

Walter Hutchinson Stainton

April 19, 1897 — December 9, 1987

Walter Stainton's academic training was gained entirely at Cornell: a bachelor's degree in engineering in 1920 and a Ph.D. in physics in 1927. He first taught physics at Cornell from 1921 to 1927 and public speaking from 1925 to 1927. Then, after a year at Dartmouth, where he abandoned the sciences to become Director of the Dartmouth Players, he returned to Ithaca in 1928 and became an assistant professor in the Department of Public Speaking (later known as Speech and Drama). Here he received imaginative support and seasoning from J.A. Winans and Alec Drummond.

Mr. Stainton's scientific background was put to use in many ways in his work in theatre and cinema, two of which stand out: in his use of optics in developing a wide knowledge and broad use of stage lighting and in his special interest in early films. For the very rare films which he placed in the Archives of the Library, he treated the pictures registered on early, combustible film stock in such a way as to make them safe to copy onto contemporary film stock. Indeed, his great interest in silent film-making in Ithaca led to his becoming an authority on that subject, and in his last years he was working on a book dealing with its history. Additionally, he founded the Cornell Film Collection, collecting assiduously and shrewdly throughout his active career, both films and extremely rare cameras and projectors.

Within and outside his department he brought imagination and vigor to whatever he turned to. He was a long-time supporter of Cornell's library system and established endowments for purchasing books in various fields of American literature and drama and theatre. In 1936 he founded and for many years directed Cornell Theatre's Film Division; in that context he taught a pioneer course in cinema history. After he retired and was named professor emeritus in 1965, he served as president of Ithaca's Dewitt Historical Association from 1969 to 1974.

Beyond this, he was active in both world wars: as an Army aviation ground instructor at Cornell in World War I and as a Captain in Chemical Warfare in Europe in World War II. He continued in the Army Reserves beyond the war and retired in 1953 with the rank of Major.

Mr. Stainton is survived by his wife, Elsie Myers Stainton; a sister, Annette S. Ashworth; and two sons and a daughter, John, David, and Catherine, from an earlier marriage.

Anthony Caputi, Don Fredericksen, H.D. Albright