

Wheeler, Raymond Milner ^[1]

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by J. Isaac Copeland, 1996

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Raymond Milner Wheeler, physician, champion of the rights of the poor and hungry, and crusader for social justice, was born in [Farmville](#) ^[2], where his father, George Raymond Wheeler, was superintendent of schools. His mother was Sallie Kate Collins Wheeler. Young Wheeler attended [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[3] (1936–39) and in the fall of 1939 entered the university's two-year School of Medicine. He received a certificate after completing the course of study, then entered the [Medical School of Washington University](#) ^[4], St. Louis, and was awarded a medical degree in 1943. Dr. Wheeler served his internship in Barnes Hospital, also located in St. Louis.

From 1944 to 1946 he served in the Army Medical Corps with the rank of captain. Wheeler participated in some of the war's heaviest fighting, including the [Battle of the Bulge](#) ^[5], and was awarded the Silver Star and a Purple Heart. After being mustered out of service he was a resident in medicine at North Carolina Baptist Hospital in [Winston-Salem](#) ^[6] until 1948, when he entered the practice of internal medicine in association with the Charlotte Medical Clinic. From 1966 to 1970 he was clinical associate professor of medicine in [The University of North Carolina Medical School](#) ^[7]. Wheeler's standing in the medical profession was soundly based; he was a diplomate of the [American Board of Internal Medicine](#) ^[8] (1951), a [Fellow of the American College of Physicians](#) ^[9], and recipient in 1969 of The University of North Carolina Medical School's Distinguished Service Award.

Many remember him as a shy, smallish man who loved good jokes yet was unable to tell them, and as "a graying physician . . . who still made house calls." Dr. William Porter, a medical partner, was impressed by Wheeler's acute power of observation both in the examining room and in the field; he regarded him as a doctor who not only "understood the science of medicine . . . [but] had the art to underpin it." There were those who regarded Wheeler as cold, even abrupt, or at least not overly warm. This seemingly impersonal quality was a part of his nature for he was not one to engage in small talk with patients, nor was he a sympathetic handholder. However, any impression of coolness or indifference belied Wheeler's concern for the sick and for mankind in general.

In addition to being a knowledgeable and able physician there was another Raymond Wheeler, a man who for three decades worked to better the lot of society's neglected ones. He was, indeed, a doctor cast in a different mold. Social concerns led him to active membership in the [Southern Regional Council](#) ^[10], the North Carolina Council for Human Relations, the National Sharecroppers' Fund, the [North Carolina Hunger Coalition](#) ^[11], the Voter Education Project, and [Southerners for Economic Justice](#) ^[12]. For four of these organizations he was at one time or another a member of the executive committee (or board of directors) and later president. In recognition of his distinguished service to the cause of civil liberty the [North Carolina Civil Liberties Union](#) ^[13] honored him in 1979 with the Frank Porter Graham Award.

In 1967 Wheeler joined a team of six doctors who conducted a study of the health and living conditions of Black children in two rural Mississippi counties. A report of their findings was published by the Southern Regional Council under the title [Hungry Children](#) ^[14]. Members of the team were later called to testify before the U.S. Senate's Employment, Manpower, and Poverty Subcommittee. Wheeler's testimony was devastating as he described the cases of lack of health care, malnutrition, and near starvation they had seen. His was the testimony most frequently quoted by the national press, and it brought him both support and a flood of hate mail. Mississippi's senators, James Eastland and John Stennis, though not members of the subcommittee, were in attendance and responded angrily. Eastland called the testimony "totally untrue," and Stennis labeled it as "gross libel and slander." These two lawmakers referred to the doctors as "outside agitators" and "quickie experts on Mississippi health." The Mississippi newspapers and a few others in the Deep South, plus a radio station or two, followed suit.

Wheeler was also a member of a group of physicians who surveyed health and living conditions among migrant farm workers in Texas and Florida, and he sat on the Citizens Board of Inquiry into Hunger and Malnutrition in the United States. The Citizens Board published [Hunger, U.S.A., 1967–1968](#) ^[15], with Wheeler selected by CBS for preparation of the television documentary *Hunger in America, 1967–1968*.

Wheeler's marriage in 1942 to Mary Lou Browning ended in divorce in 1956. In 1958 he married Julie Buckner Carr, who survived him. By his first wife he had three children—Linda Lou, Margaret Browning, and David Stewart.

Wheeler died suddenly at age sixty-two as the result of a heart attack. Long before his death he had let it be known that he wanted no funeral or memorial service. During his lifetime he had "gently sustained old people and fought for little children. He [had] comforted the afflicted and sometimes afflicted the comfortable." He was a southerner saddened by the twin blights of malnutrition and injustice and set out to do something about them. The path that he walked might well have led to self-righteousness, but modesty and sincerity were his hallmarks, not self-importance. It can be said that his

influence over a period of almost two decades made a vast difference in the physical well-being of the poor.

Wheeler was a member of the Unitarian Fellowship and for a term was president of the Charlotte congregation. His papers—containing about 1,740 items—in the University of North Carolina's Southern Historical Collection and the newspaper clipping file of the university's North Carolina Collection are the prime sources of information about his career.

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