Mildred Mott Wedel — A Pioneering Iowan Archaeologist

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Abstract

Mildred Mott Wedel (1912–1999) was a pioneering Iowan archaeologist and a distinguished scholar, most notably in Prarie Plains ethnohistory. Born in Marengo in Iowa County, Mildred graduated from the University of Iowa in 1934 with a major in History and a minor in French. As a result of her French language skills, she was awarded a fellowship in anthropology at the University of Chicago in 1935. Mildred was the first woman to receive a fellowship in American archaeology.

Mildred's research was focused on the relationship between history and anthropology, specifically the relationship between historic and prehistoric Native American cultures. Her work was heavily influenced by her mentor, Waldo Wedel, a Plains scholar and Assistant Curator of Archaeology at the University of Iowa.

Mildred's graduate thesis entitled “The Relation of Historic Indian Tribes to Archaeological Manifestations in Iowa” was based on her fieldwork and published in 1935. It was the first major work on the subject of ethnohistory and archaeology in Iowa. Mildred's research focused on the study of the prehistoric and historic Ioway and Oto Native American tribes and their archaeological remains.

Roots and Inspirations

An Iowa native, Mildred Mott was born in Marengo on September 7, 1912 to her mother Vera Ingram Mott and father, Franklin Luther Mott. Her father was an accomplished historian and professor. In 1939, she won the Pulitzer Prize in American History. He served as the director of the School of Journalism at the University of Iowa and later the dean of the School of Journalism at the University of Missouri.

It is not surprising that with an accomplished historian as a father, Mildred also pursued a career in academia. As an undergraduate, she studied History at the University of Iowa under Dr. Louis Poliner. In graduate school at the University of Chicago, Mildred was the first woman to receive a fellowship in Anthropology. She started her academic career at the University of Minnesota in 1935. She attended her first archaeology field school, sponsored by the University of New Mexico.

During her years in graduate school, Mildred first made her mark on the archaeological scene in 1936. She worked with the Illinois Field Work Group (ISFM181) and the Indiana Field Work Group (ISFM181) on the historic and prehistoric layers of the site. Mildred's dissertation focused on the relationship between history and prehistory.

Mildred also worked with another father-figure of Iowa archaeology—Charles K. Keeny. In 1936, after receiving her MA degree in Anthropology, Mildred served as field director for an archaeological expedition near Wabasha City. The project, supervised by Keeny, investigated the Wabasha Indian Site (13BN1). The site was noted for its well-preserved cultural layers.

Another inspiration in Mildred’s life was her famous husband, Waldo Wedel, a fellow student and Assistant Curator of Anthropology at the Smithsonian Institution. They married in 1939 in Iowa City. For several decades, they and Waldo worked together on archaeological projects in central Kansas and the Missouri River Basin as well as Wisconsin and other locations. They continued to publish her research even as they set up their family in Washington, D.C.

Direct-Historical Applications

Mildred's graduate thesis entitled “The Relation of Historic Indian Tribes to Archaeological Manifestations in Iowa” remains one of her most significant contributions to Iowa Archaeology. She employed the direct-historical approach using ethnohistory and historic descriptions to study the prehistoric and historic layers of the site. The direct-historical approach, described by William Duncan Strong in his book, An Introduction to Native American Archaeology in 1915, is based on the concept of cultural contracts. One could directly refer to ethnohistoric and historic descriptions of sites by known historic groups with similar sites containing similar material remains. Through this framework, scholars and archaeologists attribute ancient earthworks (mounds) and sites with the direct genetic and cultural ancestors to historically known Native American groups.

Mildred's research interests focused primarily on ethnography and the direct-historical approach. She conducted extensive research on the Ioway and Oto tribes and the prehistoric Oneota archaeological deposits in Iowa. Her research was heavily featured in the Journal of the Iowa Archeological Society (JIAS) throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

In her later years, Mildred continued to research the relationship between the Ioway speaking, Oto-Ems, and archaeological Oneota manifestations, even sending the link to the Oglala Omaha-speaking Osage. She also authored an extensive essay on the Ioway in the Southwestern Handbook on North American Indians, Volume 13, on the Plains.

The Woman Remembered

"Mildred was a pioneer and distinguished scholar of Iowa archaeology and Prairie-State ethnohistory over six decades" (Gradwohl). In all of her work, Mildred was noted for her rigorous accuracy. She would often make her own translations from French when she did not trust the originals. For instance, one recent publication is the trade on the Upper Missouri. The Journal of Ethnography and Archaeology: Before 1541, 1979–1990. Her contributions to Iowa Archaeology are still considered to be required reading for any archaeologist studying the proto-historic and historic periods.

"Mildred was heard to warn that just as archaeologists decry those who "doilate", archaeologists themselves are just as guilty..." (Gradwohl). In 1977, she published The Direct-Historical Approach using Ethnohistory and Historic Descriptions to Study Prehistoric and Historic Indian Villages on the Upper Iowa River. The journal of the Iowa Archeological Society, 28:1–13.

Mildred was respected both by workers and townspeople for her archaeological expertise, her good humor, and her willingness to work alongside her crew. One field crewmember, John MacGregor, described her as a woman from Marengo who entered and excelled in a professional domain that was once dominated by men. She was a woman who was able to work with a wry sense of humor who could stop and enjoy the beauty around her.

Beyond her scholarly accomplishments, which are essentially a matter of record, Mildred was an exemplary human being. Her family and colleagues acknowledged her contributions to the field, but they also acknowledged the personal sacrifice she made to achieve her goals.

Credits

Mildred Mott


Selected Writings

Mildred Mott Wedel


