Perspective

Mayor Albert Wheeler

In our Perspective Department, the Observer presents articles which aim at broadening understanding of people, issues, and events affecting central Ann Arbor. In this issue, we begin a two-part series on Ann Arbor's 94th mayor, Albert Wheeler, Jr. This article is based on Mayor Wheeler's reminiscences going all the way back to his childhood days.

Achiever and the major theme in Albert Wheeler's life as he related it to us is first academic and scientific achievement, and then achievement in the political sphere (working toward equal opportunity for minorities of society).

Wheeler was born in 1915, and he is black. That means he has seen a lot of changes over the past fifty years. It went as a shock to remember that in 1936, when Wheeler first came to Ann Arbor as a graduate student, the most politically prominent black person in this country was the head of the union for sleeping car porters, that many upper-middle-class white families had full-time colored help, and that the military service would remain segregated for nearly a decade. Mayor Wheeler has been both participant and observer of the dramatic changes in black opportunities since that time.

This article consists of two parts. The second part will focus on the time after 1950, when Wheeler first entered local politics by participating in the revitalization of Ann Arbor's then moribund Democratic Party. However, let's take a look at the man — where he came from and what early experiences he considers significant.

Timely Encouragement Changed the Course of His Life

Part One: Albert Wheeler Remembers

Al Wheeler grew up in St. Louis, Missouri, in a neighborhood of working-class families on the outskirts of town. Black and white, they were all poor. This early environment was an important influence, he says. "Just seeing people around me who didn't get very far in our society made a deep impression. Wanting to get out of that bag of poverty was something that was ground into me very early."

Wheeler grew up in an extended family. His parents shared a house with his mother's parents, and other relatives were in close contact. Wheeler remembers his family as less concerned with their lot than most of the black families in the neighborhood. "They didn't like what they had or didn't have. They had the idea that the only way to get out of that bag of poverty was education."

His oldest child, Wheeler was the active and industrious type, who loved both sports and reading. Elementary school was in a two-room schoolhouse — an early example of the "open classroom" concept of education, although by necessity, not design. "Each teacher had a room with 30 to 40 kids of different ages," Wheeler remembers, "and individual attention was the rule. They were teachers who cared. They'd be pretty tough on us if we goofed off."

Segregated schools had one important benefit for black people; they had black teachers who were important role models for children growing up. Black children here in Ann Arbor, Wheeler commented, had no such models until the first black teacher was hired in 1955.

A Turning Point

But that was in 1932, in the heart of the Depression. Though he had thought of going to college, Wheeler figured financing would be impossible to find. At this time a neighbor's intervention caused a dramatic turn in the direction of Wheeler's life.

The neighbor was named Rev. Branch. He had been impressed by Wheeler's industry — doing odd jobs and moving lawns. Branch was also aware of Wheeler's academic success.

One day near the time he was to graduate from high school, Wheeler was asked by Rev. Branch what his plans were. Wheeler was able to tell him with some pride that he already had a good job lined up: he was going to be a dishwasher in a black cab company.

Rev. Branch encouraged Wheeler to continue his education, even though they were in the thick of the Depression. Having graduated from Lincoln College in Pennsylvania, he suggested Wheeler apply there. Wheeler was not only accepted and given a partial scholarship, but was given a $100 bonus for being the school's first student from Missouri.

Lincoln was a predominately black man's college founded in 1854 by Presbyterians connected with Princeton University. Most of the faculty at Lincoln when Wheeler attended were retired Princeton professors, and it was one of the outstanding black colleges in the country. Lincoln graduated many future black physicians and distinguished men such as Langston Hughes and Thurgood Marshall. More recently, Ann Arbor's city manager, Sylvester Murray, graduated from Lincoln.

Wheeler remembers the Lincoln student body back in the 1930's as an interesting composition of blacks from all along the eastern seaboard, from Massachusetts down to Florida. It was a totally new world that made a big impression on the 16-year-old from St. Louis.

Lincoln had a significant number of African students, who as it turned out would be among the leaders of the emerging independent African states; Naumul Akitw, the first president of Nigeria, was a teaching assistant when Wheeler was at Lincoln, and when Wheeler was a senior, his freshman "dog" the new student who had to do Wheeler's bidding was Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's dynamic first-president.

Social Concern Leads to Microbiology

Wheeler majored in biology at Lincoln. As graduation drew near, he wasn't sure what his next step would be. Once again, Rev. Branch back in St. Louis made a timely intervention. Branch had a regular meeting with Dr. Lawrence Foster, who had a doctorate in political science and taught in college.

They both listened when Wheeler talked about his career ambitions — how "I was never really gangsta about the medical school, although I had a deep interest in the biological sciences. But I also felt a pull towards working with large numbers of people rather than with individuals. My concerns were directed more to the community as a whole."

Rev. Branch and Dr. Foster put the two together and came up with medical microbiology, the study of infectious diseases caused by microorganisms. It was a field, surprisingly empty, that Dr. Foster had students graduating from high school days, when he had read Paul de Kruif's "Dynamite". He realized that "it intrigued me that there were these tiny living things that caused epidemics of diseases."

To Foster suggested that Wheeler enter a graduate program in microbiology and recommended the program at Iowa State University. Until he got to Iowa State in Ames, Iowa, Wheeler had yet to experience what might he called "culture shock." He lived in essentially black communities and had accepted the restricted comfort zone. Once he was going to Iowa State, he was suddenly plunged into an almost totally white society. Sitting down to take his first biology class, he realized that he was the only black in class, his usual self-confidence dropped in the water, and in the hell am I doing here? Then, two things happened quickly in that classroom which stilled his fears. First, he saw another fellow chemi-
Dr. Wheeler Seeks a Job

Wheeler received his doctorate in Public Health in 1945 and set about looking for a job, either teaching in a university or working in a public health program. Finding a job in public health was not easy at that time for a young black professional. After many inquiries proved negative, Wheeler happened to discuss his situation with Dr. Reuben Kahn, who had been on his doctoral committee at Michigan. Kahn was by that time famous as the developer of the first widely used test for syphilis. He had an extensive laboratory in University Hospital, Learning that Wheeler was still looking for a job, Kahn promptly hired him as a research associate for his own lab.

Wheeler was to work with Dr. Kahn for the next eight years, from 1945 to 1952. He performed research to find a syphilis vaccine and to improve diagnostic tests. During this time he became increasingly frustrated that he was not given a full academic appointment by the University, despite his proven competence in his field. "I began to pest people about whether I could get a job on the faculty," he recalls. His initiative finally paid off. In 1952, at age 37, he was appointed Assistant Professor in the Department of Microbiology and Dermatology, specializing in venereal diseases and medical microbiology. As far as he can determine, he was the first black to receive a full-time appointment on the University faculty.

Wheeler had met his wife, Emma, in the School of Public Health at Michigan, where she was obtaining her master's degree. They were married in 1938. Emma came from a very different background than Wheeler. She grew up in Columbus, South Carolina, where segregation was much more pointed than in St. Louis, and where blacks were subject to a vastly greater amount of abuse. Her husband had left her with even less tolerance for second-class citizenship than Wheeler had, and she was to become even more determined that they receive equal housing and employment opportunities.

On to Ann Arbor

He received his master's degree in microbiology at Iowa State in 1938, and in the process narrowed his interest to the more medically oriented part of public health. Again with the help of Rev. Branch and Dr. Foster, he chose the University of Michigan to continue his education. So in 1938 Wheeler came to Ann Arbor to begin work at the School of Public Health. There were between 100 and 200 black students at the University at the time, Wheeler remembers, most of whom lived with black Ann Arbor families. Discrimination, although not as bad in the South or as restricting as in Iowa, nonetheless was prevalent in the Ann Arbor of the 1930s and 1940s. "There were restaurants, " Wheeler recalls, "where you would not be served. You would not be asked to leave. You would just be ignored." And if you were foolish or ignorant enough to enter some bars down around Main Street, the word was, "You took your life in your hands."

Wheeler's graduate studies at Michigan were pleasant on the whole, but there were experiences which left bitter memories. "Some professors," he relates, "seemed to go out of their way to make it clear to the whole class that I was somehow different from everybody else. Once, for example, we had a laboratory assignment to observe an experiment. Several separate classes gathered together to observe. Before the experiment was to begin, the professor said that the room was getting too crowded and painted directly in the midst of the students to me to sit. I argued that I should leave to provide more room. That memory is still painful for Wheeler to recall. "It was as if my classmates were embarrassed and a last surrender matter than hell. But I left.

"It was when a graduate assistant seemed to me purposely designed to keep him away from teaching or working with under- graduate students," he recalls. "He was working, earning good money, and felt, "I'm not gonna complain about that."