

Saving the Neglected History Of FM Radio's Unsung Pioneer

The questions seemed simple enough: When and how did Edwin H. Armstrong, the father of FM radio, make the discovery that led to that invention?

In 2007, Mischa Schwarz, an emeritus professor of electrical engineering at Columbia, tried to find the answer. He starting digging into some of the nearly 600 boxes of Armstrong's archives donated to Columbia decades ago, only to find them disorganized and his quest complicated.

He also saw the condition of the archives as a deterrent to other scholars who might be interested in Armstrong, a figure who largely fell out of public awareness — his name “sliding toward oblivion,” The New York Times wrote in 1981 — just decades after he committed suicide in 1954.

Even Mr. Schwarz, who considers Armstrong the “greatest inventor in radio,” admitted to giving Armstrong short shrift in the past. In textbooks that he had written, Mr. Schwarz said he had attributed advancements to one inventor, only to later discover that Armstrong had made the

same discovery and had understood it much better.

So Mr. Schwarz reached out to groups like the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers Foundation and raised more than \$70,000 to get an archivist at Columbia, Jennifer Comins, to organize the material.

The collection includes papers outlining his theories; photographs of Armstrong and his many inventions; to-do checklists; reel-to-reel audio; and boxes of material from the many years of litigation between Armstrong and RCA, and Armstrong and Lee De Forest, another inventor, over patent issues.

Ms. Comins, who has the help of a graduate student, Jennifer Howard, began the project last December and plans to finish by the end of November. They created a blog that would track their findings and, they hoped, renew some interest in Armstrong.

“When I was growing up I heard about Edison and Marconi, and I never heard of him,” said Ms. Comins, 37. “And now I wonder why.” JOSEPH PLAMBECK



EDWIN H. ARMSTRONG PAPERS, RARE BOOK AND MANUSCRIPT LIBRARY, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

Edwin H. Armstrong, considered the father of FM radio, on top of the WJZ station's antenna tower in New York in 1923.