Memorial to Walter Hall Wheeler 1923–1989

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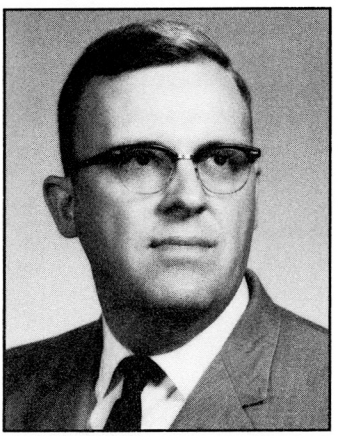

Professor Walter Hall Wheeler, a Fellow of the Society since 1964, was not only a distinguished Atlantic Coastal Plain and Triassic basin stratigrapher and paleontologist but also a first-rate and beloved teacher who advised or co-advised eight doctoral students and 16 masters students. Though small, a more loyal and successful group of scientists would be difficult to find. Walter worked with them from the time he came to the University of North Carolina as an instructor in 1951 until his retirement at age 62 in 1986. He enjoyed three quality years of retirement until his death of a massive heart attack in Chapel Hill, on November 21, 1989.

Walter loved people, and they loved him; he was a person who would listen, think, and respond to nearly any topic under the sun, including the Civil War and good food. He was a true, well-read renaissance person, and he remained an FDR liberal Democrat his entire life!

Walter was born on December 21, 1923, in Syracuse, New York, and grew up in Grand Forks, North Dakota, where his father was on the zoology faculty at the university. His mother died while he was in high school. Walter attended the University of North Dakota from 1940 to 1942, and then served in the United States Army Air Corps from 1943 to 1946, during which time he became a meteorologist and a 1st Lieutenant. He earned his BS in geology in 1945, and the MS in geology in 1948, both from the University of Michigan. His masters research dealt with the paleontology and stratigraphy of Cenozoic strata in the Upper Ruby River basin of Montana. His doctoral research, on Uintatheres of basins in the western mountain states, was done at Yale University, where he earned the Ph.D. in 1951. Both advanced degrees resulted in major museum publications.

Walter rose through the academic ranks at the University of North Carolina as instructor (1951–1952), assistant professor (1952–1957), associate professor (1957–1968), and professor (1968). During his time in Chapel Hill he was active in numerous organizations: editor of the Journal of the Elisha Mitchell Scientific Society, 1960–1966; president of the Carolina Geological Society, 1971–1972; president of the University of North Carolina Chapter of Sigma Xi, 1974–1975 and 1984–1985; president of the Carolina Section of the American Institute of Professional Geologists, 1976; and chairman of the Southeastern Section of the Geological Society of America, 1986–1987. He also served the University as an elected member of the Faculty Council (1957–1960 and 1965–1968), and University Research Council (1971–1974 and 1975–1977). In addition to GSA, he was a member of the Society of Vertebrate Paleontologists, American Association of Petroleum Geologists, Paleontological Society, American Association for the Advancement of Science, Society of Economic Paleontologists and Mineralogists, History of Science Society, North Carolina Academy of Science, and Elisha Mitchell Scientific Society.

As a two-term president of the local chapter of Sigma Xi, Walter gave such informative and popular presentations at the annual dinner meetings that even nonmembers were attracted to his talks. The first was an enthralling presentation on the origin of the Carolina Bays of the southeastern United States, and the second was a spellbinding talk on the geology of the Upper Triassic–Lower Jurassic rift basins of the eastern United States. He was an expert on each topic, and was able to present the material in a scientific but understandable way to an audience of mixed ages and scientific backgrounds. These talks are still remembered by those who attended.

No one was more in demand than Walter; he spoke to gem associations, fossil clubs, and various museum and school groups. He could make dinosaurs come alive! He made time for these presentations while assembling a bibliography of 26 journal articles, 20 abstracts, and 19 field guidebooks and maps.

The summer after his first year of teaching, he and his family spent a vacation at the family place on Sebago Lake, Maine, an idyllic spot that still serves as summer headquarters for the family. On the way back to Chapel Hill, he became ill with polio, which damaged his legs and vocal cords. For a teacher and field geologist, it could not have been more critical. Walter met the challenge. Although he missed teaching and professional activities for the fall of 1952, he was back at work in January 1953. With the use of crutches and canes, he continued an active career. In the field, he could put faculty and students to shame. Even after retirement, he was an active participant in a field trip held in conjunction with the Third Annual Midyear Meeting of the Society of Economic Paleontologists and Mineralogists, held in Raleigh, in the fall of 1986. He had to show an outcrop of basal Upper Triassic strata that lay by nonconformity on upper Precambrian metamorphosed beds. Because the exposure was along the steep ledge of an abandoned quarry, it was treacherous. But, accepting no help, he crawled ahead of the field party, pulling his crutches with him so he would be the first at the site and in position to hold his audience spellbound.

This was a most beloved and large man, with a big heart and a keen mind, who knew no obstacles. His presence in Mitchell Hall will be missed by all faculty, students, and staff, both past and present.

Walter Wheeler is survived by his wife of nearly 45 years, the former Eula Krueger; a daughter, Dr. Dianna Wheeler of Tuscon, Arizona; a son, Roger Wheeler of Casco, Maine; his father and stepmother, Dr. George Wheeler and Dr. Jeannette Wheeler of Silver Springs, Florida; a brother, Colonel Ralph Wheeler of Sheppard Air Force Base, Texas; and four grandchildren.

The family has requested that memorials be made to the Walter H. Wheeler Teaching Award fund in the Department of Geology, University of North Carolina. This fund was established on his retirement. The award is made each spring to an outstanding graduate student teacher. Walter's love of students and teaching makes this a fitting memorial.

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