

Mildred Mott Wedel —A Pioneering Iowan Archaeologist



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Mildred Mott at Kincaid lab, Illinois, 1937.

Abstract

Mildred Mott Wedel (1912–1995) was a pioneering Iowan archaeologist and a distinguished scholar, most notably in Prairie-Plains ethnohistory. Born in Marengo in Iowa County, Mildred majored in History at the University of Iowa and subsequently studied Anthropology at the University of Chicago. Her Master's thesis in 1938 entitled “The Relation of Historic Indian Tribes to Archaeological Manifestations in Iowa” was ground-breaking, utilizing the direct-historical approach to substantiate links between historic Ioway and Oto Native American tribes with prehistoric Oneota archaeological deposits in Iowa. Mildred worked with other Iowa archaeological pioneers including Ellison Orr and Charles R. Keyes. Mildred's research interests focused primarily on ethnohistory, specifically the relationship between history and anthropology. Not only was Mildred one of the first trained female archaeologists in the country, her lasting legacy lies in her rigorous approach to the direct-historical method and archival research.

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 solidify links between the historic Ioway and Oto tribes and the prehistoric Oneota archaeological deposits in Iowa.

The direct-historical approach, described by William Duncan Strong in his book *An Introduction to Nebraska Archaeology* in 1935, is based in the concept of cultural continuity. One could directly link ethno-historical and historic descriptions of sites of known historic groups with earlier sites containing similar material deposits. Through this framework, scholars and archaeologists attribute ancient earthworks (mounds) and sites with the direct genetic and cultural ancestors to historically known Native Americans.

Throughout her career, Mildred's research interests tended to focus on ethnohistory, specifically on the interrelationships of history and anthropology. She consulted with Living History Farms in Des Moines, Iowa on their reconstruction of an Ioway Indian village as it might have appeared around 1700. She published scholarly work on Iowa ethnohistory in two articles in the *Journal of the Iowa Archeological Society (JIAS)* in the 1970s and 1980s.

Building on her thesis work, Mildred continued to research the relationship between the Chiwere speaking Siouan people (Ioway and Oto) and the archaeological Oneota manifestations, even extending the link to the Dhegiha Siouan-speaking Omaha. She also authored an extensive essay on the Ioway in the *Smithsonian's Handbook on North American Indians*, Volume 13, on the Plains.



Mildred Mott at Jemez field school, 1933.

Credits

Most of the content presented here was originally assembled by David Gradwohl as published in the *JIAS* in 1997. We also borrowed liberally from Lynn Alex's OSA series pamphlet “Founding Figures in Iowa Archaeology: Mildred Mott Wedel 1912–1995.”

Selected Writings

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- 1937 The Relation of Historic Indian Tribes to Archaeological Sites In Iowa. Master thesis, Department of Anthropology, University of Chicago, Illinois.
- 1938 An Attempt to Identify Indian Tribes with Archaeological Sites In Iowa. Manuscript on file, Office of the State Archaeologist, University of Iowa, Iowa City.
- 1938 The Relation of Historic Indian Tribes to Archaeological Manifestations in Iowa. *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* 36:227–336

- Wedel, Mildred Mott
- 1959 Oneota Sites on the Upper Iowa River. *The Missouri Archaeologist* 21(2–4):1–181.
- 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.
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- 1981 The Ioway, Oto, and Omaha Indians in 1700. *Journal of the Iowa Archeological Society* 28:1–13.
- 1986 Peering at the Ioway Indians Through the Mist of Time: 1650–Circa 1700. *Journal of the Iowa Archeological Society* 33:1–74.
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- 2001 Ioway. In *Handbook of North American Indians Volume 13 Plains*, edited by Raymond J. DeMallie Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press, Washington D.C.
- Wedel, Mildred Mott [translator]
- 2017 *A Fur Trader on the Upper Missouri—The Journal and Description of Jean-Baptiste Truteau, 1794–1796*. Jean-Baptiste Truteau. Edited by Raymond J. DeMallie, Douglas R. Parks, and Robert Vézina. Translated by Mildred Mott Wedel, Raymond J. DeMallie, and Robert Vézina. University of Nebraska Press.



Ellison Orr, circa 1935.



Mildred Mott Wedel peeking out of the cook tent at Horner site camp (48PA29), Wyoming, 1952.

Roots and Inspirations

An Iowa native, Mildred Mott was born in Marengo on September 7, 1912 to her mother Vera Ingram Mott and father Frank Luther Mott. Her father was an accomplished historian and professor. In 1939 he 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 Peltzer. In graduate school at the University of Chicago, Mildred was the first woman to receive a fellowship in Anthropology at the university. In 1933 she attended her first archaeological field school, sponsored by the University of New Mexico.

It was during her years in graduate school that Mildred first made her stamp on Iowa Archaeology. In 1936 she assisted Ellison Orr in the study of the Hill Mound Group (13AM105) and Brazell's Island Bear Effigy Mound (13AM81) in northeast Iowa. Mildred thought of Ellison Orr as a mentor, crediting him with giving her an appreciation and knowledge of the archaeology of her home state.

Mildred also worked with another father-figure of Iowa archaeology—Charles R. Keyes. In 1938, after receiving her MA degree in Anthropology, Mildred served as field director for an archaeological excavation near Webster City. The project, supervised by Keyes, investigated the Willson Mound Group (13HM1) and the Humble Village Site (13HM2).

Another inspiration in Mildred's life and career was her husband, Waldo Wedel, a Plains scholar and Assistant Curator of Archaeology at the Smithsonian Institution. They married in 1939 in Iowa City. For the several decades, she and Waldo worked together on archaeological projects in central Kansas and the Missouri River Basin as well as Wyoming and other locations. She continued to pursue her research even as they set up their family in Washington D.C.



Charles R. Keyes, 1920s.



Mildred Mott and John MacGregor excavating the Willson Mounds in Webster City, 1938 (courtesy of State Historical Society of Iowa).

The Woman Remembered

“Mildred was a pioneer and distinguished scholar of Iowa archaeology and Prairie-Plains 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 *A Fur Trader on the Upper Missouri—The Journal and Description of Jean-Baptiste Truteau, 1794–1796* heavily features Mildred's French to English translations so much that the book authors dedicated the volume to she and her husband.

Mildred challenged archaeologists to be as critical and methodological in archival research as they are in survey, excavation, and laboratory analysis. Her high standards for accuracy is clearly apparent in her 1976 article in the *JIAS* “Ethnohistory: Its Payoffs and Pitfalls for Iowa Archaeologists.” This article is 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 ‘pot-hole’ archaeological sites, they should not be satisfied with ‘pot-holing’ the archives!” (Gradwohl 1997).

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, remembered Mildred as a “delightful, slight, serious, redheaded young woman—vigorous, though fairly small.”

These comments by David Gradwohl eloquently characterize Mildred:

Beyond her scholarly accomplishments, which are essentially a matter of record, Mildred was an exemplary human being... “Mrs. Wedel,” the archaeologist-ethnohistorian, [assisted] 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.

... 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... 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...

... [Mildred Mott Wedel] was 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.



Mildred Mott Wedel, 1950s.

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