

Interview with George Davis
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On March 15, 2005, I was fortunate enough to meet and interview George Riley Davis, the elder of D. P. Davis' two sons, in Woodland, California, just outside of Sacramento. Mr. Davis, 88 years old at the time, was an extremely interesting and very engaging man. Though his body was failing, his mind was sharp. He was able to provide me with details of his early life, and the life of his father, that I would never have known.

George Davis' ill health finally got the best of him. He passed away in his sleep on August 15, 2006 in his California home, just six days short of his 90th birthday. His family celebrated his birthday two weeks early, and George and his little brother, Dave, Jr., were able to see each other one last time.

I will forever cherish the day we spent together, talking about his life, his family, and his memories of Davis Islands. What follows is a segment of my interview with George Riley Davis II.

RK-P: Alright, this is an interview with George Davis. This is March 15, 2005. Can you start by giving us your full name?

GD: George Riley Davis

RK-P: And, what is your date of birth?

GD: August 21, 1916, a long time ago.

RK-P: And what's your place of birth?

GD: Jacksonville, Florida

RK-P: Do you remember moving to Tampa, I believe in 1924?

GD: That's, I think '24, I was eight. I figured it was seven or eight, age. If I knew I've forgotten the date. Age seven, age eight, '23, '24. That sounds right. In other words, I was involved in the development of Davis Islands for two years, which is probably about right. Tampa, what do I remember?

RK-P: I guess specifically, what do you remember about the beginnings of Davis Islands and your father's work in building them?

GD: Probably I didn't do much, remember much, about the Island until the bridge was built. But I remember going out there at the very early, in the very early stages. I remember seeing them building the seawalls. Building buildings. I guess making roads.

We were on a road probably when we went there. I went out there any number of times. I can't say at what stage of construction of any particular thing was.

After they had a few homes there eventually, we lived there. Prior to moving to the Island, we lived in a home, that as I remember was, virtually right at the start of the temporary bridge. My understanding was that it had been, previously, a funeral home. A large home. I can't remember whether it was on a corner or not. I think it was on a corner. I question if it was on a corner because we had an unpaved alley. In fact I think the street at the time, I don't know where it was shell or dirt or whether it was paved. I think it was paved – not the alley. I had a pony there, that the chauffer took care of. We had, as we call now, an African American lady working for us. We had, I believe, a Chinese cook, we had an African American chauffer who took care of the pony so nobody else had to.

RK-P: And did the pony, you kept at the house, or the back of the house?

GD: We had some kind of a building, whether it was the back of the garage or what, I can't say. That wasn't my chore, fortunately. What else about the place?

RK-P: You mentioned remembering the big hotel along the river.

GD: Oh yeah, the Tampa [Bay] Hotel. Yeah, I don't remember, I think we went there more than once, for what I don't know. I do remember we saw a Houdini magician show there. The yacht my dad had, small yacht, was tied, as I recall, right at the hotel, but it may have been a little further up the river. It was across the river from downtown Tampa. Oh, I remember that the great aunts, who took care of us after dad died, they went to a Billy Sunday show in a tent. I can't tell you where it was, other than Tampa.

RK-P: For those who may not know, can you say who Billy Sunday was?

GD: Yeah, he was an evangelist. I think is the right term for him. I think what impressed me probably more was I was reading he was an ex-baseball player.

RK-P: You mentioned that after people began moving on to Davis Islands, you had a job. Can you tell me about that job?

GD: I don't know how long I had it, or how much business I did, probably not very much – what was I eight years old, maybe nine? I don't know whether dad got, well, one of my considerations was dad probably got the job for me. I think rather than to individuals, I think I was delivering the Saturday Evening Post to the building, like an apartment house or the hotel or something, and presumably I got paid something for that, so that was certainly my first paying job. I don't know how long I had it, I don't remember it was much of a chore. There weren't that many buildings to deliver to, and possibly I did a few individuals, I don't remember. I don't remember if they had coin racks where they put it in and I cleaned 'em out. I don't remember how it was handled. Probably all set up for me nicely, though [laughs].

RK-P: Do you remember, or can you describe to me, basically where your family's home was on Davis Islands, as if you were coming over the bridge.

GD: The best I can remember, is when you came off the bridge you turned right. I would say, I don't remember the back of the house going over to the seawall, but I would say that it was either the first or second street that had homes on it. I don't think we were very far from the bridge. I can't say whether the first, second, or seventh house that was built in a row there. I don't remember the particulars of the house. I'm sure it was a nice house.

RK-P: Do you remember your dad's office, or the office building where your dad had his office?

GD: I remember the Administration Building. I remember, I know, I know I've seen pictures of it. I've seen pictures of the crowds, the sale. I'm sure I was at his office, in his office. I don't remember anything like an office on the Island. It's something that I wouldn't be going to, really, on either place other than once or twice probably. I'd just be in the way.

RK-P: Do you have any specific memories of your father, either kind of personality traits or anything real specific about him?

GD: In my mind, he was a real fun guy. I did, for a guy who was as busy as he was he did a lot with me. On whatever trip it was, we'd play golf... [laughs] ... we'd play golf – I walked the golf course with him. Played the Caramont Country Club at the end of Broadway in Oakland, California. A very exclusive club there. I'm not trying to put the dog on, but it was my first experience, I guess, with golf, other than some pictures in Miami where I had golf clubs.

I think we did a lot, considering his busy-ness that he had – all the stuff he had to do in such a short period of time. On weekends, Sunday or something, we'd take the speedboat, go over to St. Petersburg. We'd go out to the beach at Indian Rock[s], as I recall the name of it, out on the Gulf. He took me to New York three times for operations. Once for my tonsils. Once for surgery on one eye, and once for surgery on the other eye. Obviously, he figured they would have a better chance for curing my problem in New York than in Florida, I don't know. It didn't do a thing for me. Whether the first, no not the first surgery, but later on the eyes, I don't know whether I met a girlfriend, or his girlfriend, in New York on the first trip or whether it was the second trip, or both of them, but she took care of me. I wasn't with him all the time.

RK-P: Do you remember her name at all?

GD: I have no idea. Took me to shows, took me out to, uh, the Statue of Liberty, the fish place, museum. I don't know why I remember learning to drink Canada Dry Ginger Ale. That was a big pleasure. Did I drink it in Florida? I don't remember that, but I

remember it in New York, and I remember, now this is really strange, coming from an orange growing state, but I was impressed with how much people valued fresh oranges in New York.

RK-P: You mentioned that you met your father's girlfriend. Do you have any memories of his second wife? And do you remember what her name was?

GD: I remember her name, Elizabeth Nelson. I believe the Nelson family was florists in Tampa, I believe. I think something that you wrote, I don't know whether I knew at the time or not, that she was queen at the Gasparilla thing.

RK-P: You mentioned that you might have lived with her for a little bit of time?

GD: I'm thinking, they must have lived together for a while when they were married. Did she cook dinner? She was pretty young. And her family, I suspect she didn't have to cook much. They were business people. I really, I have no problems, and I have nothing good or interesting to say, other than if she was there, I don't remember if she was on the boat rides to St. Pete or whether she was out there at Indian Rock[s] Beach, I just don't remember.

RK-P: Alright, the next question is about your father's death. You were on board the Majestic when your father disappeared overboard.

GD: Yes.

RK-P: What do you remember about that trip?

GD: The trip, I think I remember the warehouse type of building that we went into and part of the dock there to go on board, the gangway or whatever it was. I think I remember the start of it.

RK-P: Do you know who you were with? Who was in the big, the group that went?

GD: At that point I don't remember anybody. Whether dad was with me or what, must have been, but I don't know. On board, I can't say I remember any going away party. Maybe faintly there was something like that, I don't remember. I remember being up on the top deck watching the tugboats, and us churning, backing up and the tugboats pulling us to start. I remember being on a ship. I've always liked to watch the wake? Is that the churning back there? I remember, I think, gambling on the horse races. Dad must have given me some money, but I think I remember actually betting money. I remember that. I remember the happening. And of course I was very sad, crying.

RK-P: Was there a lot of commotion? Do you remember that part of it, or the kind of after-effect more?

GD: I don't remember, I started hearing people talking about the cause, or their opinions of causes. I can't say specific commotion. I probably slept through the sailing around and around looking for the body, but I don't remember it. The after-effects were bad. I remember we landed in Cherbourg, I believe. Do I really remember that? I think I do. I remember taking a train trip to Paris. I think, I don't know whether they were drinking wine or water. I think at the time I was thinking this is interesting, bottled water on the train. I don't know why I thought that, but it comes to my mind.

As far as the question I know that everybody has, I'm sure that you could make a pretty solid case, yes it was suicide, or a pretty solid case no it wasn't suicide. Take your choice. The insurance company, for whatever reason, decided it was not suicide, so we got some money out of it, which was a help. Then again, I don't remember Elizabeth Nelson. I must have seen her in Paris. I don't remember who else was on the trip. I suspect, and I think maybe you confirmed it, Arthur Milam. I don't know why a private detective was on the trip, which I think you said.

RK-P: Yeah, that's something that your Uncle Milton actually I believe said.

GD: Maybe he was telling tall stories, too. I'm sure it was my dad's girlfriend that took me around Paris. I remember going up the Eiffel Tower. I remember going into Napoleon's tomb, very definitely remember those. Other buildings specifically, I'm not sure whether I remember the church up on the hill. I think we went up there. We went to the Moulin Rouge, which is the topless type place. I was impressed with that.

RK-P: You were a 10 year old boy and you went to the Moulin Rouge?

GD: I guess she wanted to see it, I don't know.