

## The (Presumed) Death of David Paul Davis

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October 2006 marks the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of David P. Davis' death. The passage of time has done little to clear up the details regarding that fateful night aboard the steamship *Majestic*. What follows is an examination of the few facts that are known about the incident.

In October 1926, D. P. Davis booked passage aboard the luxury liner *Majestic* for a trip to Europe. His life, both professional and personal, had taken some severe hits over the past few months. He had to sell his interest in Davis Islands, Davis Shores, in St. Augustine, was proceeding very slowly, and his marriage to the former Elizabeth Nelson was falling apart. Nelson had fled to France, as the story goes, and Davis was headed her way. He would not live to see the end of the trans-Atlantic voyage.

Stories of Davis's death always include some element of mystery. The only undisputed facts are that he went overboard and drowned while en route to Europe aboard the large ocean liner on October 12, 1926 and that his girlfriend, Lucille Zehring, accompanied him on the voyage. What is in question is how he ended up in the water: by accidentally falling out of a stateroom window, being pushed out or jumping out to end his own life. A multitude of stories fill the void.

Victory National Life Insurance Company, founded by Sumter Lowry, (a

member of Tampa's City Commission in 1924) sold Davis a \$300,000 policy a few months before his death. Davis held policies with other insurance companies and, since his body was not recovered, some felt that Davis faked his own death.

Lowry, "anxious to make a reputation for paying claims promptly," hired an investigator, who determined that Davis had accidentally fallen overboard.

Lowry's findings regarding Davis' death did not assuage all doubts on the subject. Many felt that Davis leapt overboard to end his life. Chief among this theory's proponents was the captain of the *Majestic*. Another who thought Davis killed himself was Jerome McLeod, who had joined D. P. Davis Properties in 1925 as assistant publicity director after a stint at the *Tampa Daily Times*. "He got drunk," McLeod told a later interviewer, and "when he got drunk he got maudlin."

A third story comes from a steward who stood outside Davis' room and overheard an argument between Davis and Zehring. The *Majestic's* employee claimed Davis said, "I can go on living or end it. I can make money or spend it. It all depends on you." The statement was punctuated by a loud splash. This runs somewhat counter to the testimony given Lowry, in which the steward had to be told of Davis' fall by Zehring.

Davis' brother Milton had a different story. While acknowledging D. P. Davis had a drinking problem, he believed his death was an accident. Milton traveled to New York City to speak with Zehring about his brother's final

moments. Milton, who claimed David probably intended to divorce Elizabeth and marry his girlfriend, restated Zehring's recollection: "Lucille said there had been a party and D. P. was sitting in an open porthole, one of those big ones. It was storming outside, and he blew out the window. She said she started to scream and grab his leg, but it was blown out of her hands. That's what happened."

There are a variety of problems and inconsistencies with each of these stories. Some say that Davis and Zehring were alone while others say there was a party. The *Majestic* was the largest ship in the world, a sister to the *Titanic*, and undoubtedly had "large portholes," and Davis was a small man, but could he really sit in one and then be "blown overboard"? Could the steward standing outside of the closed stateroom door hear a loud splash that occurred *outside* the ship and dozens of yards below the open window? The idea that Davis booked passage with a large party, including Davis Properties employees and possibly his oldest son, George, places doubt that the intent of the voyage was to divorce his wife.

Davis' drinking problem unquestionably contributed to his untimely death, but to what degree? Some point to the possible fight with Zehring, others to his overall financial collapse, as reasons why he would commit suicide. Alcohol inevitably compounded those problems. Others, like Davis' brother, felt that his alcoholism merely put him in the position of hurting himself, intentionally or otherwise. D. P. Davis' eldest son, George, was aboard the *Majestic*, and he, too,

feels that suicide is as likely as any other scenario.

Murder, too, is a possibility. Some stories relate that Davis had up to \$50,000 in cash with him. Others discount this, claiming that he hardly ever carried large amounts of money on him. Motive and opportunity do not seem to be on the side of murder, but no one could lead his life without making enemies, especially after losing so much money in such a brief period of time.

Yet another theory intimates that Davis faked his death. While discredited by Lowry's investigation and Milton's assurances to the contrary, it remains a possibility, though remote given that his son was on the ship, too.

How, or even if, he fell overboard is still a mystery. Until new evidence is found, any theory regarding Davis' death is just that, theory.