Interview with James Davis

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Interview # 1: February 22, 2012

Interviewer: Ted Hild

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Hild: This morning is Wednesday, February 22nd. I'm here with James Davis, a professor of history at Illinois College in Jacksonville. The subject will be his life and career and the times of James Davis. (laughter) Good morning, Jim.

Davis: Good morning.

Hild: You're not a native Illinoisan?

Davis: No.

Hild: Where are you from?

Davis: I was born in Detroit, Michigan in 1940. Both of my parents, however, are from Illinois. My mother was born in southern Shelby County in Cold Spring Township, about five miles north of Herrick. She was born in January of 1897, and my father was born in Chicago in 1901.

Hild: So, how did they wind up in Detroit?

Davis: Well, my father was one of five or six children, in Chicago. His father was a physician, who was born in Canada, who, by the early 1900s, concluded that Chicago was just too big of a city to raise a family in. It was too big, perhaps too corrupt or alluring or something. So, he decided he wanted to move the

family to Michigan. They did move to the little town of Clinton, Michigan in Lenawee County in 1909, when my father was about eight years old.

Then, later on, they moved to Detroit, around 1918. My father ended up going to a couple of universities, but eventually, the University of Michigan, where he met my mother.

My mother told me that she did not want to spend the rest of her life in southern Shelby County. She had ambitions, so to speak. She saw her sisters and her friends getting married at an early age and settling down. This is something she did not want to do. She had two cousins, who were in med school at the University of Michigan, in the early twenties. So, she took a course in stenography and specialized in medical stenography. They helped her get a job at the brand new university hospital in Ann Arbor, as a medical secretary. She loved that job. It was there that she met my father. My father was dating her roommate. One day, the roommate could not make a date, so my father asked my mother out. Things developed from there, and they got married in July of 1930.

Hild: He was in medical school?

Davis: No, my father had just completed engineering school.

Hild: Ah, I see.

Davis: He was an engineer.

Hild: Do you have siblings?

Davis: I have one. Franklin, who is five years older than I am.

Hild: So, you were born in Detroit, a city to which your father fled, just before it became the giant city it became, with the automobile industry.

Davis: Yes, he was an engineer, and he worked for Detroit Edison, well into the depression. Finally, in 1932 or ’33, the worsening depression caused Detroit Edison to lay off more people, and he was laid off.

So, he went back to school, at the University of Michigan, took some education courses, received a master’s there and decided he wanted to teach. So, in 1936, he actually got a couple of job offers, one, to teach in Detroit, at Denby High School and the other, to teach in Dearborn, at Fordson High School. He took the job at Fordson, taught school during the school year, then, generally, about every other year, took a job in industry.

During the war, he worked in war industries, during the summer, and then, after that, he worked for automobile industries and other industries for a month or two, every other summer.

Hild: So, you were born in Detroit. Was this a densely, urban neighborhood that you came to?

Davis: Well, I don't know the exact neighborhood in which I was born. It was Mt. Carmel Hospital, but my parents, by that time, were living in East Dearborn, on Miller Road. It was an apartment. They were eager to try to get out of that situation and move to the emerging suburbs, a suburb in West Dearborn.

West Dearborn had neighborhoods that were started in the twenties, but then, the Great Depression put a halt to most building, and they were eager to get out there. So, they saved their money and managed to scrape up $500 for a down payment, on a house in West Dearborn, on Waverly. They moved into that house on the weekend of Pearl Harbor, when I was a little over a year old.

Hild: You were living there when you started your education?

Davis: Yes, I went to Lindbergh Elementary School, a half a block from where we lived, at 650 North Waverly.

Hild: Ok, straight through, like K through six there or eight?

Davis: Yes, K through six at Lindbergh, and then, I went to the brand new Clara Bryant Junior High, across Telegraph Road, that was built in the winter of 1950, '51, as I recall it. I think I started there in '51 or '52, in junior high. Then, I went to the old Dearborn High for two years, and my last year I went to the brand new Dearborn High, on Outer Drive Road and graduated from Dearborn High, there, in June of '58.

Hild: June of '58, then, directly to college?

Davis: Yes.

Hild: Which college did you attend and why that one?

Davis: Well, I chose Wayne State University in Detroit, mostly because I could live at home and go there. I didn't have much money. My parents were, I later learned, really strapped at this time. They could not loan me or given me any assistance. So, I went to Wayne State and graduated from it in 1962, with a major in history and a minor in geography and English and with a teacher's certificate. I wanted to try teaching, so I started teaching then.

Hild: That kind of teaching, being substantially different from being a college professor?

Davis: Yes, yes. In many ways, I entered the golden age of education, in 1962. It was wonderful. The support was there for young teachers, like me. I started teaching at Lowrey Junior High and Lowrey Senior High. I taught junior high

classes and senior high classes at the same time. It was a real experience. It was wonderful. It was a time when teachers were looked up to. They were respected.

Many of my students were either immigrants, themselves, or, in many cases, first generation American students. Their parents greatly valued education. They wanted their kids to get educated, just with a spirit of…the desire for education was strong. Many of the kids were from places like Italy. There were a number from Poland. There were a lot of Armenian students and a few students in every class, from the Middle East, from Lebanon and Jordan and places like that.

Then, in the high school, there was a fairly hefty contingent of people from Appalachia. Their parents had come up, during the war, to work in the war industries, in and around Detroit. Those kids were quite different from the other kids, in terms of their background. But it was a wonderful time. It was a wonderful school. I had some great colleagues. Dearborn, at that time, had great resources behind education. I realize, now, how fortunate I was, in terms of the equipment we needed. Everything was there, to teach well, and the support from parents was just incredibly great.

In a way, I could do no wrong, in the eyes of many of the parents, there. That was incredible, because I was a new teacher. I did do wrong (laughter), and I did make mistakes. But, in their eyes, I was wonderful. So, they let me know that they supported me. The school situation, then, was such that, discipline was almost…problems with discipline were almost nonexistent.

The things that might get a student in trouble included chewing gum in class, being caught in the halls, without a hall pass, speaking when others were speaking, and that was about it. In the years that I taught at Lowrey, evidently, there was, literally, just one fist fight, between two students. Wouldn't you know it, I happened to come across it, about my fourth year there, third or fourth year there. It was a fight between two guys. I stepped in, dragged the guy, who was getting beaten up, out of the fight. He protested. He didn't want to go out. But, I knew he did. I broke up the fight and took the kids to the principal's office. The principal was rough on these guys, because they were fighting in school. That was something unheard of.

The situation at Lowrey Junior High and Senior High was really a remarkable situation. I now realize…I look around at what goes on in schools now and the troubles that schools have with drugs and violence and the like, and I realize that that was a situation that was wonderful.

Hild: But, nevertheless, you went back to graduate school?

Davis: Yes, yes.

Hild: Was that your plan all along?

Davis: No, I did want to go on to grad school, to obtain a master's, which I did, at Wayne State, in history. I thought, well, this will help me in my teaching, and I think it did. But, around 1965, I decided that, maybe, a PhD would be good, and maybe I wanted to teach at the college level. One thing I always wanted to do—one thing I was always interested in—was writing. I thought, well, if I want to write, what kind of a chance would I have to write, if I continued teaching high school? I concluded, probably not much.

So, I started, again, at the University of Michigan, part-time in '66 and then, in 1968 took a two and a half year leave of absence from the Dearborn Public Schools. My wife and I were married in December of '66. So, we went up to Ann Arbor, and I pursued my degree there and got it in 1971. Before I got it, I went back to teach one more semester in Dearborn.

Then, Illinois College contacted me in…would have been around March of 1971 and asked if I were interested in teaching there. I hadn't heard of the place. I made some inquiries. So, we came down here, in April of '71, and interviewed at Illinois College. After the first day, my wife and I kind of looked at each other and said, this is a wonderful place, and we decided this would be good.

Hild: Great. You said, when you started teaching school, it was the golden age of education, but, when you returned to graduate school, college campus life was a little different, in the late sixties, than it was in the late fifties and early sixties. So, how did you…you were married; you were working on a doctorate, so, you probably didn't have a lot of time to, I don't know, go hang out and protest the war or things.

Davis: No, I did not. You are right, it was a different world by '68. The campuses, of course, were in turmoil. There were racial problems, all across the nation. Detroit suffered a terrible riot in the summer of '67. There were disturbances in Ann Arbor, over the war, over racial issues. So, you're absolutely right; it was a different world, from the world I had entered as a new teacher. I realized that, but, you're also right, I was up to my ears in work.

I wanted to try to get through the program as quickly as I could. I told my advisor that, Shaw Livermore. I said to him, right off the bat, I want to get through this and get out and get teaching and writing. He was very supportive of me. I, in a sense, kept my nose to the grindstone. I did not attend even one football game; I'm sorry to say. (laughter) We did attend some plays and some musicals and stuff like that, on campus.

But, generally speaking…We ended up living up at a student housing, called Northwood 4, which is on the north campus. Every day, I would catch the bus at Northwood 4, a university bus, would take me down to the central

campus. I would step off the bus, around five minutes to eight, and I'd be in my carrel, in the graduate library, about two minutes after eight. I would come home for dinner, usually around 5:30 and usually head back to my carrel by 7:30 and not leave the library, until it closed, at either 11:00 or midnight. That went on day after day after day.

But it paid off. I did finish early, and things went well. I had very good people on my prelim committee and on my dissertation committee. Both committees were excellent. I had a cognate in geography at the University of Michigan. I'm so glad I did that. Geography was, then, under going great changes. I was involved in learning about those changes. At Illinois College in Jacksonville, I taught geography, for the length of my career.

But, you're right. The world was different in '68 from what it was five or six years earlier. It was a time of turmoil, a time of confusion, of bitterness. I saw riots on the campus. I saw…On one occasion. I came out the graduate library, about eleven o'clock at night, and there was a big disturbance, right in front of the library. The police were on one side of the steps, more or less, and the rioters were on the other side. The rioters were throwing things at the police. I stood there, not knowing…what should I do? (laughter) There was tear gas in the air, and there was pepper fog or pepper spray. There was clouds of…those were wafting around. I stood there, and I took it all in and said, well, this is remarkable, that it's a sign of the times and—

Hild: Must have been Kent State.

Davis: Well, it was, yes. Kent State, of course, occurred in May of 1970. I remember the reaction, on the campus in Ann Arbor, to Kent State. It was very severe, and people were exceedingly angry.

Hild: Yeah, everywhere.

Davis: Yes.

Hild: Everywhere. I imagine, at times, it took some effort and concentration to stay focused on—

Davis: Yes.

Hild: …your work.

Davis: One thing I did do there, I took it upon myself, every morning, to walk to all of the tables that various groups had set up, in front in the library, every day. They had their literature on the tables, protesting this or calling attention to that. It was a huge range of activities. There were communists, socialists; there were Young Americans for Freedom; there were tables, promoting this group or that group or this cause or that cause. So, I went around to every

table, every morning, when it wasn't raining, and just picked up their literature. I talked to people at the tables.

After a while, they got to know me. They would see me coming, and, literally, hand me the literature, as I approached their table. I took it all up into my carrel and put in a big box, which, then, became another box. When we left Ann Arbor, in August of 1971, to come down to Illinois College, I took all of this material in and donated it to the Bentley Library. So, they have, in the Bentley, a collection of this material that normally gets thrown out.

Hild: Ephemera

Davis: Ephemera, exactly. I'm glad I did that, and I had interesting chats with people, manning the tables. I later learned, at just about the time we moved, maybe in about June of '71…I later learned that some of these people, behind the tables, who got to know me and whom I enjoyed, concluded that I was collecting this literature, because I was working for the FBI or something else. (laughter) I was rather surprised by that, because I donated it all to the Bentley.

Hild: Well, the FBI probably did have somebody collecting it; I'm sure. (laughter)

Davis: I'm sure.

Hild: Were the people at the tables able to convince you of anything or persuade you one way or the other?

Davis: I think the thing that they persuaded me about was the fact there were all kinds of people, who had strongly held ideas, and many of these ideas conflicted with each other. I was surprised to learn that the left was so badly divided. I wasn't aware of this, until this time. But, these tables, that various leftist causes set up, were, let's say, hostile to other leftist causes.

The Trotskyites had no use for the hard core communists. I recall, the Left had trouble with the emerging feminist movement, as well, on campus. They saw this as kind of frivolous or unimportant, in their world view. Later on, that changed. I think the only thing I was convinced about was that there were a lot of people, pushing a lot of causes, with great enthusiasm.

Hild: But you stayed focused on history. What was your dissertation topic?

Davis: Well, it was an attempt to discover who went to the American frontier, what kind of people went to the American frontier, from the year 1800, through the year 1840. So, it was a demographic study, trying to determine, were these people largely male or female or old people or young, or were their households big, or were their households small? Then, I tried to determine why certain groups, certain demographic entities, did go to the frontier and others appear not to have gone to the frontier.

Hild: Did people keep moving, or did they leap frog?

Davis: People…there was a lot of movement for a lot of families. That is to say, there were people who, for example, would live in southern New England, and their first move might take them to northern Ohio, in the early 1800s. Then, for whatever reason, they would hear of opportunity, say, in Illinois. They would come out here, with their growing family, say, in 1820, and they would settle in one place or another.

I learned, too, that there was often, what I termed, an adjustment move, after the initial move. They would move into an area and realize, whoops, we moved a quarter of a mile away from better land or better water or better timber or whatever. So, there was often a final, small move, within the first few months or so of the initial settlement.

Hild: I would gather that your background in geography made you really well suited…better suited than ordinary historians for this work.

Davis: It did. Looking back on it, I realize that I did not, let's say, blend my findings in history, with my emerging understandings of geography. I realize that I could have done this more fully, and I could have done it in a better way. But, the geography that was emerging, at this time, around the world, in Europe and in America, was so new and so dynamic, it was breathtaking. I loved it. But, it was so—in some ways, theoretical—that I found it…I won't say, intimidating, but I found it very impressive. I think, one conversation I had with my advisor about this, resulted in an agreement that, maybe, the two would not blend all that well. I went that route, and within a matter of, I don't know, ten years, I suppose, I realized it was not the route I should have taken. (laughter) I should have blended the emerging, theoretical ideas, coming out of Sweden and Britain and Germany and elsewhere, with what I was doing.

Hild: What were those different approaches? All I know, like, Henry Glassy, who's a cultural geographer.

Davis: Yes, well, the great emphasis was on cultural and economic geography, at the time. Basically, the geographers of the sixties and the, so-called, revolution of the sixties, were trying to…well, were engaging in locational analysis. They were trying to answer the question, why are things located where they are, in terms of human geography, especially. Why are certain crops raised a few miles from a town, and other crops are raised farther out, and still, other crops are raised farther out from there?

Also, there was a great deal of work done on the morphology, the shapes of villages, and how hamlets grow into villages, and villages grow into towns and stuff like that. The diffusion of people, across space, was a big, big topic among many geographers, back then.

I had a wonderful, wonderful mentor at the University of Michigan, Gunnar Olson, who was a Swede, who introduced me to this new geography. It was so breathtaking that I was just awed by it, and I loved it. About six or eight years ago, I got back in touch with him. I found him on the Internet, in Sweden, and emailed him and told him how much his teaching impacted my life and my teaching of geography. Then, also my teaching of history and my doing of history; his ideas helped influence my thinking to a very great degree.

Hild: So, was he the creator of a school of geography or just…What's the lineage there?

Davis: Well, he was part of the, kind of, the new school of geography that actually had its roots, I think, in the Marc Bloch and the Braudel approach to understanding, where you take geography, and you take a climate, and you take humans, and you study these, kind of in to with everything else, and you study it from the ground up. You focus on the, kind of, the nobodies of history.

Hild: French structuralism?

Davis: Yes, exactly. Precisely.

Hild: You're a Braudelian, then?

Davis: Well, I respect that, and I thoroughly enjoy it. Gunnar Olson was, I think, a person who was a…well, he was very interested in special dynamics and how people arranged themselves, spatially, and he looked at this, largely, through the eyes of economics.

On the other hand, he was also interested in the…what we could call, the irrational, or the movements across space that don't appear to make sense. He was interested in why it is that some settlement patterns or some human activities, in one place or another, don't seem to adhere to the "laws," the economic laws that were operating or the social norms. So, he was interested in the exceptions, as well.

I don't think he was a determinist. I don't think he pushed economic influences to the point that we could call him a determinist. Later on, I learned that he, I think, rebelled against determinists and pulled back. I won't say, "turned against" the new school of geography, but I think he saw, perhaps, some of the shortcomings of it or the limitations of it. Also, I think he was put off by the stridency of it. There were people who argued—almost in Marxist terms—about how economics dictates things in human life, how we are, kind of, driven by economics, in ways that we don't understand, and we have to submit to the laws of history, the laws of economics. Gunnar Olson, in the end, I think, rejected that.

Hild: I understand that one of the issues or problems with the Braudel school is that it only seems best used in consideration of the long duré.

Davis: Yes.

Hild: So, as it applies to United States history, like, the duré is not very long.

Davis: It's not very long, at all, no. I think that's a good criticism of it, because you do need evidence, over time, and you need layers, so to speak, layers of human activity, in the same place to, in a sense, make it work. Though, one can argue that it could work, even in a place like Illinois, because we do have layers of human activity, different cultures. We have different technologies applied to Illinois, from before statehood to the present time. It's something that intrigues me, perhaps, because of my interest in geography.

I think I maybe one of those very rare people who, when I drive—as did about four days ago—from the Chicago area, down here, on Route 55, I'm just all eyes. I love the landscape. I look out on it, as I drive or as my wife drives, and I just can't get enough of it. It's, to me, infinitely interesting and varied. Many people find I-55 terribly boring. But, I think that, if you look at it through the eyes of geographer or a social historian or cultural historian, the landscape is infinitely interesting.

Hild: I've told people that the more you drive I-55, the more details you see.

Davis: Yes, exactly. And the changes too, that you see, places that are abandoned, farmsteads that are…well, the bones of the farms are there, but crumbling houses and crumbling barns. You see villages and hamlets that were once thriving, perhaps as recently as forty or fifty years ago, that are now not doing so well. You see the inevitable developments, near the exits of the I-55, with the trinity of gas stations, motels and restaurants there, with some Walmarts and some other things nearby, too.

Hild: Well, if you have Gunnar Olson and others, in the geographical side, on the historical side, it must all start with Fredrick Jackson Turner (laughter)?

Davis: Well it does, I suppose. Even before I learned of Fredrick Jackson Turner—I think I was maybe a teenager, I'm not sure—but, even before I learned of him, I loved poking around in the neighborhood in Dearborn. As a kid, I played along the Rouge River, with my friends. I dug tunnels in the ground and holes in the ground that we called forts. We discovered things. We discovered arrow heads and shards of pottery, along the Rouge River. So, my interest in early American history, I think, was stimulated by where I lived and what I was able to do as a youngster, playing out in the fields and along the Rouge River and so forth.

My parents instilled a love of history in me. My father took about nine years to get through college, I think. He loved learning, and he was a

pragmatist, at the same time. He would go to City College in Detroit, what later became Wayne State. He went, for about a year and a half, to Miami in Oxford, Ohio, and he ended up graduating, in 1929, from the University of Michigan. But he loved learning everything. On his way to becoming an engineer, he took Spanish, I think, had several years of it. He learned Greek. He learned Latin. Twice I saw his transcripts—I think I have them in my files somewhere—he had fifty-six hours in history. He had forty hours in political science and something like twenty-one or twenty-four hours in philosophy. He was a remarkable man.

Hild: Plus engineering.

Davis: Plus engineering, of course. I remember, as a kid, going with him to downtown Detroit. He would walk me by the Fisher Building or the Penobscot Building, and he would point up to…he would say, "You see the first set-back, up there." I look up, eighteen floors or something, and he would say, "On a windy day up there, when we working, poor Harry got knocked off the building, and we lost him." So, he worked on the skyscrapers of Detroit. Sometimes, he'd drop out of school for a year or two and become a laborer, and he worked in the sewers, building the deep storm sewers of Detroit and Ann Arbor. We'd be driving along, and he'd come up to an intersection, and he'd say "Son, over on this side, the sewer is eighty feet underground, and, when we were working, we hit quicksand, and we had to get out of there in thirty seconds."

I was very much impressed by the fact that he did these things. Yet, at the same time, he could take me up to an entrance—oh, perhaps the Penobscot Building or the Fisher Building, I don't recall which ones, now, maybe the Whitney Building perhaps—and he would read to me the Greek inscription, above the door, the Latin inscription, above the door. I thought, this is wonderful.

He had books all over the house. The books were on every topic under the sun, architecture and engineering and medicine and history and government and current affairs. As a kid, I grew up just imbibing these books, loving them, having great discussions with my father and my mother, to some extent. My mother did not graduate from high school, but she was, to a great extent, self-educated and read a lot. But, my father was the person who, in a sense, opened up worlds of learning to me.

About every other summer, we would take a significant trip somewhere. I had an uncle, who lived in New York and Manhattan, and we spent, I think, five weeks there, in the summer of '46. I came to love New York, as a result of all of that, and it was up on the East, 86th Street. I just loved the city, China Town, Central Park, Brooklyn, Coney Island and the Empire State Building and museums. But I loved the streets, near Yorkville, and I loved that neighborhood. Other times, we would go for, upwards of six

or seven weeks, on trips to the West Coast. In 1951, we went on a trip to the West Coast. I think it lasted about seven weeks, and we'd go to—

Hild: Did you drive?

Davis: Yes, we drove. We always drove. My father drove. My mother did not drive. He did all the driving. We looked for inexpensive motels and stayed in cabins, often cooked our own meals, on the cooker that we took with us.

Hild: Those are great adventures.

Davis: Really a great, great time, a great adventure. No air conditioning, of course. When we got into the deep south, in the summer of '50, I can recall, it must have been ninety-five or a hundred, and the humidity was probably 95%. So, my introduction to the south, in '48 and again in '50, was memorable.

We happened to roll into Washington, D.C. on June 26th, 1950, at the tail end of a long trip in the south. That was a day after the Korean War broke out. We saw the hubbub in Washington, people scurrying about, military people. Obviously, it was a crisis situation, and I remember that. But I remember the great talks I had with my father, some arguments. We were different, politically.

Hild: So, he led to you to value education and travel. Do you still travel?

Davis: Oh, every chance I get, yes, every chance. I love to travel. If someone paid the way, I would travel to the middle of Antarctica and spend six months down there. I'd go to Siberia or anywhere. I just love to travel, by car or by ship or plane or whatever.

One of my joys at Illinois College has been the ability to take students to all kinds of places, the Soviet Union in the last years of its existence, a couple of trips there; helped to take students to Turkey or Israel. And then I took a lot of trips with students, down to Civil War battlefields, Shiloh and Vicksburg and Donaldson, here in the west, and then, in the east, to places like Gettysburg and Antietam. I also traveled with students to Washington, D.C. a couple of times to do research in the Library of Congress with them and helped them with their projects in the Library of Congress and the National Archives. We took a van on all these trips, in the U.S., and I loved learning about students in the van. You gain different perspectives when you're in a van, as opposed to a classroom.

Hild: You referred to Fort Donaldson as the west, so I'm thinking that identifies you as a frontier historian, because only a frontier historian would think of Illinois and Mississippi as the west. (laughter)

Davis: True enough.

Hild: What were your influences in graduate school? You had geography, but what led you to frontier history?

Davis: Well, I did a master's at Wayne State, and my essay was on the settlement of Dearborn, the early settlement of Dearborn, from the 1830s to about 1870. I had this kind of life-long interest in the frontier. When I got to the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, I learned that Shaw Livermore had done work on the frontier, the frontier of Wisconsin. He'd been part of a team that did some very good work, very exciting work on Trempealeau County in Wisconsin.

As I learned from him, about this work and learned from other graduate students, about the work that Shaw Livermore had done, I thought, this is good. I took a course from him. I enjoyed it. He was good. Then, I realized, as I was taking the class, I wanted to work with him on something on the frontier.

Hild: As I recall, that was…those Trempealeau County stories were famous in the field. They were ground-breaking.

Davis: Yes, they were, they were. Certainly they were, for the day, and they were attempts to quantify what was going on in Trempealeau County.

Hild: In regard to the Turner Thesis, too, weren't they?

Davis: Exactly, exactly, yes. How shall I put it? I Examined the Turner thesis. I enjoyed it. I read other works by Turner, and I think, in many ways, the thesis—even though it's been revised and altered and, in some ways, abandoned. It has been attacked, especially since the 1930s. I think there's basic merit in the thesis, especially as it has been revised by, oh, people like David Potter and people like George Pearson and others who have…Stanley Elkins, Eric McKitrick, all put a different spin on what the frontier did to or did for America. So, I think, without doubt, the frontier was one of the four or five most important influences in American life and still is.

Hild: Few would disagree with that, as you point out, and plenty room for discussion.

Davis: Yes.

Hild: After graduate school, you said that Illinois College contacted you? How did they know about you, a brand new PhD?

Davis: Well, at the time, I wasn't aware of how they contacted me. I did put my name into, oh, the job search thing at the University of Michigan. Every graduate student submitted his name and his or her credentials there, and I did that.

But what I did not know, was that the former dean at Illinois College, Ernest Hildner, who had stepped down from being dean and was now the

chair of the history at political science department, was a graduate of the University of Michigan. He taught history, and he taught geography. He wanted someone from the University of Michigan and, preferably, someone who could teach history and geography. It turned out, so I later learned—hope I'm getting this right—it turned out, later on, that he contacted the then chair of the department at the University of Michigan—Sidney Fine I believe it was—and basically, introduced himself, and said he was going to be retiring in a year or two, and did they have someone who could teach American history and geography. Well, I was the only one. (laughter) So, by default, they sent him my records and so forth. One Friday afternoon, I think it was toward the end of March, my wife and I were in our apartment, up at Northwood 4, in the north campus—

Hild: March of '71?

Davis: Seventy-one, yes. The phone rang, and the person on the phone was Mrs. Gillham, who was the president's administrative assistant, back then. She basically said, would I be interested in looking into the idea of teaching at Illinois College? I said, well, yes, but could you tell me what is it and where is it and the like? (laughter) She did, and I said, "Well, that sounds interesting." We spoke for perhaps three or four minutes, and then, she said, "Would you mind speaking to the president of the college?" I said, No." This was a bit of a surprise. She said, "He will call you in just a few minutes."

Surely enough, five or ten minutes later, Vernon Caine called me. He was the president of the college, and we had a very good talk. I think it lasted fifteen or twenty minutes. It was, from the beginning, a good talk. We just were kind of in tune with each other, on each other's wave lengths, so to speak.

At the end of the conversation, I said to myself, this place and these people seem to be the kind of place we're looking for. So, anyway, they invited us to come down, which we did, in April. And wouldn't you know it, all the flowers were blooming in Jacksonville. It was beautiful. We were leaving the bleak Michigan winter behind and coming down to an early spring, in April.

Down here, I met the students. I met people who became my colleagues. We got to see the town, and, at the end of the first day, we, Joanie and I, kind of looked at each other and said, well if they want to hire me, this is the place we should be. We liked it very much, and never regretted that decision.

Hild: Sounds like the phone call with the president turned out to be your job interview.

Davis: It was, in effect, yes. I did see him, as part of the interview process, in April. It was, then, kind of a pro-forma interview. We talked, mostly about, as I recall it, the history of the college and some people associated with the college, who were still there, Ernie Hildner and some other long-time faculty members. He wanted me to know about these people, and I'm glad he alerted me to them. But, I did interview with the faculty and students and others. It went well.

They extended a job offer, and I'm happy that I took it. Vernon Caine was good. He was exactly what Illinois College needed, at that time. I got to know him much, much better, later, in discussion groups and over many, many meals together. I learned that he was a man who helped save Illinois College in the 1950s.

Then, there were other wonderful people there to Iver Yeager, Charles Frank, Ernie Hildner, of course, Malcolm Stewart and many other people who had been there for, oh, twenty, thirty, forty years, who were excellent people, in many ways.

Hild: You have clear memories of showing up in Jacksonville for the first time. So, they made you the offer, right there, in April?

Davis: Yes, I think it was within a matter of just a couple of days, after we interviewed, perhaps, within a day, if I'm not mistaken.

Hild: They wanted you to start that fall?

Davis: Yes.

Hild: So, you pack up everything and…

Davis: We did.

Hild: How'd you move to Jacksonville?

Davis: Well, it was relatively easy because, at the point in our lives, we had relatively little to move. We had books; we had some furniture, and my brother helped me move. My brother and I drove down in a U-Haul truck from Detroit, from Ann Arbor, I should say, and arrived in town…an uneventful trip, all in all. My wife…by this time we had the beginnings of…well, we had our family. Our daughters were born in May of 1970. So, they were only sixteen months or so, when we moved. So, she came down, of course, and my mother and father helped with the move too, with the kids.

We arrived. We had bought a house, an old wooden frame house, on 748 West Douglas, and that was our first house. We moved in there on, I believe, September 1st, 1971. It was a hot, humid summer that summer, which we quickly learned, but it was a good move. It was an easy move, and I fit right into Illinois College.

Hild: Well, if you arrived on September 1st, you probably would have been teaching a class a week later, then?

Davis: Yes, I think school began somewhat after Labor Day, if I'm not mistaken.

Hild: Did you have to spend the summer, organizing your lecture notes?

Davis: I did that. I did some early photo copying of articles that I wanted to have with me. Yes, I tried to get this under control.

Well, I still had the dissertation to wrap up. I still had approximately, oh, maybe the equivalent of one week's work to do on it. I had hoped to defend it in June, but I was working with the early computer and computer programs at Michigan, and it took longer to master those things than I had anticipated. All the data wasn't in place, until early 1971, and then, I had to write.

I was, essentially, finished with it by June, but I still had about a week's work. So, I think I devoted two weekends and, maybe, parts of other days to finishing it. I defended it in December, in Ann Arbor, and, fortunately, the only corrections they wanted was…What were the corrections? I think there were, maybe, three words they wanted to change. They wanted one word dropped, an adjective or an adverb, and something else. I think there were five very minor changes, and I made those in ten minutes. That was the end of that, so to speak.

Hild: Even so, with the young family, with relocation, with finding a job and preparing to teach and then, finishing your dissertation, you must…I'm surprised you didn't lose your mind that year.

Davis: Well, it was a challenge. There was one stretch, the following spring, in 1972, in which I was up…I had eight o'clock classes in the morning, and there were three consecutive nights in which I was up well after three o'clock in the morning, working on lectures, working on grading papers or doing something. These three nights were back-to-back. I would go to bed at three thirty or four, get up around quarter to seven, go off and teach my classes, come back, do more work during the day in my office or at home, stay up until well after three the next night. That went on for three nights solid.

There were other times, when I would be up, if not all night, certainly up until three or four, working on lectures, doing readings, grading papers and stuff like that. It was a real challenge. Fortunately, I was comparatively young. I was healthy. My wonderful wife was able to manage the family well, the kids. She did most of the raising, at that point. But, within two years or so, much of what I was doing was becoming…I won't say routine, but was becoming manageable, by that time. So, I was beginning to feel good about that by, let's say, the end of '73.

Hild: The seventies is when it began…it was tougher and tougher to find teaching jobs anyplace. Boy, just being in the right place at the right time, with the right credentials and tenure track and a place you liked, on top of it.

Davis: I was exceedingly fortunate. I realized, then, I was. But I came to realize how fortunate I was, over a number of years, when I learned of some exceedingly wonderful colleagues of mine in graduate school at the University of Michigan, who, in every way were at least as good as I was and, in some ways, far better than I was, who never obtained teaching jobs.

These were great people at the University, and just then, had conditions been better, they would have been at first rate places. I learned, later on, some excellent historians, who had careers in other fields, but, in a couple of instances, these fields had little to do with history, per say. I've learned, fairly recently—in the last five or eight years or so—of a couple of these people, who, I think, at the time, in Ann Arbor, I would have said, oh these people would have…they would get the top jobs, right off the bat. They would be at leading universities or, if they wanted to be there, you know, in five or ten years. These people never had an opportunity to teach. But I hope that they've had good lives in their work that they had there. They are good people, and, in a better situation, they would have been superb.

Hild: So, then, we saw the rise of the public historians.

Davis: Yes.

Hild: I imagine, with your career with local history, you would have come in contact with a lot of…public history, as well as non-professional history. I don't want to say, amateur, nonetheless, but…

Davis: Yes, I came into contact with public historians very quickly. I think I came over to the Illinois State Historical Library about mid-September, about two weeks after I started teaching. I wanted to get to know this place and got to know people in the Illinois State Archives. Those ties that I developed over here were…well, they're still wonderful ties. I remember meeting Cheryl Schnirring, for example, I believe, in mid-September, 1971, or maybe it was early September of '72. I'm not sure. She's still with the library, of course, with the agency. There were other good people, too. I met them; I got to know them. They have been so helpful in my career, over here.

Then, in the beginning in 1975, I began to bring students over here. Generally, on Tuesdays we would come over, leave campus by eight o'clock. We'd be at work by nine o'clock, in the Illinois State Historical Library and in the Illinois State Archives. Students would do work on their projects. I would oversee their work. There were usually three, sometimes four, of them. This was a class I taught for quite a number of years, about twenty years or more,

twenty-five years, and I loved it. They got to meet public historians and see public history in action.

Then, beginning in 1976, the year after I started bringing students over here, I started introducing them to intern opportunities, here at what was, then, the Illinois State Historical Library, at the Illinois State Archives and the Illinois State Museum and, later on, at the Illinois State Military Museum, as well. Over the years, from the seventies on, and early eighties on, these students have had wonderful internship opportunities in a wide range of public history institutions here.

Many have gone on to earn their master's degrees at Eastern Illinois University in public history, and elsewhere. Others have gone on to get their PhDs. Some have become librarians. There's one, now working…the last I heard, she was at the Library of Congress. She did work over here at, I think, at the library at the records and collections center of the Illinois State Museum. Then, she did library work at the University of Maryland, I think, and then, ended up at the Library of Congress.

The ties I had with public history, here, have helped me, but they've also helped my students in many, many ways. For that, I'm eternally grateful. This has been a wonderful relationship. Then, you mentioned amateur history or non-professional history. Yes, I've been involved in the local historical society in Morgan County, the Morgan County Historical Society, and other activities like that. I've enjoyed that. I've done some consulting work for banks, in Jacksonville, for the Elliott State Bank and for the Farmers State Bank. They commissioned me to research for them. For some of that work, I've involved students, and, for other projects, I've not. But, the opportunities to have these ties, beyond Illinois College and beyond the campus, have just been, for me and for my students, great.

Hild: I know someone, whose field was revolution in the early national period. He did a lot of work in upstate New York. He said he was just stupefied by the information that these local historical societies had. He would have some obscure topic, and he'd talk to the local historian, and they'd say, "Oh, well, we have a whole room devoted to that. (laughter)

Davis: That's often the case. One should be, let's say, prepared for these pleasant surprises, when they happen, because many, many people, who are perhaps not professional historians at all, perhaps they've never even gone to college, but they're interested people. They're interesting people; they're intelligent. Many of these people have done first rate work in local history in, not only, learning about the local place, but in collecting and preserving and organizing and saving a lot of documents and other materials from local history.

This is case in Jacksonville. There was one woman, Florence Hutchinson, I think was her name. She was a character. She was an interesting

person. But her great love was cemetery records and preservation and the genealogy associated with it. People now realize that she did an immense amount of work in identifying cemeteries and plotting who was in them, of writing them up. She served the public very well by her avocation, her love of history and of the local place, over there. I think she's now deceased. She was kind of a character; she was different. Some people tended to, oh, dismiss her because of that. I learned pretty early, yes, she had this kind of unusual…

Hild: Eccentricity

Davis: ….yes, exactly. But she was also doing first rate work. There are a number of people in the Morgan County Historical Society and elsewhere, who have done similar work. I think of Art Seaman and Jack Barwick, who amassed, so I understand, perhaps, twenty thousand images of Morgan County. They went around, photographing every picture in Morgan County, associated with the county, every plaque, every room in every significant building, every detail of architecture in significant buildings, and here are these, I understand, over twenty thousand slides that are still held by Jack Barwick's decedents. I hope someday they'll all come over here and be preserved in the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.

Hild: There's much out there. You know, in the seventies, there seemed to be a revival in the study of local and state history.

Davis: Yes.

Hild: I know that, like the first histories ever written in the United States, like even in the seventeenth century, were local histories.

Davis: Yes.

Hild: And then, events intervened and academic interest went in different directions. But, it looked like, in the seventies, we were going to go back to a big interest in local history. Possibly because of just market forces, academic market forces. (coughing) It didn't quite turn out that way, though. Do you agree?

Davis: Well, I think you're right. I think there was the surge in local history interest in the 1970s, and, if I'm not mistaken, that's when the—I'm going to botch the name, but the Association of State and Local History—was founded, around 1971, as I recall it. I think it's now based at Nashville; isn't it? Yes.

There were a lot of people who—professional historians and others—who did a lot of micro studies of small areas, small towns. Don Doyle, for example, at Northwestern University, he was a grad student at Northwestern, came through Jacksonville, about 1972 or '73, and ended up doing a wonderful study on the early, what, first forty years or so, of Jacksonville, a micro study. He, then, went on to a great career at Vanderbilt and, I think, is now at the University of South Carolina. But there were a lot of micro studies.

I think that some of these, well, were inspired by comparable micro studies that had been done in Europe, as early as, perhaps, the 1920s and, perhaps, even earlier. In Britain, there were very detailed studies of villages, of small rural areas, that I think inspired people over here, as well.

I sometimes wonder about the course that American history has taken, the study of American history, has taken. I know that, in Britain—I saw this, when I was there a time or two—in Britain, there were very close connections between leading universities and local historical societies, and it is still not uncommon for Oxford or Cambridge or other first rate institutions to send their finest historians out, to speak at very small gatherings in the local scene. These historians do this willingly and eagerly, and they establish ties between the profession and the professional historian and local people and local places. Those ties are very healthy and work, in a sense, in both directions to invigorate history.

I sometimes think that, perhaps, under the influence of the German understandings of higher education from the 1870s on, and the influence of the seminar and the influence of the idea of the professional historian that came to us largely from Germany, that perhaps we in America, where we pride ourselves in being democratic and having a relatively classless society as, say, compared to England, that we in the United States still have, unfortunately, great distance between professional historians and local historical activities. It's unfortunate, but I think it's true that there are some professional historians who, in fact, don't want much to do with the local scenes and the local people who are doing history.

Hild: You find it cuts both ways?

Davis: It does cut both ways. It really does. I think, in some cases, local people, who are doing local history and doing it well, may feel threatened by the professional historian, coming in from the outside, and, in a sense, laying claim to understandings that the local people don't have or don't want to have. So, yes, it does cut both ways.

Hild: I've run across some valuable studies, like that of micro histories, written by professional scholars, by academics.

Davis: Yes.

Hild: Going back and looking back at the historiography of Illinois…well, for most of us, it starts with the centennial histories.

Davis: Yes.

Hild: And then, goes on from there. I think those are wonderful books. There among my favorites.

Davis: Yes, and mine. I think that series was done with a conscious effort to do a monumental work that would last, that would survive the test of time. And, from my perspective, they have. They have.

Hild: That's should be a high complement to Professor Pease[1] and those, because I don't think anybody wrote a history of frontier Illinois until you did then, did they?

Davis: Well, no one that I know of wrote history of the whole frontier. There were histories of towns and locales and counties and the like, but, no, I don't think anyone did. Yes, it was quite a few years.

Hild: How did those guys influence you?

Davis: Well, one way was that they…I have immense respect for the work that they did. They worked under trying conditions. They worked when collections were either still not formed or not systematized, where a lot of things that we now have—a lot of sources we now have developed, here at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library—were still not available, or, if they were available, they were available in unorganized form.

These people worked in conditions, without air conditioning, with dirty conditions, with dust and the like. They did heroic work, sometimes dimly lit places, at the old library at the University of Illinois, for example, before they built a wonderful addition, thirty years or so ago. This was before air conditioning. It was before inexpensive travel. It was before photocopying. To me, photocopying has made the doing of history much, well, much easier, but it's also opened up all kinds of worlds that these people did not have. They had to take notes. They had to take notes on three by five cards. Fortunately, I'm old enough to have gone that route. I have hundreds, thousands of three by five cards and four by six cards that I took notes on. I still have those. I've used them for various projects, and I hope to use some in the not too distant future. I'm going back to some, here, on one project. But, they worked under conditions and in situations that were simply daunting, and yet, they persevered, and I have great respect for them.

They also, in some instances, tried to break the mold. They did focus, for example, on ordinary people and ordinary situations. They did not necessarily organize their work around the great politicians of the era or the great events of the era. They were interested in ordinary people in ordinary lives and the like. I think of the work, by the great R. Carlyle Buley, on the northwest. Here, you have a man who is very interested in how do ordinary people in a household treat those who are ill, for example. What kinds of household medicines are applied? What were the assumptions that these

[1] Professor Theodore Calvin Pease's wrote *The Story of Illinois, a history of the state of Illinois,* first issued in 1925. (http://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/imh/article/view/8000/9713)

people had about illness and disease and the like? That kind of history, done by those people, back then, I think was…well, it reflects very well on them. Those series of books by Pease and Clarence Alvord and Solon buck and those people, who did all of that marvelous work, well, we're in debt to them. I wonder, as we approach the bicentennial, whether there will be anything comparable. Who knows?

Hild: Well, the sesquicentennial was a bit of a disappointment, wasn't it, when it came to the production of a state history?

Davis: I think it was, all in all. There were some state histories, here and there, that were produced. I think some of them are good. I think, in at least one or two instances that I know of, the results were disappointing. Partly, I think, because at least one historian that I know of was asked to do his state history, more or less at the last moment and had to hurry to try to get it out in time, and I think the work suffered. Yes, it was something of a disappointment.

Hild: There was a lot of money put into local histories, too, at that time. Grants were given out to local historical societies to produce things.

Davis: Yes.

Hild: Are you still running across those things?

Davis: Oh yes, definitely. And there are some very good works among them, especially on the part of those people who had been doing history in these locales for decades and knew the primary sources and came to be able to master them and make sense of them. Those people produced good works.

There are other works that were produced by, let's say, people who got the job, due to politics or small "p" politics. They were friends of influential people in towns, and they got to write the local history. Some of those are awful, should never have written. But, even some of those do have, sometimes, oh, appendices or tables or, well, even understandings that are of value.

I think a great deal of what was written about local places added to our understanding of history. Unfortunately, some of the rest was, well, perhaps should not have been written.

Hild: Living in Jacksonville and having Springfield close by or even Champaign, for the records collected over there, must have been a real advantage to your particular efforts.

Davis: Oh, it was. There's no doubt about it. I realized the wonderful potential very early, and I loved to do work under the Old State Capitol building, in the old Illinois State Historical Library and in the Archives and over at the U of I in the Illinois collection, the Illinois Survey, and elsewhere.

Fortunately, Illinois College has been exceedingly kind to me and supportive of me in my work. Even when we did not have much in the way of funding, back in the seventies—we had very little funding—the college still found means to get me to the U of I or get me over here to do the work that I wanted to do.

I was fortunate. I had some friends from the University of Michigan and some friends that I've made since then, who would be two thousand miles from the primary sources that they needed to use to write history. They told me how fortunate I was, and I said, yes I am. (laughter)

Hild: Similarly, I was always a little baffled by Americans who wanted to study European history.

Davis: I guess I'm not baffled so much as I am…I wonder about that, and then, I also wonder, how fully can they master the sources that need to be mastered, unless they have a Fulbright after a Fulbright after a Fulbright or whatever to research?

Hild: And maybe a spouse who was born and raised there.

Davis: (laughter) That helps, too, yes.

Hild: What about our neighboring states? Do you have any familiarity with the quality and the quantity of similar material?

Davis: Well, Indiana has, I think, has been very fortunate. The Lilly money there has funded a lot of good projects over time, and the *Indiana Magazine of History* has been, all in all, a high quality product.

The work done by Andrew Cayten— he's at Miami University in Oxford—on Indiana was good. Doug Hurt did a wonderful work on Ohio, and Mark Wyman did a very interesting, good work on Wisconsin. I'm trying to think of the person who did the work on Missouri, some years back, several decades back. It's a good work, as well. It's a common enough name, but I'm just not conjuring it up at the moment.

Hild: Are there collections as good as ours?

Davis: Certainly the ones that I've seen are good. I hate to admit it, but I've not mined the sources in Iowa. That's been a big gap in my work, and I hope someday to rectify that shortcoming. But, I have used sources in Missouri, and the holdings are good. I'm not sure that they're as…the size is as great as the holdings here or in Chicago. The collections in Indiana are very good. I've also worked in Michigan and in Wisconsin and in Ohio, and I've been very pleased with the quality and quantity of primary source material there, in those holdings.

Hild: Buley was from Michigan, wasn't he?

Davis: I think he was from Michigan.

Hild: Yes.

Davis: If I'm not mistaken, he had much of his career in Indiana. I could be wrong, but I think he had a Michigan connection, and then, later on, an Indiana connection, but I could be wrong on that.

Hild: He won a Pulitzer Prize for that *History of the Northwest.*

Davis: That's right. I had forgotten that.

Hild: In 1950, or something like that.

Davis: Yes, a two volume work.

Hild: Yeah.

Davis: It is still…It's breathtaking, when you go back and you see what he did, and you see the sources that he used and the insights that he derived from the evidence, from a huge variety of evidence, early newspapers, early accounts of the settlers. Some of them were recollections that they had…that someone had written, in 1880, and stuff like that. I mean, it's a huge range of material that he mined. When I first ran across Buley, I think, in the sixties, I said to myself, this work is remarkable. I hope it will be reprinted someday. I hope new generations of people will come to use it and appreciate it.

Hild: So, what do you think is the future of state and local history, then?

Davis: Well, it's an exciting time. It's a wonderful time, and, in part, it's because so much material is now available online, and more and more libraries are putting more and more materials up. It is just incredibly exciting.

Last night, yes, last night, I was at home, and I visited the Bentley Library in Ann Arbor, one of the university libraries. I went into the Bentley and found sources there that…well, sources, civil war letters, and then, sources dealing with the Michigan frontier. These were there, but now you can tap them online. So many of them, you can tap online. You can print off. I think that that is one of the largest, most profound changes in the doing of history at all levels, the local history, the state history, the state level, and even the national level, the ability to tap sources from your office or your home, print these off and use them. This, to me, is revolutionary, and it's going to make…it's going to, I think, vastly improve history or has the potential to improve the doing of history.

At the same time, however, it is also very daunting, because, when you embark on a project and you surf the net, you realize that, oh, this library has six hundred sources that you can use. That library has four hundred that you can use, and there are perhaps twenty other such libraries that you can tap for comparable sources. You realize, wow, how much of this can I do in one lifetime? So, there's a very…I think that it's easy to feel overwhelmed or feel that there's just so much primary source evidence and other good evidence that you cannot possibly find it all, use it all or even make sense of more than a small portion of it.

Hild: But, years ago, the worry was, oh, how can I afford to go and stay there for two weeks?

Davis: Yes, exactly, exactly. I remember going over to the U of I The college gave me some funds to go to the U of I in 1974. I stayed in a motel. It cost…was it $14 a night? I believe it was. I walked about seven or eight blocks to the main library, and it was in winter. I remember walking that, then getting up into dimly lit stacks, up in the ninth and tenth floors, and finding…pulling the journals off the shelves, carrying them to a nearby little desk, dimly lit part of the stacks up there, getting my, then, four by six cards and taking notes on what I was finding in the journals. This was in 1974.

Now, it is just so different. Fortunately, at Illinois College, the college now, and myself included, but the college now receives grants, college grants, to study at Washington and in Los Angeles, places all around the world. The funds are available now for colleagues to go to places. But, fortunately, it's not necessary to go to many of these places, because so many sources are now there on the Internet.

Hild: The Xerox [photocopy] machine was the big breakthrough.

Davis: Yes, yes.

Hild: Yeah.

Davis: I might add, along those lines, the first time I used a photocopier was around 1959. One of my professors had put something on reserve, two articles, as I recall it. We were expected to read these articles. Well, the problem was that the whole class was expected to read these two articles, and they weren't always available, there, behind the desk. So, some of us decided to photocopy these.

Well, the process was called Ducostat, I don't know if you remember the Ducostat process, but, for every shot, it cost a quarter. This is 1959. The copy came out in the bottom of the machine, sopping wet, and you had to pick up one corner of it, hold it up for twenty seconds, while it dried, and not smudge it. You couldn't touch it, and you had to put it over, so it would dry even more. To Xerox [photocopy] an article, that I think was about eighteen

pages, cost a small fortune. The photocopy process was imperfect. I remember thinking at the time, I hope things improve. Well, they have, they have markedly, of course.

Hild: They sure have. Do you think—back again with state and local history—there's great concern about the future of publishing in the United States. Do you think that the publishing industry and the study of state and local history are going to meet positively or negatively?

Davis: Well, I think publishing, of course, is changing radically, and there are some very positive signs in publishing. I don't know the technicalities of it, but I do know, now, that publishers can publish, more or less, on demand.

University presses, after printing their initial run of a few hundred works, copies, will bind perhaps fifty of those, or a hundred of those, and get those out to reviewers and keep the others unbound. Then, if the reviewers are kind to the book, and the book begins to sell, they'll bind the remaining issues, sell those, and then, they will print on demand. They'll print twenty books on demand or ten books, or a college class orders forty books, they'll print those.

So, I understand the technical breakthroughs now in publishing, enable publishers to do that and to do it well and to do it consistently well and to do it with a profit. So, it's my understanding that publishers now have that opportunity to print on demand, and they don't have to print two thousand bound books and hope that they sell. And then, if they don't sell, they're stuck with them.

Hild: Now, you've published, like, three books, right?

Davis: Yes.

Hild: What were your experiences with those? I know at least…I think two of them were parts of series, correct?

Davis: Yes. The first book was through the Arthur H. Clark Company, the old publishers of frontier histories, going clear back to about, what, 1896—

Hild: All the county histories?

Davis: Well, county histories, and they also did the…I think they did the great—

Hild: Atlases?

Davis: No, the great, thirty-two volume set of early western travels, Rueben Gold Thwaites[2], and then, they did a lot of other histories of regions and states, oh, in 1906 and on up, through…well, they were still in existence as of a few years back. They moved to Los Angeles.

The first work was basically a redoing of my dissertation, an upgrading of it and updating of it. They published that in 1977, and it was received well. I was pleased by the professional reception of it. Howard Lamar at Yale University wrote a very fine, glowing review of it for the *American Historical Review,* and it received some other good reviews. It was a narrowly conceived work. It did not obtain a big audience, but it has shown up in some footnotes and so on.

The other work was a work I edited, a work of Charles Ross Park, a physician from Illinois, who went to California in the gold rush and came back and ended up going and serving in the czar's army in the Crimean War, as a physician. So, I edited his diary that took him to California and back. Then, the third work was the work by Indiana University Press, part of a series called…well, it was the series dealing with the states from the Appalachians to the Mississippi River. And I was asked to do Illinois.

Hild: So, why you…or how you, I should say, perhaps?

Davis: Well, I don't know for sure. I have a hunch. There were chief editors of this series, Malcolm Rohrbough and Walter Nugent. Through Shaw Livermore, my advisor at the University of Michigan, I had come into contact with Malcolm Rohrbough, I think by phone or maybe by letter, maybe in the late seventies. I'm not sure. We had something of a tie. I don't recall what it was about. It dealt with something he was doing, some kind work he was doing.

Oh, I did review a work, his work on the *Trans Appalachian Frontier* that come out, about 1978 or 1980, right in there, in the *Journal of American History.* So, there was that tie, as well.

When it came time for these two men and the publisher to identify historians to do the frontier histories of these states, from the Appalachians to the Mississippi, I think they wanted people who, in their estimation, could do a good job. I think Malcolm Rohrbough may have cited my work, *Frontier America*, which was the re-work of my dissertation, in one of his books. I think that was the case. So, I think he knew of me professionally. It may well be that, when it came time for them to pick someone to do Illinois, Malcolm Rohrbough may have been the person who said, "Why not Jim Davis?"

[2] Rueben Gold Whaites, 1853-1913 historian. (http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Content.aspx?dsNav=N:4294963828-4294963805&dsRecordDetails=R:CS1690)

So, anyway, I was asked to do it. There were other people, of course, asked to do the other states, and they got some really, really good people, as I mentioned, Doug Hurt, Mark Wyman and Andrew Cayton. John Finger did Tennessee. Anyway, they picked some good people for that series.

Hild: You must have had some ambivalence when you were asked, would you like to do this? Sounds like a huge project.

Davis: It was. I was asked in 1989, and I was already researching civil war soldiers from the lower north. I'd already put in around five years of pretty consistent research on the civil war, compiled a huge mass of Xeroxed letters that they had written. I hoped soon to pursue that farther and to start publishing some civil war material.

Well, they asked me in 1989, and I signed the contract, around May or April of '89, I think it was. I was to be finished, completely finished with this, in 1992. That's what they called for. I thought, well, three years for this. I can get back to the civil war work pretty quickly. Well, to make a long story short, I think I sent this to the publisher in 1997 or 1998. It took about five years longer than I had assumed. Malcolm Rohrbough and Walter Nugent were very patient. They were very good at making suggestions for improvements in the work.

Hild: So, they actually did edit the series, then?

Davis: They did; they did.

Hild: They were active editors, then?

Davis: Oh, yes, they were actively editing, and the work is improved, because of that. The work originally…one of the glitches was the fact that the work…I think the works were supposed to, originally, be around 850,000 words or thereabouts, and suddenly we got a notice—I don't recall when—No, it can't be that long. It cannot be over 525,000 words or whatever. So, it took a lot of work to scale down, down to that limit. It took me five years longer than I had anticipated, but it was a labor of love.

Hild: Probably no one brought their volume in on time, anyway, did they?

Davis: Ah, I'm not sure, but I doubt it.

Hild: Oh, so you weren't exactly prepared…you just didn't go to your office and collect all you lecture notes?

Davis: No, no. I'd taught one course, one summer, in Illinois history. I was asked to do that in the summer of 1974. It was the first year that Illinois College offered summer school, and three of us were tapped to offer courses. The dean or the president said, "How'd you like to do something in Illinois history?" I

said, "Well," said, "I don't know much about it, but okay." So, I used Robert Howard's work.

Hild: Oh, all right.

Davis: And got to know Robert Howard. I'd known him before, and, in fact, I invited him to speak before the class. Then, I invited him back a time or two to speak in other classes, later on. So, I used his work, and I learned a lot of Illinois history, in teaching the class, (laughter) you know, as you do.

Hild: You're one lecture ahead of the students.

Davis: One lecture ahead of the students, yes. But I found it exciting. I found I liked Howard's work. It helped shape my work, because he, as an old newspaper man who stressed politics, did a masterful job in that work, I think, in dealing with the politics of the situation, of early Illinois and up to modern Illinois.

People, like Rodney Davis at Knox College, had also done wonderful work on the politics of Illinois. So, when it came time for me to write, I basically said, well, good people have covered those areas well. I won't say I minimized the politics, but I kind of skirted around what they had done, used some of it. I recognized that much of what should have been done, was done by Robert Howard and Rodney Davis and some others. So, I did other things. I focused more on the culture and more on some other things.

Hild: I think that's certainly what most of the book's value is on, that kind of thing. Let's take a break.

Davis: Yes.

Hild: All right.

(A break was taken)

Hild: You said that you taught one class in Illinois history in 1974. Every now and then, I know, the colleges and universities in the state will offer classes in Illinois history. What's the state of Illinois history today?

Davis: Well, I've not kept up with it very well, I have to admit. But, I think it's pretty healthy. I think there are good people, who are doing good work and continue to do good work. They do a wide variety of work, as well. You have people, like Kay Carr and others, who do kind of micro studies and studies on specific places. They do that with a wide background of understanding of how to do it. Their micro studies are always put into a larger context, so they're not simply esoteric and narrowly focused. It's a work. You have people, I think, like Gerald Danzer and others, who are interested in images and spatial dynamics of things. I find that work exciting. He's exploring architecture and the location of things and the shapes of things. I think there's a real place for that.

In terms of current state history, there have been some works that have come out in the last few years that are good and take our understandings farther. I don't know of anything kind of revolutionary or radically different, at this point. We've had some wonderful breakthroughs and wonderful work done on Abraham Lincoln, of course. We still have that great model of Benjamin Thomas, back about seventy plus years now, and he still stands as a giant in our understanding of Lincoln.

Hild: Yes, yes. I think of it as good, old fashioned history.

Davis: Exactly, exactly. Anyone who wants to understand Lincoln should tap Benjamin Thomas. We have, in more recent years, of course, not only people like Paul Angle and others, writing in their fifties, regularly. But we have, of course, Michael Burlingame and others, who are giving us new insights into the sociology and psychology of Lincoln and his family, in the times. I find that to be very exciting stuff. I think the writing of history is alive and well. I'm not sure where it's going, at this point. There are so many opportunities for historians.

I think we're much more interdisciplinary than we were, prior to the 1970s. We bring in psychology and sociology and economics and geography, and that's all for the good. I think, too, generally speaking, we're much more interested in history, from the bottom up. One very good thing, I think the new left gave to us in the sixties and seventies, was the desire to look at history through the eyes of the "nobodies" of history and through the lives of ordinary events and ordinary people. What we learn is that the ordinary can be extraordinary and can be endlessly fascinating. I think that history will continue to be written along those lines.

I think that, as the state's demographics change and the nation's demographics change, we will see more and more histories of groups that, heretofore, have not been center stage in writing. That's for the good too. I hope that bringing all kinds of groups and people and classifications of people into the spotlight, does not Balkanize history and doesn't cause us to focus so narrowly on group X, Y or Z that we lose the larger picture. I think we always need to go back to context and to the larger picture. But, I think it's a very healthy thing that groups that, heretofore, have not received much attention are, at long last, receiving proper attention and properly so.

Hild: You mention, like Charles Danzer, who is retired.

Davis: Yes.

Hild: Kay Carr is probably…if not retired, as we speak, will be soon.

Davis: I think so.

Hild: Carl Eckberg retired several years ago.

Davis: Yes.

Hild: So, we hope that others are coming up to carry on, I guess. I think, if you look at the Illinois history conferences—and there's like two of them—there doesn't seem to be any lack of topics. Nor does there seem to be a lack of people, who are interested. But, I wonder if there would be…what kind of institutional support we could look forward to. By institutional, I mean, like commercial, like through publishing, as well as, academic institutions?

Davis: Well, we're in choppy waters, of course, now, economically. A number of colleges and universities are retrenching, and budgets are tight. It's my understanding that attendance at some professional meetings, nationally and regionally and even statewide, is down, because people simply don't have the travel funds that they used to have, a few a years ago. The same may be true for research. I'm not sure, but I've heard stories that, at certain institutions, funds have been cut in such a way that historians can't get to major research libraries.

That's said, I'm still greatly impressed by the two conferences we do have, the symposium and the conference, one sponsored by the Illinois State Historical Society and the other by the Illinois Historical Preservation Agency. I attend those whenever I can. I'm greatly impressed by the quality of newer people who are coming up and the wide range of interests that they have and the interdisciplinary tools that they use in presenting their findings.

I've two new colleagues at Illinois College, who are, I think, are going to make great marks. In fact, they already have, in local and regional history. Joe Genetin-Pilawa is definitely a rising expert, in Indian history, and he's already…I think he's currently writing...He's under contract, writing two books on different aspects of Indian history. I do hope that he will focus on the lower Great Lakes in Illinois. He's already done that, to some extent. Jennifer Barker Devine is another superb colleague, who is very steeped in agricultural history and women's history. She's from Iowa, grew up in rural conditions in Iowa and has ties to the land, and I think that she is also typical of a new breed of people, who are coming to the doing of history with new understandings and interests.

They both focus on people and groups who, heretofore, have not been given adequate coverage or fair coverage. It think all of that is for the good. They also travel to give papers, to research. So, from my perspective, what I think I know, the doing of history in Illinois is in good shape. I think we have excellent people giving papers at conferences.

Hild: Are there schools that are teaching Illinois history?

Davis: I think so. I know a number of community colleges are. I think Eastern Illinois University still is. I hope Eastern still is. I would expect U of I is still teaching

it, but I don't know for sure. There are some four-year institutions that have taught it. I think Quincy College has taught it. Well, anyway, I'm not sure. Oh, I think Illinois Wesleyan and ISU have both taught Illinois history.

Hild: Well, here our own UIS does.

Davis: Oh, of course.

Hild: Dan Holt, I think, taught a class.

Davis: Yes, he did.

Hild: And Dick Taylor taught a class.

Davis: Yes.

Hild: …for, I think, one year. Dan may have done it for several years.

Davis: Yes. I think so.

Hild: I don't know if it was that the students lost interest in taking the class or if it's just that the departments had different priorities. I'm unaware.

Davis: I don't know. I think, in recent years, there's been an effort at some universities to trim courses, reduce offerings. I think that may have resulted in some Illinois history courses being dropped.

Hild: Yeah, if you make classes more universal, you can put them online and don't need faculties. (laughter)

Davis: That's kind of scary (laughter).

Hild: Interactive. We talk about Pease and Alvord and other just really, first rate historians, working in the field. They were the progressive wave of historians, and then, different generations have different approaches to history.

When you worked under Livermore at Michigan, did you have to grow out of him at all? How did you grow beyond what you learned as a graduate student?

Davis: Well, I think, much to his credit, he expected his students to grow beyond him. I'm very certain he did not want to clone and he made that clear in certain ways, in very supportive ways. He would say things like, well, we have this understanding of such and such, and I was involved in helping to create that understanding, but you're going to take it farther. You're going to do this; you're going to ask questions that we did not think to ask and so forth. So, he deliberately, in a sense, pushed us out of the nest, and I think it was wonderful that he did that. He sent signals to me and to others, at the time,

that he did not want to simply have a cookie cutter and create more Shaw Livermores that would, then, go on and do what he did.

I think that we all are indebted to the people and movements that come before us. I think of the great progressive era, Charles Beard, and in a sense, Turner, as part that of that progressive movement, as well. They looked around, and they saw needs in society. They saw forces at work in society, and they tried to explain these, in part, in order to control them in the end, to soften the impact of industrialization or urbanization or immigration.

About a hundred years ago, on, these progressive historians tried to create history that would not only be good history but would be useful history. It would be a utilitarian component to it. There's nothing wrong with that, providing the ideology doesn't drive the history, providing the thesis, in a sense, doesn't determine which facts are used.

I think that many progressive historians did good work. I think some, perhaps, tried to, let's say, trim the facts to present findings that were preconceived in their minds. I think of Charles Beard's work on the economic origins of the Constitution and subsequent historians, Brown and others, have demonstrated, I think, that Charles Beard did, in fact, trim the evidence to fit his agenda, so to speak. Well, we should avoid that wherever possible. I think, during the days of the cold war, the post-World War II era, into the sixties, there was a perceived need to create something of a consensus in the country and a consensus concerning who we are and where we've been and where we're going.

So, you get certain historians, Daniel Boorstin and others, who had been on the left, politically, in earlier years of becoming…well, helping to develop, consensus in American history. Perhaps we needed that. Again, I think it was good and useful, providing the ideology did not determine the end product.

Since the seventies, we've had the new left, the new history. We've had the influence of groups that have been, let's say, marginalized in the past, that have been now brought to the center of the arena. We have new historians. When I was coming along in the department at the University of Michigan, there were some women in the department, and there were other…there were women who were in the graduate program, and they were good. They were good historians and have been good historians since. But there weren't many, and now there are more. There were a very few blacks, then, associated with the department, and now there are some. I think I knew of one person, who might have been called Hispanic then. I'm not sure he called himself that. He was from Texas, and now I'm sure there are more Hispanics going into history and Asians and so forth and so on.

All that's for the good. We do need as many perspectives as we can get on any topic and as many takes as we can have in looking at things, understanding things. The more the better. I'm something of a First Amendment…I won't say absolutist, but I've come close to being a First Amendment absolutist, because I want every voice to be heard, and I want every voice to be heard fairly. It's not that we can accept every idea or even, perhaps, give every idea thorough treatment, but the more ideas we have on the table, the better it is for everyone. Then, in the end, we can choose and pick and go from there. I don't like it when people are excluded for arbitrary or artificial reasons.

Hild: Now we read post-modern historians, and there's a lot of attention paid to groups. There's a lot of attention paid to the impossibility of objectivity. (chuckles)

Davis: Yes.

Hild: So, how do you get along with the young post-modern crowd?

Davis: Well, I have difficulties with post-modernism, as I understand it. I'm not sure anyone fully understands it. As I understand it, the whole question of the indeterminacy of knowing and of knowledge, is something at the center of post-modernism and the idea that words do not have meaning that can be commonly understood over time. I have difficulty with that, because ultimately it leads to anarchy of knowledge, of understanding. That is to say, to no understanding or of knowledge. In the end, it implodes on itself. It's unsustainable in the end.

I think we have pretty much discarded most unhealthy features of post-modernism. I think we've put most behind us. If you talk to a post-modernist, as I've done, and you hear the person saying, "Well, we can't understand words. We can't understand even the spoken word." What is said one minute, no longer is true the next minute. Ask the person if that is true, in terms of the words that are given as testimony at a trial. Can we ever have a fair trial? Ask the person if that's true, with regard to what is written about the oppression of women, for example, in the past. All at once, that post-modernist will say, "No, no we can understand those things well and fully."

Hild: Right, yeah. It's the Holocaust deniers.

Davis: Oh, exactly, yes. No one will say that we cannot understand the Holocaust. We can. Post-modernist collide with such realities. I think, in the end, while post-modernism has been useful in trying to unravel sub-textural material and meaning within meaning and so on, all that's been good. I think, when they basically got into the realm of the indeterminacy of knowledge and the impossibility of understanding, they stepped into quicksand and basically they've disappeared.

Hild: Yeah, I don't see much evidence of that working, with the study of local history, in any case. I think they're too ambitious to deal with that.

Davis: Yeah, I think you're right. They see themselves as above it or beyond it.

Hild: So, where do you fit in, within in the historiographical scheme? You say you got your degree in 1971. That says something in itself.

Davis: Yes. Well, I got my degree at a time when there was great turbulence in universities but also in epistemology and in historiography, and things were in flux. It was exciting. I guess, if I come down on any side, it's the side that says there are ways of knowing, and history is one way of knowing. I do think that, by and large, historians should pay close attention, perhaps closer attention, to primary sources. I have difficulties with historians who rely on other historians excessively and who don't try to understand the sources that other historians use.

When I pick up a book, I go to Barnes and Noble or wherever and pick a book off the shelf and start to look at. The first thing I do is go right to the bibliography. I can sometimes, in twenty seconds, reject the book, because I know something of the sources that the author logically should have used or should have, at least, consulted. When they're not there, I say to myself, well, the historian did not do his or her work. So, I think sources are very important, and dealing with sources is very important. I think historians should, perhaps, pay closer attention to primary sources.

I'm kind of all over the map, in terms of my own understandings of history. I do share, with the new left, a desire to understand history, from the bottom up, to understand the lives of ordinary people. I find that to be very satisfying, exciting, and I think the new left is still on the cutting edge of history, in doing that. I salute them, even if I don't necessarily share their political framework or the political understandings. I tip my hat to them and say, you've rendered a fine service to history.

I once talked to a Roman…an historian of ancient Rome, who said…well, he said something to the effect that those of us in ancient Rome—this was the latter days of the republic—all we really need to do is understand the working of about two thousand people, four thousand, maximum. When we understand that crowd, we've got it all. There's nothing more that we can understand or should understand. Well, those two thousand people were the elites of the time. When I mentioned that, he basically agreed and, fortunately, was open enough to agree that archeological findings on lives of ordinary people can shed useful light on the understanding of the Roman Republic.

Hild: Right and now we have books like the *Lives of Ordinary People of the Roman Republic.*

Davis: Exactly, right. So, I think that all of that is good. I think there is a tendency as—well, there's always been a tendency, since the days of writing history in ancient Greece and Rome—to use history and the writing of history as a weapon or a tool or an ideologically-oriented club to attack or defend—

Hild: Thus, the post-modern critiques. (laughs)

Davis: Yes, yes to be sure, and there's truth to it. I think we should guard against it. One of the reasons I—as my students and colleagues know—I promote the idea of a "open, liberal, parliamentary" democracy is that I think, in those conditions, history can flourish at its best.

I remember one trip to the Soviet Union. I was talking to a couple of historians there. We're in a small setting. One said to me something that I'd never thought of, that was very moving. He said, "Our best historians are the historians who study ancient Russian history, or it's simply ancient history, Roman, Greek history." I began to pick up reasons why, as he was talking, and then he basically said, "We've learned that you simply do not inquire very closely into the past eight or ten decades, because that can get you into hot water, immediately. But, if you're doing something on the Russians in the nine hundreds, you can acknowledge, in one paragraph, you're debt to Marx and your debt to the existing cannon, and then get on with doing the history that you really want to do. But, if you do more recent history, you are really confined. You work in a straightjacket, one that can be very dangerous to one's health, so to speak, in the days of Stalin."

I think that open societies can produce the best historians, and this is one reason why I favor such societies. I also think that any finding that we come up with, in history, has to be held tentatively. I think that, even when I say to myself, ah, all the evidence points in this direction, and I can state this with great certainty. Yes, I can. But I have to keep in the back of my mind the idea that there may be a body of evidence elsewhere that I've not seen—no one has seen—that can come along, and in fifty years, radically revise my finding, throw it into the dust bin of history.

I'm bothered by people, historians and others, who like to think that the work that they've done or that others have done, will forever withstand the test of time. Some works do. Some works are done in such a way that the method by which they're done enables them to withstand the test of time. But the findings are often revised, within a matter of few years, and in some cases, within a generation or two, largely discarded. I think we have to be open to that possibility that our findings—even though we think they're true, and they're based upon the best evidence—nevertheless, have to be presented as kind of…well, in a tentative manner and in a manner that causes us to hold our breath, so to speak.

Hild: Yeah, I agree. There's the admiration of their talent too. We may disagree with Boorstin or other people writing from the forties and through the fifties, but they were darn good historians.

Davis: Oh, absolutely. When you look at a historian like Daniel Boorstin, when you look at his trilogy on America, especially the second book, *The Americans: The National Experience*, when you realize what he did, in terms of pulling together, again, ordinary sources, sources that many historians of the day would have just kind of rejected or would have thought little of. He pulled together ordinary sources and, in a brilliantly creative way, wove for us a tapestry of understanding of how we became the people we have become, and what are our traits now. His wonderful comments on such things as American love of speed, how we love things in a hurry, how we developed things, like the fast snack at railroad stations. We would eat our food standing up and gobble our food down in seven minutes and jump back on the train and the like. Well, he glories in this. How our steamboats were often pushed to the point where they blew up. But, again, he says, "Well, yes, that was bad for those involved, but it was wonderful that we wanted to get ahead. We wanted to push faster, farther than we thought we could." These findings—for the day—that he came up with, were controversial, and he was attacked for them. But the brilliancy with which he put that story together, I think, is still very inspiring.

Hild: When your students approach you and say, "Well, Professor Davis, this all well and good that this happened, but why did it happen? Why did it these people do this? What motivates people to make history?" In other words, what is your philosophy of history, and why do people behave the way they do?

Davis: Oh. Well, it's evolving, even now. I think John Adams may have put his finger on something. He referred to the passion for distinction. The idea that everyone wants to be someone in the eyes of important people, people important to that person. We all want to shine in some way. I think that that does motivate a great deal of history, the desire to be something and to be remembered for being something. I think this is important in motivating the lives of a lot of people.

I think fear or anxiety also motivates. I've gone back recently and looked at some work of Lucidities in there and the Melian Dialogue, or conversation, about why it is that Athens says to the rulers of Milos, "We must destroy you. It's not that you've done anything, but we must destroy you, because, if we don't, then our enemies will look at us and say, 'They're weak,' and that will hurt us. So, the reason we are about to destroy you is not because you're bad or whatever, but we must do it, in order to demonstrate that we're not weak. Sadly, I think that such fear does drive a lot of history and motivates people.

Then, I would add to that, anxiety, which I think is markedly different from fear, as I understand it. With fear, you have an object that you know may threaten you, an object that can do you damage. Anxiety is more of a feeling that there is something out there, something that isn't right, and this something may cause us some grief, but we don't know how or when or whatever. I think anxiety is a motivator of history, as well.

I think, of course, we can look at economics as a motivator. I do think that most people are not economic animals. I think most people voluntarily back away from economic gain for other reasons. They give up, voluntarily give up economic gain, in search of something better or different. I think that we can be understood, in terms of sociology and psychology and geography. I think we sort ourselves out spatially, in certain ways that can help us understand how we developed in history.

Do I belong to any school? Well, several, I suppose, a bit of this and bit of that. I am bothered and…well, I was bothered in graduate school, when I saw some of my friends writing history in ways that clearly indicated that they were writing the history to prove a point that they held, before they started their research.

Hild: Rhetorical history.

Davis: Yes, and that bothers me. I could refer to one or two individuals, but I won't, but, people who had a political agenda, at the time, who set out to prove a political point and ignored all countervailing evidence, denied its existence or tried to denigrate it and wrote in such a way as to prove a political point. I don't like that. History should not be subordinate to prevailing ideologies or political movements or whatever. We can't avoid it. We can't avoid our biases. We can't avoid our likes and dislikes. We all come to the writing of history with baggage. Our childhood years, our professional years, they all influence who we are, what we are.

We cannot write "objective" history. We have to be aware of the fact that we cannot do this. What we should do is try to do it as well as we can and be aware of the fact that we cannot do it, fully. I think we also have to guard against, on the one hand, determinism. We have to guard against believing that there are forces, economic or psychological or biological forces that drive us to behave in certain ways, over which we have no control. We're not just atoms in the universe, bounced along by impersonal, remote forces. We do have intelligence.

We have will. We have the capacity to go against prevailing breezes and currents and do so consciously. I think that we have to be have to aware of the fact that people who argue history, from a deterministic point of view that force X, Y or Z determines history, are often rudely surprised when they

learn that force X, Y or Z, in the end, does not determine history, that, in fact, history can develop, quite to the contrary these forces.

Having said that, I think we should also guard mightily against relativism, against the idea that all ideas are equal, that all ideas are of equal value, and we should not judge. I think there's a tendency to be excessively nonjudgmental.

We should not engage in presentism, to be sure. We should not apply our set of values and understandings to people of the past. We should guard against that. We should give people that we study in the past, wide latitude in trying to explain why they did what they did. We should not apply our values and understandings to them. Well, we would not want someone to say, two hundred years from now, to attack us, those of us who eat meat, for eating meat, for being carnivores. Two hundred years from now, perhaps, no one will eat meat. Well, we can't be attacked for liking a hamburger now. I think that we should guard against presentism. We should guard against determinism and we should also, basically, be open to all kinds of ideas.

Hild: Your students enroll and they come to college as products of their zeitgeist, do you have to unlearn them at all?

Davis: I think that rather than say unlearn, I think I would say I would have to build upon what it is they bring to the enterprise. They come out of different settings. Some come from small rural schools where libraries were virtually non-existent. Others come from places like greater Chicago and other places. Some are foreign students. So I try to understand what it is they bring to the undertaking and I try to build on that. There must be some unlearning by all of us. When we go into any enterprise, go into any project. We go into it with ideas that we have at the time and we often pursue and learn that those ideas or understandings are inadequate for the task at hand; that we must drop certain ideas or understandings that we had and develop new ones. So I expect them to do that. I expect them to when they come to school be ready to learn and that does involve some unlearning. I am reluctant to say to students who are poorly prepared in one way or another that you cannot. I think even they can learn. But I have to be very sensitive to the idea that the do come to school with their baggage and their understandings. I'll never forget the time a student who—well it's a long story but he basically behaved in a very, in a way that other students perceived as arrogant and know-it-all. I called him on it. I asked him to talk to me and he tried to maintain that front with me when he talked and all at once he changed and he almost broke down in tears. He blurted out to me he said "Professor Davis do you know what it is for me to come to Illinois College?". I said no, tell me. And he said "Well it might have been something like if you at age seventeen had suddenly gone to Harvard." And I said "What, in what way". He said to me "I've never seen a building with so many books." He was referring to our library which had at that time maybe 80,000 volumes, it's not a big library at all. But he was so awed by

what he encountered on campus in the way of the library and the way of other things that he basically said he had to create this false front of cockiness and arrogance to deal with it. I understood that and I helped him through it and he ended up doing well.

Hild: Good. A happy ending.

Davis: Yes.

Hild: Well graduate students feel like that all the time (laughter). You taught your entire career at a small four-year liberal arts school in the Midwest; did you ever have a chance to go teach at a huge multiversity in a big city or anything? Or were you even interested in that?

Davis: No, I wasn't interested in that. I don't know if I ever had the chance. There were people from time to time oh perhaps in the late eighties early nineties who suggested that if I wanted to apply at place X, Y or Z I might find an opportunity. But I did not want to do it. I loved Illinois College. I loved the people I met there, colleagues and students. I like the town; I still like the town. I did lecture at other institutions including what is now University of Illinois at Springfield and at other places. I valued those opportunities and I would still do that but I had no desire to be part of a larger institution. The two caveats to my comment however would be, I did value the opportunity to be around large libraries when I researched at the U of I or the University of Michigan or other major libraries the Newberry or the Library of Congress or the Bancroft and Huntington. I love libraries and so forth. So had their been a major university ten miles away from Illinois College that would have been great, I suppose. And the other thing is I do know that at larger institutions in the seventies in particular before Illinois College endowment grew, there were wonderful opportunities for faculty at these institutions to go and research and go and travel and take students to places. During the seventies and eighties at Illinois College we had a wonderful president, President Donald Mundinger[3]. He and his predecessor Vernon Caine[4] raised an immense amount of money for Illinois College. Our endowment shot from about six million in the seventies to oh I think it's a hundred forty million now or more and we've kept that endowment in the meantime for various purposes. We have a lot of money now backing campus activities, research by faculty, the opportunity to take students to as I've done, to the Library of Congress and the National Archives and take them to foreign trips, foreign places. Send them abroad for a semester or year. At Illinois College we now have many of the opportunities and resources that we did not have in the seventies that many universities have and I think will continue to have them in the future, because their endowment is managed very well.

[3] Donald Mundinger, President Illinois College 1973 - 1993
[4] Vernon Caine, President Illinois College 1955 - 19973

Hild: You've never had to teach graduate students, then?

Davis: No. No except …

Hild: There's pros and cons to that.

Davis: Yes, to be sure. I've spoken to graduate students over here at the University of Illinois at Springfield as recently as about or four or five years ago I think and elsewhere. But no, I've never had the opportunity to teach graduate students.

Hild: Your teaching career including before you went back to graduate school covers almost fifty years.

Davis: Yes.

Hild: Or fifty years. I suppose you've seen some big changes there and I suppose you've seen some good things happen and some bad things happen. You talked earlier about the changes in discipline in the students, the behavior. What else do you find that in your cause for concern or cause for congratulations?

Davis: Well, I think the evolving technology is a cause for celebration on the one hand and a cause for some pause on the other hand. I'm greatly pleased by what technology enables faculty and students to do and things they can tap, the things they can see, the communication they can have with people all over the world. We now have at Illinois College a student from Southeast Asia and she is in touch with her parents back there and she Skypes and I think all this is wonderful. We can be in touch with colleagues around the world who are involved in activities similar to ours, it's wonderful to be in touch with people who are doing similar research, get ideas from them. There's a community, an electronic community now that simply was not there even fifteen years ago. I'm delighted that that's there. It's there for students and the amount of variety and quality of technology available now in classroom settings is simply awesome. It's wonderful. On the other hand, I have some concerns that in a number of instances technology is not only driving learning and determining or influencing what is learned or how it's learned or what extent it's learned but in some cases it's also undermining learning. I think you and I and perhaps everyone, every historian has seen a wonderful lecture destroyed by power point (laughter). A wonderful lecture destroyed by the fact that someone could not operate a video device properly and things did not work out and therefore the lecture could not be given. We've become dependant upon technology in ways that I think can be a little bit scary. I've always had Plan B in the back of my mind whenever I've walked into a class, a back up plan, and sometimes I would go to show a video first and then a DVD and sometimes I walk into the room and the player has been moved, can't find it. You know some colleague has come in and moved it to another room, I can't locate it. Well that's when Plan B swings into operation and there's nothing

wrong with chalk and talk, I find. There's a world of difference. I think that students perhaps have a shorter attention span now or a less of a willingness to stay with something in a kind of drudged manner, a detailed focused manner than they did thirty or forty years ago. Maybe because they've been surfing the net associated with videos and with images that flash before them for three seconds and go on to something else that their very oriented toward the next thing; the next thing that better come along in ten seconds or one minute. I think some students have exhibited a weakness when it comes to the ability to stay with something for hours and days. I remember telling the class, a couple of classes, several years back that one time I spent about eleven or twelve days on one footnote until I got the footnote straight. The looks of horror that came across the students faces when I said that (laughter) are still with me. They were like How could you do that?. Well this one footnote that I wanted to get straight and I think that perhaps technology has undermined the ability of some students to stay with things.

Hild: Or maybe it's just the technology is the end in itself, perhaps?

Davis: Yes, I think that's unfortunately the case. Yes, yes.

Hild: Do you find students as curious and as willing to learn as forty years ago?

Davis: Yes, perhaps their curious in different ways, they want to learn different things in different ways. Yes, I do find that. I'm glad to see that. Tomorrow in fact, I'll lecture or make a presentation in one colleague's class, on the civil war and I fully expect that those twenty-five students there will be as interested in what's going on as the students I had thirty, forty, fifty years ago. I think that'll be the case. I won't have any technology, I won't even have a laser pointer. I may have a map. But I think that students do want to learn. The ability of students to tap into major libraries and to tap into primary sources now I think may make students a bit impatient with what I would call ordinary learning or learning at an ordinary pace.

Hild: Slow cooking.

Davis: Yes, slow cooking. Maybe that's okay. Maybe they have the ability now to pull together and to synthesis and to digest and to work with materials in ways that students thirty, forty years ago did not have, partly because of the fast-paced nature of technology. Maybe that's the case. On the other hand I do know, I've seen some students who have come to worship the technology and not the product that technology can produce. I think that's a problem.

Hild: Um, do you find your students are—we think of the seventies and sixties we think of rebelling against authority; is your authority as a source of educational material or knowledge, is that challenged?

Davis: No, in a way sometimes that's too bad. No, it is not. Having gray hair helps a bit, I think, the image for a while carries the day so to speak. But there must

be substance behind the image. No one of the finest students I ever had, sadly is now deceased, was a fellow who as a freshman when he was at the college, would raise his hand and basically say in a rather firm way, politely but firm way, would say, "Professor Davis that isn't right, Professor Davis it didn't work out that way." And I would say "Oh, tell me Ray, how did it work". Well he would give his version. He was an exceptionally interested student. He was curious about everything. At one geography class I was teaching I happened to make an off-hand comment. I said oh in an article that appeared three or four years ago I said, such and such an idea was stated. He raised his hand and he said "No, that was about eight years ago." And I said, "Really?" I said "do you know that article?" He said "Yes". Well the article was in *Commentary* a publication that few students, few academicians read. I said "Where did, how did you go to find that article?" He said, "Well", this was when he was a sophomore at this time, he said "Well, last year I discovered *Commentary* and I went back and I read a lot of the back issues." I said "really". He said "Oh, I love it" he said. And anyway he was right, the article was from about eight years a back and he remembered. Another occasion when I was teaching a civil war class I mentioned that certain weapon, I said was probably introduced around 1864. And again he raised his hand and politely said "No that weapon was deployed and in use in the fall of 1863." I checked and he was right, he got that fact right. So he in raising these points, Ray and other students were indicating that they were paying attention, that they took the undertaking seriously, seriously enough to raise their hand and challenge something that I said. It also I think for Ray and for others this whole enterprise had a moral dimension. Ray could not let something slide by that was not true. He came at this from a certain perspective, certain set of understandings, but to him truth was terribly important and making sure that the last detail was correct was important for him. This did not always sit well with some people. They found this to be bothersome and they found it to be a bit of an irritant. But I've always welcomed students who want to raise points that are not in conformity with whatever it was I was saying at the time. Some of the very best students have done that. Some students who have received As from me, sadly were the ones who could take what I said, memorize it, put it down on paper and convince me that they knew it. That bothered me, they were not curious beyond the assignments. They were not curious beyond the class, I had no choice but to award them with the grade of A. It was the other students, the B- students and B students who were truly inquisitive, truly saw moral dimension to learning that are forever in my memory.

Hild: Students can just give back to you what you give them and let it go at that. What do with like someone who is—the reason for the Civil War was that God was punishing us, providential cause?

Davis: I've had some students who saw history and saw geography along those lines.

Hild: I had a creationist in geography, yeah.

Davis: Oh yes, yes. All I could do under those conditions was to Number One listen to them, respect their take on things and try to get them to realize that there may be other ways of understanding and those other ways may have validity. The question of course came boiled down to sometimes to the test or to the paper that they would write. I can think of students who saw geopolitics, saw the working of history through the eyes of providence, through God was doing this or the reason we must support Israel for example, is because God has told us to do this; never mind other considerations. And again some of these people were very good students and some of them are I know are out doing fine things now. I did not see it as my job to belittle their take or undermine it or to in any way try to strip it away from them. I did see it as my role to listen to them with respect and try to get them to see that other people saw things differently. I did expect them to understand how other people saw things. So when it came time to write an exam for example, they did have to know the understandings of MacKinder, Spykeman and other geopoliticians and they had to put their ideas down in a way that convinced me that they knew these. At the same time when they left class they perhaps would take understandings that they gained from the class with them. Perhaps their own original ideas intact and unchanged, I don't know.

Hild: When was the last time you—you said you were lecturing tomorrow—but are you relieved of all you classroom duties now?

Davis: Yes, very happily about five years ago I went to talk to the President of the College, Axel Steuer, and I worked out an arrangement with him by which I retired in kind of phases. Beginning about five years ago I asked to be relieved of all responsibility outside of the classroom and my office. That meant that I had the option to go to any faculty meeting I wanted to go, I could go. I could attend any other meeting that I was entitled to go to, but I did not have to. So I chose not to go to any. (laughter) I rejoiced in that, that lifted from me a burden.

Hild: You have emeritus status, then?

Davis: Yes, I have emeritus status. Then I also worked out an arrangement at the same time by which I taught half time for the last two or three years of college of my teaching. I continue to receive the financial support to research, to write, to travel, to do these things. I had a diminished salary for the courses I did teach, the half time courses I did teach somewhat diminished salary. I continue to receive benefits from the college but I had no responsibilities beyond the teaching and the advising. Well, I didn't even have formal advising, but I was expected to make myself available to students as I did in the classroom or in the office. That was a great arrangement and then when I retired what two years ago, I was granted emeritus status and then I was asked to come back this last spring and teach an upper level course. I taught the Early National course and it was a good experience. I relearned how hard teaching it is, physically hard it is. How hard it is to teach for fifty minutes,

well it's an hour and a quarter actually. How draining it is and at the same time how exhilarating it is. It was a learning experience for me, it was a good class and I still see one or two of the students from that class.

Hild: If you're emeritus and teaching one class, they don't call you adjunct then you're…

Davis: No.

Hild: That overrides it. So after all those decades where you could do it standing on your head, it's still not easy at times.

Davis: No, yeah.

Hild: Yeah, you know when you look at your five decades of participation in this project here, what was your favorite decade? Any idea even?

Davis: Oh……

Hild: That would be a tough question for anyone.

Davis: I think the first few years of teaching in Dearborn, junior high and senior high, were exhilarating. It was a time of learning for me. I learned a great deal about how to teach, I had some wonderful colleagues and administrators. Those were exhilarating years. Married in 1966, working on my Masters and starting my PhD program, those were good exhilarating years. They were exciting years nationally in terms of the events going on in the country. But I guess if I had to pick—pin down a few years it would be some years in the seventies with some wonderful students. Some of whom I still see, some of whom are still associated with the agency here in Springfield. And in the eighties under the leadership of President Mundinger there was a feeling of a sense that we were moving up in a variety of ways. Moving up in terms of the rapidly expanding endowment, new buildings, new opportunities for faculty were beginning to be developed for research opportunities, opportunities to take students here and there. There was a general sense of upward momentum in the eighties. Added to that was the fact that beginning in around 1987 I think, yes, I began to get more non-traditional students. These were students who were coming back to college or coming to college for the first time perhaps, who were in their thirties and forties. These students were wonderful, almost without exception. They were superior students and to have one or two or three or in one or in a couple of cases four of these students in one class was to realize that this class would be great. And they made it great. An overwhelming majority of them were women and many of them had families. There was one who had four kids at the time, she was married, four kids and she was a spark plug and I don't know in three or four different classes. She also along with two or three other non-traditional students accompanied me to the Soviet Union in the winter of 1990-1991 and were very good on that sixteen day trip in the winter in seeing Russia and the Baltic Republics. There

was another woman who lived forty miles to the south. She got up every morning, got her family going, made her husband's lunch and then drove forty miles on icy roads and rainy conditions to campus. She was also a about a straight A student. She was late to one class one time because she got icy–an ice storm had obliterated parking places and she had to park—she left at something like five in the morning. Got up here and couldn't find a parking spot within about three blocks of the campus and was late for one class. That was an age of non-trads as we called them, the non-trads coming back to school and leavening the loaf—wherever they were, whatever they did they improved everything. So those were good times, we have fewer now, we have had since the retirement of President Mundinger some uneven times at Illinois College. Times of some uncertainty, some turbulence and those conditions are, well I hope will not continue.

Hild: In addition to teaching you also did some traveling with the students then?

Davis: Yes, yes.

Hild: What was the nature of that?

Davis: Well there were about four or five different things that motivated travel. One was to take students to law schools. I helped beginning in the early seventies, around seventy-three or four, I helped the then pre-law advisor on campus to encourage students to consider law. We went to places like, we took students to places like St. Louis University and when my colleague who was the pre-law advisor retired in the early nineties, then I became the pre-law advisor and took students to Chicago to the law schools there, to U of I down to St. Louis and elsewhere on pre-law trips. Another set of travel experiences had to do with taking students to historical sights here in Springfield, down to the French country down at Cahokia and Kaskaskia, St. Genevieve. Take them to St. Louis to ah yeah U of I and up to Chicago and elsewhere. Then also twice, I took students to Washington, D.C. to enable them to research in the Library of Congress and the National Archives. Then we visited other places in the evenings or on weekends or whatever. Another set of experiences beginning in the early nineties enabled me to take—some sources enabled me to take students to Civil War battlefields: the ones down in Tennessee and Mississippi and also the ones in Maryland and Pennsylvania and Virginia. I did that oh I don't know how many times but they were great experiences. And finally in the late eighties, 1987, 1988 some funds were becoming available to take students overseas. They were the very first funds, became available I think in 1986 or 1987. I tapped into these funds in 1987 to take twenty nine students and others to the Soviet Union. That was quite an experience because—I take that back no that was the first time I went to the Soviet Union. It was in 1990, 1991 that the funds were beginning to be available and that's when I took twenty nine students to the Soviet Union. It was at an exciting time because the Soviet Union was in a state of beginning to collapse at that time; it was very evident. But prior to that funds enabled me to—the Malcolm Stewart

Fund at Illinois College enabled me to go to Russia to learn some Russian throughout June of 1989 and I studied Russian in Moscow. With the understanding that then I would teach the Russian Soviet courses, which I did in the nineties and into this century because our Dean, Dean Wallace Jamison was going to retire in….what year was he going to retire in…around 1993 or thereabouts, and so I took over Russian and Soviet course. I wanted to see Russia and the Soviet Union. I wanted to learn some language. I wanted to learn art and architecture and I did. I also applied for and received two major grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities to study Russian art and architecture for six weeks in the summer of 1992 and six weeks in the summer of 1994 and that helped me tremendously in teaching these classes. I might add, more recently we've had three National Endowment for the Humanities summer seminars on campus at Illinois College, year 2003, 2009, and 2011. We've brought teachers from all over the country to these to study the American Frontier with emphasis on Illinois and whatnot and I've traveled with them. I traveled down to the French country and to Nauvoo and to St. Louis and various other places.

Hild: Were you the tour guide?

Davis: Kind of the tour guide, yes. They were—it was a lot of fun with those NEHers and they were all good groups all three times.

Hild: Yeah, yeah.

Davis: So a lot of travel. As the college obtained more endowment and as travel became increasingly possible in the late eighties, early nineties, I was one who jumped at the chance to try to tap these funds to travel and to take students with me. I love that.

Hild: Yeah, so what does it a matter of days or weeks that you'll have no longer any affiliation with Illinois College?

Davis: Yes, we're moving back to Michigan in late April, apparently April 24th. We will be going back to our native state and will be locating close to where our daughters live. Our daughters live in Plymouth or Plymouth Township with their families. My brother lives not too far away up near Flint. I've a close cousin who lives about four miles from where we will be living. We'll be living in a new subdivision in the northern part of a little town of Dexter. Dexter is located about eight or ten miles northwest of Ann Arbor. So we'll be getting back to familiar landmarks.

Hild: Yes. You'll want to get library privileges at the university won't you?

Davis: Oh, I've already, I've already been in touch with them, yes. __the (unintelligible??)

Hild: Well um, you moved from Ann Arbor to Jacksonville in 1971 and I presume your children were if not born certainly raised there.

Davis: Yes.

Hild: And then they live in—well how did they wind up back in—tell us about your daughters.

Davis: Well, they—Kathi and Mary, came to Jacksonville when they were about sixteen months old. They grew up in Jacksonville and absorbed I think, some of the finest offerings that Jacksonville had and few of the vices, if any, and they turned out to be very fine daughters. Through a tuition exchange program that Illinois College had at the time we had a number of options as to where they could go to college providing they could you know get in and meet the acceptance requirements. We looked at a number of these colleges. We looked at Hanover and we looked, I don't know several others, and make a long story short they loved Adrian College in southeastern Michigan. It's southwest of Ann Arbor, about thirty-five miles, a lovely little town of Adrian. There are two colleges in that town and it's a county seat and there are other attractions in it. They went to Adrian. Adrian was a very fine place for them. They fell in love with Michigan. We would go back to Michigan frequently when they were growing up to see relatives. Joanie's mother has a cottage on Lake Michigan in the upper peninsula. We would go up there; so they were already Michigan oriented in a sense. When Kathi got married about seven years ago now, seven or eight years ago now, she and her husband wanted to live in Michigan. Her husband has a job in Detroit. He commutes from Plymouth, down to Detroit almost every day. They greatly like the town of Plymouth. Plymouth is a town that we grew up knowing. It wasn't far from Dearborn. We visited Sunday afternoon we'd go for drives out to Plymouth and out to Selene and Clinton and to the town of Dexter, where we're moving. Mary, our other daughter, married about what thirteen, fourteen years back now or something; anyway she and her husband lived in the Detroit area a little bit. Then they—he got a job in Wisconsin, Wauwautosa near Milwaukee. They were there for about five years. Then they he was transferred to Greenville, South Carolina. They lived there for five years and now he has a job that took him back to Southeastern Michigan. When it came time for them to move they looked all over for a house and as it turned out, really by sheer coincidence or by providence or whatever, they found a house about four blocks from Kathi's house.

Hild: (laughter)

Davis: So it happens that our two daughters live very close to each other and that makes visiting them easy.

Hild: Sure, are there grandchildren?

Davis: There are four grandchildren.

Hild: I assume then that's a big part of the reason for relocating?

Davis: Definitely, we were many times torn by the fact that we would be leaving as one of the grandchildren would be engaging in a game or being in a musical or in a play or whatever; we had to come home. We decided that in so many words that we—life was too short not to enjoy the grandchildren and our daughters and their husbands. So that was the big factor that induced us to move back to Michigan.

Hild: So you'll be moving out of state but you'll still be engaged with you know you're moving you're not ending your career, yes well….

Davis: No, no.

Hild: What are your plans for the future then aside from relocation?

Davis: Well I'm taking with me probably terribly, unreasonably large collection of notes and of Xeroxed material, Civil War letters that I've Xeroxed all over the place and taking them; many boxes of these. So I do have some projects that I started and well as far back as the eighties on the Civil War that I hope to push forward and hope to complete. I'm in touch with some major publishers, university publishers two in particular over three of the projects and they're interested in these. We'll see how far that goes. I think I'm in good health. I know I'm going to be very much a part of the grandchildren's lives and attending all kinds of events and family gatherings. I look forward to that but in the spare time I do hope to work on these projects and push some of them forward and complete them.

Hild: Um hum. Well you know I'm thinking you know you told us that in graduate school you were focused and spent all your time in your carrel in the library while all hell was breaking loose out in the streets. I wonder if you'd be able do that with your grandchildren? (laughter)

Davis: No and I don't want to. Ah, no. Our house will have for me an office and I do expect to spend some time in the office. I hope to finish them and I'll be happy if I finish it but its secondary to family.

Hild: Well you know you've had a long and distinguished career here in Illinois. For all of us Illinoisans we hope we certainly haven't seen the last of you.

Davis: Thank you.

Hild: In fact we anticipate your return on occasion for events and that kind of thing.

Davis: And we intend to and I look forward to attending the conferences here in the state, in the college.

Hild: Good, we'll be there. Alright.

Davis: Thanks so much.

End of interview.