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## **ENGINEERING**

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### **Lab Notes**

**A theoretician develops his applied side**

[Henry Petroski](#)

My home away from home during the first years of my graduate-student days was Talbot Laboratory, which housed the Department of Theoretical and Applied Mechanics at the University of Illinois at Urbana. The building, dating from 1928, was first known as the Materials Testing Laboratory. Ten years later, it was renamed in honor of Arthur Newell Talbot, the professor of municipal and sanitary engineering who in 1890 had been put in charge of Theoretical and Applied Mechanics at Illinois.

In the 1960s, when I roamed them, the corridors of Talbot Lab were hung with images of prominent figures in mechanics, though these were not what held my attention when I first set foot in the building. The halls were unusual in that they opened into offices on one side only; the other side opened onto and overlooked the enormous atrium space that was known as the "crane bay," which is exactly what it was. Shortly after the building was completed, a 3-million-pound-capacity testing machine had been installed on the floor of the bay dominating the lab's interior space. As if on display at a great exhibition, the machine rose up four stories and appeared to bump against the roof.

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The giant testing machine mostly just sat there as a static structure, an industrial stable. When there was any activity around it, the technicians appeared to be tending to its needs rather than adjusting it for its ultimate purpose, which was to break things too large to be broken by other means.

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