

Sam Davis: Ethical Comstock Humorist

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A story is told of a clergyman who was once visited by an angel. The clergyman asked how many people from his town were destined for Heaven. “Only one,” replied the angel, and named a man known for his constant joking. “What quality does that man have,” asked the surprised clergyman, “that outweighs the piety, the scholarship, or the solid achievements of so many of our other inhabitants?” “He makes people laugh,” answered the angel. “It is a rare and precious virtue.” Samuel Post Davis made many people laugh, but that was not his only talent; he also was a force for ethics in a region whose motto could have been *caveat emptor*.

In the familiar literary phrase, Davis is an unjustly neglected author. But the phrase is familiar because many worthy authors of the nineteenth century are in truth unjustly neglected. Someone today who wishes to read Davis will have difficulty in locating his works. He published only two books in his lifetime: *Short Stories* (1886)—which has not been reprinted—and the two-volume *History of Nevada* (1913)—which has. But before *Short Stories*, Davis published more fiction than

was collected in it, as well as much nonfiction and poetry.¹

Sam Davis was both the youngest and the last of the major writers of the Comstock Lode in Nevada. Although he arrived in the West when he was only twenty-two, he had been a journalist since his late teens. He had learned his trade on Nebraska and Chicago newspapers before he and his family moved to California in 1872, and he began writing for a variety of San Francisco area journals.² From the very beginning of his career he demonstrated a lively penchant for humor, and in California and Nevada, regions which gave rise to such skillful hoaxers as Ambrose Bierce, Mark Twain, and Dan De Quille, Davis's achievements in that line were quickly recognized as worthy of respect by all of them.

In 1874, for example, a former colleague on the *Vallejo Chronicle* naively asked Davis to cover a horse race for him in San Francisco. Davis mischievously sent several telegrams reporting fabricated events to the paper under his colleague's name. The first said that an earthquake had destroyed the grandstand at the cost of several hundred lives but had not stopped the first race. The second reported that another quake "swallowed up several thousand people." Davis, alias his colleague, urged an extra edition and then claimed he had to flee for his life. The *Chronicle* editor did publish an extra and so alarmed Vallejo residents that some chartered a steamboat to take them to San Francisco to identify or help victims of the quakes. When the boat arrived, however, the passengers were perplexed to find that all was well. The hoax was revealed the next day when Davis sent the editor a bill for \$12.50: \$10 "For earthquake item—two shocks at \$5 per shock" and \$2.50 for "a small boy to cut the wires" so that no San Francisco newspaper could send its own dispatches. Davis then offered to supply the editor with similar "exclusive items" on the shortest notice ("[Untitled]," *Argonaut* 4). As if to demonstrate that the Vallejo hoax would not be a one-time achievement, in that same year Davis, to win a bet, concocted "Binley

¹The selections from his writing used herein have been gathered from *Short Stories*, various uncollected publications, and the private Stoddard-Crowell archive of his clippings and unpublished manuscripts maintained by relatives.

²I cover Davis's publishing career in "Samuel Post Davis."

and '46," a poem in the style of Bret Harte, and published it as Harte's work. Soon *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, believing it had been written by Harte, republished an illustrated version that propelled it to national popularity.

In addition to demonstrating his abilities at Western humor, Davis showed his ethical mettle when he moved to Carson City, Nevada, in 1879 to assist the widowed Nellie Mighels (whom he married a year later) with the *Morning Appeal*. Henry Rust Mighels, its recently deceased editor and a straight-talking and distinguished Comstock journalist in his own right, had made enemies during his honorable career who were now attacking the dead man's character and policies. Davis swung right into the fight, not just by setting the record straight but also by the ferocity of his counterattacks. In those days, a journalist who spoke out boldly had to be prepared to back up his words with fists or guns. Davis silenced the critics because they saw he was serious and prepared to fight. This was not the first time even in his as yet short career that he had put his personal safety and position on the line to report information other people passionately wanted to suppress, nor would it be the last.³ The pattern of digging in his heels when he felt a principle was at stake was deeply ingrained in him quite early.

It might have begun with his father, the Rev. Mr. George R. Davis. Rev. Davis was an Episcopal priest his son Sam always referred to with respect as well as affection, although in some of his later writings it is clear that Sam seems to have drifted away from formal religion towards agnostic skepticism. Rev. Davis held pulpits, successively, in Branford (where Sam was born) and Ansonia, Connecticut; Newark, New Jersey; Brownville, Nebraska; Vallejo and Nevada City, California; and, finally, Carson City. The frequency of moves is unexplained. Rev. Davis must have hoped Sam would follow him into the ministry, for while the

³While Davis worked for the *Omaha Herald*, some Nebraska politicians, stung by his journalistic exposés, sent thugs to his apartment to kill him. Davis slipped out a back window and escaped to another town. From there he outwitted and frustrated his enemies by hiring a friendly colleague to continue

family was living in Nebraska, Sam was sent to Racine College in Wisconsin, then a theological school. Although Sam became a good cricket player there and worked on the school paper, he did not thrive academically, and a fondness for pranks seems to have ended his student career before he could graduate. Still, Sam accompanied his father as he moved westward to fill California and then Nevada pulpits.

Describing Davis as an ethical humorist forces the admission that not all of his humor has an ethical character and that Davis was no saint—indeed, there were few saints on the Comstock. In his later years on the lecture circuit, Mark Twain, describing the abundance of saloons, gambling houses, dance halls, and jails on the Comstock, concluded only half-humorously that “It was no place for a Presbyterian—and I did not remain one very long” (*Mark*). While there were churches on the Comstock, most men in the region were there to make high wages, and the conditions of money-making were such that it was nearly impossible to be successful while living a religiously exemplary life. Nevertheless, many of the Comstock’s best writers were highly moral, if not religious, individuals. Davis was one of the few leading figures on the Comstock for whom wealth and power were not main priorities.⁴ In the course of his editorial and political campaigns Davis was occasionally charged by opponents with unethical behavior, but he always met those challenges head on and none succeeded.

But if his public record supported the inculpability of his own actions, Davis was aware that it did not record everything. In “The Campaign Debt,” a witty poem he wrote after he became active in politics, he reflected wryly on the weakness of the flesh where human affairs were concerned:

Once when on a campaign trip I met a dainty maid,
Who for a job political solicited my aid.

⁴In Virginia City, Joe Goodman was an outspoken opponent of egregious corruption and deceit, and he inspired Mark Twain, Rollin Daggett, and Dan DeQuille, while they worked for him, to follow his principles. In Carson City, Goodman’s role was undertaken first by Henry Mighels and then Sam Davis. I examine this phenomenon in *Ethical Records of Twain and His Circle of Sagebrush Journalists* (1994).

And in the conversation she led me to infer,
She'd like a stenographic st[i]nt at a hundred dollars per.
In compensation for a boost this maiden did agree,
To fall upon my willing neck in payment for her fee.
Lured by her gauzy promise I got the girl the place,
And all the other candidates were hustled from the race.
But after she copped the job and salted down some dough,
She didn't seem to me the same seductive little Flo.
And when she ambled down the street, in gay attire you bet,
She lost all recollection of that little campaign debt.
I met her once at eventide, and told her I felt sore,
That she had been so mortal slow in settling that score.
She looked me squarely in the face, with eye that never
swerved.

"A pact political is never religiously observed.
You told the voters you would send monopoly to grass,
But ever since election you have ridden on a pass."

* * *

I never got the principal from that designing maid.
But installments on the interest have occasionally been
paid.⁵

While the poem is very likely not strictly autobiographical, its wry and self-mocking tone reflects self-knowledge as well as honest wisdom about universal human patterns far more basic than temptations created by any particular political event.

A second poem, although untitled, because of its allusion to Shaw's notorious play *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1898) could aptly be titled "The Mrs. Warren of Carson City." It is as successful as "The Campaign Debt" in combining entertainment and thoughtful meditation on a political topic:

Her figure was perfect, her face was exquisite
When first she blew in to pay Carson a visit.

⁵This poem, edited for grammar and spelling, follows the text of a manuscript in the Stoddard-Crowell family archive, maintained by Mr. Royal Crowell, of Orange, California.

She had been but a couple of weeks in the city
 When she copped a fat job as a clerk of Committee.
 Her bonnets were dreams, clothes perfect in fitting
 Whether standing or walking, reclining or sitting.
 Whether dancing or flirting, receiving or feeding,
 Her manners were always the height of good breeding.
 The kids in the lower house simply adored her
 And the senators most deferential toward her.
 But 'twas covertly whispered when half through the session
 That the lady had known "Mrs. Warren's Profession."
 Of course 'twasn't sure and not positively certain
 Of her present or past, and none lifted the curtain.
 If a bill needed help, you'd certainly find it
 Moved better along with this lady behind it.
 Slow, adipose members who long loved to linger
 Would jump like gazelles at the crook of her finger.
 Her conduct was seldom with levity laden;
 She posed as a prim Puritanical maiden.

Her figure was perfect, her face was exquisite
 When first she blew in to pay Carson a visit.
 Now mention her name and there's scoff and derision
 And she's gone from our gaze like a beautiful vision.⁶

Like the drunkards and gamblers still fond of the weakness that ruined their lives, the speaker remains ambivalent about the vanished poser who enriched herself at others' expense yet brought the intoxication of alluring beauty into their lives.

This same ironic balancing of materialistic and sentimental values lies at the heart of Davis's most famous story, "The First Piano in Camp." Originally titled "A Christmas Carol," the tale is about a hoaxer in disguise who steals a large amount of money from a remote mining camp on Christmas Eve. Before doing this, he first restores to

⁶This untitled poem, edited for grammar and spelling, follows the text of a

the hard-bitten men in the camp's saloon precious feelings and memories they had almost forgotten by playing childhood songs, familiar ballads, and carols for hours on a piano. Davis wisely does not draw a moral in this rich story. Implicit in it, however, are questions of whether the men gained or lost most by their Christmas Eve experience, and also about the larger wonderment of how a person with such capacity to move the heart could be a swindler, a question at least as old as Chaucer's "The Pardoner's Tale."

This thoughtful probing of ethical matters is characteristic of Davis, and he was particularly interested in situations of moral ambivalence or paradoxicality and sometimes explored them in his fiction.⁷ "The Parish Primaries," for example, begins with a surreptitious plan by the shallow parishioners of St. Paul's Church to remove its virtuous but dull and unsuspecting rector at the Easter election of vestrymen. At this point, a secular and unscrupulous political boss, hearing of the plot, decides to join the church in order to intervene on the side of the rector for no other reason than that "he loved to be able to spoil somebody's little game" (118). Davis quite possibly had inside information on church politics from his father, and the story, a deft mixture of psychological and moral ironies, contains some choice passages of theological aspirations expressed in gamblers' argot. Virtue is rescued at the end but not by virtuous means. Unstated but clearly implicit is a Machiavellian dilemma: if the end does

⁷Davis's uncollected—and sometimes uncompleted—fiction manuscripts in the Stoddard-Crowell archive include some striking examples of this interest. Among the best are "The Conversion of Champagne Liz," the three versions of which reflect slightly different positions on the theological issue of salvation by faith or deeds, and "The Divorcon," unfortunately unfinished, for it would have been one of the earliest and most thoughtful treatments in fiction of Nevada's divorce industry. Even in its unfinished state it shows evidence of Davis at the top of his literary form in his mature phase, it shows impressive potential in its depiction of the moral complications that arise when a divorce lawyer and his client become romantically involved, and it probes the morality of laws, religious as well as legal, which bind together two people who no longer love each other and keep apart two others who

not justify the means, would the observer prefer virtue to lose?

The same problem is posed in “A Day with Bill Nye,” a particularly interesting piece because it may be based on experience. Sam Davis appears in it in his own person, as does Bill Nye, a well-known humorist of the period, and the fact that both Davis and Nye were widely known as accomplished liars adds another layer to the ironies of the tale. The work describes Davis’s visit to Nye, one of whose jobs in Laramie, Wyoming, was justice of the peace. While Nye is sitting in judgment on a case whose legal ramifications are not only beyond him but also involve a conflict of interest on his part, Davis arrives, and a glib Nye immediately introduces him as Judge Berryfloss of San Francisco, a former member of the Twelfth Judicial District bench, and maneuvers Davis into publicly agreeing to give him legal counsel. Despite the complete duplicity of the proceedings, Nye succeeds in having justice done. The story, in short, is funny but again raises complex questions about unethical means to an ethical end.

A good deal of Davis’s ethical humor appears in a series of clever fictitious sketches written for the *San Francisco Daily Examiner* in the late 1880s and early 1890s, a series attesting that Davis’s popularity was at this time already established, for it identifies him as one of William Randolph Hearst’s earliest choices after Hearst became publisher of the *Examiner* in 1887 and immediately began hiring the best literary talent he could find. In these sketches Davis would frequently mock well-known real-life personalities—including himself—by depicting them either in uncomplimentary situations or in activities so blatantly out of keeping with their characters as to be ludicrous.

An example of how Davis satirized unethical behavior occurs in a piece supposedly aimed at himself.⁸ He narrates how he once dawdled to the last minute in preparing a speech, for which he had been engaged, because he was “perfectly serene” about his ability to crib it from an encyclopedia set at home. But when he finally went to the set, he noticed that one volume, that dealing with entries beginning with the letter “N,” did not have the coating of thick dust that lay over all

⁸This piece and the next two are undated clippings in the Stoddard-Crowell

the other volumes. Davis comments, "A dreadful suspicion flashed across my mind that I hardly dared to harbor at first that my wife had presented a paper on the early English novel sometime last winter." Looking into the volume, he found "a piece torn from a newspaper which had been left there as a bookmark" with a date just preceding that of his wife's presentation: "It was perfectly plain now and there I was confronted with the damning evidence of her guilt." In expressing shock at his wife's guilt at misrepresenting her expertise, Davis conveniently overlooks his own intention to do the same thing. Although the thrust of the incident is humorously turned inward, the larger point is a disparagement of hypocrisy.

Frequently returning to the device of the hypocritical first-person narrator, Davis skillfully extended it beyond apparent self-mockery to social criticism. In an article on Nevada voting practices, for instance, he cloaks with humor the seriousness of his criticism of the corruption of "the sacred graveyard vote":

Much has been said and written about the graveyard vote in this state. The idea prevails in the sparsely settled districts of Missouri and in a few New York City wards that polling places are established on election day in the various cemeteries about Virginia City and Carson.

There is no foundation for these slanders.

No one here would allow a polling place to be set up in the sacred precincts of the dead.

Of course dead men have been voted at the polls in Virginia City at primaries, but never at regular elections, unless the votes were absolutely necessary for the salvation of the party, and then only on the advice of the County Central Committee.

The narrator's irate and absolute denial, followed by damning qualifications, each preceded by "of course" or "unless," is skillful tongue-in-cheek black humor in the tradition of Swift's *A Modest Proposal* (1729). Just below the narrator's patriotic denials is the author's scorn of the custom practiced not only in Nevada, but in Missouri, New York City,

and, by implication, elsewhere.

Using apparently self-mocking humor as the sugar coating of a bitter pill, Davis ranges easily and with selective precision in the *Examiner* series over a number of targets. His handling of political personalities required literary deftness as well as moral daring because he faced a real danger of incurring financial or even physical retaliation. The following passage illustrates how Davis could approach his targets with skillful indirection, yet quickly dart in, thrust in his knife, and pull away almost as if the stab had been unintentional. While pretending to describe with naïve enthusiasm a “great play” that he wrote, he thus summarizes part of its action:

The second scene of the third act contained a touching picture where a broker got conscience-stricken and returned to a starving widow the amount she had invested in stocks. In the next act was a fine mechanical scene where Senator Fair was laying the cornerstone of an Asylum for Disabled Miners, all built at his own expense.

Some of the surface humor obviously derives from the protagonist’s seeming unawareness that his excessively sentimental plot is inconsistent with literary quality. The real targets of the passage, however, are, first, the improbable notion of a conscience-stricken stockbroker and, second, the unbelievable idea that Silver King Senator James G. Fair, notoriously miserly and uncompassionate, would do anything at his own expense to assist miners who were disabled in his mines. Davis hated Fair, as did many other Comstockers, but Davis was one of the very few who ever openly criticized him.

In fact, one of the riskiest causes that Davis pursued was his courageously persistent campaign against “Slippery Jim” Fair, one of the most unscrupulous of the Comstock’s wealthy mine owners. Most Comstock journalists either ignored Fair’s many deceits or even flattered him because Fair could play very rough. Davis, however, in addition to his disgust with Fair’s character, had reason to believe that Fair was responsible for at least one murder, and maybe more, and Davis re-

solved not to let the matter remain hushed. Apparently alone among Comstock journalists, he jabbed at Fair in his columns. He could not risk a blatant exposé of Fair because that certainly would have led to a prohibitively expensive lawsuit, and the witnesses he would have needed were either unavailable or would be vulnerable. Instead, Davis goaded Fair, doubtlessly assuming that Fair would not want a court case which would surely cause him to lose face in the public eye.

Another example of Davis's cleverly savage treatment of Fair appeared in an issue of a newspaper Davis published for the Nevada State Exhibit at the 1894 Midwinter Fair in San Francisco:

Jackass Hill, Jan.1—The new Presbyterian minister James G. Fair arrived at the hill yesterday and preached a glowing sermon, taking for his text the sixth verse of the fourth chapter of Corinthians, which says: "And these things brethren I have in a figure transferred to myself **." He dwelt also upon the advantage of an early Christian education as connected with the mining industry. He was introduced to the congregation by Major James Gillis, who took up the collection and repaired to the vestry, where the Reverend Mr. Fair joined him after the benediction. In a few moments the sound of an altercation issued from the rear and a rough and tumble fight followed in which Gillis and the new Parson were engaged. It appeared that Fair had guaranteed Gillis 20 per cent of the collection and wanted to cut him down to 15; hence the row.

Enoch Strother, a Methodist missionary who witnessed the racket, says Gillis was the liveliest on his feet and landed three times in the midst of the preacher's whiskers before that dignitary could get in an overhand paste with a Moody & Sankey hymnal, which blow knocked Gillis senseless, after which Fair skinned off with the stakes and reopened again at 7 o'clock sharp for evening praise service, where he took up the collection himself.

Gillis is now in the rear of Campfire Jake's Saloon having his injuries treated by Hair[sic]-Lip Annie, the old parish nurse.

Mr. Fair is destined to become a very popular preacher in this

camp if he keeps up his licks. (“[Untitled],” *Midwinter* 4)

Every line of this piece is drenched in satire. First, not only was Fair not, of course, a clergyman, he was a Roman Catholic. James Gillis (who was not a major) was the bachelor brother of Steve Gillis, Mark Twain’s friend, and was famous in the Jackass Hill region of California for his storytelling abilities. If Gillis even knew Fair, he probably did not admire him. Thus, part of the spoof lies in Davis’s friendly rivalry with Gillis at storytelling, and part rests on the ludicrous propositions that Gillis would be a member of Fair’s church and also cut a deal with him on splitting the take from charitable donations. The biblical quotation, besides warping the meaning of “in a figure,” typifies Fair’s inclination to transfer “figures” (i.e., money) to himself and is abridged by asterisks, the implication being that Fair selects from the Bible only what suits him and misconstrues it. This is reinforced in the next sentence in which the ambiguous phraseology “Christian education as connected with the mining industry” is in itself close to an oxymoron. The narrator thinly pretends not to notice that taking a cut of the collection is wrong on the face of it and only reports that the cause of the fight was Fair’s renegeing on his promise—the kind of action typical of Fair’s practices. The description of the imaginary fight is especially delightful in the way it mixes formal English with revealing slang terms such as “paste” and “skinned off.” Similarly, the details that Fair “reopened” for evening praise service and made sure he took up the collection himself further damn Fair for his pious hypocrisy. The penultimate improbable sentence about Gillis being treated in the back of a saloon by Hair-Lip Annie, a parish nurse, is another friendly dig at Gillis, but the last line’s irony and its derogatory phrase “if he keeps up his licks” are unambiguously hostile toward Fair.

Such layered humor and irony demonstrate that Davis was a writer of skill, depth, and subtlety, one worthy of renewed study. His ethical principles were manifested not only in his writings but also in his public life. Davis’s finest hour occurred while he served as ex-officio insurance commissioner for Nevada, a post probably intended to be mainly honorific, as a reward for his engagement in Nevada politics. Most men in this position would have regarded it as a sinecure. But in 1906 an earthquake devastated most of San Francisco, and insurance com-

panies attempted to cut their losses by stalling on payments and pressuring victims to settle for less. At that point, Davis, acting on his own, publicly announced that any insurance company that did not pay one hundred cents on the dollar in California would not be permitted to do business in Nevada. When other states began to follow his lead, the insurance companies gave up and complied with their contracts. This episode makes dramatically clear the vast good a single individual can accomplish by taking a moral stand.

Other examples of Davis's exemplary public service abound. He was directly responsible for arranging the funding of the statue of John Mackay that stands in front of the University of Nevada School of Mines, and he was indirectly responsible for establishing that school itself. He was tireless in supporting Nevada's interests, promoting Nevada tourism, and opposing dishonest practices of brokering Nevada mining stocks. He was also instrumental in establishing an Arbor Day in Nevada and in bringing the Corbett-Fitzsimmons prize fight to Reno.

Nevertheless, toward the end of a life dedicated to bringing laughter to the multitudes who read his humor and listened to his jokes at social functions, to service to the community, to good deeds in general, and to the steadfast support of ethical causes, Davis felt neglected by a citizenry who forgot today what he had done for it yesterday. He was wearied of captious sniping by the many enemies he had inevitably made, and, according to family tradition, the last piece Davis wrote, a poem entitled "The Gleaner," reflects his sorrow and loneliness:

I watched the gleaners rake the field
After the ripening sheaves were stored,
Toiling the while in the noonday sun,
As they garnered their meager hoard.

And when they called on the autumn winds
To help them winnow the golden wheat,
The chaff went out to be scattered wide,

While the grain fell at their feet,
I wandered over the field of life,
Following after the harvest done;
While in the stubble I sought for friends,
And gathered them one by one.

And after the crowning autumn years
The field of friendship I culled once more.
And, as I gathered the winnowed grain,
I grieved at the scanty store.

The winds of adversity swept the chaff,
And, as it littered the desert sand,
I gathered the wheat from about my feet
And held it all in my hollowed hand.⁹

In the final analysis, life for Davis was serious. He outlived most of his friends and learned at the end, painfully it appears, that virtue was its own reward. Although his last written words were sad, he left behind many others that still evoke thoughtful pleasure. Some of his pieces are already available, and more are fortunately being recovered.¹⁰ In more than the obvious sense, more silver ore of the Comstock remains to be mined, and it runs deep.

⁹This poem, edited for grammar and spelling, follows the text of a manuscript in the Stoddard-Crowell archive.

¹⁰See especially Berkove's *The Devil's in the Details* (2003). A significant number of Comstock memoirs in this collection is traced to Davis and comprises

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