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The Ghost (and second Dean) of Dickinson Law: Walter Harrison Hitchler

OCTOBER 25, 2018 BY [PAMELA G SMITH](#)

185
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Have you heard unexplained noises while studying in the Law Library late at night? If so, then it is possible you have encountered the spirit of Dickinson Law's second Dean, Walter Harrison Hitchler.

Walter Harrison Hitchler was born on February 20, 1883 in Plymouth, Pennsylvania. As a youth, he attended Harry Hillman Academy in Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania. He received his Bachelor of Laws degree from the University of Virginia in 1905. After graduation, he worked as an editor for the Michie Publishing Company before becoming a member of the faculty at Dickinson Law in the fall of 1906.



Dean Walter Harrison Hitchler

In the summer of 1928, Dean William Trickett, realizing that his health was failing, wrote a letter to Hitchler, indicating that "I think you are the member of the faculty on whom the deanship now properly devolves." Hitchler was appointed as Dean of the Law School in 1930.

Hitchler faced many challenges as Dean, including World War II. To sustain the Law School during World War II, Dean Hitchler devised a plan that would allow for an accelerated program for law students and a liberal return policy for those who found their studies interrupted by the War.

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Hitchler's additional accomplishments are too numerous to efficiently summarize. In 1933, he moved for the Law School's readmittance to the Association of American Law Schools (AALS). The Law School was readmitted to that organization in 1934.

Under Dean Hitchler's guidance, the Law School began publishing a weekly student newspaper called the *Bill of Particulars*. Hitchler also revived the Law School's yearbook, under a new name, *Res Ipsa Loquitur*, in 1941.

Dean Hitchler played a vital role in the construction of a dormitory on the Law School campus. The Sadler Curtilage, which included a section named after Dean Hitchler, opened in 1952. The Curtilage included an apartment, which was occupied by Dean Hitchler.

Hitchler was considered an expert in the field of criminal law, writing many articles, as well as a book, *The Law of Crimes*, on the subject. Hitchler taught courses in equity, pleadings, bailments, and criminal law, but he was most remembered by his students for his criminal law course, where he was fond of using colorful hypotheticals to demonstrate his point.

"Suppose I take a saw, go to the [Cumberland Valley] Railroad Station and chop off Mr. Burke's head." *Junior History, Microcosm* (1916).

"If I were to hit Mr. Magarick on the head with a baseball bat – the violence that was verbally practiced on me because I sat up front, was legion." Pat Magarick, *Reminiscences of a Septuagenarian*, *Bill of Particulars*, (May 1977).

Upon Dean Hitchler's retirement:

"Ours is the last class. No other will be hit over the head with a baseball bat in the interest of illustrating some fine point of criminal law." *Dedication, Res Ipsa Loquitur* (1955).

"We all had our chance to be hit on the head with a baseball bat...[T]hose assaults and batteries will long be remembered...and we thank him for them." *Class History, Res Ipsa Loquitur* (1956).

Despite these ongoing hypothetical assaults on students in his criminal law classes, Hitchler was well-known for his generosity. He often paid students' tuition out of his own pocket. In his Last Will and Testament, he bequeathed most of his estate, the equivalent of more than \$300,000, to the Law School.

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Hitchler on his bicycle. This bicycle remains a part of the Law School Archives Collection.

After his retirement, Hitchler remained at the Law School as an advisor to students and faculty. He continued to reside in the Curtilage during that time. He passed away at a local hospital on February 5, 1959.

However, it appears that Hitchler's spirit never left the Law School. According to an article in the *Bill of Particulars*, unexplained noises began to be heard in the Law School shortly after Dean Hitchler's passing. One such report came from a long-time professor of the Law School, William H. Dodd, who reported hearing "a concussion or crash of such deafening intensity that I

was thoroughly shocked." Dodd reported the incident to the police, who searched the building and found nothing. Former Dean Burton R. Laub, author of *The Dickinson School of Law: Proud and Independent*, also reported hearing footsteps in the Law School when no one was around. *Mystery Haunts Law School*, *Bill of Particulars* (October 30, 1968).

Yet, perhaps the most telling evidence of a spectral visitor occurred when a woman cleaning Dean Hitchler's empty apartment was frightened by a man stepping out of one of the rooms, wearing a purple and yellow robe. It was Hitchler's custom to wear a purple and yellow robe for lounging. What made the incident even more interesting is that the woman was new to the Law School and had never met or seen Hitchler in person. Therefore, she could not have known this fact about Hitchler. *Mystery Haunts Law School*, *Bill of Particulars* (Oct. 30, 1968).

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In case you are frightened by these tales of mysterious happenings, don't be. By all accounts, Hitchler loved the Law School dearly. Therefore, if Hitchler's spirit remains, he surely remains only to ensure that all is well with the School that he loved so much. After all, "what revered institution has not its friendly ghost to stand guard over it?" Burton R. Laub, *The Dickinson School of Law: Proud and Independent* (1983).

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