

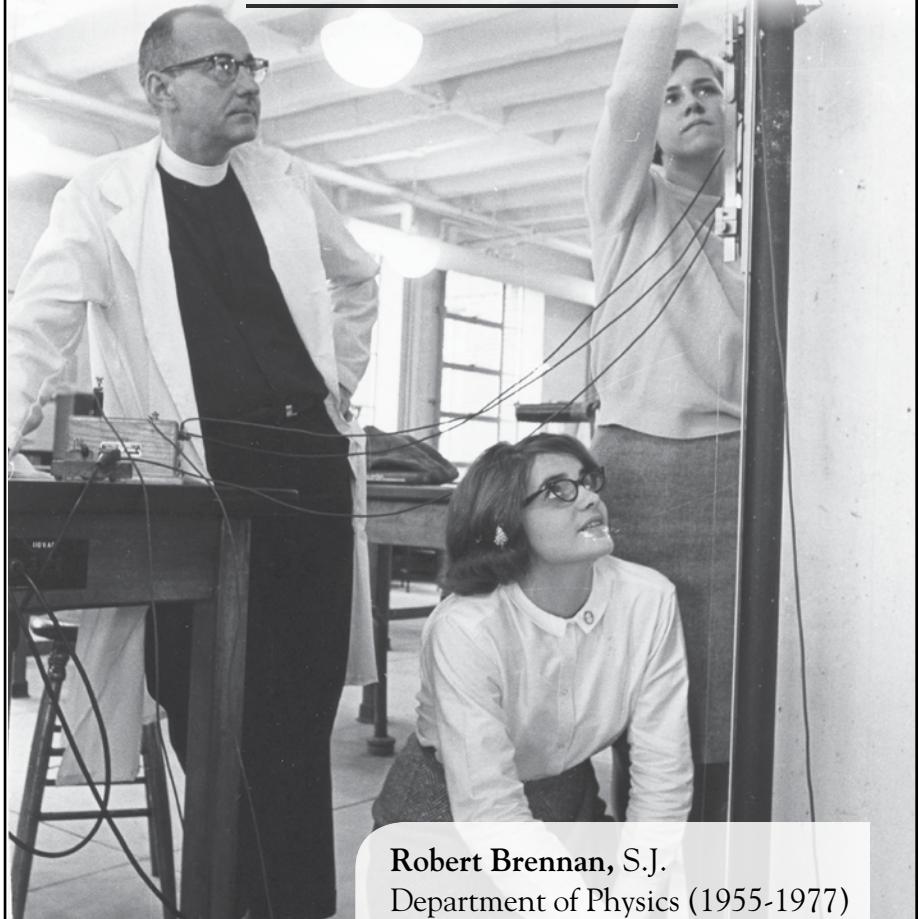
ARCHIVE

NEWS

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PHYSICS: THE BIG BANG AT LE MOYNE



Robert Brennan, S.J.
Department of Physics (1955-1977)

LE MOYNE
Greatness meets Goodness

THE ARCHIVIST'S CREED:

Preserve the Past, Enrich the Present, Protect the Future

DEPARTMENT OF PHYSICS: THE FIRST DECADE

I have always advised history majors that, when writing a paper, their first concern should be to narrow down the paper's topic so they can adequately deal with it. When I was assigned to write about the history of the Department of Physics, I figured that this topic would require at least a doctoral dissertation. The Archives has more than 22 folders stuffed with information on the department. So I have limited my topic to some observations on the first decade of the physics department. It is a history of beginnings, of growth and of the department's search for self-identity and respectability.

In Le Moyne's first year, 1946, the College offered only courses in philosophy and religion, but the following year a large range of courses made its appearance, modeled on the Canisius College catalogue. Among the offerings was a B.S. in pure science, which included physics, designated as "pre-engineering." There was only one teacher in the department, Edward McDevitt, S.J. He taught General Physics, which was a fundamental course that covered the basic aspects of mechanics, heat, sound and light.

In this early period, physics was intertwined with mathematics. The early school catalogues listed only the department faculty of mathematics, not physics. Professors such as McDevitt, Leon Malthby and Charles McCain had joint appointments in the two departments. At times, the two held common departmental meetings. By 1950, to aid the physics department, mathematics faculty reversed the sequence of their courses in mechanical drawing and descriptive geometry.

A constant concern was to make the major more academically respectable. Physics was considered the easy road to a science degree. Incoming physics majors had lower averages in high school than did chemistry or biology majors. A significant number of juniors majoring in physics were failing. The department leaders decided to implement a more careful screening of freshmen and sophomores, raising the number of required courses and requiring a C or better in prescribed courses before a student moved on.

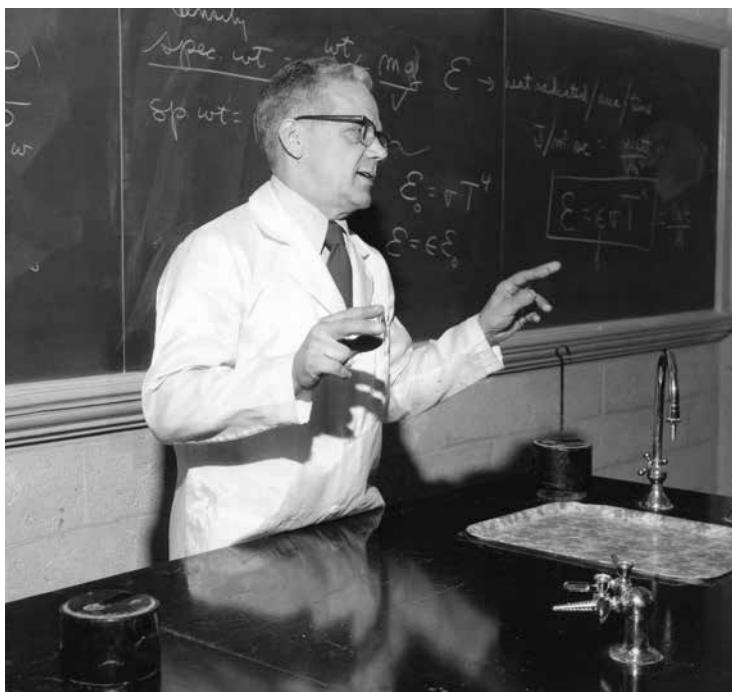
In the same year, the New York Province of the Society of Jesus abolished the titles "pre-medicine" and "pre-engineering" at its colleges and universities. It was thought that if a graduate in these majors failed to go on into these specific fields, the graduate would be stigmatized because it would be assumed that there must be something lacking.

In 1958, the Department of Physics started a summer institute for high school seniors. The hope was that they would enroll at Le Moyne in the fall of 1959. Only men participated because the students would live on campus and there was no women's dormitory yet. Students had to buy their own textbooks at an estimated cost of \$10.

It was during this early period that Le Moyne departments sought surplus equipment from the U.S. government. College officials had only to present a ripped out page from an official booklet to get any item that they wanted. The chairs of physics, biology and chemistry departments saw a listing for fans and figured these would be good additions on warm summer days. After a few weeks they got a call from the railyard saying a shipment

addressed to the College had arrived. They eagerly jumped into a little pickup truck and drove to the station, where the stationmaster informed them that their shipment was in a few boxcars. When they opened the doors to the cars, to their surprise, they saw exhaust fans from Navy ships. They were so enormous that just two or three filled a whole railroad car. Obviously the fans could not be transported to the College, so they left them there.

About a week later the rail master called and told the department chairs they had to get rid of the fans so that the freight cars could be used. The faculty members they contacted a scrap metal dealer and offered him the fans for nothing, provided he got them out of the boxcars.



Professor James Welter, Ph.D. – Department of Physics (1953-1998)

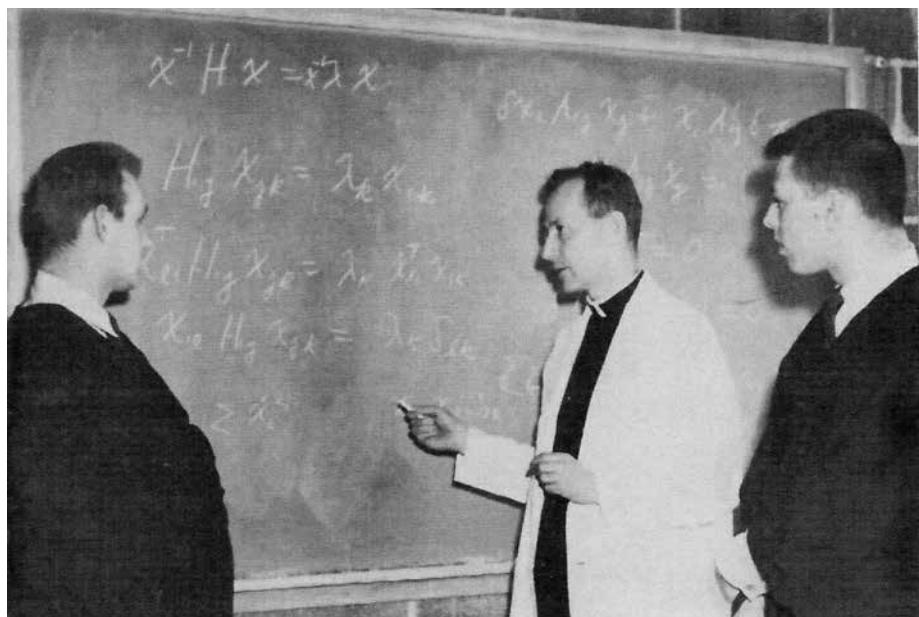
A few days later an F.B.I. agent came and talked to Father McDevitt. The agent waved paperwork that revealed that Le Moyne had sold some fans to a scrap metal dealer. He informed the faculty member that reselling war surplus was illegal. Father McDevitt explained the whole situation. The F.B.I. man responded, "Since you are a priest and I'm an Irish Catholic, I'll let you off this time with a warning. Don't it again. It is against the law."

The physics faculty changed and grew during the first decade. From the beginning, people realized that Father McDevitt's health was not up the strain of being department chair when all was new. He was hospitalized for three months in 1954; he left the department and Le Moyne that year.

But the future pillars of the department had arrived. McCain, who joined the faculty in 1952, would teach electricity, magnetism, and atomic and nuclear physics until 1990. Welter, who came in 1953 and "died with his boots on" in 1998, taught optics, electronics, and thermodynamics. The last major addition to physics faculty during the first decade was Robert Brennan, S.J., who came as chair in 1955. He taught thermodynamics and optics until 1977.

Starting from a blank page, the physics department added many new facets of its operation, grew in number of teachers, and started to define itself as separate from mathematics. The department was on its long way to this 70th celebration of physics at Le Moyne.

William Bosch, S.J.
Le Moyne College Archivist



Professor Edward McDevitt, S.J. – Department of Physics
(1947-1954 and 1957-1961)



Professor Leon Maltby – Department of Physics
and Department of Mathematics (1948-1964)

WAR SURPLUS #2

*Charles McCain reflects on the history of the Department of Physics
during an oral history interview with the Archives.*

There is another little story associated with that. About a month later Father [Edward] McDevitt himself went down to get some more surpluses. He was interested in a radar truck or van, which had all sorts of electronics equipment in it. He thought that the physics department could use the electronics gear as teaching tools, and in the laboratory. So any way he got the van, stripped all the electronics equipment, which is still around the school by the way. The truck was in no running condition, so he left it parked behind the science building. It languished there for a couple of years, but he didn't know what to do with it. He knew after the incident with the fans that he could not sell it. The the building-and-grounds people pressured Father McDevitt to get rid of it so that they could plow the back lot, and it was very difficult to do with that van sitting there. So Father McDevitt told the head of buildings and grounds his problem. The B-and-G people then dug a big hole in the lot behind the now cafeteria, and buried the van. As far as I know, it is still there. Now in all fairness in interest of accuracy I remember repeating this story to Father [Vincent] Ryan. He chuckled to himself and said, "I have yet to meet someone who saw the burial of the truck." However I had a chance to talk to Father John J. O'Brien and he assured me that it actually happened. I thought this was a very humorous human-interest story. The College in the early years did not have much money, so [its leaders] had to rely on their wits to get equipment for their science department.

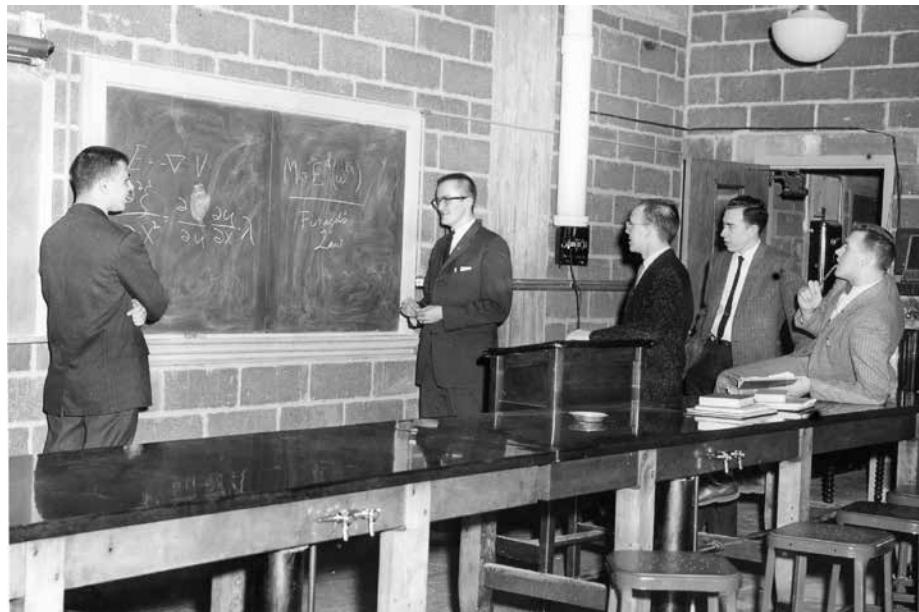
NOSTALGIA

The Department of Physics began its history with challenges and hardships, including pitiful, poor salaries, lack of equipment and cramped quarters. However, later some remembered this early age with deep nostalgia.

Professor Charles McCain, Ph.D., in his oral history interview for the Archives, expressed his fond memories of that lost Golden Age.



In terms of the College how it has changed over the years, one thing that impressed me very much as a newcomer in 1952 was that the College was very closely knit. You always felt that you were almost like a member of a family. Most of the faculty that I talked to felt that they had the best interests of the College at their heart. They also felt that they were in on the beginning of something big and important. As a consequence their feelings for the College were much different than they are today. Now the school is so much more diverse. There are so many new and young people coming [here]. The atmosphere has changed quite a bit. [For] the most part the faculty was Catholic in belief and they attended most of the religious observances. This is very obvious nowadays because the faculty does not support



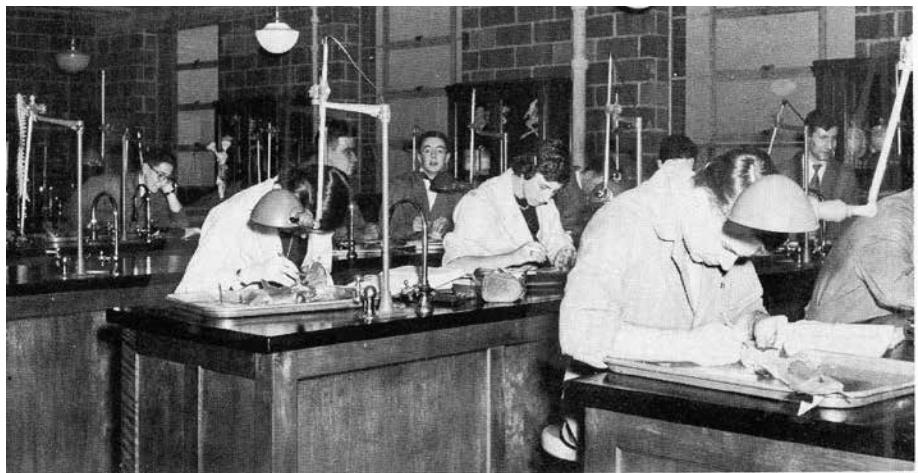
Junior Physics Seminar – Class of 1960

Ed Richards, Ed Mahern, Walt Wojeik, Tom Fleming and Roger Richardson.



Professor Charles McCain, Ph.D. – Department of Physics (1952-1994)

those observances like they used to. I tend to think that in recruiting the new faculty they don't pay much attention to that anymore. I realize that there is a problem in discrimination and all that sort of thing. The people doing the hiring have to be very careful. On the other hand, they do not touch on it at all, and I think that it is critical nowadays that they should. That is part in parcel with the entire school. One last comment: It is easy for old timers like myself and others have a different idea about the College because we felt that we were in on the ground floor of the College. So we felt that we had a vested interest in the place. It is easier for us to have these feelings than the newer faculty.



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**THOUGH PHYSICS AND OTHER SCIENCES
PUBLICITY BECOMES OUT OF DATE,
THE ARCHIVES' HOLDING BECOME MORE GOLDEN
AS TIME GOES BY.**

The Archives depend upon the generosity of the Le Moyne community. Donations of documents, scrapbooks, photographs and memorabilia that help to tell the story of the College – as well as that of its students, staff and administrators – are welcomed.

If you have material to donate, please contact the archivist at boschwj@lemyne.edu or (315) 445-4732.

Check out the Archives website at lemyne.edu/archives.

Editorial Board: Barbara Blaszak
 Kathleen Hennigan
Copy Editor: Jennifer Reddy

The Archives are located on the second floor of the Noreen Reale Falcone Library.

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