

N. P. WHEELER: LUMBERMAN, CONGRESSMAN, CHRISTIAN*

BY W. REGINALD WHEELER

I SEE him walking along the board sidewalk in a mountain village nestled in "the mortal sweet hills of Pennsylvania." He has a stocky figure, broad-chested, with shoulders consciously thrown back; he walks with lightness of tread, despite his sturdiness, with a nimbleness learned on log-drives and in the woods. He wears a business suit with vest, a wide-brimmed, soft hat, a stiff, white-



winged collar. He has a broad brow; keen, honest blue eyes; a strong nose; a short beard, worn in the fashion of the generals of the Civil War, whom, on horseback, he greatly resembles. He has the dignity, benevolence and nobility of a General Lee rather than the bearing of a General Grant. He gives an impression of a man of integrity, with an alert mind, sound judgment, with a genial spirit and kind heart.

The central dirt road of the village is flanked on both sides by rows of neat, white frame houses. At the head of the valley are

*A chapter from the forthcoming book, *Pine Knots and Bark Peelers: The Story of Five Generations of American Lumbermen*.

three lumber mills; the upper pine mill, the lower hemlock mill, and the planing mill; a broad mill pond full of logs—pine, hemlock and hard wood; a dam with the clear water of Hickory Creek spilling over its top boards. Serrated rows of board-piles rise near the mills and along the railroad. The "Hickory Valley Railroad" extends up Hickory Creek from the Allegheny River a mile away, and divides into branch lines that ascend the forested streams of Beaver, Ross Run, Otter, and Queen, and that extend to the beautiful forested height of land known as Heart's Content. The railroad traverses the valleys which hold the forty thousand acres of timberland owned by "The Company."

Below the mills stand the office building, "The Company Store," the boarding house, the kindergarten, and the neat, white church with its steeple pointing like a clean aspiration into the clear mountain air. Below the board yard stands an ample school house. Each of the households has a vegetable garden nearby available to the tenant of the house. The whole scene speaks of industry, prosperity, cleanliness, and friendship.

"N. P.," as he is widely known, is returning from the office to his home, "Bonnie Brae," a quarter of a mile down the valley. He is in a happy, genial mood. His memory goes back to the days



Bonnie Brae, the home of Hon. N. P. Wheeler, Endeavor, Pa.

Courtesy W. Reginald Wheeler



Pine timber at Heart's Content, a tree $4\frac{1}{2}$ feet in diameter, in the Wheeler and Dusenbury holdings, with N. P. Wheeler, Jr., managing partner of Wheeler and Dusenbury.

Courtesy W. Reginald Wheeler

when he first rode on horseback into that valley where Hickory Creek empties into the Allegheny River, forty years before. A death had occurred. The man's body was lowered into the grave without a word of prayer or the presence of a minister. There was no school, no church; the crooked corduroy road zigzagged through half-drained swamps; half a dozen ramshackle houses were spaced irregularly along the road. This was to be his home. The prospect seemed bleak and desolate. Forty years later he wrote of his arrival in the woods to his sister:

THE SAMOSET
ROCKLAND BREAKWATER, ME.

September 5, 1909

Dear Sister:

Are you aware that this is the 44th Anniversary of my arrival, a green boy at Newtown! Everyone against me, no one to consult with and the battle to fight alone, twelve miles to a post office and almost forty to the railroad or a telegraph line and no roads to speak of. A boy of twenty-three turned loose in the woods. I remember you said, "I don't like John Dusenbury. He took away my Nanie."

I went there with uncertain health, untried, but with a faith in God and a determination to do my best.

Now I am filled with gratitude to the Heavenly Father for the kindly way in which he has led me. My health was preserved, undertakings prospered. Given the best wife for me possible and children of promise. Enough of this world's goods to make me comfortable and not enough to make me proud. Honors that I sought not time after time. It was not burying me in the woods as my sister feared when I went there.

Tonight I am full of gratitude to God for the wonderful blessings he has showered upon me all my life. I have tried to honor Him and He has blessed me abundantly in his service. Success in business was not the only object but equally to build up a Christian sentiment and community. God blessed the efforts. Am writing while listening to fine music.

With love,
Your Brother
N. P. WHEELER

N. P. Wheeler remembered his father's telling of riding his horse in 1837 two hundred miles across New York State from Deposit, on the Delaware River, so named because the raftsmen

"deposited" their belongings there for the trips down the river to Philadelphia, to Portville, "the Port" on the upper Allegheny where rafts were coupled up for the voyage down the river to Pittsburgh and to Cincinnati and Louisville. From Portville his father had ridden one hundred seventy-five miles down the river to Tionesta Creek, and up the creek to Newtown, a village newly carved out of the wilderness, where a water mill had been installed. William F. Wheeler inspected the timber and the mill, and on his return to Deposit on the Delaware, after three hundred and seventy-five miles on the road, told his father, William Wheeler, "Deacon Bill," of the journey and the desired purchase. N. P. Wheeler's father, William F. Wheeler, thus described the journey and the decision in regard to the investment:

In 1837, we started a lumber yard at Cincinnati, in charge of Gregory and Van Bergen. When this had been in operation about a year, Mr. Van Bergen wrote us that there was an opportunity to buy timber lands and mills on the Tionesta Creek, in Pennsylvania. He appointed the time to meet one of us at the property very soon, giving us barely time to reach there.

Dusenbury said, "How can any one go?"

I said, "I will go."

"How will you go?"

"I will get on Old Eggleston,"

an awkward, hard-going horse. I left here after noon, with snow six inches deep, and went by way of Smethport, supposing that it be the best way. I rode thirty-six miles that day, and stopped in a log house 'til morning; then pushed on next day by a path through the woods—no road—and reached the Tionesta Creek. When the path came to an end, I followed the creek, and rode *in* the creek, for about eight miles. When I reached the property, called the Siverly Mill property, I found that Mr. Van Bergen had been there an hour and a half. We found a saw-mill, pretty good for those days, with two gates, good water power, and four thousand acres of pine timber land, with some log cabins for the men. We spent two or three days in the woods, looking the property over, and bought it, having to go to Franklin to draw the necessary papers. Van Bergen returned to Cincinnati by boat; and I returned here per "Old Eggleston." The mill was located in what is now Forest County, Kingsley Township, near what is now the Newtown Mills.

We had promised to make a cash payment of \$8,000, then a very large amount, within thirty days, and we had no money to do it with. Reaching here, now Portville, then South Olean, after my ride of 150 miles from Franklin, I changed "Old Eggleston" for another horse, and made for Bath without rest. There I obtained all the money I dared ask for, which was only \$1,500 and then went on to Deposit to see my father. I reached there in four days from here, a ride of 200 miles. Hitching my horse in front of my old home, I went in to find my father sick on the bed—the first time I ever saw him sick. He jumped off the bed, clasped me by the hand and said,

"William, what has brought you here?"

I said, "Oh, we've bought some more timber land and a mill down in Pennsylvania, and we've got to have money at once to make the cash payment."

He rubbed his hands and said, "We'll have it! We'll have it!"

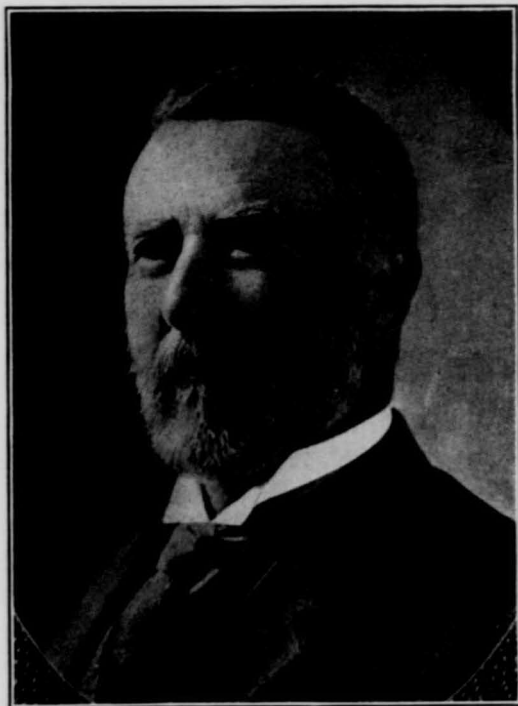
Then I felt cheered, for I knew we should have it.

During the forty years in Pennsylvania that followed his arrival on horseback at Stowtown at the mouth of Hickory Creek in 1871, N. P. Wheeler had seen the community change from a lumber camp with loggers,—lawless, godless, and with no minister to bury the dead—to a village where a strong church had grown up, preceded by a Christian Endeavor Society; a community where Christian men and women lived and worked and brought the bright spirit of their faith into all its life. When a post office was organized in 1898, and the suggestion was made that it be named "Wheeler" after the company, Wheeler and Dusenbury, N. P. Wheeler had suggested instead that, as the people often spoke of going up to "Endeavor" for meetings of the Endeavor Society, that this name be given to the post office and his suggestion was carried out. The name "Endeavor" truly expressed the spirit of the community. N. P. Wheeler thought of this growth of a Christian community, of the prosperity of the work of the firm, of the men in its employ in which there had never been a strike; of "Wheeler & Dusenbury Hall" on the banks of the Chien-Tang River near Hangchow, the "City of Heaven" in China; of his happy home, "Bonnie Brae," with the inscription over the open fireplace, "East, West, Home's Best." He thought of his family circle with three sons and a daughter, and he hummed a happy refrain as he walked up the hill to his home.

"Now let the wide world wag as it will; we'll be gay and happy still!"

The original investment of \$60,000 had returned substantial dividends to the Wheeler and Dusenbury partners; additional profitable investments had been made by N. P. Wheeler and by individual members of the firm in western timber. N. P. Wheeler's interest in timber conservation was shown by his caution in cutting the first-growth pine and hemlock so that long after other timber holdings had been exhausted, Wheeler and Dusenbury still had ample resources available. Some of the finest timber was in the height of land known as "Heart's Content" and there, later, the Company made a gift to the Federal Government of twenty acres of that beautiful timber, and sold to the Government one hundred acres, the resulting tract of 120 acres being preserved for "public use and enjoyment." That Heart's Content tract is at the center of the great "Allegheny National Forest" comprising over 500,000 acres of timberland which N. P. Wheeler's son, Alexander R. Wheeler, when a member of the State Legislature, helped to create and protect.

N. P. Wheeler was not only a successful lumberman, but a citizen who served his State and the National Government in the Legislature and Congress, and was active in public service work in the community and county. In 1878 he had been elected to the Pennsylvania State Legislature at Harrisburg, but refused a second nomination. He was an active leader in conservation measures, and in 1907 he had been given the Republican nomination for Representative from the 19th District of Pennsylvania in Congress. He served for two terms and refused a third nomination. He carried out his work in Washington with the same high principles as in Pennsylvania. In the lumber camps and in the town of Endeavor the sale of liquor was not permitted, and the local law strictly enforced. When N. P. Wheeler went to Washington and invited guests to dinner at the Willard Hotel where he lived, he had to take a position in regard to the serving of liquor at dinner. One evening Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler gave a dinner for James S. Sherman, who was Vice President, and for his wife and other friends in the government. When the chef at the Willard came to Mr. Wheeler to receive his orders for the dinner, he asked him, "What liquor shall we serve?"



N. P. WHEELER

From Pine Knots and Bark Peelers, by W. Reginald Wheeler

N. P. Wheeler answered: "We are temperance people, we do not want any liquor served!"

The chef replied: "But you cannot have a dinner in Washington without liquor."

N. P. Wheeler answered: "Well, there is going to be one!"

The dinner was served with no liquor officially appearing on the menu. Vice-President Sherman was impressed by this allegiance to principle. Later someone spoke of N. P. Wheeler to him, and he exclaimed: "Wheeler? Wheeler is the truest man in the House!"

During President Theodore Roosevelt's last year in office, a Bill was before the Congress, which, if passed, would have lowered the tariff on pulp-wood and certain forest products from Canada. The Pennsylvania lumbermen were opposed to the Bill as its passage would have brought in across the border increased quantities

of such forest products from Canada and would have made less profitable in the United States the marketing of lumber cut from small trees and derived from the growth in the slashings where the larger trees had been cut. N. P. Wheeler, as one of those Pennsylvania lumbermen, debated within himself whether or not to approach the President on this matter, and finally decided to attempt to see him and to present his views and those of the lumbermen in his district on the Bill. He enjoyed telling of his interview with "T. R."; how the President received him in his private office, "invited me to sit by him on the sofa, crooked his knee up on that sofa, put his arm around my shoulder and listened to me as I presented my views.

'Now, Mr. President, you have been in the woods enough to know how they look after the chief timber crop has been cut; how slashings are left in the timber that are frequently the cause of destructive forest fires; we are trying to cut out the smaller trees and clean up these slashings so that the fire risk will be avoided or reduced; the passage of this tariff bill will make it economically impossible for us to continue to do that, and we hope you will oppose the bill.'

Teddy said '*I did not know that! ! I did not know that!*'

and the President said he would not press the bill." The House heard nothing further of Presidential support and the Bill was defeated.

So much for glimpses of N. P. Wheeler as lumberman, public servant, and Congressman. A deeper insight into his character and into the source of his strength and warmth of spirit is given by his characteristic action in the family circle at the beginning of the day.

In earlier years the mills began work at six o'clock with the first whistle sounding at five. N. P. Wheeler was almost always at the mill as the day's work was begun. In later years, work began at seven o'clock, but always and every day, whether the mills started at six or at seven, N. P. Wheeler gathered his family together in his home after breakfast, and with them held family prayers. The order was always the same: the reading by each member of the family of a verse in the Bible; the singing of a familiar hymn: "Saviour, Like a Shepherd Lead Us," "He Leadeth Me,"

"Loving Kindness, O How Great," "At the Cross." The mother of the family would lead the singing; then all kneeled, and the father led in the prayer, closing with the Lord's Prayer. The prayer rarely varied:

We thank Thee we can gather to worship here, with no one to molest or make us afraid. We pray for Thy blessing on this community in which our lot is cast. Lead us out of nature's darkness into Thy marvelous light. Prosper our undertakings, if it be Thy will; may we be not slothful in business, but fervent in spirit, serving the Lord. Guide us, and bless us, and keep us, for Christ's Sake. Amen.



Church and kindergarten at Endeavor, Pa. The town took its name from the Christian Endeavor Society there.

Courtesy W. Reginald Wheeler

N. P. Wheeler and his wife were leaders in organizing the church in the village. Earnest Christian men joined the staff of the Company. I remember the Sunday School, Church and Weekly Prayer Meetings, held in the little church which was built in 1900, and the prayers of one of the elders, who would begin:

I was glad when they say, "Let us go into the house of the Lord."

We, who were boys, knew the men of the community. We saw with our own eyes the change in them from dissolute men, lawless, and heavy drinkers, into steady, dependable Christians. The superintendent of the Sunday School was George W. Warden, the superintendent of the Company, who was as reliable as the sun, and never missed a service. He was followed by Cleveland, who, as superintendent of the Sunday School, did not miss a service for 35 years. Endeavor became known throughout the surrounding counties and in the State as a lumber town characterized not by roistering and rough lumberjacks, as were many logging camps, but for the brightness of the Christian life and light and witness, and for the friendliness and fellowship of the people guided and blessed by that spirit.

N. P. Wheeler suffered a stroke in the Spring of 1916 when he was 75 years of age. He was partially paralyzed; later he regained the ability to walk, but he had lost the power of coherent speech. He was never able to recognize his family or loved ones, and lived thus for nearly four years. Nurses cared for him night and day. He was driven daily in the car; but his mind was gone. Yet even in those last days, before the end, his words were often in the familiar pattern of the family worship, twisted and garbled, and yet recognizable. He died March 3, 1920, in his California home in Pasadena, carrying to the end allegiance to the verses he often quoted in his prayers: "Not slothful in business, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord."

Dr. John A. Lester, for many years a member of the faculty of The Hill School, who accompanied the twin sons of N. P. Wheeler on several camping trips in Michigan and in Canada, who had visited Endeavor and stayed in the Wheeler home, thus wrote of his memories of N. P. Wheeler, of Bonnie Brae and of Endeavor:

It is an honor to have even the tip of the least finger in a book about N. P. Wheeler. I never knew him as I knew his sons and nephews, but the sharpest memory I hold of N. P. Wheeler is enough, because for me, the whole man is in it. Towards sundown at Heart's Content Mr. Wheeler stood alone, and as he thought, unobserved, beneath one of those magnificent white pines. He laid his left hand on the bole as if he were caressing the flank of his saddle-horse, and stood looking for the

best part of a minute, up along the straight shaft. There, I thought, stand two of a kind; physically all but blood brothers; spiritually identical twins. After four decades that is how I see him and think of him.

Bonnie Brae is what I remember best. It was a place of sunshine and peace, and from it northward stretched the wooded land over gentle slopes and through brooky valleys to that sanctuary of beauty where even a trout fisherman was minded to rest—Heart's Content. The seventeen miles between was filled with water music and the high pitched *noli me tangere* ("Don't touch me!") of blunt-faced bees, with pools and likely riffles where we had our bouts with fiery little trout of an incredible courage drawn from those cold springs of the pine woods.

Bonnie Brae was for me a strange commingling of the feudal, the patriarchal, the classical and the Christian, and withal it gave me the impression of being a piece of arrested pioneering, as if the westward-facing wagoners of a century ago had found here a place too good to leave and had changed their minds.

At Bonnie Brae it was a sort of refinement or flowering of feudalism, where the loyalty of the oath had grown into the loyalty of the heart, and the powerful motives of mythical chivalry had been sweetened by a positive and outgoing human love. But the strong hand was still there within; his knights felled hemlock and white pine, hauled the squared logs to the river and rode the timber rafts to Pittsburgh. Asher did not mount a charger and ride away with his eye peeled for a Tidioute damsel in distress; he peeled a log or manned a sweep, or primed his old bee-box with anise and strode off up the Hickory after wild honey to sweeten the missus over winter. The loyalties of this Wheeler feudalism bound the community of Endeavor together; you saw it even in the raucous lumber camp. But it was a loyalty with a difference.

I felt that N. P. Wheeler's influence was that of a patriarch as much as of a chieftain; he was sheriff and shepherd in one. There was in the feudalism of Bonnie Brae a peculiarly intimate, even familial democracy of a kind possible only in a small, relatively isolated community drawn together by a common purpose. I remember Asher's referring to members of N. P. Wheeler's family quite naturally by their Christian names, even by the affectionate nicknames that the boys used when they spoke of their kinsfolk.

This patriarchal influence of the home penetrated deep and radiated far. Family prayers at Bonnie Brae always

recalled to me the chair-moving we boys had to do after breakfast at home in England, and the maids tripping in with set caps and faces to sit upright while the big ha'-Bible was read, and the saint, the father, and the husband prayed—a Cotter's Saturday Night every morning at eight. Without knowing it, we were listening and responding to the language of the soul. The effect on the young? No bum-brusher who knew the younger Wheelers at school could miss the fact that behind these lads there had been at work a profound and permanent influence in the home. And this influence, centered in the father, spread out. So that it was natural for Asher after the wreck of the canoes on the Steel River, to take out his Bible and read it about the campfire. The record tells that part of what he chose to read was the fourteenth and fifteenth chapters of Matthew. Grub had been lost and trout were scarce. Faith remained; and the old man chose to recall once again the two occasions when Jesus made a few little fishes go so far. "And they did all eat and were filled."

The woodsmen and rivermen of Bonnie Brae had somehow developed a touching courtesy and delicacy. Perhaps it came from contact with the women of the household. I have in mind old Emery, Frank's brother, biting into comb honey, and warning me from where he sat on the beelog, of the penalty you paid for doing what he did—"Have a care, Doctor, have a care; basswood honey when it's warm in the comb *will put a man to flight.*"

Closely entangled with these elements in my memories of Bonnie Brae is the impression that the woods and streams of the Wheeler and Dusenbury Lumber Company were somehow the favorite haunts of the spirits of Theocritus, Vergil, Horace and Catullus, and that sometimes the noble shade of Plato came and sat down with us as we lengthened out the lunch hour by the brookside.

Or those wild two hours of fish-spearing by night on the Allegheny: the long, black, square-ended river punt with the four cressets high over the gunwales; the boatmen holding her evenly across the current; the three of us with fish-spears, and the punt bottom at the end of the passage slippery with suckers, wall-eyed pike and Allegheny "salmon." Gross, ignoble, primitive fishing? No; we were Poseidons with tridons riding the Thesalion horses by night.

It was not the Hickory that we three were wading, it was the nymph-haunted Mincio; the brooks and rich upland meadows were fresh with a new radiance after

the twins had drunk deep of those "useless studies" at Yale. Jimmy led the Naiads up the Beaver and the Otter; he gave the Dryads the freedom of the new Elysium at Heart's Content; he lived for me as the Tityrus of the Forest County woodlands.

Bonnie Brae burned down "and there was mourning among all they that cast angle into the brooks." And Jimmy left us for a while to pace by other waters. But these memories of the house and the true men bred under its roof endure to lift and to fortify the heart.

Tityre hinc aberat. Ipsae te, Tityre, pinus,

Ipsi te fontes, ipsa haec arbusta vocabant.

(Tityrus has gone hence; but the fountains and even these sturdy pine trees still speak of him. Vergil. Eclogue I, 39-40.)

