

**Dora Hughes Wheeler's Recollections of Richard Smith Wheeler**  
**June 3, 1993**

Richard Smith Wheeler was born in Oak Park, Illinois on March 30, 1909, the first son of Orra May Smith Foote (her first husband was Ralph Foote) and Herbert Merrill Wheeler of Chicago, Illinois. Orra was a graduate of Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, Michigan (then a teachers college), daughter of Merrill Herbert and Marcia Smith of Jackson, Michigan. Orra had two brothers, Horace and Arthur. Arthur married Ada Byrne of Jackson, Michigan (the well-known "Aunt Ada"). Herbert Wheeler graduated from the University of Minnesota in engineering at the age of 19, a member of Sigma Psi, the engineering society. Orra had married young, a local man who was a matchmaker and part owner of a drugstore in Nashville. When he died at 28 years of age, Orra moved to a suburb of Chicago to live with her parents. A cousin, who was then a teacher of home economics at what is now Armour Institute, persuaded her to take a teaching job at that school, a technical college for men and women. Herbert Wheeler, already chief engineer for the Chicago surface railways (street cars) who was also on the night faculty, met Orra at faculty meetings. They were married sometime in 1908 and spent their honeymoon in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

Subsequently, Richard had one brother, Edmund Goodrich Wheeler, 13 months younger than he. Their father died in 1915 of a cerebral hemorrhage, leaving Orra with a house in Oak Park Illinois and almost \$25,000 insurance. She felt very independent, but decided to sell her house and move back to her girlhood home in Nashville, Michigan where she had many close friends.

Richard attended the Nashville schools, and went to the University of Michigan in the Fall of 1926. At first, he waited on tables in a fraternity house for some support, but soon got a job in the cancer research laboratory of Dr. Clarence P. Little, the president of the University. He worked with generations of mice, learning to accept them and care for them. When he graduated from the University in 1930, Dr. Little had been made the head of a large laboratory for cancer research in Bar Harbor, Maine. (This subsequently burned to the ground, losing all manner of valuable records on generations of mice.) All the mice in the Ann Arbor laboratory were transplanted by boxcar train from Ann Arbor to Maine that summer with R. S. Wheeler in charge of food and care. All summer, R.S.W. worked at the lab with men who later were the leaders in cancer research in the USA and many universities, including Yale.

Richard had many opportunities during the following few years to go to Yale or other colleges to get graduate degrees in science and go into the field of cancer research. He, apparently, did not feel enough interested in this phase of science to accept any of these offers. But his personality was such that many of the scientists (whose names I fail to recall) liked him enough to offer him opportunities. He kept in touch with several of them, all of whom are long deceased.

Leaving Bar Harbor in the Fall of 1930, he found his way to New York. He located at the Y.M.C.A. but soon found quarters with two other young men who were also job hunting. In 1930, New York City had no jobs to offer. People were being laid off. The depression was beginning to be felt everywhere. Richard at last found a job selling toys at Macy's where he took

a course in salesmanship for college graduates.

Meanwhile, his mother had lost every bit of her money in a bank-closing in Jackson. She had a nervous collapse and was taken to a hospital. Richard managed to hitch-hike his way to see her, but had no means of helping her. It was a desperate situation until Ada Smith invited Orra to live temporarily with her. Herbert Wheeler had served briefly in the Spanish-American War, and it was discovered that his wife was entitled to a small pension, based on his military service. As Orra became stronger, she also found a small job at a small hospital in Jackson for TB patients. She conducted an art therapy program for recovering patients - serving, knotting, etc. She was still in her fifties and could support herself with some reservations. She stayed in Jackson after she retired from the hospital in about 1935. Then she opened her house in Nashville and moved back there to stay until she died in 1945.

Richard lost his job at Macy's in 1932 and could find nothing to do in New York. A salesman from Washington had once offered him a job in a store in that city, so he came to D.C. and got a job at S. S. Kanns, a now defunct department store. He went subsequently to Woodward and Lothrop, but he always disliked merchandising, and when he was offered a small job in one of the new agencies President Roosevelt had created for special activities, he gladly agreed to start at the disagreeable hours of 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. It was an easy job, but the hours were miserable for an active young man.

He was now living with a family named Hunt at 2001 Wisconsin Avenue, N. W. He had shared a one-room apartment with a Michigan man named Albert Bohringer (Barry) for about a year, but found new quarters when Barry moved to Alexandria. Meanwhile, he had met Dora Hughes, a girl three years his senior, who lived in Chevy Chase and worked in the District. She had taught school in New Jersey for a while, planning soon to marry a young naval officer whom she had known since 1924. Her parents were very much opposed to her entering on the somewhat footloose life of a Navy wife and encouraged her to try other avenues of interest. This led to her returning in 1933 to her alma mater, Hood College, to be executive secretary to the President. Frederick was about 45 miles from Chevy Chase, D.C. but Dora came home weekends, saw Richard, and their interest in each other became stronger. At his job in F.E.R.A. (Federal Emergency Relief Administration) Richard received many promotions, as his background and ability became apparent.

Richard and Dora were married on June 3, 1937 at 5044 Reno Road, Chevy Chase, D.C. at 4 p.m. About 50 people were crowded into the house and garden for the ceremony and reception. Dora's minister, Dr. Gore G. Johnson, performed the ceremony. Margorie Hughes Canary attended the bride; Goodrich Wheeler attended the groom. Mary Sue Powell was the flower girl. A large delegation of Hood friends came from Frederick, relatives from Cleveland were also present. Richard's mother and Aunt Ada were present for the rehearsal dinner the previous night and for the wedding.

Richard continued with the F.E.R.A. while the couple lived at 2310 Ashmead Place, N.W. The following May 12, 1938, their first child was born with great difficulty, and the attendants were unable to get the boy to breathe properly. This loss was a severe blow to the parents of the

boy. Two years later on March 30, 1940, another son, Douglas Hughes Wheeler, arrived much to his parents' delight. At this point, they were living at 1420 Tucherman Street, N.W. in a small apartment. When Douglas was fourteen months old they found a newly built house at 234 N. Abingdon Street, Arlington, Virginia where they moved on May 15, 1941. Around this time, Richard transferred to a better post in the War Department. It was only seven months later that war was declared, first with Japan and then with the Central Powers, after the December 7 attack on Honolulu by Japan.

Only a few months after this move to a new house, Richard was urged to join the Armed Forces. Since his job was now with the Air Corps, he became a first lieutenant in Spring 1942. He was first sent to Orlando, Florida for some special training, but returned soon after, and, in time, was moved to new quarters in the Pentagon, where he remained until after peace was declared. His immediate office was call Statistical Control and involved flying all over the country, plus Bermuda and Iceland, to depots of the Air Forces.

At the close of the war, Richard was a Lieutenant Colonel with two medals, a bronze star and the Legion of Merit, and was urged to remain in the service. But, though fiercely patriotic, he did not enjoy the military chain of command. And when invited by Clark Willard to join the Division of International Conferences in the State Department in January 1946, he did so with enthusiasm.

Meanwhile, on November 10, 1942, Richard Merrill Wheeler had joined the Wheeler family, and on June 30, 1945 David Lyndon Wheeler put in an appearance. They did not see much of their father for the next few years, because his main job was marshaling delegates to international conferences in foreign cities.

Richard was probably a grade 13 in the Foreign Service chain of command, but advanced gradually until he reached grade 16 or a #2 Foreign Service Officer classification. He was appointed member of the U. S. delegation to the International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna in 1958 and left Washington in March of that year. His sons finished out their year at school (Douglas was a freshman at Denison University, Dick was a sophomore at Wakefield High School, and David an 8th grader at Kenmore Junior High School) while Dora sold the house in Arlington first. They had expected to leave the country in July 1958 but owing to Douglas' illness, this trip was postponed until August, when Dora, the boys and their dog, Duchess, departed from New York on the S. S. Independence, bound for Genoa, Italy. Richard met them in Genoa, where they remained one day, then from Venice took the Orient Express for Vienna. In Vienna, they occupied a large house at 1 Dr. Henrich-Meyer Strasse until November, where in order to seek better medical treatment for Douglas, they returned to the U.S. Richard assumed his former position in the State Department. They occupied a house on North Greenbrier Street in Arlington from September until the following June, when on June 25th they moved to 5614 North 33rd Street in Arlington. This became their house until 1987.

During the next few years, Richard made several minor trips and one major trip with Secretary of State Christian Herter to Beirut, Lebanon. In June 1960 Richard had a serious heart attack, followed by two other heart attacks while in Arlington Hospital. In the Fall he returned

gradually to his work in the State Department, a few hours a day to begin with. After a time, it was obvious that he could no longer be an active member of his division, and he sought early retirement. This took place in 1962. He was awarded a citation of meritorious achievement and was assigned to the Speakers' Bureau of the Department.

During the following two years, Richard became restless at home and sought a part time job. At length, he joined the staff of the Arlington Trust Company, an Arlington banking institution, and, ultimately, became an officer (Assistant Treasurer) of the Bank. In 1970 he retired for the second time and became a gentleman of leisure. He died suddenly of a heart attack in 1972 at age 63. He had lived to see all three of his sons married and to enjoy two of his grandchildren. He is interred at Ivy Hill Cemetery, King Street, Alexandria, Virginia.