

Box 2368
China's Inner Asian
Frontier
Photos of Dr. Wulsin
Expedition to NW China
in 1923.

F. R. Wulsin, The Explorer, and the Northwest* China Expedition of 1923

In March of 1923, Frederick R. Wulsin, sponsored by the National Geographic Society, set off on an expedition to the northwest borders of China to collect animal and plant specimens of the region and to build a photographic record of its peoples and places.

Wulsin started his expedition from Baotou in Inner Mongolia. Baotou, which is today a major industrial center, had just become the northern terminus of the Beijing (Peking)-Suiyuan Railroad. It was then a bustling, booming frontier town, spearhead of the centuries-old expansion of Han culture and economic modes into Inner Mongolia. Mongolian nomadic life was giving way to Han cities and irrigated agriculture, and Wulsin recorded this scene and its contradictions.

From Baotou he marched westward in a long arc north of the Yellow River through Inner Mongolia. The members of the expedition were Wulsin and his wife Janet, another American couple, Harry and Susanne Emery, and a Chinese manager, Mr. Wu, two Chinese taxidermists, a botanist, a hunter, a cook, and a groom. As they started out, Janet Wulsin felt their venture into these unknown territories was like a trip to Mars. They rode on twenty-seven camels, six ponies, and a donkey, averaging fifteen miles a day, traveling only in the afternoon and early evening to accommodate the feeding habits of the camels.

The expedition was headed to Wangyefu, the capital of the Mongol kingdom of Alashan, and it took them six weeks to reach it. Their nights were spent in tents, farmhouses, inns, and trading posts. Crossing the Alashan desert, their inexperienced Mongol guide was vague about the location of the water wells, so that they had trouble finding water. Often, after ten hours of strenuous marching, they would find only a small pool of water so brackish that even the camels

would not drink it. Toward the end of this leg of the expedition, supplies ran low and they were forced to live on millet mush and syrup made from melted sugar.

They stayed a month in Wangyefu, photographing and collecting, then proceeded with six carts (which reminded Janet of prairie wagons) to Lanzhou, capital of the province of Gansu, meeting place of Tibetans, Mongols, and Hans. On mule and horseback they went to Xining and Tangar and to Lake Kokonor, in the Tibetan grasslands. Returning on a southeasterly course, they visited the great lamaseries at Kumbum and Labrang. Here, as in Baotou, they saw societies in crucial transition. In these areas, Tibetan, Mongol, Muslim, and Han peoples and life styles coexisted in a shifting broth. The tides of trade and of the workings of national and cultural interests involved the change from nomadism to settlement, the forming and conflict of ethnic and religious identities, and the jelling of a Chinese nation within the conflicting spheres of influence of world wide empires.

When Wulsin's expedition returned to Lanzhou, they rented a house and gave a Fourth of July party for all foreigners, dining with everyone, including missionaries and civil and military governors, who had given them help along the way. Wulsin also rented an office where he went each day to work on articles for the National Geographic, do accounts and letters, and develop his photographs.

* The official title of the expedition was the Central China Expedition but because of unrest in south and central China Wulsin, in 1923, went to northwest China.

From Lanzhou they floated three weeks on a raft down the Yellow River back to Baotou, arriving at the end of October. By now they clearly felt they were heading home. As Wulsin wrote his mother "... we have been floating peacefully . . . through gorges where the Yellow River was swift, and dead yellow hills closed us in on both sides; then through level desert, where the stream was slow and we had nothing to look at but now and then a Mongol or his cow . . . we both got well rested . . . I have done a great deal of office work to lighten my load when we get to Peking."



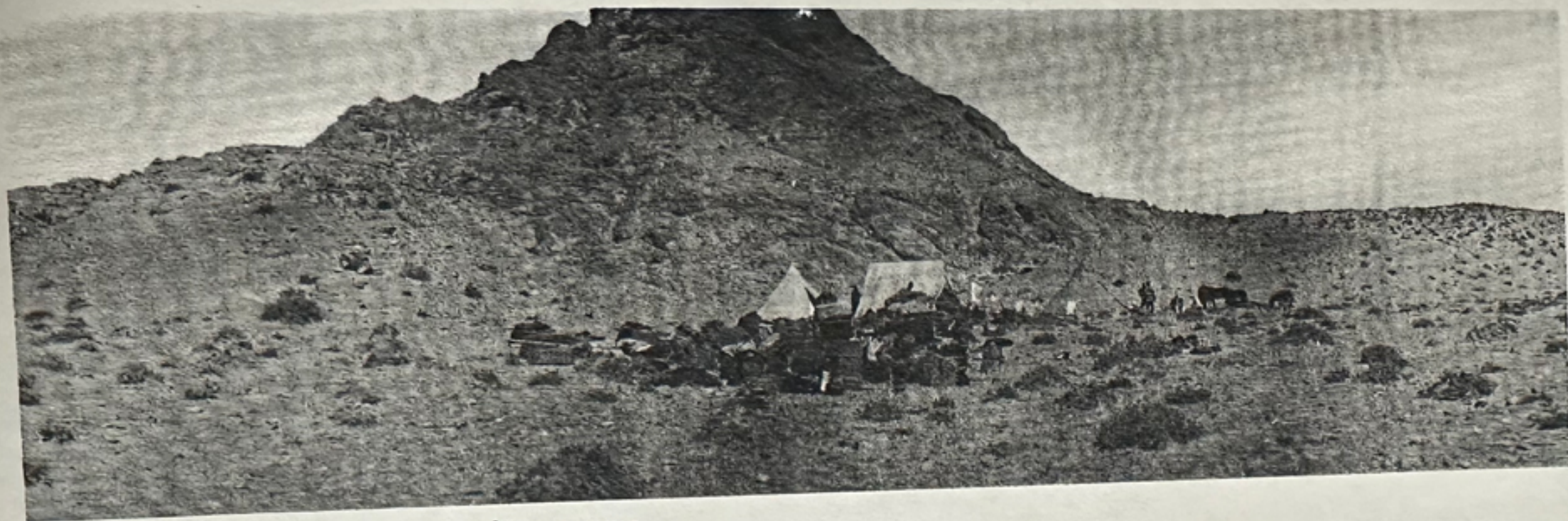
The logistics of such a trip had been formidable, and the planning and management required were clearly pleasurable to Wulsin, who outfitted the expedition with clothing, equipment, emergency foods, personnel, and weapons for every possible contingency; 43 boxes weighing 1,580 kgs. He even carried all manner of receipts and business correspondence going back several years. Some sense may be gained of the logistical magnitude by considering that, by the time they boarded the rafts home on the Yellow River, they carried with them 1,293 zoological specimens and 1,100 botanical specimens, with ten plant sheets for each, in addition to some 2,000 photographic negatives.

It is a testimony to the effectiveness of Wulsin's planning, and perhaps a measure of his luck, that this long trip through little known lands wracked by geopolitical and ethnic conflict, and afflicted by brigandage, was uneventful and in fact without a direct taste of danger.

Wulsin, at this time in his life, was trying to develop a career as an explorer. He had graduated from Harvard in 1913, and done an additional year's study in engineering. In 1914 and 1915 he had traveled in East Africa and Madagascar forming zoological collections for Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology. At that time he wrote to his mother "I really think now that this—a mixture of 'scientific exploration,' collecting, etc.—is the work I was born for," and "I see that I have a fair sort of knack at this . . . what I want now is training (say at Harvard in preference . . .) in zoology, botany, geology, anthropology, and practical astronomy, so that when I travel I can do every bit of scientific work that circumstances permit and do it properly."

Chiaotzu. Two small baskets made of a wooden frame covered with blue Chinese cloth and suspended on either side of the camel. You climb in while the camel is on the ground and then he rises or rather unfolds, lurches forward, then back, and is up. But what an arising! The drop in a huge elevator is as nothing compared to it. Ours were the most elaborate, I feel sure, that ever crossed Inner Mongolia. We had spent days interior decorating them, a window of thin Chinese gauze, a curtain to hang down in front and roll up, pockets galore, cushions, a nice fat straw mattress—any small girl would have loved them for a doll house.

J.W. August 1923



For days we slept four in a tent and spent some wild nights while the Mongolian winds shrieked around us and shook the tent as tho' it were made of paper.

J.W. August 1923

After military service in the First World War, he searched about for the basis of the career he envisioned for himself. He decided "to go to China as a scientific traveller, learn Chinese, go into official and other society all I can, and travel through the interior sufficiently to get a thoroughly good idea of it and to make useful scientific records—zoology, meteorology, position and relative altitude observations, some geology and botany if possible—and thorough economic and political and social observations."

Wulsin left for China in 1921. Janet, whom he had married two years earlier, reported to his mother: "F. is full of plans and ideas . . . to get specimens for the museum, to do some work for the National Geographic Society, some data for the State Department, etc.; but when one comes down to brass tacks—all that is definite is the Harvard Museum—who today wrote that they would send him a sum of money to spend as he sees fit. All the rest is vague, possible."

And so Wulsin, whose family had money, in effect, at first financed himself as an investment for the career he had in mind. In 1921 he traveled in the province of Shanxi for five months, and gave the resulting zoological collection to Harvard's Agassiz Museum. He "picked up some germs in Shansi," and spent 1922 in Beijing and the United States recovering. His 1923

was sponsored by the National Geographic Society. The zoological and botanical collections went to the Smithsonian Institution and, after the National Geographic Society chose from among his photographs, he donated the remainder to Harvard's Peabody Museum.

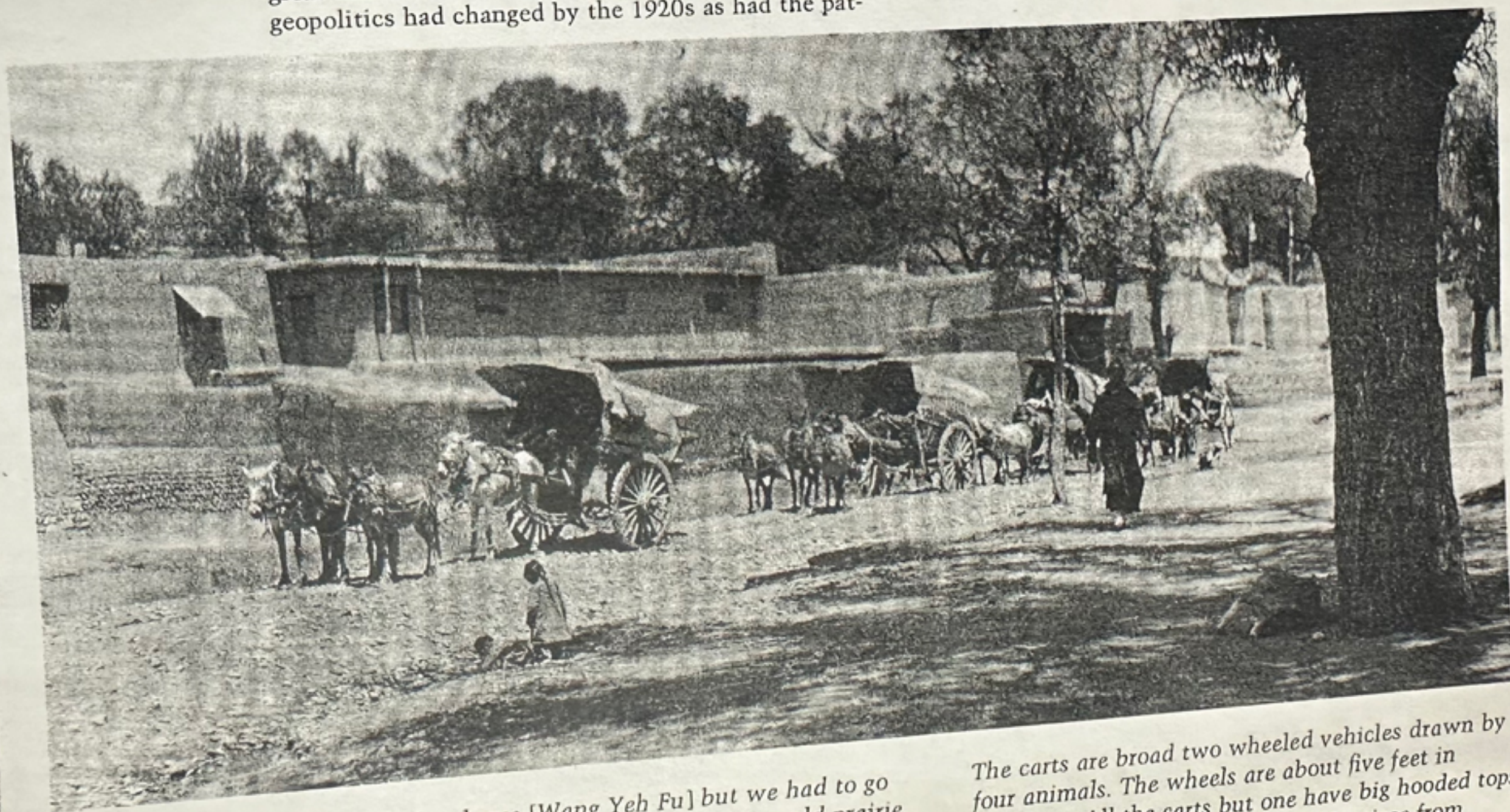
Wulsin's expedition produced approximately 2,000 photographs. The National Geographic Society selected approximately 300 from these and 28 pictures were used to illustrate an article "The Road to Wang Yeh Fu" published in the National Geographic, February 1926. This photographic record has lain quietly for over half a century in the files of both Wulsin and the National Geographic Society, and later, the archives of the Peabody Museum, Harvard University. The negatives are on a nitrocellulose base, which tends to deteriorate, and many have gone beyond retrieval, leaving only positive prints, some of which are of indifferent quality. New prints, made by Peabody photographers Hillel Burger and Christopher Burnett from the old negatives, reveal the fineness of Wulsin's photography.

Wulsin's photographic record is unique. Few people have ever photographed in this part of China. Moreover, since Wulsin's purpose was to thoroughly document the people and their ways of life, the range and

In 1924, accompanied by Captain P. G. Tenney of the United States Army, Wulsin traveled through southwest China, north Vietnam, and northern Laos, again under the sponsorship of the National Geographic Society. Long afterwards, in 1956, he wrote: "The museums were particularly anxious for specimens of this region, but it was a dismal journey for the area had suffered for years from civil wars and famines, with occasional visitations of the plague, and the rains never stopped."

This expedition in 1924 to southwest China was the end of Wulsin's efforts to develop a lifetime career as a professional generalist and scientific explorer. While the model he had in mind was clearly that of the great nineteenth-century explorers, primarily British, geopolitics had changed by the 1920s as had the pat-

tern of sponsorship by the learned societies. The European empires were no longer so much expanding into undeveloped territories as trying to consolidate their holdings, often in conflict with other imperial systems and with national and ethnic stirrings. The sponsorship for exploration and local information now was likelier to come from military and commercial sources rather than from scientific societies. The partial alternative basis of support was journalism, in the manner of Lowell Thomas, where the economics of the mass media complemented the circumstances of modern empires at their borders. Wulsin felt, however, that for him this was not possible because, as he said in the VI Report (1933) of the Harvard Class of 1913, "Unfortunately the gift of descriptive writing is not mine."

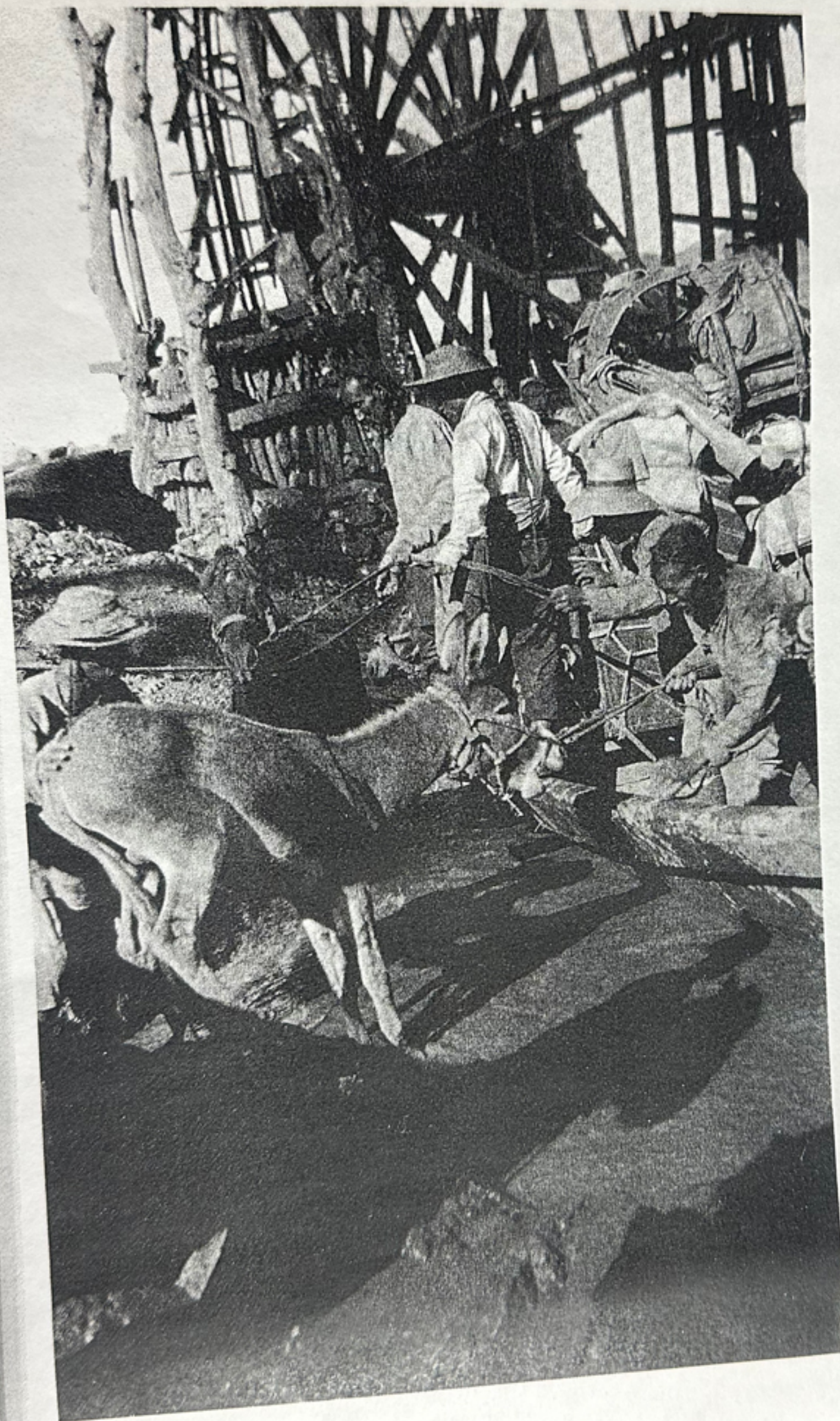


We hated to leave [Wang Yeh Fu] but we had to go on. May 31st with six great carts like our old prairie schooners and our six ponies we started for Lanchow.

J.W. October 1923

The carts are broad two wheeled vehicles drawn by four animals. The wheels are about five feet in diameter. All the carts but one have big hooded tops of matting. [They] are costing \$108 apiece from Wang Yeh Fu to Lanchow calculated on the basis of 18 days travel at \$6 a day. We are to pay \$3 a day for each day we elect not to march.

F.R.W. May 1923



Wulsin returned to Harvard in 1925, and obtained his Ph.D. in anthropology in 1929, meanwhile conducting an archaeological expedition to Central Africa. In these years he and Janet were divorced, and he then married Susanne Emery, who had been widowed. In the early 1930s he became a curator for anthropology at the University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania and was involved in archaeological excavations in Iran. During the later 1930s he mainly stayed at home writing and teaching part-time at Boston University. During the Second World War he served in the Quartermaster General's office and did important research on the survival of men under extreme climatic conditions.

From 1945 until his retirement in 1958 he was Professor of Anthropology at Tufts University. There at last this big, vigorous man had a platform from which he conveyed his enthusiasm and his sense of the variety of human experiences and circumstances to a generation of undergraduates. His successor in the large undergraduate course which Wulsin had taught was told by a student: "You may know your anthropology very well and you tell us that these studies are important to a Liberal Arts education, but Professor Wulsin made the lifeways of those distant people seem pertinent to our own lives."

The man who had found no market as an explorer had at last found his audience as a teacher. But he was never a mere colorist; he understood the importance of what he saw. Even as a young man in 1922, while trying to work out the finances for a five-year study of the non-Han peoples and the zoology of China, he wrote: "The Washington Conference and the present civil war in China have made people realize that new political forces are being born in the Far East whose importance for the whole future history of the world it would be hard to exaggerate."

He died in 1961.

M. E. Alonso
Cambridge 1979



OASIS
Online Archival Search
Information System

Wulsin, Frederick Roelker, 1891-. Papers: Guide. (MS
Am 1329-1330)
Houghton Library, Harvard College Library, Harvard
University

MS Am 1329-1330

Wulsin, Frederick Roelker, 1891-. Papers: Guide.

Houghton Library, Harvard College Library



Harvard University, Cambridge, MA 02138

© 2002 The President and Fellows of Harvard College

Descriptive Summary

Repository: Houghton Library, Harvard College Library, Harvard University
Call No.: MS Am 1329
Call No.: MS Am 1330
Creator: Wulsin, Frederick Roelker, 1891-.
Title: Papers,
Date(s): 1914-1932.
Quantity: 58 v. (3 linear ft.)
Abstract: Journals, notebooks, and account books of the American anthropologist Frederick R. Wulsin.

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information: *42M-1153-1179.
Gift of Frederick R. Wulsin; received: 1941.

Historical Note

Wulsin was an anthropologist who collected zoological specimens in East Africa and Madagascar, 1914-1915; and in China, Mongolia, Kokonor, and Indo-China, 1921-1924. He made archaeological journeys to the Belgian Congo and French Equatorial Africa, 1927-1928; and to Persia, 1930-1931. Wulsin also served as first lieutenant in the U.S. Army during World War I and taught anthropology at Boston University, 1935-1936, and Tufts, 1945-1957. He died in 1961.

Organization

Organized into two series:

- MS Am 1329
- MS Am 1330

Scope and Content

Includes journals, notebooks, and account books documenting Wulsin's zoological collecting in China and other regions in East Asia from 1921 to 1924 for the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard and the National Geographic Society, and trips to East Africa and Madagascar from 1914 to 1915. Notes pertain to equipment, provisions, personnel, photography, transport, weather and other matters. Also field notes for archaeological collecting in Persia from 1930 to 1932; and journal, 1914, recording a voyage to Lesser Antilles and other islands.

Related Material

For related materials see: Frederick Roelker Wulsin Papers, Tozzer Library, Harvard University.

Container List

- **Series: MS Am 1329**
 - (1) Wulsin, Frederick Roelker, 1891-. *Natural history notes*. [n.p.] July 1914. 1v. Ms. commonplace book. *42M-1153.
 - (2) Wulsin, Frederick Roelker, 1891-. *Notes on trip to Lesser Antilles*. [v.p.] 1914. 1v. Manuscript journal. *42M-1154
 - (3-4) Wulsin, Frederick Roelker, 1891-. *First [-second] character book*. [Peking?] 1922. 2v. Ms. practice book of Chinese characters. *42M-1155.
 - (5) Wulsin, Frederick Roelker, 1891-. *Chinese lessons, 1921*. [Peking?] 1921. 1v. Ms. practice book of Chinese characters. *42M-1156.
 - (6) Wulsin, Frederick Roelker, 1891-. *Notes on outfit, 1914 etc. Trip for H.U. Museum*. [n.p.] 1914. 1v. Ms. notebook. *42M-1157.
 - (7) Wulsin, Frederick Roelker, 1891-. *Equipment notes. Summer of 1922*. [n.p.] 1922. 1v. Manuscript. *42M-1158.
 - (8) Wulsin, Frederick Roelker, 1891-. *Madagascar side notes. Notes on transport, outfit, etc.* [Madagascar, 1915] 1v. Ms. notebook. *42M-1159.
 - (9) Wulsin, Frederick Roelker, 1891-. *Photographic note-book no. 1*. [Peking?] 1923 [-1924]. 1v. Ms. notebook. *42M-1160.
 - (10) Wulsin, Frederick Roelker, 1891-. *Schooner notes*. [Madagascar] 1915. 1v.

- Ms. journal.
*42M-1161.
- (11) Wulsin, Frederick Roelker, 1891-. *Ethnological notes*. Madagascar, 1915. 1v.
Ms. journal.
*42M-1162.
- (12) Wulsin, Frederick Roelker, 1891-. *Books, book notes, and bibliography*. [n.p.]
December 1921 [-1922] 1v.
Ms. notebook.
*42M-1163.
- (13) Wulsin, Frederick Roelker, 1891-. *House book*. [Peking?] 1923. 1v.
Ms. account book.
*42M-1164.
- (14) Wulsin, Frederick Roelker, 1891-. *Accounts, 1922*. [n.p.] 1922. 1v.
Ms. notebook.
*42M-1165.
- (15-16) Wulsin, Frederick Roelker. 1891-. *Random notes on safari equipment, etc.* [East Africa] 1915. 2v.
Ms. notebooks.
*42M-1166.
- (17-19) Wulsin, Frederick Roelker, 1891-. *China trip, 1921. Journal ...* [v.p.] 1921. 3v.
Manuscript.
*42M-1167.
- (20-21) Wulsin, Frederick Roelker, 1891-. *Miscellaneous notes. No.14 [-15]*. Dec.13, 1930
[- Feb.14, 1932] [n.p.] 1930-1932. 2v.
Manuscript.
*42M-1168.
- (22-23) Wulsin, Frederick Roelker, 1891-. [National geographic society. Central China expedition, 1923. *Accounts and inventory, 1923-1924*] [n.p.] 1923-1924. 2v.
Manuscript.
*42M-1169.
- (24) Wulsin, Frederick Roelker, 1891-. [Journal, Dec 23, 1914-Jan 18, 1915] [n.p.] 1914-1915. 1v.
Manuscript.
*42M-1170.
- (25) Wulsin, Frederick Roelker, 1891-. National geographic society. Central China expedition. *Accounts from Dec.10, 1923 to [Mar.26 1924]* [Peking? 1923-1924] 1v.
Manuscript.
*42M-1171.
- (26-29) Wulsin, Frederick Roelker, 1891-. National geographic society. Central China expedition, 1923. *Personnel book, 1923 [-1924]* [n.d.] 1923 [-1924] 4v.
Manuscript.
*42M-1172.
- (30-33) Wulsin, Frederick Roelker, 1891-. National geographic society. Central China expedition, 1923. *Weather book. March 25, 1923 [-Nov 25 1924]* [n.p., 1923-1924] 4v.
Manuscript.
*42M-1173.
- (34) Wulsin, Frederick Roelker, 1891-. *Recollections, 1917-1918*. [U.S.S. Leviathan, 1919] 1v.
Manuscript.
*42M-1174.
- (35) Wulsin, Frederick Roelker, 1891-. *Notes*. London [etc.] 1914. 1v.

Manuscript.

*42M-1175.

- (36-43) Wulsin, Frederick Roelker, 1891-. *Miscellaneous notes. 1922 [-1925].* [n.p.] 1921 [-1925]. 8v.

Ms. notebooks dealing with Wulsin's work in China.

*42M-1176.

- (44-48) Wulsin, Frederick Roelker, 1891-. *National geographic society. Central China expedition ... Journal ...* [v.p.] 1923 [-1924]. 1v. 5v.

Manuscript.

*42M-1177.

- (49-57) Wulsin, Frederick Roelker, 1891-. *Journal, Oct. 17, 1914 [-Sept.15, 1915]* [v.p.] 1914 [-1915] 9v.

Manuscript.

Incomplete: v.1-2, 4-10 only. Only 9 vols. total.

*42M-1178.

- **Series:** MS Am 1330

- Tenney, P. G. [*National geographic society. Central China expedition, 1923]. Personnel, 1924. [Peking? 1924]* 1v.

Manuscript.

*42M-1179.