

KBD 16: Asilomar and Georgian Bay

After announcement of her intention to retire from the Bureau of Social Hygiene, newspapers carried the news, some with lengthy interviews. One in the *Brooklyn Eagle* on New Year's Day, 1928, painted a word picture showing her remaining resolutely unfashionable as ever:

Dr. Davis is now 68 years old, and makes no effort to conceal the fact, either in word or in dress. She has not succumbed to the short skirt and the permanent wave. She still wears her hair, which is now a little grayer and thinner than when she was Commissioner of Correction for New York City, drawn back in a knot on the top of her head in a bygone fashion. She still carries that motherly attitude toward life that gives confidence and assurance of a sympathetic hearing.

After leaving the bureau, Katharine entered upon more semi-retirement than total retirement. She took on little projects that came her way and served as a part-time consultant with the American Social Hygiene Association. In 1930, when sister Helen left her post at the YWCA National Board headquarters in Manhattan to serve as administrator of the YW's conference grounds in California, Katharine decided to join her. She and sister Charlotte, who had been executive secretary to various Rochester post-masters, moved there from New York around the Christmas/New Year's holidays of 1930/31. Helen had preceded them by several months. Before departing the New York scene, Katharine told a reporter, "We are three old maids and we have lived together for many years. Now I feel as if I am going to heaven."

After being in Asilomar a few weeks, KBD informed Rockefeller Jr., in that big sprawling handwriting of hers, "It's very lovely here. We have the surf within a few minutes walk. We can watch squirrels from the window while we eat our breakfast and occasionally a deer passes by." Katharine was describing one of the most scenic spots in America — Asilomar on the Monterey peninsula.

In another of history's ironies, the Davis sisters had traveled three thousand miles across the country but, in a sense, they also

traveled back in time to their childhood days at Dunkirk. For the West Coast town to which they moved had its origins in the summer training camp movement begun at Lake Chautauqua, N. Y.

One year after the first such camp program took place, figuratively speaking, in the Davis family's Western New York backyard, a similar gathering took place at what became Pacific Grove. There in 1875 a tent village grew up seemingly overnight, a center for weeks of worship and Sunday school training. In June of 1879, the camp grounds formally became the Pacific Coast branch of the Chautaugua Literary and Scientific Circle. Over time, people came just to enjoy the beauty and the recreational opportunities that the ocean and the nearby Monterey Bay offered. The resort town incorporated in 1889.

Mrs. Phoebe Apperson Hearst, an avid supporter of the Young Woman's Christian Association, saw the potential of the area as the site for a conference center where YWCA training camp activities could be held. She found a real estate company willing to donate Monterey peninsula land, provided the Y would pay the taxes and make the necessary improvements. Mrs. Hearst brought in architect Julia Morgan to see to it. Morgan established the facility's classic "art and crafts" style. The National Board of the YWCA named the conference grounds Asilomar, meaning retreat or refuge by the sea, and opened its 30 acres to West Coast YWers for the first time in 1912 and then to YWers nationally the following year.

After a long and distinguished career with the YW, starting as a gym instructor in Rochester and rising to national board executive, having carried out duties for it around the country and the globe, even serving as acting national general secretary, Helen Alling Davis was offered the post of Asilomar administrator. It was not exactly "retirement" of the kind that the Bureau of Social Hygiene had decided for Katharine. But neither was it the kind of high-profile, middle-of-the-action position Helen previously had. If there was some element in the appointment equivalent to being put out to pasture after years of workhorse service, what a beautiful pasture! On the other hand, there are indications that the move and timing were more matters of her own choice.

Regardless, the position of Asilomar administrator was a challenging one. The conference/camping center was the YW's national crown jewel. The person in charge had to have experience and skills in executive management and be familiar with the YW's operations in this country and abroad because YW leaderships from U.S. cities and states and from other countries often conferenced at Asilomar. Yet, for all the practicality required, the administrator also had to be able to communicate genuine spirituality. For that was an essential aspect and tradition of Asilomar. On all points, the YW could not have selected better. Helen Alling Davis was the perfect match for the job description. In any single family, to have either a Katharine Bement Davis or a Helen Alling Davis would have been remarkable enough; to have them both in the same family is truly extraordinary.

Eventually, as the Great Depression deepened, the YWCA had to suspend operations at the conference/camping center completely. The three sisters decided to remain in Pacific Grove, rather than move back to New York, even though Katharine still owned a Jackson Heights, Queens, co-op apartment she had bought in the 1920s and lived in before moving to California. She had asked Rockefeller Jr.'s help to expedite its sale, but even JDR Jr. could not find buyers in those "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" days. After the family renting it from her experienced economic reverses too, Katharine was reluctant to evict them. So she reduced the rent to a level they could afford to pay.

After Asilomar shut down, the Sisters Davis found themselves a pleasant little Spanish-style bungalow with red tile roof at 832 Lighthouse Avenue, a short drive or lengthy walk from Asilomar.

Katharine's throwaway line of a few years earlier in New York, that "We are three old maids and we have lived together for many years," besides reflecting her characteristic self-mocking good humor, contained considerable truth. Throughout their busy lives, the sisters did often live together when their respective career situations permitted. They even vacationed together on occasion.

Simply Hammy's Sisters

In the summer of 1902, Helen Davis and the H.T. Moshers had boated from their home town of Rochester to Toronto, in-

tending to explore the northern lakes. Instead, they found Georgian Bay — waters more or less surrounded by mainland Ontario, the Bruce Peninsula, Manitoulin Island, and Lake Huron. The bay was (and still is) dotted with scores of lovely little islands with fascinating rock formations, some looking like giant flower pots and others, when seen together with their reflection in still water, looking like primitive stone totem poles. The trio elected to spend time exploring the Bay. One day as they rowed among the islands, the Americans came upon a Canadian surveyor whom they engaged in conversation to learn more about what they viewing. Among other items of interest, they learned he was surveying the islands for the British crown (Canada had not yet achieved total independence as a nation). They also learned that for a relatively small sum, like \$5 or \$10, a person could buy an island of an acre or two. That's exactly what Helen Davis and the Moshers did.

For some reason that her YW associates could never square with her peacemaking ways, Helen was a Napoleon buff. She named her isle St. Helena, had a rustic cabin built for her, and soon filled it with pictures and statues of the French emperor/military adventurer. In 1904, sister Katharine and brother Hamilton visited to see what sibling Helen had wrought. KBD wasted little time, promptly bought her own little island nearby for an equally small amount of money, and had a cabin built. The two islands were close enough that, in calm waters, one sister could boat over to see the other. Hamilton seems to have possessed the Davis talent to see possibilities for making change in situations most people simply accept as is. Call it vision, imagination, foresight or whatever, Katharine had this capacity to a high degree. Helen also had it.

What Hamilton saw was the possibility of a large resort hotel on an island big enough to provide a variety of recreational resources yet enough out of view of Pointe au Baril harbor to create the feeling of being “away from it all.” Helping his vision was the common knowledge that the Canadian Pacific Railroad was coming to the Baril area, more than 150 miles north of Toronto. He selected as his resort site a 42-acre island virtually surrounded by other islands and well out of sight of the harbor

that had its own hotel, the Bellevue.

Started in 1900, the Bellevue offered a coastal atmosphere. Its guests could see the lighthouse, the fishing stations, the little harbor town, the open bay. What Hamilton had in mind was a clientele that wanted a more rugged, woodland setting. Beginning in 1907, his Ojibway Hotel drew its own guests season after season and also served as the equivalent of village green for all the island owners, aka islanders, aka cottagers, for miles around. For 35 years, Hamilton ran the hotel resort as a kind of community hub. When the time came for him to retire in 1942, he offered to sell it to the islanders. A limited company was formed and shares were issued but no one could own more than \$2,500 in common stock. More than 100 shareholders purchased stock. No dividends were ever paid and none were ever expected. Sellers of the shares made no profit. “This was a true community enterprise,” wrote local historian Ruth M. McCuaig.

Hamilton’s foresight to turn the Ojibway into a community endeavor was typical of the local leadership he had provided for decades. In the U.S., Helen rose to the national executive level of the YW and Katharine became a national figure on several fronts but in Georgian Bay, Ontario, they were simply Hammy’s sisters. In the parlance of today, the tall, gaunt Hamilton was Georgian Bay islanders’ “main man.” After 20 years of community operation, the hotel had to close as a place of lodging because the facilities simply wore out and reconstruction was not feasible. But the grounds remain a community recreation center and the buildings are used for limited functions other than as living quarters. Succeeding generations of cottager families continue to maintain Ojibway as a hub of islander social life.

The Mothering Aunts

The sisters shared more than vacations and living quarters through the years. They shared being “second mothers” to their first niece, daughter of brother Frank Allen Davis, Rochester stationery store owner/operator, after the child’s mother died when the girl was 2 years old. Several years later, Frank remarried and had another daughter. By then, his first daughter was in her early teens. The close bond that had formed between the three mothering aunts — especially Helen — and their first niece during her

childhood, girlhood and early adolescent years remained strong throughout the remainder of her life and theirs. Summers for her almost always meant Georgian Bay, one or more of the aunts, Uncle Hammy, and the Ojibway.

Rather than turning out “spoiled rotten” from so much loving attention, she apparently took the best qualities of each Davis, added something unique from within herself, and developed into a fine young woman, remarkable on her own terms. It is through her that the Davis story continues but that telling remains for another day.

The second niece also received her share of attention from the three maiden sisters. She remembers with fondness “spending a whole year with the Aunts in Pacific Grove. It was such a beautiful place and they were such beautiful people.”

The Monarchs and Cannery Row

As if Nature wants to underscore that Pacific Grove’s beauty is intentional, not simply a happy accident of arbitrary forces, thousands of Monarch butterflies descend upon a 3.25-acre area of the town at the western end of Lighthouse Avenue every autumn, usually in late October. There they stay, clinging to the pine trees and the hanging moss or fluttering about on sunny days. Come March with its arrival of spring, the Monarchs depart. In effect, they “winter” at Pacific Grove.

America’s only regularly migrating butterfly, the Monarch is a graphic designer’s dream logo: reddish brown wings with black borders and two rows of white spots along the wing edges. When the wings open wide, the Monarch looks like a combination of stain-glass window and mosaic in miniature and in motion.

The first recorded sighting of the Monarchs’ “wintering” at P.G. is reported to have been in 1875. As awareness of the Monarchs’ annual visitations spread, tourists came in increasing numbers from near and far just to see and photograph the butterflies. Concerned about the safety of the Monarchs, their loyal Pacific Grove subjects had a local law enacted making killing the butterfly illegal. The image of the Monarch became identified with Pacific Grove, especially after the town adopted the promotional slogan “Follow the butterfly to Pacific Grove” on roadside directional signs pointing the way.

When, in the late 1980s, owners of the Monarchs' winter acreage announced plans to develop the private property commercially, Pacific Grovers were aghast. They promptly voted to raise their taxes in order to buy the land and have it designated a butterfly sanctuary. If not the only, Pacific Grove's "Monarch Grove Sanctuary" must be one of a very few city-owned/operated Monarch butterfly sanctuaries in the country. It is situated off Lighthouse Avenue just a leisurely walk or two-minute drive from where the Davis Sisters had their tile roof house. The butterflies' site would have been a little longer walk and maybe a four-minute drive from Asilomar. The sisters would have certainly visited the Monarchs' regal acreage, in its pre-sanctuary era, perhaps more than once, during their years in Pacific Grove.

The eastern end of Lighthouse Avenue in Pacific Grove — definitely not leisurely walking distance from house Number 832 — lies within the neighborhood of Cannery Row, the mile-long bayfront street that was the setting for the 1945 novel of the same name by John Steinbeck. The street begins in P.G. at the Stanford University Hopkins Marine Station and proceeds a few more blocks before becoming part of Monterey where most of the fish canning, packing, rendering and reduction factories were located. That industry give the street its name and its distinct character.

Like other residents who might have poked their noses out of doors when atmospheric conditions and wind direction were terribly wrong, the sisters would have come to know the saying popular in P.G. and nearby Carmel: *Carmel-by-the-Sea, Monterey-by-the-Smell, and Pacific Grove-by-God.*

New technology and relocation of the offending plants have eliminated the overpowering smell that gave rise to the Monterey reference in the above wisecrack. As for the Pacific Grove reference, Asilomar ceased to be a site for Young Women's Christian Association conferencing and training. Now California operates it as Asilomar State Beach and Conference Grounds.

Needing a Project

Katharine once acknowledged, when discussing retirement, that she was the sort of person who needs a project. She had worked all her life, from when she graduated Rochester high school to when she left the Bureau of Social Hygiene a half cen-

ture later. Her work had been her life. She did not easily relax. Occasionally, during her career, she would force herself to take a vacation when she had reached the point of exhaustion. She might book passage on an oceanliner without much caring where it went because she would remain on board for the immediate return trip. It was simply a getaway trip, not a going-someplace journey.

In California retirement, Katharine occasionally visited friends at Stanford, did very little consulting in penology and social hygiene, and dabbled in genealogy. But the main project was her memoirs. With Jean Henry Large's help, KBD had begun assembling autobiographical materials. Her *Three Score Years and Ten* was to have been a personal preamble to a series of articles by Large. In it, Katharine acknowledged having had a few marriage proposals, all of which she turned down. Particularly, she recalled that as a young girl she turned down a young farmer:

If I had accepted him I might have spent my days in managing a dairy farm and running a milk route in one of our large cities. Grandma Davis lived on a farm until she was 82-year-old and always seemed happy. But somehow, it did not appeal to me. . . I will confess now that I would have liked children and grandchildren. I miss them. More than I do a husband.

Among the points of interest in this, perhaps Katharine's most personal disclosure, such as it is or seems to be, are her management assumptions and her regrets about being childless.

Unless the rejected farmer had unwisely said her management skills were part of why he was attracted to her, or if his own lack of such skills made that obvious, Davis was simply assuming she would have a management role in the dairy business. Not having such role simply would not occur to her. Being in charge was Davis' default mode. From directing her younger brothers and sisters in plays that she wrote, to teaching high schoolers not much younger than herself, to running a model home complete with live-in family, to heading a settlement house, to superintending a reformatory, to organizing quake relief, to leading a city agency etc., KBD was ever and always the manager.

As to her not having children of her own, KBD's part in the aunts' mothering of their first niece — though here Helen seemed

to have taken the lead — may have given Katharine insights into that side of life she might not otherwise have had, at least not to the degree that she did. One wonders what if the aunt-parenting role had not been experienced? Would KBD have felt the pang over her own childlessness quite so strongly as to give it expression? Additionally, did the fact that her nieces might read the U. of Chicago magazine article figure into her “confession” of regrets? Was it a way of saying to them, over the heads of all other readers, “Having known you, I now realize what I have missed by not having children of my own”? The point here is not that these exact thoughts went through her mind but that her personal disclosure about regretting her childlessness should be read with awareness of her status as one of the second-mother aunts.

Perhaps sensing such questions might arise in her readers, she forewarned:

Neither will you find [here] any attempt at character analysis either of myself or of any other person; I have no trap-door in my brain through which I can look to see the wheels go round. I am not in the least an introvert, but a rather extreme extrovert who likes to experiment, to do things, to improve things where I can. I suppose I must have some philosophical basis as a foundation for action, but it is not easy to put into words.

A footnote at the end of Mrs. Large’s *A Man’s Job*, the companion piece to Katharine’s autobiographical sketch, expressed regret the U. of C. magazine could not publish more of the story but added: “It is a compensating pleasure, however, to look forward to the publication of her ‘Autobiographical Biography’ in the near future.”

But it never happened. The tremor in Katharine’s writing hand reached the point that she could barely sign her name. Bouts of illness forced delays. Mrs. Large moved onto other projects. Monterey was family home grounds for Jean, younger sister of Lou Henry Hoover, wife of President Herbert Hoover. Successful banker Charles Delano Henry had moved his family from Whittier to Monterey in 1890 when Jean was 8 and Lou 16. There Mr. Henry opened the town’s first local bank and from there elder daughter Lou went off the Stanford University, met and mar-

ried the future President. Jean, who had trained to be a violinist, went on to marriage, motherhood and free-lance writing.

Once a featured speaker on a special cross-country campaign train, making speeches on behalf of New York Governor Charles Evans Hughes' 1916 unsuccessful bid for the Presidency, Davis had also been an early Hoover booster. She served as a member of the 1928 National Hoover Republican Committee.

As her infirmities prevented KBD from working on her autobiography, she had little to do but read and think for longer periods than her busy career life ever permitted. For some people, that would have been most welcome. One suspects not so with Katharine. Despite having close at hand many artifacts testifying to her accomplishments — for example, the honorary degrees from Mount Holyoke, Western Reserve and Yale (which misspelled her first name); souvenirs from the Panama-Pacific Exposition where she was designated one of the three most famous women in America; the various medals, plaques and certificates — Katharine began experiencing something that must have been rare during her hectic professional life: self-doubt.

She wondered in a letter to JDR Jr. whether she had done the right thing in accepting appointment in the Mitchel administration, that she might have succeeded making the Bedford inmate screening lab into what she and he had originally envisioned. Rockefeller's very gracious and sympathetic reply (a copy of which is in the Rockefeller Archives Center as is all the Davis-JDR Jr. correspondence cited) sought to reassure her:

You did at the time what seemed to you wise and best, and that is all that any of us can do. Moreover, you cannot say, even now, that had you remained at Bedford, you would have rendered more useful service than as a member of Mayor Mitchel's official family.

In a later letter, cheerier because it reflected more activity, Katharine wrote him:

You will be surprised, probably, to hear that I am joining the Episcopal Church so as to go with Helen. I have been going there all the time. The Rector, Dr. Albert E. Clay, is a delightful Englishman. He preaches wonderful sermons and I do like the services of the Episcopal Church.

Both professionally as Asilomar administrator and personally even afterwards, Helen had taken an active role in Pacific Grove community affairs, serving on various committees and boards. She was much involved in its Episcopal church, St. Mary's By-the-Sea, about a block from the oceanfront. It was Pacific Grove's first formal church when built in 1887 after the Gothic style of a church in Bath, England. Among its featured attractions were two Tiffany windows donated by inventor Cyrus McCormick's nephew. They were given in memory of the nephew's wife whom he married in the church two years after it was opened.

Katharine's "delightful" English clergyman, St. Mary's By-the-Sea Rector Clay, read the Episcopal funeral service for her Dec. 13, 1935. She had died December 10 of cerebral arteriosclerosis at home, the one with the little red tile roof a short walk from where the Monarchs were in residence. She was 75.

KBD had been up and about, able to do a little reading, until about a week before her death. During her last days, she lay unconscious. The leading newspapers across the country carried reports of her death. Major papers in New York City and upstate devoted extensive column space to her obituary and a portrait photo of her that had been used on her 1928 testimonial's printed program.

Rockefeller's letter of condolence to Helen serves well as eulogy:

. . . I found her [at first meeting in Bedford]. . . a plain work-a-day woman who deeply loved her fellowmen, who strove in her relations with them to do as she would be done by, and who applied in her work the ordinary principles of common sense and humanity, the value of which her unusually fine mind and trained intellect had long since made clear to her. She was always kind, unselfish and thoughtful to a degree. On the other hand, no one could take advantage of those qualities to get the better of her or to thwart the end which she was seeking to attain. Red tape, unnecessary motion, in-direction, she abhorred, and was never willing to waste time on them. What she accomplished at the Reformatory, and in the laboratory, which I helped her build and operate, was epoch-making . . . Her contribution in [the Mitchel adminis-



Photo used with KBD obits. (Courtesy of Rockefeller Archives Center.)

tration] . . . was again outstanding. . . I have always had a feeling, however, that her heart was above all in the work at Bedford . . . The years she spent in the Bureau of Social Hygiene were also productive and fruitful. . . .

Your sister was one of the great women of her day. Her life was a long and useful one, and she leaves a record of devotion and service to humanity which few can boast of. I am proud to have been her friend and often her fellow worker, and mourn deeply with you and yours her going.

After Katharine's death, her friend and colleague from U. of Chicago days, Alderson Superintendent Harris, had a reception and classification center at the federal facility named for her in memorial. Harris felt that tribute was appropriate because Dr. Davis had contributed so much to advance and reform penology in America and, additionally, had been so helpful with the chapel fund campaign. So today, high on a hill in that sprawling correctional campus stands a Federalist-style red-brick building with "KATHARINE BEMENT DAVIS HALL" in large letters over the white columned entrance. The name is clearly visible, even from a distance.

History has its ironies. Surely one of them is this fact: that Katharine Bement Davis was commemorated with a building in West Virginia and a road system in Sicily, but in New York where she pioneered in Correction, social science and women's rights, not a statue nor a street, not a park nor public building can be found named for her, not even a jail nor a unit within a jail. At least, this author's search found none.

Perhaps these pages, once posted on a New York cyberspace site, will represent the beginning of long due recognition. The digital environment is appropriate. How Commissioner Davis would have loved putting the statistics-keeping and data-correlating capacities of computers to work "counting noses."