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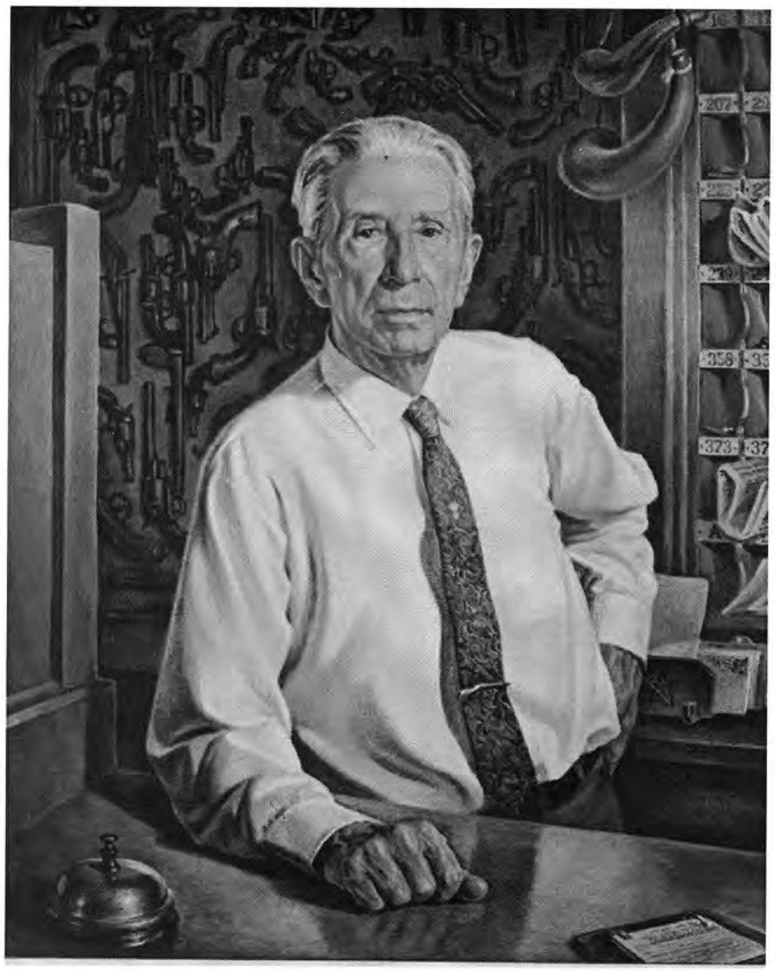
John Mo

"From Hobby to Legacy"

by Patt Cameron



JOHN MONROE DAVIS
1887-1973
by Patt Cameron

John Monroe Davis was born June 27, 1887. His father was a farmer in Union County, Arkansas. He and his wife Bertha Elizabeth were from Danish and Irish immigrant parents. They lived all of their lives in Union County and had nine children.

John Monroe was next to the youngest child. He was always a sickly child and as a result, very spoiled. He hated school because he couldn't play games like other boys. Finally, he rebelled, so his father took him out of school and put him to work on his 400 acre timber plantation. When the doctor said his health was so bad that he wouldn't survive without the medicine that he refused to take, his father offered him a small 410 gauge shotgun that J. M. had been wanting. His father had previously offered him the best pony on the farm and various other gifts which should have made any seven year old shout with joy. J. M. agreed to stop fussing and take the medicine. That was the beginning of a 20,000 firearms and related items collection. The shotgun remained his favorite gun of all the guns he collected. There were no more tantrums and his health improved so much that a year later he didn't need medicine.

He didn't have enough money to buy shells for his gun, so he had to trade some of the valuables he carried in his pockets for shells. He was paid in live ammunition after doing chores for a neighbor. While other boys

played with toy guns, he scouted the woods for rabbits and other small game and was the only one his age with a real gun.

At the age of eleven, J. M.'s father died. He became despondent and inconsolable. Things worsened again when he was fifteen years old and his twelve year old brother, Byron died. When his aunt came to visit and saw that he spent most of his time in his room crying, she talked to him about returning to school. He said that he would if he could attend a military school where he could practice shooting and handling guns. He passed the entrance exam and was accepted at Mt. Magazine Military Academy. He was seventeen years old and owned eight guns. Little did the boy's father realize the impact his simple gift would have on his son's life because twelve years later, the son's firearms collection had grown to ninety-nine.

After spending three years at the academy, in the fall of 1907, J. M. enrolled at Draughn's Business College in Tyler, Texas, for a two year course. He was moody and spent most of his time alone until a friendly young lady named Addie introduced herself. They became good friends over the next two years and during Christmas week of 1910, he married Addie.

J. M. was an avid hunter as a young man. He boasted that at one time, he was the only man who could fell three quail on the draw.

He acquired timber land in Arkansas. After his graduation, he opened a sawmill where he made a

substantial living making hardwood ties for the railroads.

When J. M. and Addie read about oil gushing in and around Tulsa, Oklahoma, the Davis' visited there and saw prosperity. It was 1916, and they stayed in Claremore at the Mason Hotel which was for sale. The hotel had three stories and 125 rooms. Davis offered his timberland in Arkansas as a down payment on the hotel and the hotel owner agreed.

In 1919, Davis purchased and installed the first elevator in Claremore in his hotel. According to Montgomery Elevators in Molene, Illinois, the manufacturer, it was elevator number 3,000 and was at the World's Fair. It was originally to be put in the Belvedere home in Claremore, but wouldn't fit.

Claremore was growing and needed rent houses, so Davis went into construction, building the much needed homes. Mr. And Mrs. Davis bought a lot and built a new home for themselves. A year later, they took over management of the Mason Hotel.

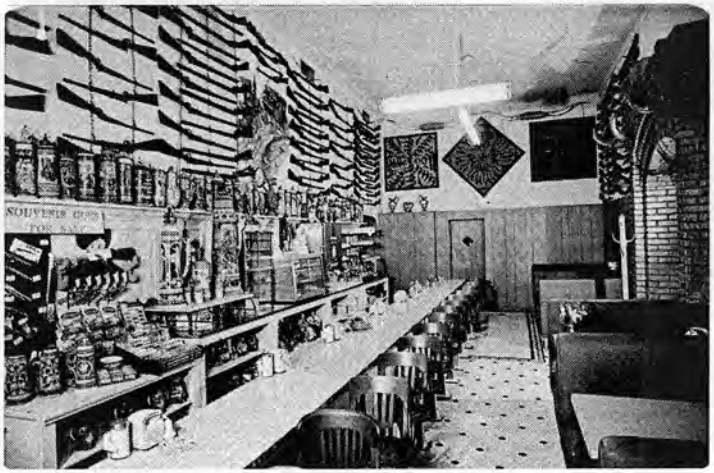
The 1920's brought new improvements to Claremore and Davis served on the City Council for eight years and was mayor from 1921 to 1923. Quite often, more business was conducted in the hotel coffee shop or lobby than at City Hall.

Shops on the first floor level of the hotel included the first bank, a dress shop, and a real estate office. Will Rogers and family dined in the dining room many times and Will stopped by to show Wiley Post the guns. A favorite feature was the ballroom. It was decorated with all the finery of the time and all kinds of parties and celebrations took place there.

J. M. was not only a good businessman and civic leader, he was compassionate. One day, a local citizen who had worked hard all day and was tired went to the hotel Coffee Shop, sat down at the counter and ordered a cup of coffee. The waitress told him she was sorry but they "don't serve colored people..." When she repeated the rule of not serving "coloreds", J. M. came over to him and told the waitress to bring him the coffee. Davis sat down and visited with the man while he drank his coffee

and when he had finished and started to leave, Davis told him to come back anytime and bring his friends.

J. M. was financially stable when the depression of the 1930's occurred. This left many people without jobs or money. When the families living in Davis' rent houses couldn't pay, J. M. didn't ask them to move because he knew they had no place to go. He was the kind of person that was foster parent to many, giving them advice in financial matters and behavior.

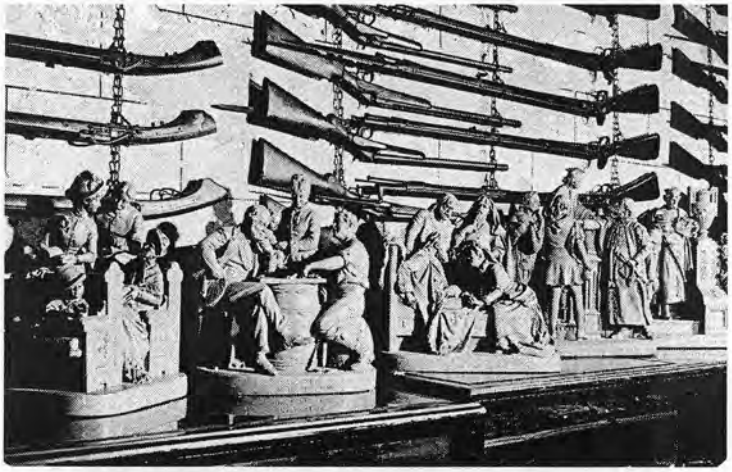


His first sizeable purchase of guns was in 1930, when he acquired the famous U. S. Bessette 500 piece collection. Two years later, he bought the Smith collection and the John Sallings collection of 500, running his total to 2,500 weapons.

In 1933, Davis was again elected Mayor of Claremore, holding the honor for the next 10 years. Opportunities to purchase firearms came so often that he finally had to limit himself to buying $3,000 worth a month. He would then sell or trade about one-third of that number.

The many years of gun swapping had taught him how to make the best of the deal. All who came to the hotel were fascinated with his collection and he showed and talked about the guns as long as they would listen. He collected guns that were unique and different as opposed to specializing in any particular manufacturer or type.

Soon he became internationally known as a gun expert and people came from far and near to buy, sell, trade, or just get his expert opinion. Well known authors would seek him out when writing research books. You will find photos of many guns in his collection included in research material. He also added knives, swords, horns, steins, saddles, Indian artifacts, statues, and other items to the collection. There were also historical items such as World War I and II posters, political buttons, music boxes and John Rogers' statuary.



Many young men from the area serving in World War II would often visit the hotel while on leave. When the young soldiers returned for a visit, they would bring something from the war and give to Davis to hang on his

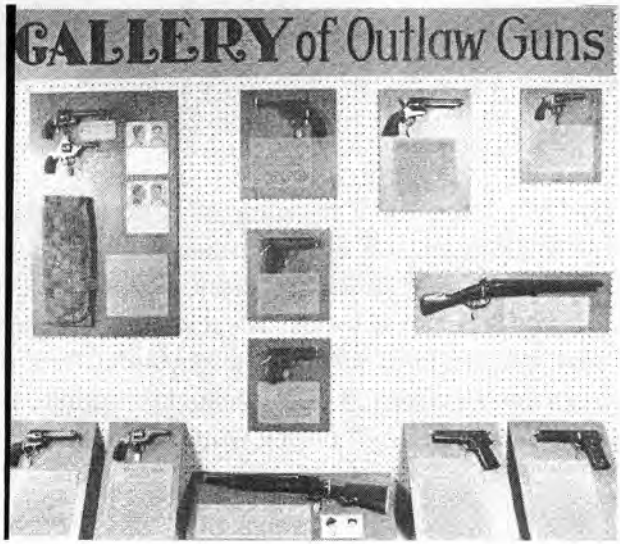
walls for people to enjoy. This accounts for many of the unusual items in the collection.

A handgun said to be like one owned and used by Napolean Bonaparte in his European conquests hung prominently on the wall over the registration desk.

Once he was talking about his guns of famous outlaws and said, "Belle Starr was the spunkiest of all the lot. She used to ride right down the front streets of Fort Smith. I saw her when I was in school in Arkansas. Never saw her without her Winchester slung over the saddle horn and she'd say, 'I don't mean any trouble, but my name is Belle Starr'. Then she would hold up the

bank. One time I saw her rob a train. She could shoot right through a man's heart at 400 yards without fail. She was a pretty woman, slight of build with dark hair and awfully nice to look at. I have her jacket upstairs; just picked it up."

Davis also liked to show visitors the two revolvers that Henry Starr carried with him when he robbed and looted from the Arkansas border to the Red River. His .38 Colt revolver hung at the top of the hotel stairway. Henry Starr had it in his holster on February 18, 1921, when he walked out of the hotel. Davis said, "Never used it again. It turned out he was on his way to rob the bank at Harrison, Arkansas, and the bank teller had a rifle hidden in the vault and shot him dead." As Davis would eye the revolver, he said, "I suppose Henry was a dangerous man, but he was always well-behaved in my hotel." Davis' colorful tales were free, the same as your look at his gun collection.



The collection had gotten so large that Davis started making plans for a museum where the collection would be safe. In 1948, he urged the City of Claremore to build a building and he would donate the lot. The Mayor proclaimed June 27th as J. M. Davis Day, to be celebrated every year.

People would often send or bring Davis artifacts they considered museum material. A farmer ploughed up a large piece of rusted iron near Ft. Smith, Arkansas, which turned out to be a cannon that was used during the Civil War. The farmer sent it to Davis as a gift.

In November, 1959, his wife, Addie, died at the age of 49. They had no children. In July, 1961, he married Genevieve Breeden. He was 74 and she was 54 years old.

Hearing of a rare gun on the west coast, Davis flew to Los Angeles only to find that the gun was already sold to a Portland, Oregon, collector for $800.00. Anxious to see the gun, Davis rushed to Portland and found the purchaser. Curious at finding him crying, Davis learned that the collector had rushed to his basement with the gun to learn if it would fire. Upon pulling the trigger, the gun had virtually fallen apart in his hands. When asked why he continued to collect, Davis' reply was, "Haven't got sense enough to tell you." When quizzed about how he could remember what he'd bought, his answer was, "When it takes all the money you've got, you remember. I've traded several million dollars from beginning to end and they haven't been all winnings--I take my losses same as any other trader." In his

collecting, price took a back seat to uniqueness. He said, "Not the value that's important, but the rarity."

In 1965, J. M. struck a deal with then Governor Henry Bellmon and the legislature appropriated funds for the J. M. Davis Memorial Commission to purchase an entire block. Davis had turned down $7,000,000. offered for the collection to accept $1 to have it remain in Claremore as a museum. He had reportedly been approached by the Smithsonian Institute, Woolaroc Museum, gambling interests in Las Vegas and even Howard Hughes to sell his collection. Hughes reportedly wanted only the collection of 1200 steins.

Plans for a 40,000 square foot museum building were approved in 1968 and Mr. and Mrs. Davis broke ground for the new Davis Gun Museum. The building was constructed two blocks north of his Mason Hotel where the collection was displayed for over 40 years.

Even with Davis' help, it took a tremendous amount of time to catalog and move the collection into the new building. Pictured below, cataloging the John Rogers statuary, Sue Cook on the left and Shirley Johnson on the right, both later advanced to the position of Director of the Museum.

On June 27, 1969, the museum opened on Davis' 82nd birthday. A medallion was struck in honor of J. M. Davis and he was presented with the first one. Only 100 were made in sterling silver and a very limited number of solid bronze. The Franklin Mint produced the coins which depict Davis and his guns on the front and illustrates some of the many other items he collected on the reverse of the coin.

On June 25, 1972, on his 85th birthday, Davis was honored with a street in Claremore being named after him, J. M. Davis Boulevard.

Citizens of Claremore, Rogers County, and friends contributed $3,000 to commission famed artist Charles Banks Wilson to capture Davis in an oil painting to hang in the museum.

Wilson said the portrait had been a real challenge for him because Davis could only sit for 10 to 15 minutes at a time. It was done in the Mason Hotel lobby while J. M. was sitting behind the front desk. An open house was held March 5, 1970, to unveil Davis' portrait.

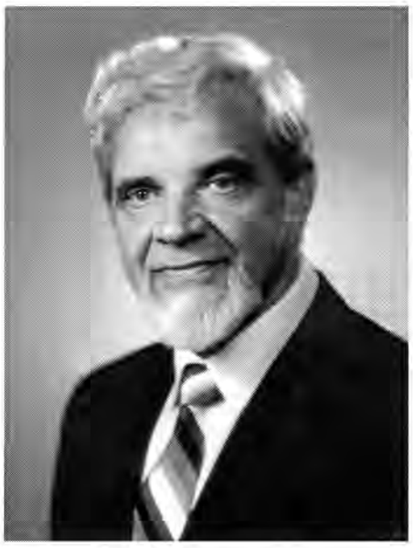
On January 20, 1973, Davis fell on the hotel stairs and hit his head. He suffered a concussion and developed penumonia that lead to a state of semi-consciousness until he died February 7, 1973.

Permission was requested for a museum burial site. The Attorney General ruled it illegal. However, the Legislature passed a new law and a year later the J. M. Davis Memorial Commission was granted a variance permit allowing J. M. to be buried in the museum.

At J. M. Davis' funeral service, the Eulogy included these comments: Every 5 years, names of outstanding Americans are listed in America's Hall of Fame. The definition of success which is used for the list is: "Fame is durable, good, renowned, earned by servants, approved by the wise, applauded by the common people." John Monroe Davis is remembered among us as a servant. The greatest legacy for man is giving of himself to his fellow man. Very few have been able to give to men yet unborn as Mr. Davis has.

Genevieve Davis died November 7, 1997, at 90 years of age and is also buried in the museum. They had no children.

To this day, the J. M. Davis gun collection remains the largest in the world, thanks to the generosity of an extraordinary man who contributed his time and talent unselfishly to the lasting betterment of his community and the world. Even more importantly, the museum collection, which includes much more than guns, represents a physical portrait of American culture, history, and manufacturing skill that is irreplaceable today. J. M. Davis devoted his life and a considerable fortune to a hobby that became his legacy.



~ In memory of ~

LEE TRIMBLE GOOD

March 9th, 1928 - November 20th, 1998

Lee applied and was employed at the J. M. Davis Gun Museum April 1, 1969 as a research assistant. He was one of the country's most knowledgeable people on the history of blackpowder guns and for many years wrote a question and answer column in the National "Muzzle Blast" magazine.

Good became Director of the Museum in 1989. He was on the Governor's Mini Cabinet, served as Director in the National Muzzle Loading Rifle Association, president, founder, and honorary member of the Osage Territory Muzzle Loaders, member of the American Society of Arms Collectors, member and past Director of the Indian Territory Gun Collectors Association, member of the National Rifle Association, past president of the Tulsa Archaeological Society and member of the Oklahoma Anthropological Society. Lee Trimble Good was inducted into the National Muzzle Loaders Hall of Fame.

On November 20, 1998, Lee Good died in the museum he loved so well.

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