



Charles D. Wheeler

OLIN DUNBAR WHEELER¹

The Minnesota Historical Society lost one of its most prominent and active members in the death of Olin Dunbar Wheeler on September 10, 1925. For twenty-two years he had been a member of the society and he had served on the executive council continuously since 1905.

Mr. Wheeler was born on May 1, 1852, at Mansfield, Ohio. His parents were the Reverend Alfred Wheeler and Lydia Curtis Wheeler, and his brother was Edward Jewett Wheeler, who for many years was editor of the *Literary Digest* and later held a similar position with *Current History*. The earlier part of Mr. Wheeler's education was received at Baldwin University in Berea, Ohio, and at Allegheny College in Meadville, Pennsylvania. He later entered Cornell University at Ithaca, New York, from which school he graduated with a degree in civil engineering in 1874. During the early seventies before receiving his degree Mr. Wheeler was employed in the First National Bank at Chattanooga, Tennessee, and later in a commercial enterprise in Erie, Pennsylvania, where his parents were living at the time.

After Mr. Wheeler was graduated from Cornell he joined Major John W. Powell's surveying expedition in the Rocky Mountain desert regions of the Southwest as topographer. This was in 1874, five years after Powell's famous exploration of the Grand Canyon. At this time Powell was engaged in an enterprise known as the Geographical and Geological Survey of the Rocky Mountain Region. In his report to the secretary of the interior for the years 1876 and 1877, he tells something about Mr. Wheeler's activities on this survey. For the field season of 1876 Powell divided his party into five branches, two of which made topographic surveys.

¹ Read at a meeting of the executive council of the Minnesota Historical Society in the Historical Building, St. Paul, October 11, 1926. *Ed.*

Of these, one was under the direction of John H. Renshawe, and his assistant was Mr. Wheeler. The work of this party "was confined to Southwestern Utah and Southeastern Nevada, one of the most rugged and barren sections in the Great Basin." It "extended over about 4,000 square miles," and Powell reports that "in all this area no considerable bodies of irrigable lands are found; probably not one-half of one per cent. possessing any value except for pasturage." In the season of 1877 Mr. Wheeler was the assistant of Professor A. H. Thompson, who had charge of the triangulation party of the survey. This group operated in the region west of the Green River in Utah. Rumors of the hostility of the Indians of this district caused Thompson to combine his party with one of the topographic parties, in order to have a stronger force in case of attack. His men, however, were not molested during the operations. In addition to establishing triangulation points, which were "marked by stone cairns and flagstaffs," Thompson's party "also determined the amount of water flowing in the larger streams of the region."²

Although Powell made no later general reports that have been published, his survey of the Rocky Mountain region continued until 1879. In that year, with two other extensive western surveys, it was discontinued, and the present United States Geological Survey was created. Mr. Wheeler remained with Powell until his survey came to an end.

It was while on this survey that Mr. Wheeler first came in contact with the West, which even as late as 1880 was largely a wilderness area inhabited only by small groups of wandering red-skinned tribesmen and the rapidly diminishing herds of buffalo and elk. Like Chittenden, Coues, and so many others who took an active part in the transition of the West,

² Powell, "Report on the Geographical and Geological Survey of the Rocky Mountain Region," in 45 Congress, 2 session, *House Executive Documents*, no. 1, p. 790, 798 (serial 1800).

he became interested in the history of the country; and he soon started on the work that was to occupy the greater part of his remaining years.

When the Powell survey was discontinued, Mr. Wheeler went to the city of Washington, where he obtained an appointment to work on the tenth United States census. During the summer months he acted as disbursing officer at Virginia City, Nevada, and during the winters he was engaged in special census work at the Capital. Here also he gained valuable experience as a special correspondent for various newspapers, writing on Congressional matters and public occurrences.

In 1882 Mr. Wheeler married Anna E. S. Burr of Mount Vernon, Ohio, and in the same year he settled in St. Paul, where he took charge of the office of Elias F. Drake, a prominent capitalist. This position Mr. Wheeler held until he went to the Northern Pacific Railway, in June, 1892, to take charge of its advertising. Here he remained for sixteen years, and after that he devoted his time to literary pursuits, specializing in history.

While he was with the Northern Pacific, Mr. Wheeler conceived and published a booklet called *Wonderland*. As an annual publication of the advertising department of that railroad, it first appeared in 1893 and continued until 1910. This booklet emphasized primarily the scenic glories of the West, the "wonderland" of America, but it also included references to important historical events that had transpired in the region. Incidentally, *Wonderland* was the first publication that systematically exploited the beauties of Yellowstone National Park.

The Lewis and Clark expedition of 1804-06 made a strong appeal to Mr. Wheeler and became his chief theme for historical research. In the course of his travels throughout the Northwest he covered practically the entire route traversed by Lewis and Clark nearly a century before. Just one hundred

years after that famous expedition started, Mr. Wheeler's great work, *The Trail of Lewis and Clark*, was published. It reveals a thorough familiarity with the journals not only of Lewis and Clark, but also of the other members of the party. Mr. Wheeler describes minutely the route of their journey and goes to some pains in showing the changes that have taken place since their time — how the sites of camps which they describe have been obliterated by the shifting channel of the Missouri, and how erosion has changed certain landmarks mentioned in the original journals. In other words he has oriented their route from the map of a hundred years ago and placed it with extreme thoroughness as to detail on a map of the present century. Yet with all this mass of facts and figures, the book is written in a popular style that makes excellent reading.

Mr. Wheeler never followed on the ground the course of Captain Lewis' separate journey on his return from the Pacific which took him in July, 1806, north from Great Falls into the upper Marias River country. An opportunity came to him to visit this region as a member of the Upper Missouri Historical Expedition in July, 1925, and for two months prior to that time he looked anxiously forward to it and hoped against hope that his failing strength would revive sufficiently to make the trip possible for him. In this he was disappointed, but an address he had prepared was read on the occasion of the dedication of a monument erected near the station of Meriwether on the Great Northern Railway to mark the farthest north point of the Lewis and Clark expedition. This was the last work from his pen. The writer saw him a few weeks later. He was very cheerful and his parting words expressed a wish and an intention to trace mile by mile the path of Captain Lewis on this northern loop. But within a month he had departed this earth for the great adventure into the beyond.

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