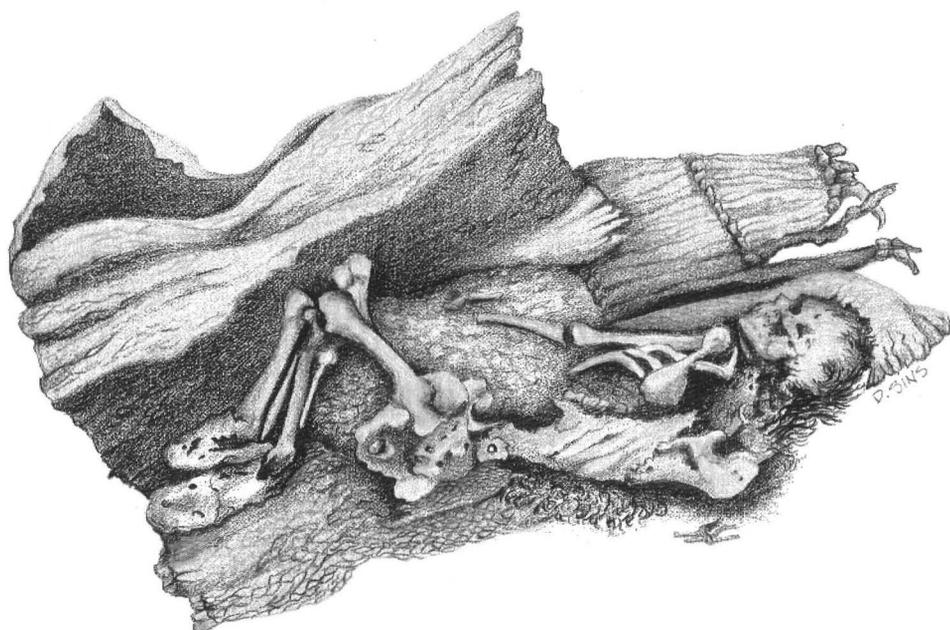


# Nevada

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# NEVADA HISTORICAL SOCIETY QUARTERLY

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# GEORGIA WHEELER IS STILL ALIVE (And We Have Her Voice on Tape)

Diane Lynne Winslow and Jeffrey R. Wedding

## FOREWORD

The authors' first entanglement with S. M. and Georgia Wheeler was during the summer of 1995. I was deciding on a topic for my M.A. thesis and working for the Desert Research Institute (DRI). While searching through mounds of what seemed to be ancient field records written in hieroglyphics or some ancient script, I discovered S. M. Wheeler. After breaking down numerous walls of opposition regarding his name, I eventually discovered that Wheeler had been quite an influential early Great Basin archaeologist. This evolved into my thesis, *Restricted Reconnaissance: The History and Archaeology of S. M. Wheeler in Nye County, Nevada*.

Those who have read S. M. Wheeler's publications are familiar with his casual narrative style. The present writers thought it fitting to adopt that style, and have written this essay straight from our field journals. For continuity, it is presented from Diane's perspective. Jeff's personal comments appear in italics.

*Diane asked me to accompany her to the Nevada State Museum for a few weeks during the summer of 1995, where she analyzed a portion of the Wheeler collection applicable to her thesis. During the early part of 1996 I spent time in the field with Diane as she attempted to relocate Wheeler's Nye County sites. At this time I began to take a sincere*

First I would like to thank Claude Warren, had he not have sent his message I might have missed this interview. Next, I would like to thank Georgia Felts for the wonderful three days and the information she shared. In addition, I would like to thank Ben Felts, Loraine and Jim Beasley, and Rebecca Felts for their gracious southern hospitality. I would also like to thank the Desert Research Institute, the Landers Endowment, the Nevada State Museum, and the James Calhoun Foundation for funding my research. Last, but most certainly never least, I want to thank my colleague and co-author Jeffrey Wedding for everything.

—Diane Winslow

I would like to thank Diane for letting me join her in her research. I would like to thank the Desert Research Institute, particularly Collen Beck, and Donald Tuohy and the staff of the Nevada State Museum. Finally, I would like to thank the Feltses and the Beasleys for letting a couple of ragtag archaeologists into their homes.

—Jeff Wedding

*interest in her thesis as the history of an archaeological forefather began to surface. Today's professional archaeologists frequently dismiss the work of pioneering "amateur" archaeologists as lacking in theory and method. However, Wheeler's work showed a competent methodical avocationalist performing at a level equal to that of contemporary professionals.*

Throughout his career S. M. Wheeler was accompanied by his wife, Georgia. Together they surveyed and excavated at numerous archaeological sites between 1933 and 1956 throughout the Great Basin. Projects included such prominent archaeological sites as Little Lake, Borax Lake, Etna Cave, Pueblo Grande de Nevada, Tule Springs, and Spirit Cave. At the time I wrote my thesis, Georgia's whereabouts were unknown and many presumed she had passed away shortly after her husband's death in 1959. I finished my thesis and received my degree from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV), in May of 1996. Within a week of semester's end, Jeff and I departed for fieldwork with DRI. After two weeks of survey, I returned to my office to find a surprise.

#### ARCHAEOLOGISTS TURN TO ETHNOGRAPHY

Early on the afternoon of May 23, 1996, I discovered that Georgia Wheeler Felts was alive. Sitting in my office reading through two weeks of back mail I found a message from Claude Warren of UNLV. The message read:

Diane, Georgia Wheeler Felts is 93, in a seniors home in Nashville, Tenn. Furthermore she says the people at the Nevada State Museum are wrong in their statement that the Wheelers never realized the significance of their work. Georgia claims that she and S. M. knew they had an old mummy and that they hoped it would be as old as it has proved to be. She says their contemporaries also thought that it was old. "We didn't go into that cave accidentally," she said. "This was my husband's profession . . ." They knew then that it was an old discovery. It is said that the Wheelers were dissuaded by other experts who put its age at not more than 3,000 years. Diane, get to it! Call her and make an appointment to go interview her with lots of tapes. This is a major person in the history of Great Basin Archaeology.

Having been in the field, I had missed several news releases the previous two weeks. The Nevada State Museum had released data on a mummy excavated in 1940 by the Wheelers. The mummy was uncovered in Spirit Cave, and, at the time, M. R. Harrington of the Southwest Museum suggested a date of approximately 2,000 years. The new radiocarbon date of 9,415 years came as a great surprise, making it the oldest mummy found in North America (Dansie 1996; Tuohy 1996; Tuohy and Dansie 1996; Kirner *et al.* 1996).

The Nevada State Museum's initial press release went around the world. The article stated that unfortunately the Wheelers had passed away not knowing the significance of their discovery. The release appeared in a paper in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, where it was read by Loraine Beasley, Georgia's step-daughter. Loraine

began to make phone calls to spread the word that her step-mother was in fact still alive, living with her second husband, Ben Felts. These phone calls resulted in the second press release read in *The Las Vegas Review-Journal* by Dr. Warren (Associated Press 1996). In the days that followed I contacted the Associated Press as well as Donald Tuohy and Amy Dansie of the Nevada State Museum, who provided me with Georgia's address and telephone number.

On the possibility of an interview I wrote a research proposal which would get me to Nashville, Tennessee. I gave the proposal to Colleen Beck, deputy director at the Quaternary Sciences Center of the Desert Research Institute. After telling me that everything looked great, she passed it onto the center director, Steven G. Wells. I quickly got on the phone and called Loraine. To my surprise, she was overwhelmed and explained the entire family would love to have me come out and interview Georgia as the basis for a biography, the archaeological careers of the Wheelers.

Within twenty-four hours I had my answer. Steven Wells had arranged for me to utilize moneys provided to the institute by the Landers Endowment. The only things lacking were airline tickets, a book outlining tape recorded interview methods (I had never done an oral history), and a helpful colleague.

*The helpful colleague was simple. Since I am a fellow DRI employee, UNLV graduate student, and already quite familiar with the subject. I have convinced myself that Diane thought of no other. I don't even remember her asking me if I wanted to go. I recall getting back to the office after a week in the field and Diane walking into the lab babbling something incoherent at me like "George is still benign." I wasn't quite sure what she was trying to tell me. Finally she took a deep breath and said, "Georgia Wheeler is still alive." This prompted me to say, "When are we leaving?" Diane started writing for grant money and I started rolling pennies. Somehow we both managed to get on a red-eye heading east.*

I turned to Edward Ives's 1995 book, *The Tape-Recorded Interview, A Manual for Fieldworkers in Folklore and Oral History*, to answer my questions about ethnographic methods. As for arrival dates, I called Loraine. She explained to me that I should come as soon as possible as Georgia was not necessarily in the best of health. I suggested the following week. This was problematic and thus the week of June 24 was chosen.

At this point, I spent my days preparing questions and gathering knowledge about oral histories. At 1:30 A.M. on June 25, 1996, Jeff and I boarded a plane to Nashville. I had agreed to call Loraine at 9:00 on the morning of our arrival to set a time for an initial contact with Georgia. When I called, Loraine informed me that Georgia would be expecting us at 2:00 that afternoon. I almost collapsed! I was so tired with jet lag that I thought I would never make it through the day. Jeff and I discussed strategies over lunch. I explained that everything should be fine as I only wanted to introduce ourselves and explain exactly how the interview would take place. I figured we would be at the Felts home for approximately an hour and then we could return to the hotel and sleep.

INTERVIEW: DAY ONE

When we arrived at the Feltses' apartment, Georgia, Ben, and Ben's daughter Rebecca Felts all began talking at the same time. Before I could even ask permission to tape record, Georgia was explaining how pleased she was that we had come and began recounting stories of her husband and their lives together.

I went to Texas Women's University at Denton. When I graduated, I didn't want to... teach or anything, and dad said you choose what you want. . . I went to Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City for a six-month internship on institutional management and special dietary treatments and came back to San Antonio where I was one of four dietitians . . . all with the same training and I had charge of the special dietary department . . . Wheeler, I met in the hospital, he was in temporarily, I do not remember for what. But, . . . they used to come to the dining room when they were able to, the officers and their wives who were in a unit in the main building, and I met him there . . . Well, we were in Texas for quite awhile, . . . I started working for . . . the University of Nevada . . . and we moved to Nevada. And, I worked [with] 4H Club leaders and 4H Club member activities and so forth. (Felts 1996a)

The afternoon was going quite well. While conducting my thesis research, I discovered that the Wheelers and M. R. Harrington had worked together on numerous projects. One of the questions asked was when the Wheelers had first met Harrington. According to Georgia they met during a trip to California during the late 1920s.

. . . while we were there, they had this special exhibit at the Southwest Museum . . . and [we] met Dr. Harrington . . . he never had a doctorate. Mark Raymond. Everyone called him Mark Raymond, and a lot of people called him doctor, but he wasn't. But, he was a wonderful man and very thorough and very professional in all his work in the field of archaeology. (Felts 1996a)

The Wheelers' initial relationship with Harrington was that of protégés. This relationship grew over the years into a life long friendship.

Well, of course, we were working under Dr. Harrington more or less, he urged us that facts were the important thing, and that in caring for anything that we discovered we should use the best method of preserving it for future generations and not just to take something you found out and show it, exhibit it for everyone to see, but properly exhibited, yes. And this . . . neither one of us had any training except the advice that he has given us and he was a dedicated . . . archaeologist himself and I feel if I have made any contribution, I am just glad (Felts 1996a).

After approximately two hours of talking (only one hour on tape) I ended the afternoon interview. Before leaving I explained to Georgia exactly what type of information we were seeking. She hoped that the next day we would have more

specific questions for her, feeling that approach would help her remember. She also proceeded to invite Jeff and me to join her and Ben for lunch the following day. We agreed and said we would meet them at 11:30 A.M.

*To clarify a point here, we were actually invited to dinner. My first real translation and protocol efforts were required. My family is from Kentucky so I was familiar with the region's jargon. I explained to Diane that arriving at 11:30 a.m. for dinner was the proper time since food would be served at noon. Most southerners know that there are actually two big meals a day, dinner and supper. Dinner, unlike Out West, is served at noon and supper about sixish. Diane, having grown up Out West, was unaware of this and was operating on the familiar breakfast, lunch, and dinner terms and was rightfully confused. This would not be the last time I would have to remind her of this. However, Diane did get it figured out by the time we left Tennessee, and was acting and speaking almost like a native.*

On the return trip to the hotel Jeff and I stopped at a local Shoney's restaurant for dinner [*that should be supper*]. During supper we discussed strategies for the next day's interview. Utilizing the well-documented anthropological method of writing questions down on napkins, we were able to arrive at a nice chronological sequence of questions. Following our meal we returned to the hotel and finally got a chance to sleep. Prior to collapsing into deep slumber, one of us had enough strength to set the alarm clock for 8:00 A.M. as we needed to get up early and prepare for the interview.

#### INTERVIEW: DAY TWO

Spontaneous cannon fire from one of the nearby Civil War battlefields would not have awakened us from our jet-lagged exhaustion, so the small travel alarm went off for two hours. We finally woke around 10:00 A.M. and quickly showered and prepared ourselves.

Jeff and I were again greeted graciously. We followed Ben downstairs to the dining room, where Georgia was waiting. She immediately began to introduce us to everyone in the room as "the people from Nevada who are interviewing me for a book. You know I was an archaeologist at one time, with my late husband and these young people are going to tell our story," Dinner was filled with light conversations surrounding the Feltses' life in the retirement home. After finishing our meal the four of us returned to the Feltses' apartment.

Jeff and I began preparing our notes and cassettes while the Feltses got comfortable. Before we could begin there was a knock at the door; Loraine had arrived to do the weekly shopping. We immediately got up and introduced ourselves as Loraine had been our main contact person from the very beginning, and we were quite excited to meet her. We talked for a few moments, and then Loraine departed for the store. Georgia, Jeff, and I sat down to the interview.



Georgia Wheeler, prior to 1940, at an historic site near Tippapah Springs, Nevada Test Site, Nevada. (*Georgia Wheeler Felts*)

Questioning began with “when did you first become interested in archaeology?”

Well, I guess I was interested in it from the first . . . Wheeler was interested in it and naturally I was interested in it. And when we got into Nevada and into Clark County I was interested, I worked at the county hospital, I was in charge of the dietary department there, but I, um, kept up with everything and I was just as interested as he was, but I didn't give any time to research or anything of that kind . . . .

. . . Well, he was interested in archaeology . . . when he accepted his appointment to West Point [but] he wanted to finish [school]. He felt like he had a commitment, and after they graduated, many of the graduates were given trips to Europe . . . he was given money. He went to England, France, and Italy, and then across to Egypt, and he became fascinated with the archaeology . . . So, this developed a desire in him to go into this field of work (Felts 1996b).

Wheeler's first excavation work in Nevada was in 1933. With the assistance of the Civilian Conservation Corps unit Wheeler was attached to, M. R. Harrington conducted the excavation of Pueblo Grande de Nevada.

[Wheeler] supervised the work and he was interested in the excavations that were being done. [H]e worked out the grid system, or a means of recording your findings so

that you could go back at a future date because your area was mapped. [A]s far as I know, Dr. Harrington never told him anything about it, but [Wheeler] organized this grid system of being able to locate certain points of interest, or something that was found at that area (Felts 1996b).

Following the excavations at Pueblo Grande de Nevada Wheeler continued to work in archaeology, increasing his field experience.

Well, you know a lot of [Wheeler's work] was volunteer[ed] . . . he had worked profitable with Dr. Harrington [although] it was a small income but we were doing very well. It was enough that we could follow the chosen profession (Felts 1996b).

By 1940, the Wheelers were considered professional archaeologists. They were employed by the Nevada State Parks Commission, assigned to investigate the cave area near Fallon, Churchill County, Nevada. This reconnaissance resulted in the testing of Spirit Cave and discovery of the Spirit Cave Man (Tuohy and Dansie 1996). During the interview Georgia stressed the attention they paid to archaeological methods.

[We] had very few workers that worked with us because you couldn't have people come in there and just shovel 'cause we did things carefully with trowels and brushes . . . because you could find [something significant] like when we found the mummy. We worked for days and we realized that something was there, but we did not, we did not go into it with a shovel and pick . . . .  
 . . . [We were] convinced that this was an important thing . . . we delighted in doing it (Felts 1996b).

We interviewed Georgia for approximately two hours that day, getting a tremendous amount of data. Finishing the interview we began showing Georgia photographs taken by S. M. Wheeler in 1940 during their reconnaissance into Nye County, Nevada. Unfortunately, she remembered very little about the expedition. She remembered the places and the people who had accompanied them, but was unable to remember specific details about the work. I found this to be a little disappointing. I was hoping to get more information since I have been working specifically on this particular reconnaissance and its findings for over a year. Georgia confirmed most everything I had previously written about her and her late husband in my thesis. Prior to our departure Loraine invited us to supper at her home the following evening. She informed me that she had found several books and some miscellaneous items that had belonged to Wheeler. After accepting Loraine's invitation, we returned to our hotel for the evening.

#### INTERVIEW: DAY THREE

Jeff and I arrived at the apartment on Thursday, June 27, with a small bouquet

of flowers as a token of thanks. We had already decided that this would be the last day of interviews as Georgia was becoming frustrated with the fact that she was unable to remember specific details. With this in mind we decided to focus our questioning on how Georgia and Ben found each other.

According to Ben, he and his first wife, Vera, had five children. Originally from Tennessee, the family moved to the arid Southwest after one of the children contracted rheumatic fever. The family settled in Hawthorne, Nevada, and Ben worked at the naval depot located there. Ben and Vera were living in Hawthorne when she died in 1960. Wheeler and Georgia had moved to Ely, Nevada, in the late 1950s. He passed away in their home the night of September 11, 1959. Georgia, still having ties to the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR), remained.

Ben and Georgia, both active in their local Baptist churches, would be introduced by conspiring church members. Ben traveled much of Nevada in the early 1960s as a missionary helping to organize new churches and share program ideas. The two married in 1962.

Ben's family [has] been wonderful to me--you know sometimes a second marriage just isn't accepted by the children. But they have accepted me from the first (Felts 1996c).

The couple remained in Ely for seven years following their marriage. During this time, Georgia finished her remaining years of work with UNR and retired. No longer bound by work, they moved back to Ben's home state of Tennessee, where



Georgia Wheeler Felts (age 94) and Ben Felts (age 103), at home in Nashville, Tennessee, June 27, 1996. (*Authors' photograph*)

Ben (now age 103) and Georgia (age 94) reside in a retirement home in Nashville.

During the interview an announcement came over the intercom system. They were having a birthday party for all the June birthdays in the recreation room. Georgia quickly reminded us that she had been born June 14, 1902, and it was decided that we would attend. Entering the colorfully decorated room filled with lively elderly folks ready to party, Georgia again introduced us as "those young people from Nevada who are writing a book about me." We had cake and punch, sang "Happy Birthday," and then Jeff and I made our goodbyes and headed to Murfreesboro.

We arrived in Murfreesboro--which incidently, was once the capital city of the state of Tennessee--as scheduled. Arriving at the home of Loraine and her husband, Jim Beasley, we were greeted warmly. The evening centered around Georgia and Wheeler's archaeological careers. Prior to all the recent publicity, the family knew little of their step-mother's endeavors. We spent the evening recounting stories of early archaeology in Nevada. Loraine also bought out several books and a small wooden box which had belonged to Wheeler.

The small wooden box was unfinished. Wheeler was apparently in the process of wood-burning Indian designs on the sides representing his archaeological interests. I carefully opened the box and found the contents to be an array of minerals, crystals, projectile points, and mementos Wheeler had treasured.

The books themselves were also treasures. One, titled *The Wheeler Family of Rutland, Massachusetts, and Some of Their Ancestors*, is self-explanatory. By the way, S. M. Wheeler's father and grandfather were surveying engineers. Wheeler's grandfather Daniel Merrick Wheeler devised an invention which would have an impact on all archaeologists for years to come.

Engineering has little, if anything, to do with women's fashions. Yet it was from an article of apparel once in great vogue that there was devised an item of equipment now universally used by engineers. Back in the days of crinoline and hoop skirts, wire manufacturers were called upon to produce a type of wire for making frames that could be flexed but not bent out of shape. The wire that was developed was termed hoopskirt wire, and its flexibility suggested to Daniel M. Wheeler of Worcester, Mass., a surveyor, the possibility of using it for making measuring tape. He obtained 100 feet of it, and ran solder on at intervals of one foot, the graduations and numbers being marked on the solder. This tape, which was made in 1870, was the first practical steel tape ever devised, and proved to be far superior to the chain in use at that time (Chicago Steel Tape Co. 1941).

We were also shown Wheeler's West Point annual, dated 1926 (the year he graduated), and a scrapbook of articles and photographs Wheeler had saved from their various projects. As the evening came to a close, Loraine's husband asked when the book would be published and if they would get copies. I replied sometime next summer, and yes they would get copies.

## GOING HOME AND CONCLUSIONS

Jeff and I returned to our hotel room in high spirits. I felt quite thankful in that I had being given the opportunity to meet these very special people. I sat down and began writing in my field journal; I did not want to forget a moment. The next day, Jeff and I did some sightseeing as our flight did not leave until the following afternoon. We took in all the sights around the city of Nashville and caught a showing of the Grand Ole Opry.

At 4:00 P.M. the following day, we boarded our plane home. Thus, our story is told. Why is this important to archaeology? The walls that separate the fields of anthropology need to come down. We as anthropologists can learn from each other. I learned more about the history of Great Basin archaeology in those few days with Georgia Wheeler Felts than I did in any classroom. The history of archaeology is just as important as the history of the Americas. We need only to listen.

The archaeological careers of S. M. Wheeler and his wife, Georgia, were both influential and contributed to the discipline. They touched the lives of all Great Basin archaeologists past and present, whether they acknowledged it or not. The Wheelers' numerous archaeological investigations have provided foundations for future research. This is easily seen in the recent analysis by the Nevada State Museum of the Spirit Cave mummy. Many early collections remain curated in museum facilities awaiting the light of inquiry. I believe that the archaeological research of the Wheelers is a shining example of what could be found by digging in the museum's archives and collections. With the current directions of cultural-resource-management archaeology and the over-all lack of funding, "basement archive archaeology" could become a new trend. The potential data to be gained should be enough to inspire any archaeologist to get out of the trenches and into the museum's archives.

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