

KBD 2: Teaches 10 Years to Earn Vassar Entry \$[©]

Davis' personal history began in western New York just before the Civil War. She was born in Buffalo on Jan. 15, 1860, the first child of Oscar Bill and Frances Freeman Davis. Three years later the family moved to nearby Dunkirk, N.Y., a much smaller city also on Lake Erie nearer the Pennsylvania line. When 17, she moved with her family to a Lake Ontario city, Rochester, N.Y. According to Katharine, her father

was not well off, but was always able to provide generously for his five children . . . So I cannot tell the story of how I dragged myself up from the depths of poverty. On the other hand, I cannot point out how, although my father was a millionaire, I was able to protect myself from the dangers that come from having a super-abundance of money.

Both sides of the family trace back in America to the 1630s; further back, the lines extent to England, Wales and France. While not affluent, her ancestry had personages of note: Grandmother Bement entered Seneca Falls chronicles when her militant abolitionism resulted in excommunication by local church elders. One Captain John Denison helped make Stonington, Conn., history. Green Mountain Boys Revolutionary War hero and outspoken radical deist Ethan Allen still guards, as a statue, Vermont's Capitol.

Oscar Davis was active in community affairs, served as Dunkirk school board president and supported the local summer school. In his own family, he also stressed education: for his three daughters no less than for his two sons. In addition to routine studies, they all received lessons in music, dancing and art. Katharine's first childhood ambition was the stage: she wrote plays, acted in them and "drilled the other children to act in them" too. Her second childhood ambition was to be a missionary. "This was about the time my brother wanted to be a coal driver so he would never have to wash his face," she recalled.

At Rochester, Oscar managed a regional office for the Bradstreet company. It had been founded in Cincinnati about 1849 as a dry goods firm by lawyer James M Bradstreet who developed a system for financial information gathering to gauge credit worthiness. In 1933, the company merged with R.G. Dun of New

York to become Dun & Bradstreet. In 1877 when Mr. Davis joined Bradstreet, the office focus was credit ratings. Later, he would become an independent insurance agent. Her father's gathering financial data, his systematic use of it to make credit evaluations, and his later use of actuarial tables in insurance made a profound impression on his eldest daughter. Eventually, Katharine would blaze new trails in political economy research, social science and penology by employing information gathering techniques and mathematical approaches not previously used in those fields for making evaluations. "I have a statistical mind that always has to count noses before I draw conclusions," she once remarked.

Determination, Daring

Business reverses had left the family financially unable to send Katharine to college after she graduated in 1879 from Rochester Free Academy, a public high school. Although he could not fund her college studies, Oscar was in a position, as former Dunkirk school board head, to help her get a job. Soon she was teaching science at Dunkirk Academy, pursuing her own studies evenings and weekends, and helping the family finances while also saving some money to pay her way into college.

For \$55 a month, Davis taught botany, geology, biology, chemistry and astronomy. One year the high school wanted to add trigonometry to its curriculum but had no one to teach it. Although she had never studied the subject, Katharine made a conditional offer to undertake giving the course. Her condition: three days lead-time to study the text book. "All year long I kept a lesson or two ahead of my class," Commissioner Davis confessed with delight decades later. "At the close, we all knew trigonometry fairly well. Anyway I knew as much about it as the class did."

At Dunkirk, Katharine led a women's literary club, was the first woman to ride a bicycle with a divided skirt, and organized a women's equality club. About the same time in Rochester where the Davis family lived, Susan B. Anthony's sister, Mary Stafford Anthony, also a teacher, founded a Political Equality Club. Davis taught Dunkirkers 10 years until she had enough saved to get into Vassar, raising the rest on her life insurance policy. What she lacked in size, the diminutive Davis made up in daring and determination.