

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, and a Western Progressive. Most importantly, he followed his own moral compass, rising above partisan politics to be stringently true to his own principles of right and wrong. He was a "people person" and was energized not only by serving the citizens of his state, but also by having one on one conversations 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 he could give the final ruling when issues arose which they could not solve amongst themselves.

Senator Wheeler was active in protecting the rights of those 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.

Burton Kendall Wheeler lived the American dream. Born in 1882 in Hudson, Massachusetts, Burton was the youngest of 10 children born to a father who 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, having turned 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 looking for work in a law office, Wheeler 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, though his election to represent the seventh ward in the Democratic city convention surprisingly defeated the "Company" or Amalgamated - later known as the Anaconda Copper Mining Company. 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 WWI.

Throughout his career, Sen. Wheeler opposed the Anaconda Copper Co.'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. Wisconsin Senator Robert M. LaFollette ran as the Presidential Candidate and hand-picked Wheeler as his running mate. Though the LaFollette-Wheeler ticket did not secure a seat in the White House, it did garner the 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 actively sought 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 would allow Roosevelt to pack the U.S. Supreme Court with six additional Justices of his own choosing. In his memoir, *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 do 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 asked Wheeler to be his running mate, in spite of Wheeler's previous opposition to the Court bill. FDR was confident Sen. Wheeler's political strength and popularity would help him win re-election to his third term. B.K. turned down the offer because he opposed FDR's "interventionist policies." Due to his Quaker background, Wheeler was a pacifist and didn't support U.S. entry into WWII until we were attacked at Pearl Harbor.

From WWI to the Great Depression to the Second World War, Sen. B.K. Wheeler served the state of Montana during turbulent times, not too dissimilar to the state of affairs that our politicians face today as we experience upheaval in our financial markets and an energy crisis. Most of all, Wheeler believed in the democratic process and the valued involvement of informed citizens.