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S. W. Robinson -- Engineer

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Have you ever wondered why Robinson Lab is "Robinson Lab"? Behind this name lies one of the most colorful careers in the engineering profession.

At the April 24 meeting of the O.S.U. student branch of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers, Dean Emeritus E. A. Hitchcock spoke on the life of Stillman W. Robinson, first head of the Mechanical Engineering Department here.

The son of a farmer, Robinson, was born near South Reading, Vermont in 1838. His father died when he was young, and after working in a sawmill he became an apprentice machinist at seventeen. After four years of this he became so interested in mechanical devices that he decided to take a course in engineering at the University of Michigan. To better prepare himself for college Robinson entered high school for a term. In spite of this and illness, he received a degree in civil engineering (the only engineering course then given) in the remarkably short time of two-and-one-half years.

While still in school, and working part time as a machinist, he perfected his first invention—a machine for graduating thermometers which served as a basis for later developments.

After graduation, in 1863, he was for three years Assistant Engineer on the U. S. Lake Survey. By the time he was 29, he had become Assistant Professor of Mining and Geodesy at the University of Michigan. In 1870 he accepted the professorship of Mechanical Engineering and Physics at what is now the University of Illinois. Here, with an appropriation of \$2000, he organized the Department of Mechanical Engineering, the first to be established in any state university in this country.

Eight years later, after building up the equipment and organizing the first specifically educational shop in America, Robinson resigned as Dean of the College of Engineering to accept the position of Professor of Mechanical Engineering and Physics at O.S.U. It was soon realized that Mechanical Engineering had become a full time subject, accordingly a separate department was organized with Robinson as its head.



PRESENTATION OF PHOTOSTAT

Left to right—Paul W. Recknagel, Chairman Student Branch A.S.M.E.; Professor F. W. Marquis, Head of Dept. of M.E.; Mr. Erdis Robinson; Dean C. E. MacQuigg; Mr. Hugh Huntington; Dean Emeritus E. A. Hitchcock.

The department laboratories progressed from four small rooms in the west basement of University Hall with meager equipment, to a separate building called Mechanical Hall, situated where the present Service Building now stands. The appropriation for the new building was \$9000. A large part of the equipment including a 10 h.p. compound steam engine, was designed and built by Robinson with the help of his students; other equipment, some of which still exists, was obtained by various means. The professor, assisted by two instructors, conducted all the classes.

Directing the Department of Mechanical Engineering was not all of Robinson's activities. He served as a consulting engineer for many concerns, as well as developing and improving many useful devices and publishing outstanding scientific papers.

Robinson was awarded the Roland Prize of the American Society of Civil Engineers for his work in connection with the longest cantilever span in this country up to that time. The mountings of the great Lick telescope stand as a monument to his engineering ability, as they have shown no material wear after fifty-four years of continuous operation.

He developed the Pitot tube for use in measuring the flow of natural gas. This simple device has been in universal use since that time, and its value for other purposes has been demonstrated many times. He also invented an odontograph for laying out teeth of gear wheels.

Professor Robinson was the inventor of some fifty items, forty of which have been patented in the United States and many foreign countries.

Fearing a breakdown, he obtained a leave of absence
(Continued on Page 27)

ROBINSON

(Continued from Page 13)

from the University in 1894, and a year later resigned because of the demand for his work as consulting engineer.

After several busy years of engineering work he organized in 1902, what is now the Robinson and Houchin Optical Company. He was one of the founders of the Society for the Promotion of Engineering Education and one of the organizing members of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers in 1880.

Professor Robinson was admired and respected by all of his students and associates. He was a constant worker and extremely modest about himself and his achievements, yet was outspoken in his praise of others.

At the conclusion of the talk, Mr. Hugh Huntington, friend of the Robinson family, presented to Dean MacQuigg, for the College of Engineering, a framed photostat of two bronze medals awarded Professor Robinson at the Centennial Exposition of 1876 and the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, for his outstanding exhibits. Mr. Huntington was introduced by Mr. Erdis Robinson, son of Professor Robinson, who is a civic leader of Columbus and President of the Robinson and Houchin Optical Company.