

OBITUARY

WILLIAM B. "DOC" DAVIS: 1902–1995



William Bennoni Davis was born March 14, 1902, in Rexburg, Idaho, to Bennoni Washington Davis and Mary Ann Matilda (Owens) Davis. Bill died in his sleep at the age of 92 from kidney failure at his home in Bryan, Texas, on June 19, 1995.

Bill's father and grandfather operated a small sawmill east of Rexburg, a small agricultural and lumber community on the Snake River about 50 miles southwest of Yellowstone National Park. His father was killed in an accident at the sawmill when Bill was only three years old and his sister, Marion, was two. Bill's mother worked as a cook to support her family, first for mining crews in northern Utah, then in a boarding house and hotel in Rupert, Idaho. Later she married Henry Dunn, a livery stable owner and later a franchise dealer for Studebaker automobiles in Idaho. They had two children together.

Bill attended school in Rupert, Idaho, and graduated from high school in February 1920.

After high school, Bill obtained a certificate to teach third grade and began his teaching career in a rural school near St. Anthony, Idaho. During the next 13 years he alternated going to summer school and teaching in elementary schools in Idaho, Washington, and California. On April 21, 1923, he married Pearl Kathryn Tansey, and they had two children, a daughter, LaNell, and a son, Robert Lee. Pearl passed away in 1984. On January 11, 1985, Bill married Leola Todd. She has two children by a former marriage.

Bill was interested in animals, particularly birds, even as a young child, although he received no particular support or encouragement from his family. By the time Bill entered Chico State College in 1932, he had already published eight scientific papers. Bill graduated from Chico State with a B.A. in Education in 1933.

During the summer of 1933, Bill served as a field assistant in Nevada to E. R. Hall of the University of California at Berkeley. This position led to his association with Dr. Joseph Grinnell, who agreed to chair Bill's graduate committee if he would switch his research to the field of mammalogy. For the next four years, Bill worked as a graduate assistant in the Department of Zoology, collecting mammals throughout Idaho for his graduate field work. He obtained his Master's degree in 1936, and his Ph.D. in 1937. His dissertation, *The Recent Mammals of Idaho*, was published in 1939.

Bill's association with Texas A&M University began in 1937, when he accepted a professorship in the Department of Wildlife Science. The following year he became Curator of the Texas Co-operative Wildlife Collections (TCWC), a position which he held until 1967. Under his tutelage, the TCWC became one of the 15 largest mammal collections in the United States and the largest collection in Texas.

Bill served as Head of the Wildlife and Fisheries Department at A&M from 1947 until his retirement in 1965. Under his leadership, this department developed into one of the premier programs of its type in the country. Because of

his strong background in zoology, Bill insisted that the curriculum and research in the department focus on the "ologies" (mammalogy, ornithology, herpetology, and ichthyology) as much as on traditional game management. He was ahead of his time with this focus on biodiversity as opposed to game management.

For as long as we knew Bill, he was affectionately and respectfully referred to as "Doc Davis." While we don't know the exact origin of this label, we are confident it arose from the tremendous respect and awe that people had for him. He was a tough task-master with little tolerance for fun and games. He exuded high standards in every aspect of his professional and personal life. He believed that students should be well versed in the fundamentals of science, but he also believed they should be prepared for success later in life. For this reason, he stressed discipline and self-sufficiency as important attributes of both professional and personal success.

Doc was a superb investor and financial disciplinarian. His efforts produced personal wealth, and he took great pride in teaching his students financial acumen as well as field biology. A shining example of his ability involved the formation of a small investment group, called Caffeine, which Doc started in 1956. The group was formed because Doc thought the faculty and staff of the Wildlife and Fisheries Department at Texas A&M were wasting time discussing irrelevant topics during twice daily coffee breaks at precisely 10:00 in the morning and 3:00 in the afternoon. Doc was exceptionally frugal but would never have foregone his coffee, notwithstanding his Mormon upbringing. In the beginning, each member of Caffeine made a monthly contribution (sort of a payroll investment plan in that each participant pledged a given amount each payday) to the fund. Doc assigned reading and research projects, the results of which were reported and discussed during the 15-minute coffee breaks. Doc wanted each faculty and staff member to understand how the stock market worked in order to make logical market decisions. The first Caffeine purchase was 100 shares of stock in Fruehoff Trailers. With Doc's guidance, individuals in the group learned to be both bulls and bears in the market—the group once made a bundle selling short on Studebaker. One of Doc's goals with Caffeine was to turn each member into a knowledgeable investor in the market. Doc prospered substan-

tially in the market, which enabled him to enjoy a clear, uncompromising ethical independence in a then rather autocratic academic environment. When he closed Caffeine because of his failing eyesight, the value of the portfolio was almost a million dollars.

Bill was a true naturalist, and his publication record and list of graduate students reflect this. During his career at Texas A&M, he supervised the theses and dissertations of 31 students, including many well-known mammalogists, ornithologists, and herpetologists such as Bryan Glass, Wendell Swank, James Dixon, Dildford Carter, and Paul Parmalee. Bill's publication record contained 191 papers published from 1923 to 1994 on varied topics about mammalogy, ornithology, and herpetology.

His chief scientific interest, as described in his vitae, was the "ecology, differentiation, and distribution of mammals, birds, reptiles, and amphibians in Mexico and the western United States." Although his research interests were diverse, Doc's extensive work on pocket gophers earned him the nickname "Gopher Bill," a label he felt appropriately reflected his affection for and interest in this particular group of mammals. Bill conducted research on terrestrial vertebrates in Texas, California, Nevada, Idaho, Colorado, most of the Mexican states, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. He also traveled and collected extensively in western Canada.

Doc loved putting up skins and preparing scientific specimens. The last entry in his field catalog, number 10,338, was made in 1981. He contributed more than 5,000 prepared specimens to the TCWC during his tenure at Texas A&M. In his publications, Bill described six species and 43 subspecies of mammals, five species and one subspecies of reptiles, and three species and one subspecies of amphibians. The taxa he described are listed under the appropriate entries in his bibliography. Bill has been honored with patronyms for three taxa of mammals (*Uroderma bilobatum davisii*, *Dasyopus novemcinctus davisii*, and *Eutamias obscurus davisii*) and one reptile (*Phyllodactylus davisii*).

Upon his retirement from administration in 1965, Bill received the Governor's Award for Outstanding Service in Conservation Education. Bill remained a member of the Texas A&M faculty as Professor Emeritus from 1967 until his death. He remained active in research following

his retirement, and his interest and enthusiasm for natural history remained strong, although failing eyesight limited his abilities in his final years.

Bill was actively involved in the American Society of Mammalogists since joining in 1934. He holds the distinction of being the oldest new member ever to join the Society that later became its President. Bill served as the 20th President of the ASM from 1955–1958, and is one of only two Presidents elected to more than two years. According to Layne and Hoffman (1994), "Davis' extended tenure was the result of a desire of the membership to maintain administrative continuity during a period of reorganization of the Society's finances." While Bill Davis was President of the ASM, the Resolutions Committee and the Honorary Membership Committee were formed. Bill also served as Corresponding Secretary from 1937 to 1940, as Editor of the *Journal of Mammalogy* from 1941 to 1947, and as Vice President from 1952 to 1955. Bill was appointed by the ASM Board of Directors as a Trustee of the ASM Reserve Fund, and he served as Chairman of the Trustees for 5 terms from 1961 to 1976. On the occasion of the Society's 50th anniversary (1969), Bill prepared a history of the Reserve Fund.

Bill was made an Honorary Member of ASM in 1968, the most esteemed recognition given by the Society, and he was the first recipient of the Hartley H. T. Jackson Award, in 1977. Bill was a Life Member of several other societies, including the American Ornithological Union, Cooper Ornithological Club, Wilson Ornithological Club, Herpetologists League, and the Wildlife Society.

Following Bill's death, the Texas Senate issued a Proclamation (S.P. No. 250) in memory of his career and numerous accomplishments. He was survived by his sister, Marion Hortense, who died in 1996 at the age of 93. A half-brother and half-sister predeceased Bill. Bill is survived by his second wife of 10 years, Leola, of Bryan, Texas. He leaves a daughter, LaNell Creel, a son, Robert Lee Davis, a step-daughter, Mary Elizabeth Bradshaw, a step-son, Robert W. Todd, 7 grandchildren and 10 great-grandchildren.

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DAVID J. SCHMIDLY, *Department of Biological Sciences, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX 79409*; JAMES R. DIXON, *Department of Wildlife and Fisheries Sciences, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843*.