

Dr. Henry Wheeler

Grand Historian Address W. David Beach, Grand Historian (Extracted from 2000 Proceedings, Page 24)

How many of you here today have heard of Jesse James; could I see your hands? All right, now how many of you have heard of Henry Wheeler; could I see your hands? Thank you. This just might prove that the bad guys are sometimes remembered longer than the good guys.

Today, I would like to tell you something about Henry Mason Wheeler. One reason I selected him as the topic for this address is because our Grand Lodge session is being conducted in this building. Henry Wheeler, a personality of the Nineteenth Century and early Twentieth Century, walked the halls of this very building; he attended functions in this auditorium and at the time of his death, his casket was placed on this stage during his memorial service. Henry Wheeler was born in Newport, New Hampshire in 1854. When he was two years old, the family moved to the town of Northfield in Minnesota Territory, still a frontier area. We don't know a lot about young Hank Wheeler's life. His father was originally a stock drover, but at some point became the owner of a drug store in Northfield. As a young man, he acquired a love of hunting and a skill and comfort level with firearms that would remain with him throughout his life. Apparently a good scholar, Henry took advantage of the fact that a college education was available in his hometown and attended Carleton College, then in its first decade of existence. His next academic stop was at Ann Arbor, Michigan, where in 1875, he was enrolled in the University of Michigan Medical School. It would appear that young Hank Wheeler had a solid foundation and a good start in life.

His life might have remained ordinary, if successful, until the events of September 7, 1876 intruded and raised Henry Wheeler to celebrity status for the rest of his life. On that date, the Jesse James gang rode into Northfield, Minnesota. This gang of outlaws, based in Missouri, had a remarkable string of bank and train robberies dating back to the Civil War. Ordinarily, they were not challenged; their reputation was such that when they appeared upon the scene, money would be handed over and they would easily make their escape. This was not to be the case in Northfield, Minnesota.

On that date, September 7, 1876, young Hank Wheeler was relaxing in front of his father's drug store, enjoying a vacation from medical school. He noticed three strangers ride up to the bank across the street, tie up their horses and then sit down on some boxes outside the bank. (Later, these three were identified as Charlie Pitts, Bob Younger, and one of the James brothers.) Two more strangers, Cole Younger and Clell Miller, arrived on horseback,

whereupon the first three entered the bank, Clell Miller closing the door and Cole Younger remaining in the street. The owner of the hardware store came along, wanting to make a routine bank transaction. When he met with resistance at the door, he was struck down by Clell Miller and thrown into the street. At this point, Hank Wheeler shouted, "Robbery, they are robbing the bank." Clell Miller fired at him, the bullet going over his head. Hank ducked into the drugstore to find a weapon.

Finding none there, he ran out the back door of the drug store, down the alley to a hotel. There he found an army carbine and raced upstairs to a window overlooking the street. By this time, downtown Northfield was a combat zone. The rest of the James gang had arrived, and several local people had secured weapons and the two sides were blazing away at each other. Hank Wheeler took aim from the upstairs window and, with his second shot, hit and instantly killed the outlaw Clell Miller. He also shot and wounded Bob Younger, although that outlaw managed to escape.

At the conclusion of the action, which lasted about seven minutes, two outlaws and two local people were dead, some of the outlaws were wounded, some captured. The net effect was that although Jesse James escaped and lived, the reputation, success and very existence of this outlaw band was ended. When Henry Wheeler died, 54 years later, he was the last surviving of those who played a major role in the Northfield bank robbery of 1876.

Now, it is sometimes difficult to separate historical fact from legend in these situations. But one of the enduring legends about Wheeler is that he approached the sheriff after the gun battle was over with a personal problem. Hank Wheeler was a practical and realistic young man. As a medical student, he needed a cadaver for experiments at school. He needed to either provide or pay for this cadaver.

But after the Northfield raid, there were fresh bodies all over the street, so Hank sensed an opportunity. He asked the sheriff if he might have one of the outlaw's bodies for his use at medical school. The sheriff said, "Hank, it would be against the law for me to turn the bodies over to you, but I'll tell you what, I'll see that the outlaws are buried plenty shallow." The legend says that a day or two later, Henry Wheeler shipped a box or a barrel by railway express in care of his roommate at the University of Michigan. The container was labeled "pickles" and smelled heavily of formaldehyde.

Apparently this scheme worked and Henry Wheeler graduated from medical school in 1877. His next studies would be at the College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York City. There he completed what we would call a residency today. During this time, Henry married in 1878, Miss Adeline Murray of Northfield. In 1880, his medical training finally completed, he returned to this hometown of Northfield, to set up practice.

It would appear that Henry Wheeler had everything going for him, a good medical education, a new wife and the promise of a good professional practice in his hometown where he would always be well known and remembered for his part in the shootout with the James gang. But his life would take a different turn at this time. His wife, Adeline died in 1881 during a difficult childbirth. The infant daughter also died, at a later time. So it was that Dr. Henry Wheeler left his hometown of Northfield in 1881, possibly to put his wife's untimely death behind him, and moved to the town of Grand Forks, in Dakota Territory.

Grand Forks was less than ten years old. There were neither clinics nor hospitals; most of a physician's work was carried on in his office or in the patient's home. A year after arriving in Grand Forks, he was appointed surgeon for the Great Northern Railway. Later he held the same position of railway surgeon for the Northern Pacific Railway. He remained a medical consultant to both railways until the time of his death. Wheeler was in partnership with various physicians over the years, but from 1896, he was a partner in Wheeler, Campbell & Williamson, in those days the largest medical practice in the city, which years later evolved into the Valley Medical Clinic. In 1894, he became secretary of the state medical examining board, serving several years in that capacity. He also was a member of the U.S. Pension Board and served as President of the North Dakota State Medical Association.

Aside from these lofty-sounding positions, what was Henry Wheeler really like as a physician? Most of a pioneer physician's work was a day-to-day routine of seeing patients, some of them in his office, but in many cases traveling up to thirty miles away over primitive roads and in bad weather to make a house call. (By the way, I have here by the podium the medical satchel of Henry Wheeler, on loan from the local historical society.) It was said that Dr. Wheeler had a gruff exterior and a rather brusque manner, but in reality these masked a heart of gold.

A letter was sent to the Grand Forks Herald from an M.J. Fletcher when Dr. Wheeler died and I will quote the letter verbatim. "At the time when the flu was raging in Grand Forks, Dr. Wheeler was called by a poor widow to attend to her stricken child. I happened along just the doctor was ready to leave. The home was clean, but bore the hallmarks of poverty, and malnutrition was evidenced in the faces of the mother and children. As the Doctor put on his overcoat, the mother apologized for the fact that she did not have any money to pay for his visit, but she assured him that she would pay him as soon as she could. A smile flickered for a moment round the corners of the doctor's mouth. Then, he turned to the mother and said, "ugh, a nice trick on play on a man. Call a physician on such a cold morning and then have nothing to pay him with." He held out his hand to say goodbye, assured her that the child would get well and promised to call again the next day. The other hand dug down into his pocket and when he left there was a ten-dollar bill on the table. One of the local legends

about Dr. Wheeler is that he had the skeleton of one of the Northfield outlaws displayed in his office, probably of Bill Styles of the James gang.

Again, quoting from the newspaper at the time of Dr. Wheeler's death, a farmer in the Grand Forks area by the name of Styles once asked to view the skeleton. Mr. Styles had a son that had not been heard from since the 1876 Northfield raid and he feared that the son had become associated with the outlaws and met his fate in Northfield. He examined the skeleton and identified it as that of his son, because one finger was missing from the joint outward, which had been his son's situation.

Exactly what happened to this skeleton has been the source of much speculation. Some say that it was donated to the University of North Dakota Medical School, others say that it was given to a fraternal organization to be used in their ritual, but the local newspaper stated in 1930 that it had been destroyed in a fire.

As Dr. Wheeler's medical career unfolded, so did his personal life take other turns. In 1883, he married again, this time to a Miss Josephine Connell of Grand Forks. They built a new home in the Central Park area in 1885, which still stands today. If you wish to see it, walk out the front door of this building, turn left and walk the few steps to Fifth Street, then turn left again. Walk down Fifth Street for three blocks to the corner of Fifth Street and Franklin Avenue and there stands Dr. Wheeler's house, bearing the address of 419 South Fifth Street and also bearing the plaque of the National Register of Historic Places. It is a tall, stately house and the present occupants maintain it in an excellent condition.

Henry Wheeler was an active citizen in the civic life of his community. Always a sportsman, he appears in 1897 as the President of the Grand Forks Gun Club. The city directory of 1898 states that he was President of the Whist club at the prestigious Pioneer Club on the top floor of the St. Johns block. He acted as district campaign manager for President William McKinley.

In the early years of the new 20th Century, Wheeler is shown as a Vice President of the Commercial Club, the forerunner of the present Chamber of Commerce. His political career started at about the same time and in 1909 we find Dr. Wheeler seated on the Grand Forks City Council. In 1917, he was elected to the highest office of the city and became His Honor, Mayor Henry M. Wheeler. He was reelected once, but when the city changed to the City Commission form of government in 1920, he chose to retire from public office and from active politics.

Tragedy had entered Dr. Wheeler's personal life again in 1914, when his second wife Josephine passed away. As with his first wife, they had lost one child in infancy. So, at the

age of 60, Henry Wheeler had lost two wives and had no surviving children. Let us now consider a brighter side of his life as we look at Henry Wheeler, the Freemason. He was made a Master Mason on September 25, 1879 in Social Lodge No. 48 of Northfield, Minnesota. He was twenty-five years old, and interestingly enough, received the three Blue Lodge degrees within the space of eight days.

When Brother Wheeler made the move to Grand Forks, he demitted from Social Lodge and on November 11, 1881 was elected to membership in Acacia Lodge No. 15 of the Grand Lodge of Dakota Territory. You would recognize this same lodge today as Acacia Lodge No. 4. He apparently made an impact as a Mason, because only one year after his arrival, he is listed as the Senior Deacon of Acacia Lodge. He served as Worshipful Master of that lodge for three terms, starting in 1883. Not only was Brother Wheeler active in Blue lodge, he was also a member of the York Rite and Shrine. Outside of the Masonic family, he held membership in the Odd Fellows, the Knights of Pythias and the Elks.

In 1884, Worshipful Brother Wheeler represented his lodge at the Dakota Territory Grand Lodge session in Aberdeen. Again, he must have made an immediate impact, because he was elected Grand Junior Warden at this session, when he had been a Master Mason for a little less than five years. He was twice elected Deputy Grand Master, in 1885 and 1886. Then in 1887, at the ripe old age of thirty-three, he became Most Worshipful Henry M. Wheeler, Grand Master of Masons in Dakota Territory.

The Grand Lodge session over which Most Worshipful Brother Wheeler presided was that of 1888 and was held in Deadwood. There were 100 constituent lodges, of which 8 were still under dispensation. The membership of the Grand Lodge stood at 4051 Master Masons, with a net increase of 512 during the year. Some lodge memberships at that time were: Shiloh No 8-118 members, Pembina No. 10-49 members, Acacia No. 15-69, Bismarck No. 16-38 and Jamestown No. 19-70 members. In his prepared remarks, Grand Master Wheeler commented on the Grand Lodge treasury balance of \$5164.40, stating 'This will be amply sufficient to discharge all the accrued indebtedness and leave a neat balance in the hands of the Grand Treasurer.'

In one report, Most Worshipful Brother Wheeler was a unique Mason. The Grand Lodge of Dakota Territory existed for only 14 years. During that time, there were only nine Grand Masters, some having served multiple terms. Henry Wheeler was the only Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Dakota Territory elected from the area that is now North Dakota, the other eight all being from what is now South Dakota.

In fairness, it should be stated that the southern part of the Territory had more of the members, perhaps around two-thirds. We in North Dakota should be proud of Henry Wheeler as our only Grand Master of Dakota Territory. Henry Wheeler was what we would call a Renaissance man, with his many varied interests. Along with the previous activities that have been mentioned, he also was somewhat mechanically inclined.

He owned the first automobile in Grand Forks. Also, far ahead of his time, he constructed a forerunner of a snowmobile by using a sled with sails. Taking one last look at this personal life, we find that Wheeler married a third time in 1933 to Miss Mae McCulloch of Grand Forks. At about the same time, he retired from active medical practice. And finally, in 1925, something that had eluded him his whole life came to pass. When Wheeler was 71 years of age, his wife Mae presented him with a healthy baby boy. He responded by going to City Hall and raising the flag. It is said that in his excitement, he raised the flag in an upside down position, a universal sign of distress.

Henry Wheeler was, of course, mortal as we all are. On April 13, 1930, his trestle board was complete and after only a couple of days of not feeling well, he died of heart complications. His services were held in this auditorium and his body lay in state on this stage, with a Knight Templar Honor Guard. Many of the Masonic Brotherhood sat together for the service. Also many non-Masons attended. The entire medical community of Grand Forks sat together as a body with many physicians from out of town.

The flags in Grand Forks flew at half-mast that day. Immediately after the service, his casket was placed on a train, and Henry Wheeler commenced the final journey to his hometown of Northfield, Minnesota. On the next day he was buried in Oaklawn Cemetery with Masonic honors by Social Lodge No. 48, which had given him his first introduction to Masonry over fifty years earlier. There he rests today with his parents, a brother, a sister, his three wives and one of the little ones that died in infancy.

Today, I have attempted to tell something of Hank Wheeler, college student turned gunfighter, Dr. Henry Wheeler, respected frontier physician, his Honor Mayer Henry M. Wheeler, civic leader, and Most Worshipful Henry M Wheeler, Freemason. He was a remarkable personality in the early days of North Dakota, an individual of diverse interests, abilities and accomplishments. We shall perhaps never see his like again.