

Einstein in Western Maryland

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Albert Einstein vacationed for two weeks in September 1946 at Deep Creek Lake in western Maryland. It was a well-kept secret. This paper describes his ordinary and yet so extraordinary visit, its historical context, his daily routine, and some interesting stories that reveal his simplicity, humanity, and unique sense of humor.

The year 1946 was one Einstein might rather have forgotten. It was right after World War II. Atomic bombs had been dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, in August 1945. On December 10, 1954, Einstein remarked: "The war was won, but peace was not." He was the man pictured next to a mushroom



Fig. 1. Dr. Wilson joking with Einstein.

cloud on the front cover of *TIME* magazine July 1, 1946, despite his having made clear on many occasions that he had nothing to do with the manufacture of the bomb. Einstein was a pacifist. He was against any kind of war or violence. Alarmed by the Nazi threat, he did sign a letter to President Franklin D. Roosevelt dated August 2, 1939, urging him to initiate a nuclear research program. He was, however, not actively involved in the development and production of the bomb, known as the Manhattan Project. His famous $E = mc^2$ equation was first proposed in the formulation of special theory of relativity in 1905, and the idea of transforming mass into energy was basic to the understanding of how the fission bomb worked. But Einstein could not really be held morally responsible some 40 years later for an application he did not foresee. Yet he expressed deep regret for having signed the letter to Roosevelt.

In 1945, Einstein had just retired from the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. Tired of unwanted publicity and mass media, he was longing for a place of solitude and peace. The late John Steiding of Midland, MD, invited Einstein to visit Deep Creek Lake. Steiding worked for the Celanese Fiber Company as a chemist. He came to know Einstein through a co-worker's wife, who was sculpting a bust of Einstein. Einstein, who wasn't very tall, found it uncomfortable to pose for the artwork since his feet would not touch the floor. John Steiding, being a handyman, made a footstool for Einstein.

Few people know of Einstein's vacation at Deep Creek. As a matter of fact, his visit wasn't revealed in

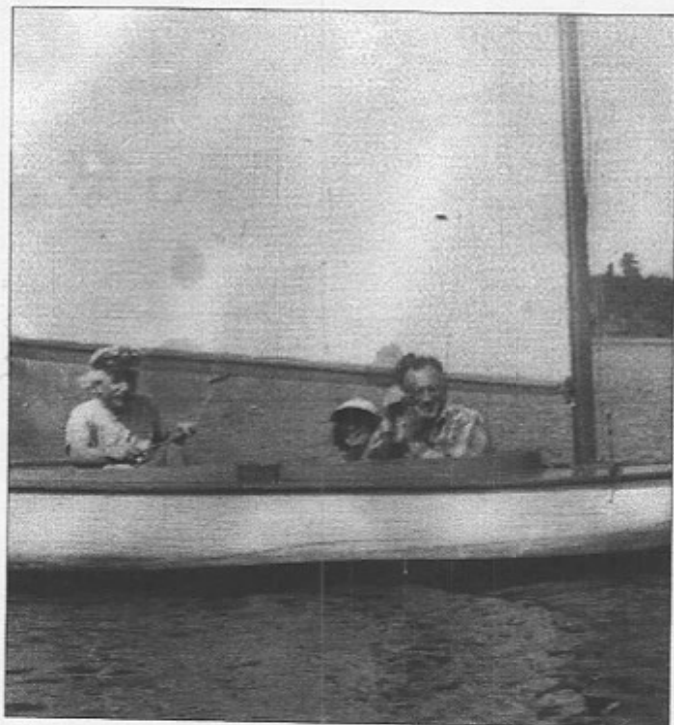


Fig. 2. Einstein sailing in the boat of Harry Muma (right, chairman of the Turkey Neck Yacht Club).



Fig. 3. Einstein enjoying a moment with John and Virginia Steiding's baby son.

the local Cumberland newspaper for more than 30 years—not until 1979.¹ Einstein was guaranteed complete privacy at Deep Creek, where he was protected from reporters and media. He was to seek the advice of Dr. Frank Wilson (Fig. 1), a prominent local surgeon, on an undisclosed ailment, which we now know was an aneurysm of the aorta of the abdomen.

Einstein stayed for two weeks at Dr. Wilson's summer cottage, Mar-Jo-Lodge, in the Long Neck section of Deep Creek Lake. He led a simple life, spending a great deal of time reading and meditating in front of the fireplace. He loved the tranquility and solitude of western Maryland.

He took daily walks along the lake, frequently stopping to chat with strangers who had no idea who he was. He was sometimes seen fishing and also bird-watching with binoculars. He never skipped a meal but was a light eater. He drank a lot of water and lemonade; his favorite vegetable was fresh corn-on-the-cob from Garrett County.

Einstein loved sailing because it was "the sport which demands the least energy."² Despite the fact that he could not swim, he refused to wear a life jacket.³ Sailing gave Einstein a sense of peace and free-

dom. There were times when "people would realize that he wasn't around, go searching for him, and find him in Harry Muma's little sailboat, 'single-handing,' on the Turkey Neck inlet"⁴ (Fig. 2).

Einstein also loved children (Fig. 3). He took the time to respond to letters from children all over the world. In his words, his secret was "to be like a child."⁵

There were many interesting stories of Einstein during his stay in western Maryland. These stories not only capture Einstein's simplicity but also his unique sense of humor. During his visit, Fred Steiding (Fig. 4), brother of John Steiding, asked him to explain relativity in layman's terms. "Put it this way," said Einstein, "if you sit on a park bench with your sweetheart, an hour seems like a minute. If you sit on a hot stove by mistake, a minute seems like an hour." There is also a charming story having to do with the invitation Einstein received from Isaac Hirsch, president of B'er Chayim Congregation in Cumberland. Hirsch wrote in 1946, "Knowing he was of my faith, and our high holidays would soon be here, I invited him to attend our services and be my guest." Einstein's response in a letter dated September 24, 1946, read, "Despite being something like a Jewish saint I have been absent from



Fig. 4. Einstein with Fred and Virginia Steiding.

a synagogue so long that I am afraid God would not recognize me and if He would it would be worse.”⁶

At the end of his visit, Einstein gave a \$50 gratuity in an autographed envelope to Blair Thompson, also known as “Man Friday,” who was employed by Dr. Wilson to serve Einstein as personal attendant.⁷ Fifty dollars in 1946 was quite generous indeed, considering that it would be equivalent to more than \$1000 in 2005. Thompson admitted in 1998 that he had spent the \$50, and regrettably lost the autographed envelope.

Was it all rest and play and no work for Einstein at Deep Creek? Surely not. He must have been thinking about his unified field theory, on which he published papers in 1950 and 1953. And, of course, he was deeply concerned about world peace. In May 1946 he became chairman of the Emergency Committee for Atomic Scientists. In October 1946 he wrote a letter to the United Nations urging them to form a world government to maintain world peace under nuclear threat.⁸

Einstein loved the simple life he lived in western Maryland. He was immersed in the beauty and solitude of the mountain scenery: “Liking for moderation and beauty was for him relaxation after the exaggerated glorifications and animosities he had experienced.”⁹ He was friendly and unassuming, humble and yet so famous. He was simple and yet so complex. In a letter Einstein wrote to fellow Nobel laureate Max Born on April 12, 1949, he stated, “You ask me what

my attitude is towards the simple life. I simply enjoy giving more than receiving in every respect, do not take myself nor the doings of the masses seriously.”¹⁰

In Einstein’s words, the visit to Deep Creek Lake was “one of the most restful and zestful vacations.” Memories of it will long continue to live in western Maryland.

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