

PLACE AND THE HEROIC

A side-wise look at Harold Lenoir Davis

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It's a pleasure to be here

And because I'm neither a scholar nor one of the area's known H.L. Davis experts, when David asked me to participate in this evening, I knew it was because we're talking about my Uncle Harold—other people call him H.L.

And I decided that if I have anything useful to contribute to a discussion of H.L. Davis, it is in terms of his relationship to his family and the country that I grew up in—what, my Father called God's Country, on the theory that only God would have it.

So what to consider with you this evening is how family and circumstance of childhood form the artist—and perhaps shape the artist's perspective as he considers his subject.

So I started with the premise that child development specialists and family counselors use in their analysis work:

The combined influence of family and small-child experience significantly determines who we are.

And in considering that, I want to touch into a few sections of work as examples of ways in which I believe Uncle Harold's family influenced his view, his voice and predicts how, in later life, his view of life would settle.



H.L. Davis at 17

Let me pause for a second and confess:

I don't want to be seduced—and for a few moments here bear with me—I don't want you to be seduced by the exquisite, eloquent, even blissful descriptive writing that he could produce.

Fabulous description does not make a novel, a short story or a poem.

Harold had something to say, a point of view—a point to make, and he makes it even while he is setting the scene.

Take this example of his political ax grinding in the first two sentences of "Team Bells Woke Me," first published in *The American Mercury* in April, 1931:

“ The wagon-freighters into Eastern Oregon in 1906 had a night camp on the Upper John Day River, in a country which, having since turned its population over to the payroll towns on the Coast and all its land to the Federal Farm Loan banks, now has neither freight-camps, freight-haulers, nor freight-users. Economic progress has made it merely another hole in Nature’s pants; but it was a paying section in the team days.”

The influences on Uncle Harold’s life reveal themselves in his novels and stories.

His years as a young man on the high flats around The Dalles and John Day, in Antelope (and thank God he wasn’t alive to read about Rajneeshpuram)—places like Dead Horse Canyon on the Washington side of the river downstream from Celilo—

That was his country, and the tough old guys who settled it—they were part of him just like the country.

And they were part of my Father.

Parenthetically, and because it will explain a little about my sense of Uncle Harold, my Father was 21 years younger than Harold. And because their Father had lost his leg at age 6 in a sawmill accident in Tennessee, and because Harold was living at home, Harold was the man in the family who rescued my Dad from tough guys in Antelope, and when my father was older, Harold taught Dad to hunt and fish—in many ways Harold taught my Father how to be a man in the outdoor world that their father couldn’t enjoy.

Also parenthetically, my Father took pleasure in describing family outings in The Dalles. Dad enjoyed the memory because their father’s one true foray into outrageousness was that he liked to keep a team of—as Dad used to say—pretty snorty greys (that is horses) to pull the buggy. My grandmother, a mild spirited Lady, was afraid of them. But imagine if you will:



Barbara Davis delivering this 1999 talk in The Old Church in a *Discovering Oregon Originals* presentation sponsored by OCHC

The old man, on his crutch and cane, with Harold’s help would harness these two grey geldings and then the old man climbing aboard.

The horses would begin to rear up and stamp around a little and the buggy would lurch back and forth—all the while Harold would be standing in front of the horses holding them as still as he could given the general goings on—

And my grandfather would begin shouting that my grandmother should get the boys out and into the buggy.

My grandmother, despite her fears of the horses’ jumping around would herd the boys out, and they would all climb into the buggy that was jerking one way and another,

With Harold still holding them back as best he could 'til everyone was in,

Then Harold would sprint around while Grandpa Davis “settled” them back, and jump in,

And they would all race away, down into town.

So there it is:

The Family

As you will learn from any good biography of Uncle Harold,

- he was born October 18, 1894;
- his father, James Alexander, was a school teacher;
- his mother, Ruth Bridges, was the daughter of a self-ordained hardshell Baptist minister;
- he had a brother, Percival, who died in 1910.

What is less clear from the biographies—which rightly concern themselves mostly with publication and travel—is the influence of family history on Uncle Harold.

The Hard Times in Tennessee connection:

Editors mention in passing that Harold’s family was from Tennessee.

Think about this:

- Harold’s father (my Grandpa Davis) was born at the beginning of the War between the States, in Tennessee.
- Shortly before Grandpa Davis was born, and after the Civil War broke out
- Harold’s grandfather, Great Grandpa Davis, left his pregnant wife and raised a company of men from the Tennessee countryside
- and they went off to serve in the Army of the Confederacy under the command of General Nathan Bedford Forrest.
- Great Grandpa Davis was killed at the battle of Black Creek in northern Alabama. A battle which the Confederacy won, notwithstanding our personal loss.
- After the war, a neighbor of the family’s and fellow Confederate veteran named Miller returned to Tennessee and fulfilled the promise he had given to my Great Grandfather.
- Miller married my Great Grandmother and raised James Alexander Davis (my Grandfather) as his son.

- And, think about the fact that, to a Southerner, the War Between the States was an heroic act. After all, nothing is so heroic as a lost cause.

My point is, that Harold's father's formative years were the Civil War and Reconstruction; and he was the son of pioneers who settled in Tennessee—the wild west of its day.

Uncle Harold knew about hard times from his own Father, long before the Great Depression or the Dust Bowl were common terms of reference.

And without burdening you with too much of the family laundry, Harold's maternal Grandfather is known in the family as "Old Man Bridges" and cursed as being crazy and one of the meanest men alive. His family scraped by in spite of him as much as because of him—Harold heard those stories (and was present for visits from relatives who were escaping the old man's wrath)—so he knew what hard times could mean, And just what kind of S-O-B's a person could get stuck with as a relative.

And you find those references to hard men and harder times and making it in spite of the conditions of the land and hard luck all through Uncle Harold's work.

For example, in *Winds of Morning*, Harold builds in a soliloquy set as a discussion of how people are hurt by life and how they survive it. He achieves this by letting his character, Hendricks, reminisce about his dead wife and how Hendricks kept going,

"He broke up an old sunflower leaf in his fingers, and went on as If I hadn't spoken. 'Hers happened a long time back. If that was it. We was up here tryin' to git started, and we both wanted to git ahead. We had the homestead and some cattle, and there come a bad winter. The grass all got froze under four feet of hard snow and the feed run out, and hay went up to ninety dollars a ton and no way to haul it in. Everybody's cattle was starvin' to death, and nobody knew anything to do but let 'em. There was a camp of Indians that had some land allotments over at Hot Creek Meadows on the reservation. The creek spread out where they was, and it run warm enough through the winter to keep the grass open, and they wasn't doin' anything with it. They couldn't sell it, and they didn't want to lease it because the money would have gone to the agency and they wouldn't have got any of it. So I took up with one of the young squaws, and she got 'em to help move our cattle over onto it, and they wintered out as slick as moles. We didn't lose a one. Most people lost every head they owned that winter, and went broke tryin' to keep 'em alive besides... It's hard to stop with Indians, once you're started, and it worked all right. They couldn't have sold their grass anywhere, and they didn't need it. They always wintered their ponies on cottonwood bark. It looked like everybody was ahead on it. I couldn't see how it hurt anybody much.'"

When I hear that language, it makes me miss my own Father because they used such similar turns of phrase.

Use of His Native Language

As a writer, Harold's choice of words and reliance on English (as opposed to Latinate) expression pleases me because the clear, direct English so effectively drives the prose—it's real, not cerebral.

I want to think that Harold's language comes from having a good ear—I come from a family of musicians—and from that Southern custom of story telling. You can see that influence in the practical way Harold's language works and the direct approach he has to narrative:

Both Grandpa Davis and my Grandmother Davis grew up with that tradition, and you can see it as a part of the devices in Harold's work—the two guys, just going along working things out and peripherally they layout the joke, the linguistic slight-of-hand sparkle that kicks the story along.

The whole family were storytellers.

My Dad was of the opinion—which I'm inclined to believe—that my Uncle Quentin was an even better storyteller than Harold—Quentin just didn't bother to write them down.

So I grew up witnessing the exercise of that gift—

At home or at my Uncle Quentin's house, the folksy way of my Dad or Uncle Quentin had of charming people into, for example, bidding up a card game, laughing all the while at the fact that the poor fool couldn't make it—because Dad or Quentin had goaded him into overbidding.

And all while they would be laughing at the card player and regaling him with some other yarn.

The pure delight in being bad, of putting one over on somebody) just tickled the hell out of them.

And, obviously out of Uncle Harold. Take his little side description of Tunison at the beginning of Winds of Morning:

“His one weakness, which broke out on him after the old man died, was a passion for profits acquired by chicanery and underhandedness, in preference to money gained honestly. Men who had worked for him claimed that he occupied his idle moments by stealing loose change out of one of his own pockets and sneaking it into another, merely to keep himself in practice. There was probably some personal spite back of that rumor, but he did own a ten-thousand-gallon whisky still back in the hills that supplied half the bootleggers in the country, and a ferryboat that ran stolen cattle across the state line after dark, and a fifteen-bed hookshop nestled in the rimrock on the Washington side of the river where wandering stockmen could disencumber themselves of their money without having unfavorable reports circulated about it among their families and creditors. Usually his enterprises ran along profitably without any trouble, but sometimes one or another of them would begin to threaten trouble for him. When that happened, he would back out and throw himself into the sheep-raising business as if his salvation depended on it, putting his hired hands to a round of harrowing, road-grading, fence-stringing, tank-mending and weed-pulling that would have made his place one of the sightliest in the country if he had carried it out far enough. Since he only worked his men in sight of the main road where passers-by could see him at it, the actual improvements he got in didn't amount to much.”

I can't help but believe it gave Harold pure pleasure to write that description, which undoubtedly he and his cronies around Wasco County would have recognized as a local crook nobody had seen fit to shoot.

And that brings me to the next part of the family influence:

The Dark Heart:

Harold's father (my Grandfather Davis) came to Oregon as part of that great westward push of people who had struggled with Reconstruction and decided to follow the promise for a new life in the west.

And he brought with him the emotional baggage of the post-Civil War generation:

- A belief that people who weren't like him were less than him;
- A serious skepticism about the goodness of people;
- A profound skepticism about the goodness of government unless he ran it;
- The belief that if you were going to get anywhere or do anything, you would have to do it yourself.

And Grandpa Davis came to Oregon and set about teaching school, courted and married my Grandmother Davis Ruth and they began their family of Harold, Percival, Quentin and (eventually) my father Richard.

And, moved the family through and around the Umpqua River Valley, teaching in Looking Glass, Drain, Ten Mile, Roseburg, Yoncalla and Oakland.

If you've read *Honey in the Horn*—whether you've been there or not—you have seen that country, so beautifully set and peopled with folks just scraping along, a little suspicious, not entirely law abiding because they didn't have too much respect for it.

(Do you hear the Southerner talking?)

Going back to the premise again, I think that Uncle Harold, like my Father, grew up thinking that the self-made man, the survivor, was the modern hero.

And that the heroic deed was noble. Something to be held in awe.

And, at the same time, both Uncle Harold and my Father seemed to believe that if a fella had to do a job, even if it meant behaving in profoundly courageous ways, he just went and did it—he didn't whine around about it, or even think too much about it.

Harold, Uncle Quentin and my Father had their father as an example—

- a man with one leg who came west, built a career and raised a family,
- who became active in politics (something the biographers don't mention),
- who served in a variety of county political positions, including the local draft board, and hosted traveling Oregon officials during my Father's boyhood,
- a man who stood his ground and paid his debts even when other town fathers didn't feel the need.

Uncle Harold lacked the heroic experience out of the war—it was over before he got started, and he spent his time at Fort McDowell in California.

But he had all those examples of people who had hung in there and fought their hardest to make a go of it. And, for the most part, made a go of it in hard times.

I think for Uncle Harold, it wasn't the pioneer man with his noble horse and girly by his side who's the hero, it was the guy out there breaking his back to keep a farm going, or keep one step ahead.

John Steinbeck dedicated an entire chapter of *Grapes of Wrath* to recounting the effort of a turtle as he tries to cross a road—a chapter that teachers employ when they present the idea of metaphor.

In his short story “Back to the Land—Oregon,” published in *The American Mercury* in March 1929, Uncle Harold takes his stab at metaphor—written before Steinbeck's turtle started out:

“But what advantage can a pack-rat derive from the instinct that causes him to carry away and hide all the old junk he can get his claws on—spoons, keys, broken crockery, old harness-buckles, bottle-necks, bent nails—anything, so long as it is portable and perfectly useless? I slept once in a cabin where the pack-rats worked all night carrying rifle-cartridges from a wooden packing-case, and hiding them under a saddle at the opposite end of the room. Out of curiosity, I left the cache undisturbed; but I learned nothing, for they left it undisturbed, too, and never came near it again.

“Since then, I have seen the same thing happen many times. If there is any reason for it in nature, I don't know what it is. Race-aberration, maybe; or a holdover from an instinct that did once have some sense in it. One guess is as good as another. The foreman probably hit as close as any when he called it afflatus. Maybe the pack-rats had hatched up some magnificent scheme in which the rifle-cartridges were designed, vaguely, to figure; and when they got the cartridges moved all their zest was gone and they decided to play something else. If moving the cartridges had done them any good I shouldn't have minded putting them back. As it was, I cursed them for a set of addle-headed little pests, and talked about putting out poison for them.

“I never got round to doing it, though, and I suppose they did get some good out of moving the cartridges, after all. They had the fun of planning big; maybe that was all they wanted or expected. If that is so, their living in the homestead houses was the most appropriate of all earthly coincidences, for they, more perfectly than any other created thing, exemplified the people whom they supplanted. If there is ever a monument to busted homesteaders, the pack-rat deserves to be on it. He is nature's one victim of the homesteaders' never-failing curse—a fury for beginning things and leaving them one-fourth done. It may have been from them that he learned his habits. I used to think so.”

What happened to the Family?

Part of the legacy that sent me to Willamette was a bequest from Uncle Harold to his youngest brother, my Father.

So in some way, the family tie was there.

But as you will learn from the biographies, Harold left Oregon after the publication of “Status Rerum” and lived in Mexico with his first wife Marian (who was also from The Dalles and about whom Harold and middle brother Quentin had a considerable row).

Marian and Harold eventually bought a ranch house outside Napa, California. They divorced. Harold moved to Point Richmond (across the Bay from San Francisco), then to Los Angeles where he lived in the guest house of Bob and Betty Shaw (two screen writers who were friends and took him in after the divorce), then back to Mexico, and then in the 50’s Harold returned to the States to be treated for tuberculosis. He met Betty, his second wife, and they spent their life together mostly in Oaxaca Mexico and in and around San Antonio.

His great books may have been conceived in Oregon, but they were made manifest and born in Mexico. *Honey in the Horn*, *Winds of Morning*—I suspect he needed that distance and dry expanse. To be that far away from the Northwest community he had attacked in *Status Rerum*.

My cousin, Martha Gatchell, and I both write—both of us descendants of this, ultimately angry and talented family.

We’ve often discussed how the family works and how it worked on Harold. We keep coming back to the question of what it means to be in and of a family and also a writer.

For Harold Davis, I suspect it was a hard, difficult, lonely and ultimately heroic life—but none of it happened in quite the way he would have wanted or expected.



Barbara Davis reading at the OCHC sponsored H.L. Davis celebration at Ft. The Dalles following the dedication of a plaque honoring the Pulitzer Prize winner at his family’s former residence in the city. Yes, the wind blew heartily.