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Memories of John Hasbrouck Van Vleck

Department of Physics Colloquium

“John Hasbrouck Van Vleck is justly considered to be the father of modern magnetism. In an obituary notice, Comptes Rendu said of him: ‘Depuis Willard Gibbs, mort en 1903, les États Unis n’avaient pas eu de représentant de la physique théorique aussi éminent que Van Vleck; il a été le maître à penser de la jeune physique théorique américaine.’ Few would disagree with this judgement...There is hardly any aspect of research in magnetism to which his work has not made an important contribution.” [B. Bleaney, Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the Royal Society 28, 627 (1982)]

This talk will explore the basis of these assessments, beginning with the genealogy of the “Ancestry and Descendants of Tielman Van Vleeck” [by his aunt, Jane Van Vleck], his undergraduate experience at the University of Wisconsin, his doctorate at Harvard, an Assistant Professorship at the University of Minnesota, his marriage to Abigail Pearson, his move to the University of Wisconsin as Professor of Physics, and finally to Harvard where he held the Hollis Professorship of Mathematics and Natural Philosophy from 1951 to his retirement in 1969. His immense contributions to science and society will be reviewed, as well as his wit and charm, and of course his love affair with railroad and airline schedules. Finally, his wonderful mentorship of so many of us will be recalled with love and affection.

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