

Biography, Burton Kendall Wheeler

-by Robin Wheeler Azqueta, great-granddaughter

Senator Burton Kendall Wheeler, or “B.K.” as he was often called, was a Democrat, infact, a Western Progressive. Most importantly he followed his own moral compass, rising above partisan politics to be stringently true to own principles of right and wrong. He was a “people person” and was energized by not only serving the citizens of his state in Washington, such as creating Fort Peck Dam, but also having one on one conversation with them. The Blackfeet Indians were his neighbors and his friends and often brought their tribal councils to the front lawn of his home in northwestern, Montana, so that he could give the final ruling when difficult issues arose which could not be solved amongst themselves.

Senator Wheeler was active in protecting the rights of those who he felt were being treated unfairly. As Chairman of the Senate Indian Affairs Committee he passed the Wheeler-Howard Indian Reorganization Act in support of Indian self-governance.

To take you to the beginning, Burton Kendall Wheeler lived the American dream. Born in 1882 in Hudson, Massachusetts, Wheeler was raised in humble circumstances in a Quaker family. He was the youngest of 10 children and his father worked as a cobbler. As a young man, armed with a Law Degree from the University of Michigan, Wheeler set out across the west in search of work as a lawyer, turning down introductions to big firms in New York because as he said, ever since he was a child, he had dreamed of going west.

In 1905 after spending a week in Butte, Montana unsatisfactorily looking for work in a law office, Wheeler had decided to try his hand in Spokane. Learning that his train was delayed, and against his better judgment, he accepted an offer to play a game of cards. As luck would have it, he was tricked into playing a dirty game of poker and was swindled out of all of his money, so he decided to stay in Butte.

He accepted a job in a law office and later said that he should have thanked the card sharp who stranded him in Butte, because he liked it there. He described it as a “generous democratic community....It didn’t make any difference who you were, where you came from, or how much money you had. How you fared depended entirely on yourself.”

Wheeler entered Butte politics in 1909, through his election to represent his seventh ward in the Democratic city convention surprisingly defeating the “Company” or Amalgamated – later known as Anaconda Copper Mining Company, candidate. Well-liked, he climbed steadily through the political ranks, serving as a Representative in the Montana Legislature, and later as U.S. District Attorney to Montana while the U.S. entered World War I.

Often during his career, Senator Wheeler opposed the Anaconda Copper Company's stranglehold on the state's political machine and its poor treatment of the mine workers.

In 1922 Wheeler was elected to the United States Senate, where he served for four terms, until 1947, through the Great Depression, the New Deal and World War II. For half of his tenure in the senate, he chaired the Interstate and Foreign Commerce Commission.

Two years into his first term as Montana's junior Senator, Wheeler made a brave bid for national office, as the Vice Presidential candidate on the Independent Progressive Party ticket in the 1924 election, which was a bi-partisan ticket. Republican, Wisconsin Senator Robert M. La Follette ran as the Presidential Candidate and hand-picked Wheeler, a Democrat, as his running mate. Though the La Follette-Wheeler ticket did not secure a seat in the White House, it did garner the third most votes of any third party in U.S. history either before or since, counting nearly 5 million votes of support. Senator Wheeler never renounced his own party, but was actively seeking to reform it. In his own words, Wheeler declared, "I am a Democrat, but not a Wall Street Democrat... I shall oppose every man on whatever ticket he may appear who bears the brand of the dollar sign."

True to his character, in 1937 Senator Wheeler again stood up to and opposed his own Democratic party and ally, President Franklin Roosevelt when Roosevelt asked congress to pass a massive judicial re-organization which among other things, would allow Roosevelt to pack the US Supreme Court with 6 additional Justices of his own choosing. In his memoirs, the book Yankee from the West, Senator Wheeler said "I was flabbergasted. Here was an unsubtle and anti-Constitution grab for power which would destroy the Court as an institution. I felt that I would have to do everything I could to fight the plan." And fight he did, undaunted by the fact that he risked his entire political future. With his leadership and determination, the bill was soundly defeated in what was the "fiercest battle in American history between two branches of our government over a third" wrote Paul Healy, his biographer.

Three years later, in 1940, President Franklin Roosevelt considered Senator Wheeler for the position of his Vice Presidential running mate, in spite of Wheeler's previous opposition to the court bill. President Roosevelt felt Senator Wheeler's political strength and popularity would help him win re-election to his third term. However, Senator Wheeler was not interested in running on the ticket with President Roosevelt because he opposed the President's "interventionist policies". Due to his Quaker background Senator Wheeler was a non-interventionist and did not support U.S. entry into World War II until the country was attacked at Pearl Harbor.

From World War I to the Great Depression to the Second World War, Senator Wheeler served the State of Montana during turbulent times, not too dissimilar to the state of

affairs which face the United States today. Senator Wheeler believed in the democratic process and the valued involvement of informed citizens.