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Virginia's Journey

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Virginia's Journey
by Lynn Niedermeier

If Bowling Green's *Park City Daily News* had hired her in 1944, Virginia Wood Davis might have taken up a long and respectable career in hometown journalism. Heeding the advice of a namesake, her high school English teacher Virginia Stone Proffitt, the 25-year-old native of Smiths Grove had directed her studies at Western Kentucky State Teachers College (now WKU) toward employment as a newspaperwoman.¹ Her credits already included an editorial post at Smiths Grove High's *Campus Chatter*, reporting for Western's *College Heights Herald*, contributions to the *Park City Progress* in Horse Cave, and a four-month stint with *The Gleaner* in Henderson, Kentucky. Being female, Davis was still something of a curiosity in the profession, but was ready to spend more time paying her dues in its junior ranks, especially after learning from her sojourn in Henderson that "a college graduate did not a reporter make." She was also determined to support both herself and the woman she termed "my companion"²—yet another Virginia, nicknamed "Jennie" and better known to outsiders as her possessive, domineering, increasingly deaf, widowed mother.³

Instead, the *Daily News* judged Davis overqualified for the \$18-per-week opening on its advertising desk,⁴ so she turned to office work and bookkeeping. A year later, resolving to give journalism another try, she looked southward for the first available job. Presenting herself in Greer, South Carolina, she quickly discovered that her new employer's assurances of suitable postwar housing had been a mirage. Davis and her mother landed in a hotel, where she divided her time between reporting for the *Greer Citizen* and washing dishes in the restaurant downstairs to earn enough for their board.⁵

Her six months in Greer were part of a journey that, over the next four decades, took Virginia Wood Davis to reporting and editorial jobs at fourteen newspapers in seven Southern states. Her longest stretch with a single newspaper was nine years, the shortest three months; she stayed with half of them for less than a year. To some, her existence seemed rootless and lonely,⁶ especially after the death of her mother in 1950, but on the eve of her retirement in 1985 Davis had no regrets. "My life," she told *The McCreary County Record*, the southeastern Kentucky weekly where she had served as managing editor since 1977, "has been a pleasure. I wouldn't trade places with anyone."⁷

Davis's satisfaction with her life's journey is evident in the memoir she wrote during the years between a diagnosis of colon cancer in 1987 and her death in 1990. Composed in the small-town journalistic style she favored, the narrative is meandering, laden with "every single

¹ "My life has been an adventure," *McCreary County Record*, 4 June 1985; see also Davis's diary, 9 February 1935 (Virginia Wood Davis Collection, Special Collections Library, Western Kentucky University) regarding a conversation between her teacher and her mother in which "Miss Va." praised Davis's ability and thought she should study journalism at Columbia University.

² Virginia Wood Davis, *Out of Virginia's Woods* (1989), 128, 129.

³ *Lexington Herald-Leader*, 4 June 1990 [reprinted with "Virginia's story sweeps the nation," *McCreary County Record*, 5 June 1990].

⁴ "My life has been an adventure," *McCreary County Record*, 4 June 1985.

⁵ *Out of Virginia's Woods*, 129, 131.

⁶ "The Mystery of Virginia Wood Davis," *Tampa Bay Life*, December 1990.

⁷ "My life has been an adventure," *McCreary County Record*, 4 June 1985.

available fact,” and in need of a sympathetic editor.⁸ But *Out of Virginia’s Woods*—its title a play on Walt Whitman’s Civil War poem (“As toilsome I wander’d Virginia’s woods”)⁹ about a soldier’s grave and its haunting inscription—was, of necessity, a meditation on many other life journeys. In particular, Davis recognized her debt to those forebears who helped to shape her quirky brand of independence even as they finally drew her back to her native state.

The migratory trails leading out of Virginia’s woods early in the nineteenth century had brought Davis’s ancestors to homesteads near the junction of Barren, Warren and Edmonson counties in Kentucky. In 1811, Revolutionary War veteran William J. “Buck” Wood arrived with his family in the Goodnight community north of Glasgow, while Hise and Arabella Davis would later settle close by, in the Coral Hill area. Born near Mammoth Cave, Meredith Howard Cox moved with his wife Sarah to Smiths Grove following its incorporation in 1871. Meredith and Sarah’s son Eugene married Buck Wood’s granddaughter Molly, but Molly died soon after giving birth to a daughter in 1880. The child, who would become Virginia Wood Davis’s mother, was sent to live with Meredith and Sarah Cox in Smiths Grove.¹⁰

Despite the best efforts of her grandparents (which included consigning her to the nuns at Bardstown’s Nazareth Academy for a year), Jennie Cox never forgot her first crush, Hise and Arabella Davis’s son, Elmore Wood Davis.¹¹ The two distant cousins did not marry, however, until Elmore, at 44, found himself a widower with three children and Jennie, at 39, began to wish for a child of her own.¹² They took up residence in Smiths Grove, in a house on the northwest corner of 5th and Main Streets that Elmore, the local freight and passenger agent for the Louisville & Nashville Railroad, had purchased in 1909.¹³ About a year after their marriage, on December 7, 1919, their only child, Virginia, was born.¹⁴

Elmore’s death on April 23, 1925 was a watershed in the life of his five-year-old daughter. Before then, Davis’s travels had been only those of small-town childhood, perched on the handlebars of her father’s bicycle for his short commute to the L&N depot, stealing away to the home of Ella Rodes, her beloved “Negro cook and mammy,” or rattling around Adairland, the farm west of Buck Wood’s old place operated by Maggie Wood Baird, the revered half-sister of her grandmother Molly Wood Cox. Afterward, the journeys became permanent. Davis’s youngest half-brother had already been sent to the care of grandparents, and Elmore’s two older children collected the proceeds of his life insurance and fled from their widowed stepmother. Ella, too, exited the suddenly downsized household, her presence no longer necessary or affordable.¹⁵

“I have to be man and woman both,” was Jennie Cox Davis’s grim understanding of the financial purgatory confronting both her and little Virginia. Other men in Jennie’s life, most notably her grandfather Meredith Cox and an uncle who died seven months after Elmore, had favored her with small bequests, but their largesse could not atone for a husband who had unpardonably betrayed his ill-educated and unprepared wife by expiring in a Louisville infirmary. From then on, wrote Davis, her mother’s sole objective was to save her child from the

⁸ “The Mystery of Virginia Wood Davis”; “Journalist Battles Ills With Grace,” *Pasco (Fla.) News*, n.d.

⁹ The poem appears as a foreword to *What’s Your Name?*, Davis’s historical sketch of the Wood family, Virginia Wood Davis Collection.

¹⁰ *Out of Virginia’s Woods*, 3, 9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 11; *What’s Your Name?*, 9.

¹² *Out of Virginia’s Woods*, 16-17.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 17; Warren County, Ky. Deed Book 112, p. 125.

¹⁴ Davis does not seem to have known the exact date of her parents’ marriage: see *What’s Your Name?*, 10.

¹⁵ “Thin Blood,” Virginia Wood Davis Collection; *Out of Virginia’s Woods*, 17, 71ff., 114, 116.

curse of dependency, from spending her life bobbing like a cork upon waters churned by the selfish whims of men. Already accustomed to the “discipline of making ends meet up to the last,” Jennie now sacrificed her needs to a higher purpose, that of giving her daughter the means to make her own way in the world.¹⁶

That she succeeded was evident from Davis’s own self-willed voyage: to Owensboro in 1942, where she answered the call of a steady wage and spent a few months assembling television tubes before returning to college;¹⁷ through WKU, where a classmate remembered her as dateless and uninterested in anything but her grades;¹⁸ to Henderson, where she chafed at the Social Security and “Victory tax” deductions from her \$25 weekly check; to the hotel in Greer, South Carolina;¹⁹ and beyond, to Virginia, Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, Florida, back to South Carolina, back to Florida, and finally back to Kentucky. When Davis retired from her \$325-per-week post at *The McCreary County Record*, there were few weeks unaccounted for in her typewritten list of every paycheck she had ever received.²⁰

But her mother, perhaps, did not cast as grim a shadow over Davis as some of her colleagues later maintained. By all accounts, the small-town girl with the slow Kentucky walk and slower Kentucky drawl was well suited to investigative reporting. Just as her mother had taken a meager inheritance and invested it with local farmers who could not qualify for bank loans, Davis cast her lot with the underdog, writing highly regarded stories about Indians in South Carolina, migrant workers in Florida, victims of racial violence in Alabama, and rural folk in eastern Kentucky. Her harmless-seeming demeanor and unprepossessing appearance—“She was just as plain as an old soup bowl,” said a friend²¹—loosened the tongues of her subjects, while her aggressive honesty and fondness for profanity signaled an unwillingness to defer to male competitors. Though she affably described herself as a “hillbilly to hillbillies,” Davis forthrightly claimed pioneer status in journalism and credited the independence of her Virginia and Kentucky ancestors with nurturing her “free spirit to grow in a different direction.”²²

The extent to which Davis used her freedom both to serve and defy stereotypes became apparent only after her death. Friends in McCreary County and in Tampa, where she had spent the last sixteen months of her life, cast each other rueful glances upon learning that they had been named in Davis’s will.²³ What, they asked, could she have left? Throughout her life, Davis had underscored the modesty of her reporter’s salary by practicing a punishing frugality. Besides dressing “like a bag lady,”²⁴ she ate peanut butter sandwiches, scavenged unharvested vegetables from farmers’ fields, and reused everything from scrap paper and plastic wrap to half-spoiled fruit and oil from the bottom of food cans. She replaced the missing front bumper of her old Volkswagen with a piece of plywood. Her personal hygiene suffered from an unwillingness to waste either bathwater or toilet tissue. “We thought,” said her executor simply, “that Virginia was poor.”²⁵

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 16, 18.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹⁸ “Reporter who scrimped leaves WKU \$300,000,” (Louisville) *Courier-Journal*, 31 May 1990.

¹⁹ *Out of Virginia’s Woods*, 126, 130.

²⁰ Salary Record, Virginia Wood Davis Collection.

²¹ “The Mystery of Virginia Wood Davis.”

²² *Out of Virginia’s Woods*, 193.

²³ “Pauper or Princess?” *McCreary County Record*, 5 June 1990.

²⁴ “Reporter who scrimped leaves WKU \$300,000.”

²⁵ *Lexington Herald-Leader*, 4 June 1990; “Frugal ex-reporter had everyone fooled,” (Lakeland, Fla.) *Ledger*, 28 May 1990; “Pauper or Princess?”

She was not. Like her mother, Davis had inherited, saved and invested. Excluding the sizeable sums she was rumored to have given away just prior to her death, her estate consisted of cash, certificates of deposit and stock valued at \$336,782; her house and personal effects brought the total to just under \$400,000.²⁶ Davis directed that 80% of it be given to the journalism department of her *alma mater*, WKU.

Her astonished friends, of course, were left to wonder how Davis had amassed such a fortune and why she spent none of it on herself. Only amateur psychology—the scars of the Depression, fear of indigence, and the influence of her unhappy mother being the most popular theories—can address the latter question. As to the former, the record is murky enough to have made it a topic worthy of Davis’s own investigative talent, but her personal papers hinted at an answer. Despite working for much of her life in the South, Davis apparently did not pursue a stake in the burgeoning postwar economy of the Sun Belt. Instead, her investments stayed closer to home, in farmland near Smiths Grove and especially in lots around Glasgow which, when sold for development, gave her the profits that she took to the bank for compound interest. In her memoir, Virginia Wood Davis insisted that she had no regrets about leaving Kentucky;²⁷ nevertheless, both her life’s journey and its central riddle suggest that Kentucky—where her ashes are now interred in a family cemetery in Goodnight—never left her.

²⁶ “The Mystery of Virginia Wood Davis.”

²⁷ *Out of Virginia’s Woods*, 111.