

# James and Frances Wheeler

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*By Lois Wheeler Rutledge*

My father, James H. Wheeler, was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, on July 25, 1871, one of eight children. His family moved to San Antonio, Texas, while he was still a young boy. The children helped their father in his business at Overland Freight — horse-drawn wagons hauling supplies between Texas and Louisiana.



**James H. Wheeler**

He attended St. Mary's College for several years in San Antonio, which concluded his formal education.

Sometime in the late 1800s, he left the family home and worked at various jobs throughout the country. After returning home, he was soon hired by the Chicago Portrait Co. as a salesman. He traveled along the West Coast from San Francisco to Alaska, with his base of operations being the city of Portland, Oregon. His main job was to contact potential customers, show them completed portraits from his sample case, and send customers' photos back to Chicago, which were then copied in color onto canvas.

It was during this period that he met a beautiful young lady, Frances Thomas, who worked for the Northern Pacific Railway in Portland.

My father shared many stories about his travels. Here are two of them: Father William Duncan was a

white Anglican minister who established a Tsimshian Indian village, called Metlakatla, on what is now known as Annette Island. Because of a friendship with Roderic Davies, an Indian man at Ketchikan, my father was able to meet with Father Duncan, who arranged a vote of the Indian elders, giving my father the honorary privilege of being the first white man to stay overnight in the village to conduct his business.

Another interesting anecdote that he liked to tell occurred during the days of "Gold Rush Fever." While south, he would buy up stray cats for 50 cents each, cage them, and take them to Skagway. He then would sell the cats as pets to the dance hall girls, receiving as much as \$300 each! Thus he became known as the "Cat Man of the Yukon."

On one of his trips to Alaska, Father became acquainted with a Dr. O.F. Stanton, who owned a drugstore in Fort Wrangell. He decided to make his home there and leased the Fort Wrangell Hotel from the Sylvester estate, from 1903-1905.

He sent for Miss Fannie Thomas to come and work for him in the hotel dining room. After the hotel was sold, they were married. They worked for Dr. Stanton in the drugstore and later purchased the store from him.

In 1909, my mother, Fannie Wheeler, was the first of our family to become a registered pharmacist, receiving her certificate from the National Institute of Pharmacy correspondence school, in Chicago. The Alaska Territorial Board of Pharmacy granted Father a license through a grandfather clause for being a drugstore owner of long-standing, relying on family members to fill prescriptions.

While still operating the drugstore at Fort Wrangell, Father was talked into taking over a store in Petersburg next to the old Brennan building. He had a man named McFarland running the store. It turned out to be an unsuccessful venture and he sold out.

During all those difficult years, my mother maintained the pharmacy in Wrangell and raised our family. Several years passed and, in 1916, the Wheelers got an opportunity to expand their business interests. E. Schoenwald, superintendent of Pacific Coast and Norway Packing Co. (later Pacific American Fisheries), offered Father land if he would return to Petersburg

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**Frances "Fannie" Wheeler**

and set up another store.

The store was never built in that location because of the marine ways for the cannery. The windlass for pulling the boats occupied the lot intended for a drugstore. Instead, the new Wheeler drugstore was built at the intersection of Main Street and Sing Lee Alley. In 1926, fire gutted the upper floor where Dr. Dan Standard's office was located.

In the early 1930s, at an entirely different location on Main Street, a three-story building was completed. It housed the old post office, the Lillian Shop, and Dr. Smith's office to the rear. The building was later demolished, making way for a new bank.

Another fire destroyed the original drugstore in the 1940s. Business continued at a temporary location until Father moved into a newly remodeled building at the corner of Main and Fram streets, formerly owned by pioneer Chris Lang. He considered this his home until his death in 1974.

My father was the first secretary of the Petersburg Commercial Club, later the Chamber of Commerce. Being the largest landowner in the Petersburg-Wrangell area at that time, he donated land to various organizations such as the Moose Lodge in Petersburg

and a playground in the town of Wrangell.

He and Ed Locken were major stockholders in the Bank of Petersburg. At different times, he served as president, vice-president and chairman of the board. My parents were both active in the Republican party and my father acted as committeeman for the Eisenhower campaign, and organized the Women's Republican Club in town. He was instrumental in attempting to get the Canadian Pacific Railway's steamships to make the town one of its ports of call — but, since Petersburg did not have a customs office, Canadian ships bypassed it.

James and Fannie raised four children: Eugene, James Jr., Raymond and Lois. We all served early apprenticeships as clerks in both Wrangell and Petersburg stores, doing the daily chores of dusting, washing windows and showcases, unpacking freight (packed with excelsior in large wooden crates), stocking shelves, and waiting on customers.

Childhood days, while growing up in two small Alaska towns, were carefree and wonderful. The basketball games between Petersburg High School and Wrangell High School were eagerly anticipated, highly competitive, and lots of fun!

As for education, Eugene graduated from North Pacific Dental College in Portland. He established his first dental practice in Petersburg, and then in Wrangell, practicing for over 30 years. Jim Jr. studied



**Wheeler Building, 1930s**

pharmacy for two years at the University of Washington and returned to clerk in the Petersburg store. Ray received a pharmacy degree from the University of Washington in 1936. He was stationed

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on Shemya Island in the Aleutians during World War II for the Army as head pharmacist.

I attended both Washington State College and University of Washington and was a clerk at both stores. I moved to Seattle during World War II, where I met and married Robert Rutledge, my husband of 57 years. He was serving in the U.S. Navy.

Besides our four children — Shelley, Rory, Rob and Zane — we have nine grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

My brother Ray is survived by his daughter, Shemya, of Tacoma, Washington. Jim III, son of Jim Jr., is deceased. My mother met a tragic end due to a pedestrian accident in Seattle in 1955. My father also died in Seattle, in 1974, at the young age of 103 — a full life indeed!

As the last surviving member of the Wheeler family, I have recorded these memories and history to



**James and Ray Wheeler**

the best of my knowledge. I am writing this down, so we will all stop crying.

To this end, everyone it seems, sooner or later in their lifetime, returns to their ROOTS — and thus, part of my heart will always remain in Alaska.



**Interior of the Wheeler drug store.**