

***Montana's Smallest National Historic
Landmark: The Burton K. Wheeler House***

Chere Jiusto

Burton Kendall Wheeler was one of Montana's most independent minded and nationally prominent Democratic senators. Raised in Massachusetts, he was drawn westward as a young law school graduate to "go anywhere that was wide open with opportunity."¹ Wheeler settled on Butte in 1905, where he built a general law practice and launched a political career, his philosophies shaped by the teachings from his Quaker upbringing and by his career as a progressive Butte lawyer living in a neighborhood of industrial laborers and railroad workers.

Wheeler rose through the political ranks in Montana to national stature and was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1922. His tenure was marked by his vigorous campaign for peace in the 1930s and 1940s and for the need to limit corporate and federal powers. According to historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr, Wheeler became "the most formidable of the Senate radicals."² During the buildup to World War II, he was central in framing isolationist arguments against entering the war. His antiwar fervor led him to contest President Roosevelt's plans for American intervention in the war to the point that he circulated to the press Roosevelt's secret 1941 Victory Plan for

entry into the war and supported the America First antiwar committee.

Wheeler's legal cases included damage suits against mining and railroad companies, and his hard-shelled criminal defendants included a train robber, a safe blower, Butte madams, and the union men of the Butte mines. Wheeler felt at home in the bustling, cacophonous landscape of the mining city and identified with Butte's working citizens. He penned in his 1962 memoirs, *Yankee from the West*:

Butte is not a pretty town. It is a honeycombed hill throwing up a network of trestles, railroad tracks, bunkers, transmission lines, etc. . . . The fiery smelters which shoot glowing abstractions into the big Montana sky also sometimes cover the entire city in winter with a soot that prevents you from seeing across the street. The arsenic smoke long ago killed all grass and trees in Butte.

Yet there was something inspiring to me in the sight of the miners' neat one-story houses. Many of them did their own painting and plumbing and I was amazed at how clean and well furnished the houses were and how well dressed the wives and children were.

Above all, it was a generous, democratic community. It didn't make any

difference who you were, where you came from, or how much money you had.³

Butte's ethnic neighborhoods were inviting to thousands of enterprising workers, and Burton K. Wheeler became part of their growing population. In 1908, he purchased a house at 1232 East Second Street and put down roots in the working enclave of South Butte at the base of the Uptown. Wheeler embraced the character and way of life in the working-class neighborhoods. For the next fourteen years, he and his wife, Lulu, lived on East Second Street and raised their young family there. Wheeler later recalled in his memoirs:

In my second year on my own, my practice improved to the point where I could make a down payment on a \$4000 four-room brick house on Second Street near the heart of the town. It was one of the more substantially built houses in that area and, with additions made as our family grew, it was to prove large enough for the Wheeler family all the years we lived in Butte.⁴

Wheeler was elected to the Montana House of Representatives in 1910. In Helena, he stood up to the influence of the Anaconda Copper Mining Company, allying himself with rising Montana Democratic

Party leader Thomas Walsh and pushing for a stronger workers' compensation law. Following Walsh's election to the U.S. Senate in 1912, Wheeler was appointed U.S. attorney for Montana and held that office from 1913 to 1918. His tenure spanned the era of Butte's greatest political upheaval as unionists and socialists gained influence and challenged the dominion of the copper companies. Wheeler's steadfast refusal to charge Industrial Workers of the World organizer Frank Little with espionage during the politically charged summer of 1917 was controversial and courageous. It was a time of "mass hysteria" that ultimately led to Little's lynching from a Butte railroad trestle. Wheeler also refused to prosecute for sedition those who disagreed with the government's war policy, efforts that he felt overreached. These experiences fueled his campaign against the concentration and abuse of government power.

By the 1920s, Wheeler was a prominent figure in Montana. Although he lost election to the governor's office in 1920, he was elected in 1922 to represent Montana in the U.S. Senate. The Wheelers moved to Washington, D.C., where he served in the Senate until 1947. Always independent, as Montana's junior senator in 1923 Wheeler teamed up with Senator Walsh in the Teapot Dome probe, which exposed the corruption and influence of big oil in President Warren G. Harding's administration. The following year, Wheeler briefly broke ranks with the Democrats to run as a third-party



candidate for vice president with the Progressive Party.

Wheeler held staunchly to an antiwar platform across the years. And although he was an early supporter of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, he opposed FDR over the issue of “packing” the Supreme Court with extra justices to ensure that New Deal programs could withstand legal challenges.

Wheeler is best known for his opposition to an American role in World War II. In 1941, he denounced

The Burton K. Wheeler House, 2009. Courtesy Dori Skrukrud, Butte Community Development Office.

Roosevelt’s Lend-Lease Act, which authorized the president to sell, trade, or lend war materials to the Allies, saying it would draw the United States into war. It was during this debate that he made the famous declaration that the Lend-Lease act would

“plow under every fourth American boy.”⁵ He held his staunch antiwar position until the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. After America’s entry into World War II, Wheeler’s camp lost support and his career drew to a close.

Wheeler’s long career as a Butte politician and his life in South Butte appear to have galvanized his independent nature and his willingness to fight a good fight. The Wheeler family home placed him on equal footing with his South Butte neighbors, whom he regarded with friendship and respect, as he remembered in later years:

The neighborhood was made up of railroad men, small merchants, and workers with modest incomes; I was the only professional among them. My choice of living there after I could afford an expensive residential section undoubtedly was worth extra votes every time I ran for office. But in truth this was not my motive in refusing to move. I simply enjoyed associating with these hard-working, fun-loving Irish, Welsh, and Cornish families. There was no pretension and there was plenty of merriment.⁶

Built in 1897 for \$975, in many ways the Wheeler house was typical of the thousands of dwellings built

in Butte’s heyday. Its original owner was a Canadian warehouse worker, and the house at the time of Wheeler’s purchase was a simple Victorian worker’s cottage—one story, brick walls, four rooms, tiny yard. The arched brick openings and sixteen-over-one sash windows were typical late-nineteenth-century embellishments that enriched the design beyond mere utility.⁷

The Burton K. Wheeler House bears the imprint of the growing Wheeler family. By 1916, the four-room brick house had sprouted an upstairs with large dormer windows and a roomier floorplan. The Craftsman period makeover resulted in broad roof gables, bracketed eaves, exposed rafters, and the battered, shingled post on the front porch, giving the house an overall appearance of an early-twentieth-century middle-class dwelling.

Throughout Butte, since first settled, there was much intermingling of working and professional classes, and the trappings of heavy industry were mixed freely into the city’s urban fabric. With the underground mines dug deep beneath the Butte hill, the city was perched atop an industrial beehive. As a result, mine yards, headframes, rail spurs, trolley lines, smelters, warehouses, tailings piles, and heavy manufacturers were common to most every neighborhood, and housing for workers was arranged in the spaces between and near these job sites. The Burton K. Wheeler property is typical of such homes, standing within a

small six-block enclave that was hemmed in between the Northern Pacific Railway and the Great Northern Railroad lines and engulfed by industry.

The Wheelers' neighborhood was a gritty, noisy place. Across the tracks to the north were the old mine yards of the Butte, Curtis and Major Mining Company and the Alliance Mine as well as a set of stockyard corrals. The Western Iron Works bordered the neighborhood to the east. Down Second Street to the west, the Butte Gas, Light and Fuel Company refined coal into gas and coke, while across the tracks to the south loomed the Parrot Smelter.

This was Butte in its glory days. Embedded in the Butte-Anaconda National Historic Landmark, the Burton K. Wheeler House is an integral part of the

working-class South Butte neighborhood. The home and its setting are a window into America's industrial past.

In 1976, a year after he died, Wheeler's modest Butte home became a National Historic Landmark for its association with a man who shaped the national discourse over war.⁸ Its location offers insights into Wheeler's affinity with working people and how their attitudes and values helped shape his thinking during his time in Butte, a way of thinking that accompanied him onto the national stage. Occupying just a city building lot, the Burton K. Wheeler House is Montana's smallest National Historic Landmark, reflecting the humble background of Montana's controversial senator.

¹ Burton K. Wheeler with Paul F. Healy, *Yankee from the West: The Candid Story of the Freewheeling U.S. Senator from Montana* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1962), 57.

² Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Politics of Upheaval, 1935–1936* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 142.

³ Wheeler, *Yankee from the West*, 65.

⁴ Wheeler, *Yankee from the West*, 67–68.

⁵ Michael P. Malone, Richard B. Roeder, and William L. Lang, *Montana: A History of Two Centuries*, rev. ed. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991), 312.

⁶ Wheeler, *Yankee from the West*, 68.

⁷ Michael Koop, "Montana Historical and Architectural Inventory Form for 1232 East Second Street, Butte-Anaconda National Historic Landmark," 1984, on file at Montana

State Historic Preservation Office, Helena.

⁸ American Association for State and Local History, "Burton K. Wheeler House, National Historic Landmark Nomination," 1976, on file at the Montana State Historic Preservation Office, Helena.