DeWitt Bristol Brace

Clan William

Pioneering Physicist

by Lori Hahn



DeWitt Brace, Ph.D.

Today's subject is the incredible pioneer scientist, DeWitt Bristol Brace, PhD. He was a brilliant physics professor and researcher who died young. Makes me wonder what he could have done had he lived a full life.

DeWitt Bristol Brace was born to Emily Cowles Bristol, our Munson descendant, and C. Lusk Brace near Wilson, Niagara County, New York on 05 Jan 1859. Lusk was a farmer and later a Lockport mill operator. Lusk and Emily had four children, DeWitt being the second son and child.

DeWitt received both his bachelor's and master's degrees from Boston College in 1881-1882. He then studied under Dr. Henry Augustus Rowland at Johns Hopkins University for two years. He then went to Berlin, Germany to study under Dr. Hermann Helmholtz and Dr. Gustav Kirchhoff at the University of Berlin. He received his Ph.D. in 1885 in Berlin after he completed his dissertation on the magnetic rotation of the plane of polarization.

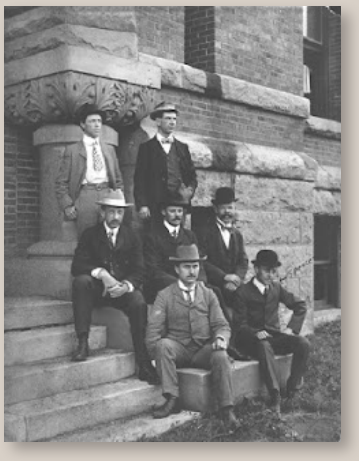
Dr. Brace returned to the US, traveling to the University of Michigan, where he spent a year as an assistant professor of physics.

The University of Nebraska at Lincoln was founded in 1869 and built in a four block section of the city. It's farm campus was built in 1873, outside of the city of Lincoln on the prairie. In the beginning, the science department was not divided into specialties like Chemistry and Physics. It was the first university west of the Missisippi to offer a doctoral program. There apparently was a bias in eastern academic circles that the western education insitutions were inferior in both the academic backgrounds of its faculty and its research capabilities. DeWitt helped dispell this myth when he arrived to take a full professorship in 1887. Part of his charge was to create a physics department.



The old laboratory

Research had not necessarily been a big deal at UNL, but Brace believed that such research was critical to the operation of the University. He believed strongly that higher education centers must develop research. His own research led to great distinction for the University. With a growing reputation, Brace used his clout to lobby for updated equipment, laboratories, facilities, and money for research. He built a very strong physics department but the department still needed a home on campus.



"Brace also began building a graduate program and hired two additional instructors in 1896, Burton Evans Moore and Louis Trenchard More. A few years later Clarence Aurelius Skinner and John Edwin Almy were also added to the physics faculty. In 1896 one of Brace's students, Harold Allen, was awarded a Ph.D. degree by the University of Nebraska. This was the very first Ph.D. given by any school west of the Mississippi. With one or two exceptions, no further Ph.D.s were given until the present Ph.D. program in physics was initiated after World War II. The photograph on the left shows members of the Physics Department in May 1905 in front of the old Nebraska Hall, which is where the Department was housed until it moved into Brace Laboratory later that year."

~ UNL Archives

DeWitt made a special study of radiation and optics and published, "The Laws of Radiation and Absorption," in 1901. Life in Nebraska was good. His mother lived with him and had been with him for many years. But, it was time to focus on more than just science. That same year, he went east to marry Iowa native Elizabeth Wing on 16 Oct 1901 in West Newton, MA. The couple returned to Lincoln and began their family.

Brace secured several patents in the course of his research almost all related to optics.

Brace fought mightily to get a building in which to house the Physics department. The Regents approved $75,000 for a new building. Brace guided its development and building with the construction team over 1904 into 1905.

At the beginning of the 1905 school year in September of that year, Brace became ill. He developed septicemia believed to have stemmed from an infection in having a carbuncle removed from his face (an infected boil) and would die on 02 Oct 1905, having never seen the completion of the project. The school named the building the Brace Physics building in his honor.

Much of his research would not be completed by Brace, leaving other physicists to continue his work. Today's Physics Chair, Dr. Dan Claes, believes that Brace's research provided a result that "contributed to Einstein's theory of relativity."



Professor and Mrs. Brace and their children Lloyd and Roger. Alice would be born after her father's death