where it was situated. Numerous scholars, both established and aspiring, made use of these nationally significant collections; their publications have since influenced many museum exhibitions and other public presentations. To this body of work, Helena added her own checklists and catalogues of MVTM's library resources, including *New City on the Merrimack: Prints of Lawrence, 1845-1876* (1974) and *Textile Technology Prints* (1980) which became invaluable research guides. During these years, the MVTM library was an exceptionally stimulating and pleasant environment; both characteristics were attributable in no small measure to Helena's presence and influence.

"It was also during her stint in the Merrimack Valley Museum that Helena began immersing herself in IA fieldwork, programs and activities conducted by the vibrant Southern New England and Northern New England chapters. In 1982 she was elected to the SIA Board of Directors. After relocating to Washington, DC and taking up the position of Curator of Graphic Arts at the National Museum of American History in 1983, Helena found her skills in great

demand among IA constituencies both at home and abroad.

“She fulfilled the presidency of SIA with aplomb during her 1984-1986 term of office; one of her initiatives involved formulating strategies for broadening the base of active participation in SIA. In the same period she was designated at the U.S. national TICCIH representative. Industrial Heritage ‘84, the 5th triennial assemblage of TICCIH which was part of a troika of major industrial history conferences staged in the Boston area over the course of ten broiling June days, owed much of its success to Helena’s dedication.

“While these achievements would certainly rank as high points on anyone’s resume, Helena has never shunned the more mundane aspects involved in maintaining the machinery of IA. She has participated in the summer Industrial Archeology Institute which provided training in recording techniques and historic preservation, the SIA’s NEH-funded curriculum project, and the Norton Prize Committee; her frequent contributions to the *SIA Newsletter* have touched on topics ranging from IA in art to important developments overseas. Following Robert Vogel’s retirement in 1988, Helena was one of a small group of stalwarts who maintained SIA headquarters at the Smithsonian until the organization’s relocation to Michigan Technological University in 1993. IN addition to acting as headquarters liaison with the SIA membership and the outside world during this interregnum, Helena continued to cultivate contacts with kindred professional societies and filled the post of Exhibits Review Editor for *Technology & Culture*. She also found time to curate the photographic exhibit, “Working People,” at the National Museum of American History in 1992.

“A few paragraphs cannot truly do justice to the extent of Helena’s accomplishments in the field of IA; nor can words alone convey the esteem in which she is held by her peers. It is with a feeling of pride and heartfelt admiration that today we recognize one of our most gracious ambassadors and colleagues—Helena E. Wright.

[The above was transcribed from Mr. Kemp’s notes as given to the Secretary.] Though Ms. Wright was not able to be present to receive the award, Mr. Kemp called for a round of applause which was warmly given by the membership.