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PIONEERS

Pioneers is devoted to personal reflections by students and colleagues on major figures in the study of the indigenous cultures of the region. These are not obituaries or memorials, but candid recollections that convey insight into the personalities of the pioneers, as well as the cultural context of anthropology during their lives. If you have suggestions for a pioneer, and names and contact information for those who may wish to prepare a recollection, please contact Steven Simms.

MEMORIES OF EMMA LOU DAVIS (1905–1988)

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Emma Lou Davis was a polymath who brought an impressive array of accomplishments when she turned her attention to archaeology in mid-life. I did not know “Davey” (as her friends called her), but I have been regaled with stories of flamboyance that verge on the scandalous. I do know from Dr. Davis’s work that she was an open thinker, and I suspect it was the breadth and richness of her life that brought something out of the ordinary to the archaeology of the Desert West.

Davis was born in Indianapolis, Indiana, on November 26, 1905. She earned a Bachelor in Fine Arts degree from Vassar College in 1927, and for the next two decades pursued a career as an artist and designer. Soon after college she traveled to the Soviet Union and China, adventures in her early twenties that signaled an activism and an interest in socialist causes that persisted throughout her life. She returned to work at the Whitney Art Gallery and the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. Her bas relief sculpture, completed in 1938, adorns the Social Security building in Washington, D.C. During World War II she employed her talents as a designer, working at the Douglas Aircraft Company. She

continued in the post-war years as a furniture designer in California, and as an art instructor at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

A move to New Mexico provided the context that awakened an interest in archaeology. She took courses at the University of New Mexico, and then enrolled in graduate school at the University of California, Los Angeles. Her Masters degree focused on the ethnography of the *Kutzadika’a* Paiute band of Mono Lake, California, which launched her into the world of Great Basin Native Americans. Her doctoral dissertation explored Mesa Verde migrations, suggesting that the connection she made with archaeology in New Mexico remained strong. She received her doctorate from UCLA in 1964 at the age of 58.

Even as she worked on her doctorate on Mesa Verde, the Great Basin was on her mind, as evidenced by her 1963 paper in *American Antiquity*, “The Desert Culture of the Western Great Basin: A Lifeway of Seasonal Transhumance.” She understood the Desert Culture as a conceptual abstraction, and employed the ethnographic analogy of the Mono Lake Paiute to draw a contrast with the discoveries of Folsom and Clovis points in Nevada and eastern California (Davis 1963).

Students of the Paleoindian period of the Desert West remember Davis for her pioneering work in Pleistocene archaeology, her efforts to press the temporal boundaries for the antiquity of a human presence in the region, and for her ability to see beyond the artifacts to regional scales of interpretation. She advocated and practiced archaeology as an interdisciplinary science. She threw her net broadly across her interests and her associations, forging a relationship with the Mojave avocational desert rats so important to really knowing the land (Campbell 2014).

Davis hit her stride with a steady stream of publications over the next two decades, resulting in over 70 monographs, papers, and reports. Some notable examples include a review of work on Mojave geoglyphs

in the *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* (Davis and Winslow 1965); her ethnography of the Mono Lake Paiute, published in the *University of Utah Anthropological Papers* (Davis 1965); “The Western Lithic Co-Tradition,” published in the *San Diego Museum Papers* (Davis et al. 1969); and “Associations of People and a Rancholabrean Fauna at China Lake, California” in *Early Man in North America from a Circum-Pacific Perspective* (Davis 1978a). She continued to write into the early 1980s, and most of her later material is in the cultural resource management literature on the Mojave Desert (see the Digital Archaeological Record, www.tdar.org).

Dr. Davis was curator of the Museum of Man in San Diego, California from 1966 to 1971. In 1975, she founded the Great Basin Foundation to further research into the temporally-deep record of the Mojave Desert, and to advocate for preservation of archaeological resources. Her interests were many, and her advocacy and support ranged from the San Diego Zoo, to Greenpeace, and to Amnesty International. “Never mean spirited, Emma Lou Davis was forever a frank and forthright individual who minced no words in pursuing truth” (Turnmire 1989:2), and she remained a fiercely independent woman whose career reflected the fact that she had been a feminist all of her life.

* * *

THE LEGACY OF EMMA LOU DAVIS: A VIEW FROM THE BLEACHERS

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I must first confess that I never really knew Emma Lou Davis personally. I met her at several archaeological conferences during my formative years, and surely heard about some of her social eccentricities and wild parties (though I was never able to attend one), but I got to know and appreciate her through her research. When first engaging the prehistory of the western Great Basin in the early 1980s, it was essential to read her writings about Mono Lake ethnohistory, her papers on the archaeology of the Mono County uplands, Panamint Valley, the central Mojave Desert, and (of course) her multi-year and many-faceted studies of the Paleoindian occupations at China Lake. These latter investigations had resulted in a recent monograph, *The Ancient Californians: Rancholabrean*

Hunters of the Mojave Lakes Country (Davis 1978b), published by the Los Angeles County Museum. Based on extensive surface reconnaissance and some subsurface excavations in a number of locations along the Pleistocene Lake China shoreline, Davis offered a rich, robust, and often creative assessment of early prehistory in the Desert West. Many of the conclusions were quite speculative, sometimes downright outrageous, and this important study was widely ignored by the scientific establishment.

China Lake even today gets only “dutifully” mentioned as one of (by now) many Mojave Desert localities that have produced cultural remains attributable to the late Pleistocene/early Holocene interval, but few details are offered regarding the specifics of the assemblages themselves, and even fewer attempts are made to compare data from China Lake with those from other key early sites. There are probably many reasons for this oversight, not the least of which are related to the often controversial claims Emma Lou Davis made regarding the sites and artifacts—that at least some of the deposits were on the order of 40,000 years old, that the Clovis culture had first emerged in Indian Wells Valley, and that she had established a direct association between people and Pleistocene megafauna. Archaeologists of the day were largely skeptical of such assertions, believing that most or all of the accumulations represented lag deposits of uncertain but mixed temporal affinity that developed over the course of an extended erosional process. The China Lake monograph was also overlooked because of the idiosyncratic way Davis provided much of the information, making it difficult to compare it directly with studies presented in a more traditional manner.

That Davis and much of the mainstream archaeological community had a “failure to communicate” is exemplified by a personal exchange she had with C. Vance Haynes, one of the premier geoarchaeologists of the day, while she was in the midst of her fieldwork. Responding to an earlier correspondence, Haynes wrote:

Dear Davey:

Your letter of November 6 is fabulous, but it's obvious that our philosophical approaches are different. As I recall the situation, we called you over to see what I considered to be the midsection of a severely weathered Lake Mojave point of obsidian. Upon seeing it you said something on the order of, “Oh! That's late.” Whereupon I said, “Well it may be nearly as old as the fluted points on China Lake.” When you