

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, July 23, 2012

Einstein, Wiener, and Hitchcock: The three qualify as “absent-minded professors” of the early 20th century. All were brilliant men, but most of you are familiar only with Albert Einstein (1879–1955) and his appearance, his connection with Princeton University, and his Theory of Relativity. There is no question that he was the best known of the three. My favorite quote from Einstein is: “If we knew what we were doing, there would be no need for research.”

Norbert Wiener (1894–1964) was a child prodigy from Missouri who attained a Ph.D. at the age of 17. When I was at M.I.T. from 1942 to 1944, he was Professor of Mathematics and Cybernetics, who probably taught only graduate students while working on his many advanced discoveries. Freshmen and meteorology students such as I were never taught by Professor Wiener, but we saw him often. Frequently, he would leave his office in the main M.I.T. building and start toward Walker Memorial Hall for his lunch. He was the least athletic looking man I ever saw, and partway to his lunch destination, he would reverse and return to his office, believing that he had finished lunch and was ready to advance his brilliant theory, whatever it was at that particular time. Usually staring at the sky instead of the path ahead, he embodied the perfect absent-minded professor. People like Irene du Pont Jr. and a young David Nergaard, associated with M.I.T. during those years, probably remember him well.

Professor Hitchcock may have been the least absent-minded, and he was a very nice man. A brilliant mathematician, he had retired from M.I.T. just before World War II began. With the shortage of teachers, they called him back, and he taught me freshman calculus, or he tried very hard to do so. He had poor eyes and very thick glasses, and he was used to teaching upper classmen in advanced subjects. It was very difficult for him to bring his thinking down to the college freshman level, but he was extremely patient, and he tried very hard to make us understand. I barely passed, but I recalled my calculus teacher most fondly.

About eight years later, George Woodbury of Bedford, New Hampshire, wrote a book entitled *The Story of a Stanley Steamer*. Woodbury, who had restored and was operating an ancestral water-powered mill near his home, had bought a 1917 Model 730 Stanley from Donald Randall (from whom I bought our Model 607 in 1946). Randall was referred to in the book as Professor Coates. Fred Marriott restored Woodbury's car mechanically about 1949. In one of the book's chapters, Woodbury talked about those who would come into his office in the mill just to chat, especially during the “January thaw.” Professor Hitchcock, finally retired again from M.I.T., was one of Woodbury's frequent visitors.