

SELECTED WRITINGS

Mott, Mildred

1938 The Relation of Historic Indian Tribes to Archaeological Manifestations in Iowa. Iowa Journal of History and Politics 36:3. pages 227-336.

Wedel, Mildred Mott

1959 Oneota Sites on the Upper Iowa River. Missouri Archaeologist 21:2-4.

1961 Indian Villages on the Upper Iowa River. The Palimpsest 42: 561-592.

1976 Ethnohistory: Its Payoffs and Pitfalls for Iowa Archeologists. Journal of the Iowa Archeological Society 23:1-44.

1978 A Synonymy of Names for the Ioway Indians. Journal of the Iowa Archeological Society 29:49-77.

1986 Peering at the Ioway Indians through the Mist of Time: 1650—Circa 1700. Journal of the Iowa Archeological Society 33:1-74.

1988 The 1804 “Old Ioway Village of Lewis and Clark. Journal of the Iowa Archeological Society 35:70-71.

1981 The Ioway, Oto, and Omaha Indians in 1700. Journal of the Iowa Archeological Society 28:1-14.

2001 Ioway in Plains Volume, Handbook of North American Indian, Vol. 13, Washington, DC, Smithsonian Institution.



Little Wolf, A Famous Warrior
IOWA (1844)



Founding Figures

In Iowa Archaeology: Mildred Mott Wedel 1912-1995



Until recently, the archaeological community throughout Iowa was composed primarily of men. One of the first professionally trained women archaeologists in the country, however, was Mildred Mott Wedel, an “Iowa girl” who became a nationally renowned scholar. Best known for her efforts to link historic Iowa tribes with archaeological cultures, Mildred’s meticulous research serves to inspire all of us. On the tenth anniversary of her death we pause to acknowledge her life and her example.

Mildred was an Iowa native, born in Marengo in Iowa County on September 7, 1912 to Frank Luther Mott and Vera Ingram Mott. Her father was professor and director of the School of Journalism at the University of Iowa in Iowa City and later dean of the School of Journalism at the University of Missouri. In 1939 he won the Pulitzer Prize in American history.



Perhaps inspired by her father's example, Mildred seemed destined for a career in academia. She majored in history at the University of Iowa, studying under Dr. Louis Pelzer, from whom she may have acquired her interest in historical criticism. After graduation in 1934 Mildred headed to graduate school at the University of Chicago to study anthropology, the first woman to receive a fellowship in that field at the university. She attended an archaeological field school sponsored by the University of New Mexico in the summer of 1933.



Her contributions to Iowa archaeology began in earnest in November 1936 when she returned to her home state to assist Ellison Orr in his study of the Hill Mound Group (13AM105) and Brazell's Island Bear Effigy Mound (13AM81) in Allamakee County. Her work on the Bear Effigy formed the basis for Orr's report on that site. She viewed Orr as a mentor, crediting him with giving her an appreciation and knowledge of the archaeology of her home state.

Returning to Chicago, she worked at the Kincaid site in Illinois during 1937. She was also a research assistant with Dr. Florence Hawley in dendrochronology (dating events using the sequence and intervals of growth rings in trees and aged wood) during 1937 and 1938.

Mildred Mott Wedel died in Boulder, Colorado, on September 4, 1995, just three days short of her eighty-third birthday. Mildred was survived by her husband, Waldo R. Wedel, of Boulder, Colorado, who passed away on August 27, 1996. The Wedels are survived by three children: Waldo M. ("Wally") Wedel of Boulder; Linda Greene of Death Valley, California; and Frank P. Wedel of Gaithersburg, Maryland; and three grandchildren.

A pioneer and distinguished scholar of Iowa archaeology and Prairie-Plains ethnohistory over six decades, Mildred served as a Research Associate at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. for several decades up to the time of her passing. For many years the Wedels spent their summers away from the rush of the nation's capital city at their cabin at the foot of Long's Peak in Allenspark, Colorado. In late May or early June they would drive west in their station wagon, loaded with books, photocopied documents, manuscripts, and typewriters prepared to work each day in the splendor of their mountain retreat. For me, visits to them were like a continuing education seminar as Mildred and Waldo shared new information and, above all, were sounding boards for various ideas of mine....I guess this is how I choose to remember Mildred: at her cabin in Allenspark—a woman from Marengo who entered and excelled in a professional domain when it was monopolized by men, an individual who was a critical and consummate scholar, and yet a human being with a wry sense of humor who could stop and enjoy the beauty around her.

Dr. David Gradwohl, professor emeritus of anthropology at Iowa State University, and a well-known scholar of Iowa archaeology in his own right must be credited with the details and insights into the life and work of



Mildred Mott Wedel relayed here. Gradwohl's significant archaeological work includes the African-American community of Buxton in Monroe County and surveys and excavation associated with the building of Iowa's Red Rock and Saylorville reservoirs. Currently he and his wife Hanna are researching Jewish cemeteries.

It is David Gradwohl's personal and professional reminiscences that eloquently summarize Mildred's life:

Beyond her scholarly accomplishments, which are essentially a matter of record, Mildred was an exemplary human being. I first met her some forty years ago in South Dakota when I was an undergraduate student on the archaeological crew of the Nebraska State Historical Society. Our field director, Marvin F. ("Gus") Kivett, allowed us the luxury of visiting the Wedels' Smithsonian field party at their site on the Cheyenne River. The huge buried earth lodge village was, of course, "awesome" in today's manner of speaking. Even more spectacular, however was "Mrs. Wedel," the archaeologist-ethnohistorian, who was assisting her husband in the field project: she was cooking for the crew, overseeing some of the laboratory processing of artifacts, driving some forty miles across the prairies to Pierre to pick up mail and buy food for the crew, and taking care of three kids. During her "spare" time she gathered chokecherries and put up jam. Duly impressed, several of my shovel bum friends and I returned to our field camp downstream, collected chokecherries, and prepared the juice from which the jam was later prepared. In subsequent years, during graduate school and beyond, Mildred became a patient critic and insightful advisor on a number of my research efforts. Her mentoring, indeed, went well beyond the intricacies of preparing chokecherry jam.



Mildred received her MA in anthropology in 1938, working under Fay-Cooper Cole. Her master's thesis "The Relation of Historic Indian Tribes to Archaeological Manifestations in Iowa" remains one of Mildred's most significant contributions to Iowa archaeology.

Published in the *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* that same year, Mildred's thesis substantiated links between the historic Ioway and Oto tribes and the prehistoric Oneota archaeological remains in Iowa. This study remains one of the classic studies utilizing the "direct-historical approach" described by William Duncan Strong in his book *An Introduction to Nebraska Archaeology* in 1935. The approach encouraged archaeologists to use ethnohistorical and historical descriptions of sites of known historic groups and linking them with earlier sites containing similar material remains.



In the summer of 1938 Mildred served as field director for an archaeological excavation near Webster City in Hamilton County. The project was supervised by Charles Keyes, generally considered one of the founders of Iowa archaeology. The project, financed by MacKinlay Kantor, Iowa Pulitzer Prize winning novelist and author of *Andersonville*, investigated the Willson Mound Group (13HM1) and the Humble Village Site (13HM2), both Woodland tradition sites.



Dr. John MacGregor, later a Mason City physician, was a member of Mildred's field crew as a young man and it is from him that we get some insightful descriptions of Mildred as a person. He recalls Mildred spending "a lot of social time with the crew and the Kantor family, getting together for drinks, going to the circus, and driving over to Clear Lake to go sailing." She was "a delightful, slight, serious, redheaded young woman—vigorous, though fairly small." She was respected both by workers and townspeople for her archaeological expertise, her good humor, and her willingness to work right along with the field crew. (from Gradwohl 1997 and his contacts with MacGregor.)

It was during this same time period that an up-and-coming Plains scholar and Assistant Curator of Archaeology at the Smithsonian Institution came to Iowa to meet with the young woman who had impressed many with her abilities and character. This was



to prove one of the more significant events of Mildred's life as Waldo Wedel and Mildred Mott soon formed one of the most famous archaeological partnerships of the twentieth century. They became engaged shortly after and were married in Iowa City on August 12, 1939.

In 1940 she and Waldo worked in central Kansas, then following World War II and on into the 1960s the couple worked on various Smithsonian Institution archaeological salvage projects in the Missouri River Basin, primarily in North and South Dakota. Mildred contributed her own expertise to the projects as well as often serving as cook for the field crews.



While she and Waldo set up a Washington D.C. household and raised their three children, at the same time, she continued with her own research activities, focusing on ethnohistory, specifically the interrelationships of history and anthropology, the interest which began with her earlier work at the University of Chicago. Maintaining her Iowa ties, she consulted with Living History Farms in Des Moines, aiding them in their reconstruction of an Ioway Indian village as it might have appeared in 1700, and helping them educate the general public about the peoples that gave the state its name. She also published more scholarly descriptions of her work on Iowa ethnohistory in two articles in the *Journal of the Iowa Archeological Society*: "A Synonymy of Names for the Ioway Indians" (1978) and "Peering at the Ioway Indians: 1650-Circa 1700" (1986).

In addition to her earlier thesis, other publications of Mildred dealt with the relationship of the Chiwere speaking Siouan people (Ioway and Oto) to the archaeological Oneota manifestations. Most detailed is "Oneota Sites on the Upper Iowa River" published in 1959 by the *Missouri Archaeologist*. In another 1981 JIAS article she related these Chiwere speakers to the Dhegiha Siouan-speaking Omaha as well, "The Ioway, Oto, and Omaha in 1700." She authored the extensive essay on the Ioway in the Smithsonian's Handbook on North American Indians, Vol. 13, on the Plains.

In all of her work Mildred is noted for rigorous accuracy. If she did not trust the translation of early French sources, she would do her own translations. If needed documents were not available, she would travel to archives in Paris or Mexico to search out primary documents. One of the clearest illustrations of her demands for close critiques of her sources can be seen in her 1976 article in the JIAS "*Ethnohistory: Its Payoffs and Pitfalls for Iowa Archaeologists*." This should be required reading for any archaeologist studying the proto-historic and post-European contact times. She challenges archaeologists to be as critical and methodical in archival research as they are in survey, excavation and laboratory analysis. Gradwohl (1997) relates that on several occasions, "Mildred was heard to warn that just as archaeologists decry those who "pot-hole" archaeological sites, they should not be satisfied with "pot-holing" the archives!"