A Famous 'Magic Show' Remembered

By ED SUMMERS

Every freshman in the physics amphitheater narrowly watched the slight, Edwardian professor as he placed a ringstand on the lecture table. Suspended from the ring was a pingpong ball. "We will observe," he stated, "harmonic vibrations. A very small force applied repeatedly at the right time will produce periodic motion of surprising magnitude. You are going to produce this small force by applying mental energy to swing this ball."

Mental Magic?
A murmur of disbelief and excitement swept the class. The professor continued in a no-nonsense tone: "When I point left, concentrate on shoving the ball to the left. When I point right, shove the ball to the right."

He lifted his left hand. The class was silent with tense expectation.

The ball moved so slightly, then indisputably swung. The class was a bedlam. The professor, his own austere features wrinkled in laughter, lifted the rubber bulb and treading he had used to create his illusion, and for fully a minute received the wild applause of his students.

"The Magic Show"
This was the class for freshmen known for years as "The Heaps Magic Show." This term is descriptive of only one facet of the lectures, for much valuable material was impressed into the group the lecturer preferred to call his audience.

This man was Claude W. Heaps, Professor of Physics. A more colorful and engaging personality never faced a class.

Perched on a Stool
Dr. Heaps did not give lectures; he held them. With infinite dignity one morning he perched on a stool, holding a large wheel which was rotating in a vertical position. When he moved the wheel to a horizontal position, the gyroscopic forces he was demonstrating abruptly spun him to face the blackboard. He lectured in this position for several minutes before righting the wheel and thereby solemnly resuming his original position before the convulsed class.

In his lectures the professor hit a paper cat in midair with an arrow. A fifty-pound weight hanging from the ceiling by a piano wire swung ponderously past a match for ten minutes before touching and lighting it.

Not even examinations were safe from Dr. Heaps' impish humor. A class was cautioned to watch for extraneous data in problems. On the next exam was a problem about weights and pulleys which read in part: "... suspended from a string is a round ball painted green and weighing 32.2 pounds..."

Many Long Hours
The students loved him no less than they respected him; even if, being only freshmen, they never appreciated him. As upperclassmen struggling with occasional monolithic, monotonic lecturers, they would at last realize how many long hours it had taken to bring the Heaps Magic Show to perfection.

For Doctor Heaps was not a professor but a Professor; not a teacher but a Teacher; not a faculty member but a Faculty Member. He was one of those who came to Rice in the first decade after the opening in 1912 and became the nucleus of the South's most distinguished faculty. Now, passed away or are in retirement; in this respect alone the Rice Institute has failed to benefit by the passing of time.

The Heaps Magic Show was the only thing of its kind. There may never be another. In failing health for many years, Doctor Heaps died quietly this summer at the age of seventy-one.