

Ralph Hicks Wheeler

September 11, 1883 — March 20, 1962

Ralph Hicks Wheeler was born in East Bloomfield, New York, the son of George A. and Mary Belle (Hicks) Wheeler.

After graduating from Canandaigua Academy in 1904, he began his long association with Cornell in 1905 as a special student in the College of Agriculture.

In 1908 he returned to his home farm near East Bloomfield, expecting to remain a farmer. Extension teaching from the College of Agriculture was gathering momentum at that time, and in 1909 he was invited to assist Charles Tuck, who in 1906 had been appointed to head the extension work. A small staff was carrying a heavy load in a period of rapid growth, but Instructor Wheeler found time and energy to complete his interrupted college work and took his Bachelor's degree in 1912. He was immediately appointed an Assistant Professor in the College of Agriculture. Full professorship came in 1917.

The functions of the old "Extension Department" in the College of Agriculture included courses in public speaking; the Reading Courses and the Nature Study program; publication of the Rural School Leaflets; distribution of experiment station bulletins, promotion and organization of Farmers' Institutes and Extension Schools; lectures and demonstrations; fair exhibits; and other activities that laid the groundwork for the development of the county extension work in agriculture and home economics. Professor Wheeler participated in all these activities. In 1908 he had been a member of the student committee that assisted in planning the first Farm and Home Week, which grew out of the college-sponsored "Experimenters' League." He continued to direct that annual event for the next thirty years, while it grew to nationally known stature.

During the period of Professor Wheeler's service to Cornell, the College of Agriculture grew from a small and not-too-highly regarded academic unit in the University to a position of pre-eminence both at home and abroad. In shaping the policies and molding the structure of the institution Professor Wheeler played a most important role.

During these earlier years of the University's work in agriculture and home economics, he earned the reputation among his colleagues for sound judgment, reasonable conservatism, and absolutely dependable integrity in safeguarding the expenditure of public funds. It was recognition of these qualities that resulted in Professor Wheeler's being appointed October 1, 1932, to the newly created position of assistant treasurer of the university

in charge of the finances of the New York State Colleges and Experiment Stations under the administration of Cornell University.

Professor Wheeler was admirably qualified for the added responsibilities given him. He had served in an administrative capacity in the Extension Service; he had seen all the buildings of the State Colleges erected with the exception of James Law Hall; he was personally acquainted with most, if not all, of the staff members of these institutions; and he was familiar with all the lands used by the State Colleges as well as experienced in the use of both state and federal appropriations and the restrictions on their use.

Although Professor Wheeler's original appointment of assistant treasurer covered only the balance of the fiscal year 1932-1933, he continued in that capacity until his retirement in 1951. During the nineteen years that he held the office, he was faced with many complex problems arising first from the Depression years, then from World War II, and later from the postwar period of expansion and adjustment. Under his supervision, there was established a central business office for all of the State Colleges, which by 1951 included thirty-one staff members and handled annual budgets in excess of thirteen million dollars.

Among the more outstanding accomplishments of those years of expansion in which Professor Wheeler had an active part was the creation of the new School of Industrial and Labor Relations, the establishment of a salary classification system, and the beginning of construction of the new Albert R. Mann Library.

For many years Professor Wheeler taught resident courses in public speaking and parliamentary law and procedure in the College of Agriculture. Because of his proficiency in those fields and his courteous and friendly personality, his services were in great demand for presiding at meetings and as judge or moderator of oratorical stages and debates. Many persons who had got themselves into a tough parliamentary tangle while presiding at a meeting were rescued when they saw Ralph Wheeler in the audience and asked him what to do next.

Professor Wheeler was a true public servant. His continuous ambition was to make sure that the taxpayers of New York State received full value for every dollar invested in resident teaching, research, and extension at the State Colleges and Experiment Stations under Cornell administration. The restriction of appropriations or emergency situations frequently forced him to turn down requests for the expenditure of funds. But when that happened, all concerned could be confident that the funds denied would be used for a more urgent need.

Professor Wheeler's sound judgment and his high professional and personal integrity won for him at Cornell, Albany, and Washington the respect and admiration of all with whom he worked. His interests in resident teaching,

research, and extension, and his desire to see all three equitably supported kept him above criticism, even by those whose proposed activities were restricted by allocation of funds that Professor Wheeler handled.

Professor Wheeler was a trustee of the Ithaca Savings Bank and for several years after he retired from Cornell served that bank as an active officer. He was a member of the Ithaca Rotary Club, Senior Citizens, Alpha Gamma Rho fraternity, and Forest Home Chapel; he was a charter member of the Cornell chapter of the honorary extension fraternity Epsilon Sigma Phi.

Ralph Wheeler was a friend and adviser to deans, students, professors, janitors, bankers, neighbors, farmers, clerks, and tradesmen—all were welcome at any time in his office or his home. His counsel on academic, business, and personal problems will be long remembered by all who were fortunate enough to receive it.

Death came to him on March 20, 1962, at 119 Forest Home Drive where he and Mrs. Wheeler, the former Jessie Elizabeth Hart, who predeceased him by several years, had made their home since he started work with the College of Agriculture.

He is survived by a daughter, Mrs. Richard C. Crosby of Birmingham, Alabama; two sons, Kenneth E., of Olean, New York, and Ralph, Jr., of Libya; two sisters, Mrs. Percy Pettit of Canandaigua and Mrs. Stanley Freeman of Rochester, New York; six grandchildren, and several nieces and nephews.

A. W. Gibson, Arthur H. Peterson, Van B. Hart