



Kingsley Davis

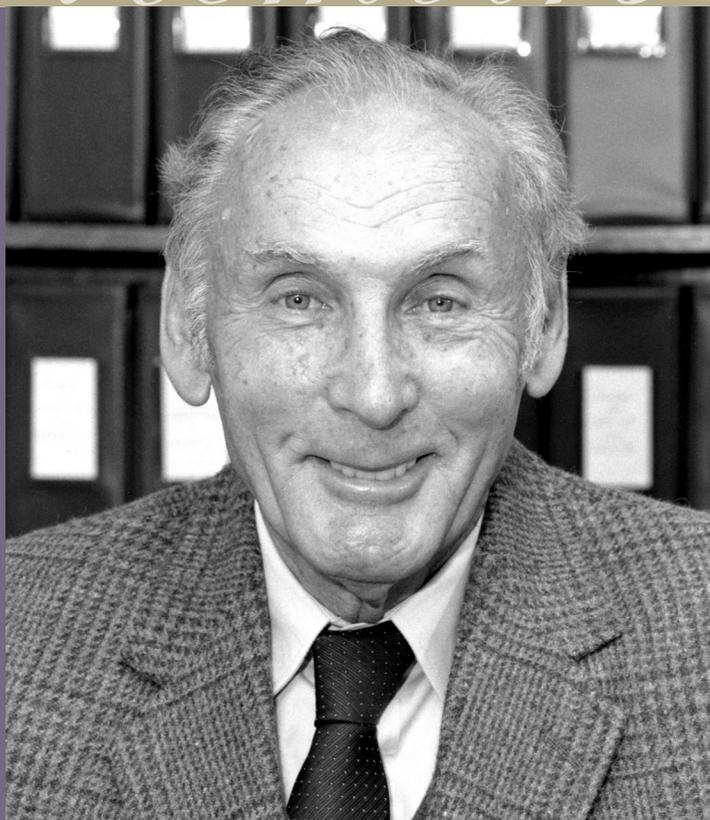
1908–1997

BIOGRAPHICAL

Memoirs

*A Biographical Memoir by
Geoffrey McNicoll*

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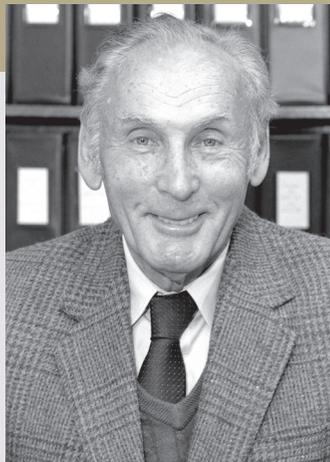
KINGSLEY DAVIS

August 20, 1908–February 27, 1997

Elected to the NAS, 1966

Kingsley Davis was a significant figure in American sociology of the mid-twentieth century and by many estimations the leading social demographer of his generation. He made influential contributions to social stratification theory and to the study of family and kinship. He was an early theorist of demographic transition—the emergence of low-mortality, low-fertility regimes in industrializing societies—and a protagonist in major and continuing debates on policy responses to rapid population growth in low-income countries.

Davis held faculty appointments at a succession of leading universities, for longest at the University of California, Berkeley. He was honored by his peers in both sociology and demography: president of the American Sociological Association in 1959 and of the Population Association of America in 1962-'63. He was elected to the National Academy of Sciences in 1966, the first sociologist to be a member.



Kingsley Davis

By Geoffrey McNicoll

Kingsley Davis was born in Tuxedo, Texas, a small community near Abilene, in 1908. His parents were Joseph Dyer Davis, a physician, and Winifred Kingsley Davis; he was a collateral descendant of Jefferson Davis. He took his baccalaureate from the University of Texas in 1930. (Revisiting the campus decades later as a distinguished professor, he allowed that he would not have qualified for admission under later, more stringent criteria.) Two years later at the same institution he received an MA in philosophy with a thesis on the moral philosophy of Bertrand Russell. Viewing English and philosophy as having scant bearing on the Depression-era conditions of the time, he turned toward the social sciences as a field for further graduate study.

He was awarded a doctoral fellowship by Harvard's sociology department, then newly established under the chairmanship of the distinguished Russian émigré scholar Pitirim Sorokin. (Sociology at Harvard had previously fallen under a Department of Social Ethics.)

In his years at Harvard, fellow students included George C. Homans, Robert Merton, and Matilda White Riley, all, like Davis, future presidents of the American Sociological Association. Another student contemporary, but in the Law School and apparently unknown to Davis, was David Riesman, who only later shifted his sights to sociology. Important influences on Davis's sociological thinking, aside from Sorokin, were Talcott Parsons, then an instructor in the department, and the anthropologists W. Lloyd Warner, his principal thesis adviser, and (from a distance) Ralph Linton. Davis's Ph.D. dissertation, titled *A Structural Analysis of Kinship: Prolegomena to the Sociology of Kinship*, was completed in 1936.

Davis's subsequent academic affiliations can be simply listed: Clark University (1936-'37), Pennsylvania State University (1937-'42), Princeton (1942-'48), Columbia (1948-'55), UC-Berkeley (1955-'76), University of Southern California (1977-'91), and the Hoover Institution (1981-'92).

Davis as Sociologist

In his early post-doctoral years Davis wrote on a variety of sociological subjects, principally in the areas of kinship, family, and stratification. His dissertation largely informed the article "Structural analysis of kinship," with W. Lloyd Warner (*Amer. Anthropol.*, 1937), an elaborate comparative study that fell between disciplines and perhaps as a result was rarely cited. However, the understanding of family structure and processes that underlay it bore fruit in Davis's later papers on caste societies, social stratification, family conflict, adolescence, marriage, "sexual property," and prostitution that he published in the 1930s and 1940s.

These were pioneering and sometimes controversial treatments of their subjects. In the summation of the *New York Times* obituarist, Davis took on issues "previously considered too intimate to explore," such as male sexual jealousy as a foundation of social organization or the case for prostitution as a benefit to society. An especially notable cause of controversy was "Some principles of stratification," which he wrote jointly with Wilbert E. Moore (*Amer. Sociol. Rev.*, April 1945). Premised on the "functional necessity" of stratification, it argued that social inequality was "an unconsciously evolved device by which societies insure that the most important positions are filled by the most qualified persons" through the allocation of prestige and tangible economic returns. By implication, egalitarian ideals were unachievable—a conclusion, not surprisingly, many have resisted. "The Davis-Moore theory of stratification," or simply "the Davis-Moore hypothesis," is chiefly how today's sociology students would likely encounter Davis's name.

Davis's main longer-form work in sociology was the book *Human Society* (1949). This was an ambitious, crisply organized analytical overview based on the sociology course he taught at Princeton. The "impertinence" (his word) of its title was qualified in the preface: He dealt with basic structural-functional questions, such as "What enables human social systems to operate as going concerns? What do they require for their existence, and what major structures do they evolve which enable them to meet these requirements?" Social evolution, though barely mentioned, was a thematic undercurrent. The level of generality was high: a reviewer (in *Social Forces*) remarked that "the carefully reasoned text is unbroken by provocative and diverting illustrations." Yet it was not any issue of readability but, rather, competition from another quarter that counted for more in the marketplace of ideas. Writing much later, the sociologist John Finley Scott, a former student of Davis's, remarked on *Human Society's* muted impact, qua theory, on the discipline. "It was not Davis but Talcott Parsons, impenetrable in style and utterly devoid of parsimony, who gave sociologists what they wanted in heavy theory."

Over time, disciplinary interests and approaches change. Before long, Parsons, too, receded into the little-read historical background of sociology. Increasingly, structural-functionalism was disdained, becoming almost a pejorative term. Davis protested. His vigorous defense, though even then to some a voice from the past, came in his 1959 presidential address to the American Sociological Association, "The Myth of Functional Analysis as a Special Method in Sociology and Anthropology." Functionalism, he asserted, was not so much dated as ubiquitous and thus no longer noticed. What was not functionalist in sociology was either reductionist or mere description. Sociologists, he might have said, were like Molière's Monsieur Jourdain, unknowingly speaking prose.

Davis's legacy in sociology lies in the clarity of ideas and analytical rigor that make *Human Society* still well worth reading. Yet that insistence on objectivity and rigorous methodology, Seymour Martin Lipset observed, put him at odds with those who called for relevance to social problems. "He saw sociology as a basic science, like the biological disciplines, which contribute to dealing with cancer by research on cells, not by surgery."

A typology of the field proposed by a later Berkeley sociologist, Michael Burawoy, identifies four varieties of sociology: professional, critical, policy, and public. Davis's oeuvre lies mostly in the first camp, "studying the world as though it were an external object, accumulating a body of knowledge and theory that interprets and explains." To a degree he also had a public role, addressing a readership beyond academic boundaries. In contrast, critical sociology, in the 1960s and 1970s increasingly embraced by sociology students and not a

few faculty, held no place in Davis's purview. As for social policy, when he treated it at all it, too, was as a subject for dispassionate analysis. Policy issues were to become central in his later work in demography, but his major disputes were with those he saw as lacking that detachment.

Demographic Theory and Analysis

Davis's introduction to formal demographic analysis came in 1940, during a postdoctoral stint at the University of Chicago with the statistician Samuel Stouffer and at the Census Bureau in Washington with Philip Hauser. In 1942 he joined Princeton's Office of Population Research (OPR) at the invitation of its founding director, Frank Notestein. (OPR fell under the School of Public and International Affairs; an appointment for Davis in sociology was arranged subsequently.)

Davis and Notestein, in separate publications in 1945, are generally credited with the first statements of what is termed the theory of demographic transition. (Dudley Kirk, another OPR researcher, could justifiably share the credit.) In its original formulation, this theory asserted that the industrialization of agrarian societies would be accompanied by a shift from a regime of high death and birth rates to one of low rates, and that death rates would fall earlier than birth rates, resulting in a period of population growth.

These propositions of course had a prehistory. From the late nineteenth century on, death rates had been steadily dropping in many Western countries, not least the United States. Social scientists proffered overlapping reasons, economic, social structural, and cultural, but essentially tying the trends to the emergence of industrial society. The best of these accounts, for example by the sociologists Edward Alsworth Ross and Charles Horton Cooley in the first decade of the twentieth century, hold up well today. In the 1930s, Adolph Landry in France and Warren S. Thompson in the United States envisaged similar demographic trends worldwide. As to the sequence of the changes, it was reasonable to expect that fertility, tied into many societal institutions and traditions, would be more resistant to change than mortality. This argument Davis had spelled out as early as 1937 in a seminal essay criticizing pre-World War II European *pronatalist* efforts ("Reproductive institutions and the pressure for population"). Although often characterized as more generalization or stylized fact than theory, demographic transition is the basic lens through which most people broadly see the course of population change in the modern world.

Davis returned to the subject in a later contribution, “The theory of change and response in modern demographic history,” his 1963 presidential address to the Population Association of America (PAA). In this, he offered a fuller account of the range of individual and societal responses to the challenge posed by sustained natural increase, encompassing migration as well as delayed marriage and birth control.

Davis’s most cited article, written jointly with Judith Blake (his wife and an important collaborator in his Berkeley years), was a contribution both to demographic analysis and to clear thinking about population policy. Titled “Social structure and fertility: an analytic framework” (*Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 1956), this article introduced what the authors termed intermediate fertility variables (now usually called proximate determinants of fertility). These are the factors immediately influencing fertility and through which—and, when fully listed, *only* through which—prevailing economic and social conditions and individual behavior can affect fertility outcomes. The Davis-Blake intermediate variables were 11 in all, such as age of entry into a union, contraceptive use, and induced abortion. Given quantitative substance in a later contribution by John Bongaarts (who condensed the number and added a newly-recognized proximate determinant: reduced fecundability due to breastfeeding), this simple framework is now routinely used in fertility analysis and policy design. Not least, it emphasizes the distinction—often blurred in the family planning literature—between motivation to use contraception and actual use.

Population Studies

Although Davis’s scholarly reputation in demography is mostly as theorist, in his early career he was at least as well known for a contribution to classical population studies: *The Population of India and Pakistan* (1951). The writing of this elaborate treatise occupied a lot of his research time at Princeton, spilling over to Columbia. The choice of subject lay in OPR’s divvying up of the world under contracts from the League of Nations and the State Department to study likely post-World War II demographic situations in major regions. The plausible relevance of Davis’s prior writings on social stratification to caste in India gave him a claim on the subcontinent. (The partition of British India occurred during the writing.) The oversize volume that resulted was an exhaustive study, not least remarkable given Davis’s resolutely U.S.-based scholarly background and personal unfamiliarity with the gritty realities of South Asian life: he took his first trip to India only after its publication.

The content draws heavily on India's long sequence of censuses from the 1860s onward, preserved in meticulous reports of successive colonial census commissioners. But the book's ambition went far beyond a sort of cumulative census report. It was intended, Davis wrote in his introduction, as "a contribution to the sociology and economics, as well as the demography, of India and Pakistan." On policy, he had a simple message: population growth urgently needed to be curtailed, and this should be achieved through "a sustained and vigorous birth control campaign, and a scheme of rapid industrialization."

The book was well received both professionally and in the region. Alfred Sauvy wrote a favorable notice in *Population* (April-June, 1951), though muttering about the Malthusianism of "l'école démographique américaine." In Delhi's *Economic and Political Weekly* of December 1, 1951, the reviewer's sole reservation, it could be argued, turned out to show Davis's prescience: "There is seemingly a shade of insolence and tenacity in his criticism of caste demography. He not only seems to exaggerate the influence of caste, but also believes that it is adapting itself to new conditions and would therefore stay with us for a long time to come." The book's policy advice was well timed: India in the early 1950s was initiating its family planning program.

Just as in sociology, in population studies Davis ranged widely. Beyond India, he published articles on contemporary population problems in the United States, on Latin American and Caribbean (Puerto Rican and Jamaican) demography, on human migration over the millennia, and on the world population crisis. He wrote not just for academic journals but also for *Foreign Affairs*, *Scientific American*, and *The New York Times Magazine*. A continuing interest of his was urbanization, reflected in the name of the institute he set up at Berkeley: International Population and Urban Research (IPUR). There are recurring articles on the subject in his bibliography, and several monographs. IPUR published two lengthy reports by Davis that assembled worldwide statistics on city sizes—to observers a somewhat pedestrian activity for an eminent scholar. Most of IPUR's research output was similarly workmanlike, heavily empirical and low-key. An exception, the source of the greatest publicity it garnered, not altogether welcomed, was a government-funded 1963 report it sponsored, prepared by David Heer, estimating the scale and geographic distribution of U.S. mortality in a nuclear war. It was published as *After Nuclear Attack: A Demographic Inquiry* (Praeger, 1965).

While Davis was wholly comfortable with numbers, as the India study made decisively apparent, he had little liking for survey research. Yet that is the direction social demography took. There had been important family surveys in the United States, one

even based at Princeton, but beginning in the 1960s demographic surveys proliferated worldwide as advances in computing technology removed the laboriousness from data analysis. The most prominent example was the World Fertility Survey (WFS), carried out through 40 surveys in an elaborately detailed uniform format in numerous third-world countries between 1972 and 1984. In “The world’s most expensive survey,” a 1987 review essay on the WFS summary volume, Davis complained of its paucity of theoretical underpinnings beyond what he characterized as “thinly disguised rationalizations” of family planning programs. His blunt conclusion: “In sum, I think the WFS was misconceived. It assumed that, from the standpoint of policy, the great need was for more and better data, but actually the need was for clearer and broader thinking.” The criticism was for naught. The WFS was succeeded by an even larger and more expensive program along the same lines, the largely U.S. government-funded Demographic and Health Survey, which became (and remains) the main depiction of changing demographic conditions around the world—as well as a major feedstock for graduate study and publication in demography.

Population Policy

According to transition theory the spread of industrialization around the world should bring about a fall in fertility to match that of mortality. Yet that expectation was soon challenged. The years following World War II witnessed, in the title of one of Davis’s articles, “the amazing decline in mortality in underdeveloped areas” induced by interventions such as malaria control and other public health measures. It was the pace of this decline that was unexpected, unleashing unprecedentedly rapid population growth in regions still economically backward. This growth threatened to impede economic development and sustain the existing high levels of fertility. A direct approach to reducing fertility seemed called for.

Dennis Hodgson (1983) has documented the changing view among American demographers in the early 1950s “from a strictly social scientific stance to an explicitly policy-oriented one,” with Notestein and Davis in the van. Alarm over rapid population growth spread widely. Survey evidence seemed to suggest the existence of a pent-up demand for birth control, one that family planning campaigns could supply. Agrarian societies could thereby lower their fertility prior to industrialization, with benefits both for individual well being and for economic development. Davis’s writings at the time, especially on India, were supportive.

In the 1960s the development of the IUD and oral contraceptives gave further impetus to this approach. A major organizational effort was mounted to spread the use of modern contraception in poor countries, led initially by private U.S.-based organizations such as the Population Council (of which Notestein was now president) and the Ford Foundation, but soon joined by U.S. and other government foreign assistance agencies and, eventually, the United Nations. Davis, now at Berkeley, had become increasingly skeptical of program interventions that promised a demographic outcome without dealing with the motivational basis and societal supports for high fertility. This was the setting in which his 1967 article “Population policy: will current programs succeed?” was published—prominently, in the journal *Science*. In essence, Davis was criticizing “the designation of population control as a medical or public health task” and reasserting, in a more sophisticated form, the earlier social-science-centered stance of transition theory. He did not pull any punches: “The world’s population problem,” he wrote, “cannot be solved by pretense and wishful thinking.”

The *Science* article took aim at the proponents of family planning, a group that encompassed many well-known demographers at Princeton, Chicago, and Michigan, among whom it created some amount of consternation and a lot of anger. One response came in the form of a letter to the editor of *Science* signed by the ten members of the National Academy of Sciences’ Committee on Population, attempting to stake out a middle ground. Davis’s reply in the same issue flatly rejected the terms of compromise. To the plea that contraception had to be promoted “within the framework of existing values,” he responded: “‘existing values’ are not the means for solving the problem; they are the problem.” Moreover, he accused the signers of trying to enlist the Academy to back their position. “Scientific controversy is ordinarily conducted in terms of logic and evidence, but the committee has chosen to assert a presumed authority.”

Aside from the asperity, what is remarkable about this debate is its longevity. Fertility declined substantially throughout the world in the subsequent decades except for some regions of Sub-Saharan Africa, but the counterfactual of what would have happened in the absence of family planning campaigns remains contested. Blurry field experiments with treatment and control areas have not resolved the matter, nor have innumerable applications of multivariate analysis. Social scientists by and large (and economists especially) take Davis’s side; public health practitioners and program managers take the other. Demographers are split.

There was a more radical follow-up to Davis’s critique. The “Population Establishment” (Davis’s term for the foundations, non-governmental organizations, and agencies promoting

and funding family planning programs) distanced their policy objective from population limitation, preferring the more politically acceptable goal of reducing unwanted births and benefiting women's health. Davis saw this as disingenuous. Returning to the fray in a 1973 paper in *Daedalus*, "Zero population growth: the goal and the means," he spelled out the more drastic kinds of measures that might indeed bring about zero population growth (ZPG) or negative growth: amounting, essentially, to curtailing reproductive freedom. His summary: "People want families and children... They do not want runaway population growth either, but they want to avoid it painlessly... In short, they want a miracle."

One can read into the ZPG article, carefully couched though it was, Davis's hankering for a less populous, less hemmed-in society of the kind he grew up in—both for the United States and, a fortiori, the world. "The human species," he wrote, "is now in the preposterous situation of using an extremely advanced technology to maintain nearly four billion people at a low average level of living while stripping the world of its resources, contaminating its water, soil and air, and driving most other species into extinction, parasitism, or domestication." Shorn of sociology, the sentiments mirror those of the ecologists Garrett Hardin and Paul Ehrlich. In a 1989 interview for the PAA Oral History Project, Davis put it starkly: "[T]he failure to control population is the greatest tragedy that ever hit humanity."

The issues that occupied Davis in the last phase of his professional life, based mainly at the Hoover Institution, were those facing the family and society in the contemporary West. He wrote on intergenerational conflict and social support for the elderly, the "sex role revolution" and changes in work-life balance, the causes and consequences of very low fertility, and the rural exodus of population. He organized a succession of conferences on contemporary marriage, below-replacement fertility, and resources and the environment, contributing introductory essays and editing or co-editing the ensuing volumes. The sociological imagination was intact; the sharp edges less evident.

People and Places

Davis had a role in the development of several sociology programs—at Penn State, Princeton, Columbia, and Berkeley. He chaired a new department of anthropology and sociology at Princeton, recruiting such figures as Marion Levy, Wilbert Moore, and Melvin Tumin and building what was to become one of the country's leading centers of sociological research. At Columbia he joined Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton in an already strong group, briefly (until he could disengage) directing a program on applied social research.

His Berkeley period was more complicated. In 1955, when Davis joined it, Berkeley's Sociology Department already had some prominent members—notably Herbert Blumer, Seymour Martin Lipset, and Reinhard Bendix. Ambitious expansion plans brought in a wave of new faculty recruited from the more established programs at Harvard, Chicago, and Columbia. The results were striking: in the national ranking of sociology departments, Berkeley moved up from eighth in 1959 to first in 1966. The dominance was not to last. The Free Speech Movement in 1964 and the anti-war and other protests later in the decade, some with significant vandalism, seriously politicized the department—as it did the university generally—dividing the faculty into supporters and opponents of an increasingly radicalized student body. (The 1969-70 campus demonstrations were quelled by California National Guard troops under then Governor Ronald Reagan, with repeated use of tear gas—on one occasion spread by helicopter.) A number of senior members of the department chose to leave. Davis had chaired the department in the early 1960s but withdrew from most of the subsequent departmental politics—literally so, by moving up the hill to IPUR's base on Piedmont Avenue. His position vehemently opposed to the radicals was not in question.

The year before he came to Berkeley Davis had married Judith Blake, then a graduate student at Columbia (and 18 years his junior), who was to become a noted social demographer herself. Together, she from a post in the School of Public Health, they were the driving force in setting up Demography as a formal academic department at Berkeley in 1967, with Blake as chair. This innovative enterprise (few such departments then existed anywhere, and not many do now) assembled a distinguished faculty: Nathan Keyfitz, Paul Demeny, and, in his first academic position, Samuel H. Preston—each of them a future president of the PAA—as well as drawing on associated faculty in neighboring departments, such as the economists Carlo M. Cipolla and Albert Fishlow, and Davis himself. Its coterie of Ph.D. students—myself included—found this a rich learning environment, even during these turbulent years. The department foundered in the early 1970s, weakened by faculty departures and eventually closed in a cost-cutting move by the university's chancellor, only to be revived in a new administration and under new leadership—that of Ronald D. Lee—later in the decade. It took over the old IPUR building as its base.

Age-based retirement at Berkeley led Davis to a distinguished professorship at the University of Southern California. Los Angeles smog drove him north again—first to a period at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, then to a fellowship at the Hoover Institution—politically a congenial setting. He finally retired in 1992.

Like most senior academics, Davis took on numerous responsibilities outside the university, many of them requiring time in Washington or New York. He chaired or was a member of a diverse array of National Academy of Sciences committees and was on the NAS Council. He served on advisory committees to the Census Bureau, the National Institutes of Health, NASA, and the California state government. For several terms he was the U.S. representative to the UN Population Commission. He held leadership posts in the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the American Statistical Association, and the American Association of University Professors. He was a one-time board member of the American Eugenics Society and a long-time trustee of the Population Reference Bureau.

Davis the Man

John Finley Scott offers perhaps the best succinct summary of Davis the scholar: “unsentimental and iconoclastic, sharp-witted and combative.” His friendships were many and long lasting, both with colleagues like Merton and Lipset and with former graduate students. Belying a reputation as somewhat of a womanizer, writes Ruth Dixon-Mueller, “he was ultimately a strong mentor for his female students.” David Heer, his biographer and a longtime friend and colleague, has written of Davis’s “famous rages” but says that these blew over quickly. Some academic conflicts were longer lasting. He fell out early with Sorokin, in a rift that Heer argues was “bound to occur” between two very strong personalities with such divergent worldviews. It began, he speculates, with Sorokin taking exception to Davis’s stance on the role of organized religion in the control of sexuality, evidenced in his early work on sexual property and prostitution. His dispute with Notestein was rooted in the major policy differences discussed above.

For Davis the person, more should be added. He took pride in proclaiming his rural Texan origins, displayed, when he chose, in a distinctive Southern drawl. At the same time this made him a something of an outsider in Ivy League precincts, which may have encouraged his move to California—and his later expressions of disdain for the mainly East-Coast population establishment. (A dislike for large cities, New York in particular, was another push factor.)

Physically, Davis was trim and fit throughout his life. His one-time student at Penn State and friend for six decades, William J. Goode, writes of Davis’s “sheer animal joy of living.” At Hoover, then in his late 70s, “he continued to ride his bike to school, to climb in the Stanford hills for an hour a day, and to spend at least two nights a week square dancing.” Only in his final years did this pace of life slow down, as the ravages of Parkinson’s took over.

Davis married four times and had four children. His first marriage was short-lived, before he left Texas. His second, to Jane Quinn in 1936, lasted 18 years; they had two children: Jo Anne (b. 1945) and Jefferson (b. 1950). They were divorced in 1954. The same year he married Judith Blake, with whom he had a daughter Laura (b. 1959). This marriage too ended in divorce, in 1976. In 1985 he married Marta Seoane, who survived him. His youngest child, Alexander, was born in 1987. Davis died on February 27, 1997, at the age of 88.

Davis's papers are deposited in the Hoover Institution Archives. A full inventory is at the Online Archive of California website.

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