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## LOOKING FOR THE PALEO-GROCERY STORE: MY RECOLLECTIONS OF EMMA LOU DAVIS

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The California deserts have natural laboratories like fluvial Pinto Wash and lacustrine lakes China, Panamint and Death Valley (Manly) where erosion exposes cultural materials in ancient deposits. Therefore these deserts should become a nationally supported field for *investigations of our cultural antiquity and its one-to-one correlation with climatic change* [Davis et al. 1980:10; emphasis in original].



I met Emma Lou Davis as a graduate student at San Diego State University in 1972. Of course, I was in awe. I had heard about her from several of my professors, including François Bordes, who indicated that I should seek knowledge from her as she was an intelligent character. I learned that she was not only a character but that she had character. She dressed wildly, spoke with exactness, and was prone to share her intellect through group participation and celebrations at her Point Loma, California home. There are three wonderful, unpublished documents that tell the story of her life (1905–1988) that anyone serious about knowing “Davey” should read: Davey’s unpublished *Autobiology* (1984); a second draft, *The Angry Shaman* (1984); and an oral history interview conducted by John McAleer from California State Parks (1982).

My first field visit with her was on a training archaeological survey in eastern San Diego County. The San Diego County Archaeological Society had arranged a training session which was to be thoroughly documented. All participants were given a field certificate for the eight hours they participated. Jay Hatley filled out the certificates and presented one to her. Davey laughed and laughed. Jay looked at her and asked what he had missed that was so humorous. She simply said, “I don’t need this piece of paper. I have thousands of hours of survey under my belt.” She handed back the certificate and suggested he save his paper.

I worked and talked with Davey off and on throughout my graduate studies about my interests in California archaeology and the peopling of the Americas. She provided the wisdom of an elder statesperson. My mentor and graduate advisor, Paul H. Ezell, was quick to point out that Davey was a bit unusual; she dressed ‘hippish’ and was very liberal in her social and political views, but extremely intelligent and financially well off. He generally shied away from her.

Her first career in art stimulated her thinking and creativity. She worked under the name of Emma Lu Davis for part of her career. She often told us, when speaking about her archaeological thoughts and theories, “Stick your neck out and let folks take a whack at it.”

I really got to know Davey when I was the District Archaeologist for the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in the California Desert Conservation Area. As a part of the planning effort, Davis was contracted to inventory the public lands for sites over 5,000 years old. She focused her efforts on the Mojave Lakes Country, particularly in the Panamint Valley, Saline Valley, Lake Manix, and Palen Lake areas. She felt these were areas where some of the earliest human settlers made camp because of the natural resources which were present. She focused much of her efforts on ‘climatic’ change and intensely studied past environments. She was certain the lakes held the answers to the peopling of the continent and contained Upper Paleolithic remains.

The waters in the chain of lakes from Mono to Manley Lake and the dry lake beds in eastern San Bernardino, Riverside, and Imperial counties provided enough resources over 5,000 years ago that they were the focus of Paleo-Indian activities, and were what Davis referred to as “paleo-grocery stores.” These places were

once teeming with megafauna seeking food and water, and with people seeking the same. She focused much of her research and theories on the remains of ‘Early Man’ in the California Deserts (Reed 2014:97), on lands managed by the BLM, as well as conducting research at Lake China, where she was confident the remains of megafauna such as mammoth would be found in association with artifacts.

Her colleagues published a festschrift in her honor in 1985, touchingly dedicated as follows: “For Davey, with whom we have shared at many hearths the awe of mystery, the pleasure of inquiry, the fierce jaw of discovery, and peals of laughter at a good rowdy joke. This book is a celebration of the pleasure of inquiry in good company” (Blackburn 1985:iv).<sup>1</sup> It focuses on the peopling of the Americas, and her creation of the Great Basin Foundation. Her research interests, her focus on older sites, and a willingness to step out of the box brought her admiration from her colleagues, while her sometimes acerbic personality could intimidate less experienced archaeologists.

I was lucky enough to spend time at many of the dry lake beds with her and invited her to visit early sites at Ft. Irwin, which she had previously been unable to access. At the time, the limited archaeology done there had been conducted by Malcolm Rogers from the San Diego Museum of Man during the 1930s, and Davey was familiar with his site records when she worked for the Museum. Later, volunteers from the Archaeological Survey Association of Southern California worked with Dee Simpson from the San Bernardino County Museum to excavate and document several sites. Davey enjoyed working with volunteers. It was one of the highlights of her career.

When the Army was required to conduct cultural resource inventories, I invited Davey to visit some of the sites. The Heritage Conservation and Recreation Services (HCRS) agency administered the contracts, but Davey was hired through Cornerstone Research to offer advice, a situation she cherished. I remember a day at Drinkwater Lake when a representative of HCRS showed up in the field wearing a big white floppy hat and a thin, long, white skirt that the breeze ferociously caught. Davey, always dressed in field clothing, had a ‘field day’ with the ‘office’ person, explaining proper field etiquette to her. She did not mince her words.

She experimented with recordation methods, and in addition to the usual pedestrian survey, used low and slow flying aircraft, such as Harry Casey’s 1940s Piper Cub and Slim Winslow’s Ercoupe (Casey 2014; Winslow 1984) for photography, as well as hot air balloons, which were very unstable in the high desert winds. She was an early user of USGS topographic quads for quicker access to remote locations. She also borrowed Paul Ezell’s famed photographic bipod to get a camera 20 feet above ground figures in north Panamint Valley, only to watch it come crashing down in the erratic winds.

Her art background allowed her to document the complex rock alignments—for which she coined the term ‘geoglyphs’—scattered throughout the Mojave Desert. Her theory for the construction and placement of the ground figures was that they were religious in purpose, constructed during a time in which the lakes were drying and significant loss of important resources was occurring. The builders were working within their religious system to influence appropriate powers to return to better times, to replenish the shrinking lakes, and to restore their associated resources, which Davey termed ‘paleogrocery stores’ (Davis and Raven 1986).

During the early 1980s, she worked with Jay von Werlhof and Harry Casey (von Werlhof 1987) to document very large geoglyphs in northern Panamint Valley and western Lake Manley, which she interpreted as representing snakes and birds. Later work in southern Panamint Valley by Julie Burcell (2007), inspired by Davis, found—instead of massive geoglyphs—ground figures which were much more delicate, made from smaller rocks, and which might have been representations of the surrounding landscape. Burcell paid tribute to Davey, someone she never had the opportunity to meet, with this statement:

This study supports the work of Emma Lou Davis and Jay von Werlhof, who observed an association between stream channels and ground figure sites in northern Panamint Valley. At this point, climate change models with solid supporting data appear to be the best avenue for exploring what we see in the archaeological record. Archaeologists should promote multidisciplinary investigations in Panamint Valley which include studies of alluvial fan development, fan chronologies, and lake level stands. This data would allow for further exploration of the concept that the ground figures are a religious response to changing weather patterns... and could prove to be an important testing ground for microlamination sequencing [Burcell 2007:v].

Davey did not mind being involved in archaeological controversy. She saw microlamination and rock varnish analysis as geological opportunities to push the envelope of science. She was a supporter of earlier than Clovis and believed that the Calico site was associated with Lake Manix—making it 15,000 to 20,000 years old. When she heard professionals suggesting that the site might represent an American Middle Paleolithic-era site, over 100,000 years old, her response, with a big grin, echoed that of François Bordes: “That is a definite maybe, maybe.”

Davey would have enjoyed the Paleoamerican Odyssey Conference held in Santa Fe, New Mexico in 2013. It seemed as though everyone who was doing significant work in the peopling of the Americas and examining pre-Clovis sites was there, and was presenting significant research. Davey would have indeed approved of the conference, and would definitely have commented on paper after paper. A surprising note though is that of the 31 published papers (Graf et al. 2013), none referenced her work. That would have disappointed her. I am sure she would not have wanted to have thought that she was forgotten.

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup>Although Blackburn is erroneously cited as the editor of the volume in most sources, the book was actually edited and assembled by Clark W. Brott and the staff of the Great Basin Foundation, who should properly receive full credit and recognition (Thomas Blackburn, personal communication 2017).

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#### LUNCH WITH DAVEY, THE ORIGINAL FEMINIST ARCHAEOLOGIST

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I had lunch in Ridgcrest with Davey, as Emma Lou Davis insisted on being called, on her birthday. We went to the local K-Mart lunch counter, her favorite restaurant, in celebration. Many younger readers may only know lunch counters from movies about the civil rights movement, but they were common at stores even outside of the deep south, including in California. The K-Mart versions were known for their daily ‘Blue-Plate

Special.’ On that particular day, this was Salisbury steak with mashed potatoes and brown gravy. Davey and I both ordered it, and it was as bad as it sounds.

I never knew why K-Mart called their daily specials ‘Blue Plates.’ The plates certainly weren’t blue. But what came out of Davey’s mouth shortly after we ordered very definitely was. Forgetting that K-Mart didn’t serve alcohol, she cussed out the waitress because she couldn’t get a beer. Then she cussed out the DMV because they had recently made her take a driving test to renew her license, which she had failed. And then she cussed out her (unnamed) lover, who that year had given her syphilis. This was in 1980. It was her seventy-fifth birthday, and we were there to talk about early sites in the China Lake Basin.

If Davey was predictable, she was predictable in the sense that she always did the unexpected. Sometimes her unpredictability was outrageous, amusing, and unforgettable, like her K-Mart birthday lunch. “The only way to treat convention is to be calmly outrageous,” as she prefaced her autobiography. But sometimes her unpredictability had a deeper, if not profound significance. This was especially true with respect to her research, where in a number of ways she made visionary contributions to California archaeology. One of these, widely overlooked, was feminist archaeology. She practiced an archaeology that did not simply highlight the place of women during Paleoindian times (the “add women and stir” approach), when the rest of the profession characterized that period entirely in terms of big-game (i.e., male) hunting—though, in the 1970s, even this was a radical break from mainstream thought. It instead was an archaeology developed from and fully reflecting a woman’s perspective (Hays-Gilpin and Whitley 1998:349). More than an archaeology of women’s roles in the past, it was the past reconstructed on the basis of a woman’s values, sensibilities, and intuitions. And this was entirely new, different, and unexpected.

As Davey wrote in the preface to her 1978 monograph, *The Ancient Californians: Rancholabrean Hunters of the Mojave Lakes Country*:

This is a very female book. Hopefully, it contributes a different voice, different attitudes and values from male traditions of archaeological writing in which, somehow, the actors become lost in the gimmicks and stage props. The carefulness is the same. There may be more devotion to detail (women have always been good at remembering where things should be