



THE RUTH ANN OVERBECK
CAPITOL HILL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Claire and Laurence Davis

Interview Date: December 2, 2002
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TAPE 1/SIDE 1

STEIN: ...A Street, NE, and we are looking forward to having an interview to talk about their experiences during the years they lived on Capitol Hill. So Claire why don't you start off by letting us know how it was you came to Washington?

C. DAVIS: Well I was born in Ottumwa, Iowa. When I was about 25 years old I decided that a friend of mine that I knew—her sister lived in San Francisco—so we took off for San Francisco and I stayed there 20 years. And then Larry and I met.

STEIN: In San Francisco?

C. DAVIS: Anyhow we came to—no I met him in Tucson, that's where he was living—and we decided to get married, so I came from San Francisco to marry him. And he—I think it was about two months after we were married—he told me to go out and look for a house, and the only thing he was interested in was a garden.

STEIN: Really. So did you come to Washington for employment or...?

C. DAVIS: No, just to get married.

STEIN: Uh-huh [affirmative].

C. DAVIS: And so it was very interesting because he had an uncle 83 years old and I didn't know he was going to be a member of our family [laugh].

STEIN: Oh, the newlyweds!

C. DAVIS: But he left, he went back to Tucson as soon as we got married. But then he'd come back about every six months and we never knew when he was coming. He would just call us from the bus depot and say, "Laurence, I'm here." [laugh]. But he was a very enjoyable person. I was glad he didn't stay more than six months, but it was a nice little thing for us to have him.

But, so right away Larry started working on the garden. And that was real important to him—he had, I think since I've been—we've visited in Tucson since that time and went to his mother's house, although she had passed away. I could tell that he had done a lot of gardening, and they had a beautiful home. It was a ranch-style home, a large patio and very lovely flowers still in the garden.

But back to our living here on Capitol Hill. We had—the neighborhood was on 7th Street were mostly black people. There was one family—they had five children, and they were very poor, and we sort of took them under our wing and we brought them to our house and we had parties for them out in the garden.

STEIN: Now was—are you talking about this very house that we’re in today?

C. DAVIS: Yes, yes. And then about two years after we were married, we adopted a baby, a small baby, two days old and—she’s 31 now—but these young children were very fond of her [laugh] and we, I remember, I just have pictures of us all sitting around in the garden. And then my husband had beautiful flowers. He grew mums, and they were just spectacular, they just filled the whole yard. And every year we would have, on I think it was Teddy Roosevelt’s birthday, we had a party. What did we have—I can’t think of it—oysters! He would go down to Maryland. Someone had a truck that took him down to Maryland and he brought 10 bushels of oysters back, and we had about 150 people coming in and out, neighbors and friends. All the neighbors came. And they had oysters on—you know—the shell. We had two shuckers, and of course the idea was to come to see the plants. And the place was just covered with mums. Different colored mums, it was just really—in fact we had a person from the Post [Phil Casey of the Washington Post newspaper, November 4, 1974 article] and a person from the Washington Star [newspaper]. I forget her name now [ed: Ann Crutcher, the food editor] but she did the one page—she was a neighbor of ours [700 East Capitol Street]. And I remember she had headlines, “Mums the Word.” [laugh]

STEIN: How delightful!

C. DAVIS: And we did that for about ten years. We’d have it every year. Now we didn’t always have 150 people, but it was just increased every year we went.

L. DAVIS: But I was very disappointed because after all these shows, nobody did suggest running me for governor. [Claire laughs]

STEIN: Oh, it may happen yet.

L. DAVIS: We hope so, I was thinking of president this time.

STEIN: Tell me more about the neighborhood and the people who lived here.

C. DAVIS: Well the neighborhood, it’s always been a lovely street.

STEIN: I should ask you what year.

C. DAVIS: Oh yes, this was in 1968 we got married. We got the house in 1969, two months later. We got it from Barbara Held [real estate agent] and she only took me around to a couple of—oh the thing about it is, she told me about this house she thought we’d like it, it had a nice garden. And she said the only thing is you’d just have to take it as is, you don’t have a lot to do, but it’s livable. Well it was livable, but when we walked in the front doorway and into the kitchen, the furnace was in the middle of the room—in the

kitchen [laugh]. So we had that moved, they moved it over in louvered doors [laugh]. I don't know why we didn't take a picture of that because it was just unbelievable. And then we had all the paper stripped. And I remember we had a party and Bob Prosky [well-known actor and neighbor] came over and he said, "That's an interesting covering you have on the wall." But back to the neighborhood. There were a lot of black people—not right here in our neighborhood on A Street, but mostly over on 7th. And we became friends with all of those people. So it was an interesting thing for...

STEIN: Well that was an interesting time.

C. DAVIS: Yes it was.

L. DAVIS: Now who were these people you're talking about?

C. DAVIS: What are their last names? Copelands. And you know they come to our house to this day, those children come, grown with their grandchildren and everything, on Halloween.

STEIN: Do they still live in the neighborhood?

C. DAVIS: No they don't. I don't know where they live. They have a lot of children, a lot of problems, but they were very—they were really a lot of fun to be with.

L. DAVIS: What do we give them stuff on Halloween don't we?

C. DAVIS: Well yes of course, of course we do.

We love the market [Eastern Market]; I mean to be able to walk to the market. Now we're at an age that the doctor suggests that Larry not drive. So we have no automobile. And we're doing just very well, with the market and the transportation we have. We have wonderful neighbors. They just watch out for us. I think we're the oldest people now. The older people ahead of us have died since we've been here and they were the oldest and now we're, we're the ones. I think there's one lady across the street...

L. DAVIS: Have we arranged for a suitable funeral with a parade and so on?

C. DAVIS: [laugh] Not yet.

L. DAVIS: Do that.

C. DAVIS: But Larry also raised these mums and he would join the mum society. And every year he would take these mums to the show and he always won blue ribbons and one time he had a lily that had about 30 blooms on it. He took it to Philadelphia. We had a convertible then, and he sat in the back seat about 7 o'clock in the morning I drove him to the Union Station [train station] and he was holding the lily

with all these blooms. And people were just staring at us [Larry laughs]. And I think he rented a room, bought a—had a room, so nothing would happen to that plant and he came home with..

L. DAVIS: You mean a room on the train.

C. DAVIS: He came home with many blue ribbons on that. We don't grow the mums now at all; he's just not able to. I never was the gardener that he is, even though I was president of the [Capitol Hill] garden club [laugh].

L. DAVIS: Who was in charge of the mums?

C. DAVIS: You, you grew all the mums. And I'd help him sometimes. Oh he had these lovely cascades that came down you know. When I think about them we don't have them now. Then we have a wisteria on the back of our house and Tom Fenski came by one day. I don't know if you know him, but he's lived on the Hill for years. He was always on his bicycle going around looking at different flowers or homes and things. He came through our alley one time. And he took this picture; I'll show it to you, it's just spectacular of this wisteria that just covered the back of our house. Oh no, now we have a fig tree. We didn't have any figs this year but we had a lot of them last year, about 300 I think. Fresh figs. And then we have a grape vine. We have also a blackberry bush and the fig tree. So we're pretty well covered with the fruits. Then we used to have strawberries.

STEIN: When was garden club first established?

C. DAVIS: Well I'll tell you about that. When we first came in the early 1970's, well 69 and 70, and Larry said I'm going to join a garden club. I've got to find out about one. So he went over to the garden club meeting one night, and there were all women, and he said, "I want to be a member." And they said, "Oh but we don't take men." [laugh]. He said, "Well, I'd like to be a member." So they had a little meeting, and they said, "Well all right, I guess it's OK." He ended up being the president later on.

STEIN: So was it a small group then?

C. DAVIS: Yes, very small group. But now, it's you know, it has 80 members I think. So it's an interesting—we still go to the Garden Club meetings. We'll be going on Christmas. Once a year they furnish all the greens—you've heard of that?

STEIN: That's my favorite part. I did that.

L. DAVIS: I'm sorry, I didn't get what...

C. DAVIS: Don't you remember, they furnish the greens and we make the wreaths and decorate them. That's a real treat.

STEIN: What other community groups have been part of your lives since you've been on the Hill?

C. DAVIS: Well I used to help these children read, these little black children they'd come over and I'd help them read. There would be like two of them. I did that. What else did I do? Once I did something with a friend. We would have to go every week and test children for their eyes to see if they needed glasses [and things] and go to the schools and testing.

STEIN: Where did your daughter go to school?

C. DAVIS: She went to Peabody [local elementary school on Stanton Park, NE] and she stayed there until 4th grade. And we thought maybe we should put her in a Catholic school since we were Catholic, so we put her in St. Peter's [3rd and D Streets, SE] but she disliked it so much that she wanted to go back to Hobson [middle school at 5th & E Streets, NE]. That was where all her friends were. So she graduated from Hobson in 8th grade.

STEIN: What were those—what were Peabody and Hobson, like?

C. DAVIS: Wonderful. Yeah, I mean really—and Marietta, you know she could walk to—and Larry walked with her when she was just a youngster. We had the neighbors next door, the Wodatches. They had children the same age. So she then went—she went to high school, she went to a Catholic school—Oakcrest by Wisconsin Avenue. Now she's in New York. She went to a school of visual arts and she learned photography and she's working for a world-famous photographer now. And she just came back from Berlin and she brought her photography with her to show [to galleries] so that was kind of exciting. She doesn't come home very often, but we talk to her every night [laugh].

STEIN: Do you really? That's very sweet. So what? Do you belong to St. Peter's?

C. DAVIS: No, we belong to St. Joseph's. We've been a member there since we came to the house. In '70, '69. It's up on 2nd and C, 2nd Street and C Street, NE. Yes we've been a member there.

STEIN: Is that a social as well as a religious...

C. DAVIS: Well we have socials, yes. They invited all the parishioners to a social hour a couple of Saturday nights ago. They had a party—catered a party. That's a lovely church. But what we're doing now is trying to restore it. They're trying to raise \$6 million. And I don't know, they say they have. The roof is falling off for one thing.

So I know another thing I did, I just remembered it. I was a Girl Scout leader...not Girl Scouts, Campfire Girls. There was a friend of mine; she and I were the leaders. We did this 'til they got into high school, we did it from the time they were about, oh I'd say five, six or seven.

STEIN: What sorts of activities do the Campfire girls do?

[phone ringing and answering machine in background]

C. DAVIS: Oh we did a lot of trips with them. We took them out to different places where we would camp, and we'd fix food and everything. I remember one time it was raining so hard [laugh]. I don't remember where we were, but it was out in the woods, I know that [laugh]. That is one thing we did. I just haven't been very active really in the last, quite a few years now.

STEIN: Mr. Davis, what was your work back when you were working?

L. DAVIS: I went to law school and got a law degree.

STEIN: In Washington?

L. DAVIS: No, as I remember I was in Tucson. And then I got drafted. I think I wound up in the Navy, didn't I? And I served—oh Lord I don't remember—in some Pacific Islands, I wasn't at sea for—[Claire says Hawaii.] Hawaii is where I went. And when other people were risking their lives in battle, I was enjoying life in Hawaii. And I did have several girl friends but there was no—I was not unfaithful to my wife. I wasn't married to her yet. [Claire laughs]

STEIN: But then, eventually you met her and you came to Washington, DC. And did you work as a lawyer then?

C. DAVIS: When he came here he was working for HEW [federal Department of Health, Education and Welfare that predated the Department of Health and Human Services] [Claire tells Larry it was in Washington, DC], and then you worked for the natural resources [Larry says, on power sub-committee of the House Government Operations Committee], and the last job you had was with the Indian Claims Commission. And the Congress abolished it in 1977 I think. So Larry retired. He had to retire, he didn't get another job. Our daughter was only 6 years old, so I got a job and went back to work, and he took care of Marietta [laugh].

STEIN: And so what did you do?

C. DAVIS: I was a legal secretary and I'm still in touch with my boss. I worked with him for 20 years. I retired about 1998.

STEIN: How did that work out to have your roles switched?

C. DAVIS: It was wonderful!

L. DAVIS: And she made more money than I ever made [Claire laughs]. That's good, I mean I lived better with her earning than with my own earnings.

C. DAVIS: You see we had this 1968 convertible, and we would take her friends in that car. That was just the fun; they just loved us for that.

STEIN: Now, since you lived in a fairly mixed neighborhood, what were the conversations back in the late 60's and early 70's?

C. DAVIS: Well, you know we knew we had to be careful, and we had to put bars on because we had people walking in here. Once I took those children swimming and when we came back there was someone in the house. And he got in, I don't know how he got in, but he did. We didn't have an iron gate then. And Rick Moss up the street, he happened to be coming down the street. I told him and he ran in the house and chased this fellow. And he got him [laughter]! He went all the way up the alley you know.

STEIN: Those were the days when you could do that. You wouldn't do that now.

C. DAVIS: No you wouldn't. Except we have a neighbor now who's always chasing after criminals. You know he's really been helpful to the police. They gave him a certificate of honor because he had saved someone's life.

L. DAVIS: You're saying he never charged for these things and he saved taxpayers' money [laughter].

C. DAVIS: So we have wonderful neighbors. I mean really they're just.... Someone—I don't know who said this, "You don't have to go to an assisted living; you have assisted living right here." [laughter] And it's true, because I had my hip replaced, and while I was gone the neighbors were just... We did have someone come in and cook for him [Larry] but everybody was helping him and you know just keeping him company. And I was gone for three weeks. So he did really well.

L. DAVIS: Actually, I was not very anxious for you to come back I was doing so well [laughter].

STEIN: Well now tell me how long did you [Claire] work then?

C. DAVIS: I worked twenty years. But I'd worked as a legal secretary in San Francisco too. So I had probably 50 years, you know 20 and 20, about 40 years of legal work. So when I met him I thought, "Oh he's a lawyer, you know." [laughter].

You know how we met? I guess it's all right to tell you. I was on vacation. I was playing a lot of golf then. And I had a cousin that lived in Phoenix—it wasn't in Tucson. And so I was playing golf and I had a friend that lived in the same building in San Francisco and she'd moved to Phoenix and she had a children. Her husband said that she could go out this night with me and he'd take care of the baby. And she was pregnant that time too. So we went to this—I was staying at the Executive House, that's where my cousin got a room for me there—and we went into the cocktail lounge and we were just having a drink there and this tall handsome man comes over and asks me to dance. I was telling this story to the neighbor and she said, "Oh Claire, you didn't dance with him, did you?" I said, "I certainly did!" [laugh] So that's how we met.

L. DAVIS: What was I doing in Phoenix?

C. DAVIS: You had a job with—what are their names now—a law firm, Marks & Marks.

L. DAVIS: Marks & Marks, they had a Phoenix office, but they were actually from Tucson I think, weren't they?

C. DAVIS: Well that's where you were working when I met you.

STEIN: How long did you court?

C. DAVIS: Not long [laughter]. Well, actually, we got away from each other for about 4 years. I mean we didn't see each other and didn't hear from each other and then I got a Christmas card from him and I sent a Christmas card back because I thought, well he's still available, my gosh [laughter]. So, then we started corresponding. He came out to see me, and I came out here to see him and then we decided to get married. You know we were older, a lot older, so...

STEIN: And you thought Washington would be a good place to come to?

C. DAVIS: Oh, I've always wanted to go to Washington.

L. DAVIS: You came to Washington then, I was working in Washington.

C. DAVIS: And when I came to Washington, he had a dinner party and he cooked the whole meal and I thought, "Oh my God!" [laughter]. He did everything. He had a leg of lamb and it was just wonderful. So that's how...

STEIN: You said that when you were in Iowa you thought about moving to Washington?

C. DAVIS: Yes I mean we were always in our family, we were always thinking it would be wonderful to go to Washington, DC. So I was all set to go. But you know we didn't know each other too well. I mean

we really, we were both taking a risk. And I couldn't tell them at work. I told them I was going to one of those so far away lands; you know to do good work. I forget the name of it.

STEIN: You mean like the Peace Corps?

C. DAVIS: Yes, something like that. It wasn't the Peace Corps, but it was similar to that. And I told them I was going there; I had to go to Washington first [laugh]. Cause I just thought, you know, if this thing doesn't work out they'll never know [laugh]. I mean I just wasn't sure, I knew what I wanted to do; you know we didn't know each other, we really hadn't...we spent weeks together but not any length of time.

L. DAVIS: I still don't know her very well [laughter].

C. DAVIS: But I remember I sent post cards telling them I got married. Now most people wouldn't do that. [ed: some of Larry's questions not included] I sent my sisters a post card saying I got married. So now we've been married 34 years. We just celebrated our anniversary and we've had a very happy life.

[telephone ringing; taped stopped temporarily]

STEIN: Yes, and you were just saying you just celebrated your 34th wedding anniversary.

C. DAVIS: 34th wedding anniversary. And we've lived in the same house. These are books Larry brought with him. He's been traveling with these ever since he was 10 years old. When he was 10, he was telling you [ES: before the taped interview began] that he was ill and his mother was a widow and she was living in Pittsburgh, and she all of a sudden just picks up and said, "I'm moving to Tucson with my child." They brought all the books, all the furniture. And they had a driver. He drove them and stayed in Tucson and he drove her around to buy a house. She died there; she was 79 I think when she died. She died in '64.

STEIN: So she knew what she wanted.

C. DAVIS: Yes, she really was a [laugh]... I never met her, but she must have been a wonderful person.

L. DAVIS: You never even met my mother?

C. DAVIS: No she died, I mean she was very ill when I was there. You didn't invite me over.

L. DAVIS: What did she die of? I've forgotten.

C. DAVIS: Well I think she had Alzheimer's.

STEIN: Just take us back to Capitol Hill. Tell me a little bit about how it's changed since all the years that you've been here.

C. DAVIS: Well; now over here on 7th Street there's not a black person in this place, you know. I mean it's all white now. The property is very expensive. These houses here up on—we have a senator, Boxer [Barbara Boxer of California], who lives here and she bought this house, about \$800,000. And that house was, I'm telling you, they just made it over and did everything with it. And then the one across the street over here went for \$900,000.

L. DAVIS: How much did we pay for our house?

C. DAVIS: We paid \$22,000 for our house.

L. DAVIS: Where'd we get the \$22,000?

C. DAVIS: [laugh] We got it and it's paid for. So it's really a high class, you know people are, well, have a lot of money. They're young people and they work every day, you know.

STEIN: At what point, if you remember, did the black people who lived here start moving out themselves? Was it that they could get money for their houses?

C. DAVIS: That's right they'd sell—these men would come around. They rented the houses. They didn't own them.

L. DAVIS: Aren't there a few colored people still living here?

C. DAVIS: There's a lovely couple that lives up the street here. And there may be some, let's see.

And these doctors, they're both psychiatrists, the husband and wife. And they bought where the Safeway used to be [mid-block, unit block, even side, 7th Street, NE]. Do you see that building that's been built there? Then they had lived across the street in a nice house, but they bought their share, one half of that building. And that was a real expensive...

[Larry questions Claire about the neighbors briefly.]

STEIN: This great development in terms of the cost of houses on the Hill is pretty recent. But I don't know whether the neighborhood has turned over just in the last five or ten years or what. Or was it earlier than that?

C. DAVIS: One thing I found out about the people that live on our street. When they once get here they're not going to move unless—like the lady that moved away—she went back to Holland because she wanted to be close to her family. But she didn't want to go. You know, I think she really had mixed emotions about it because she'd been here for so long. She had so many friends. She had a big house, you know roaming around all by herself. So, the gal across the street right over here. She has lived here fifty

years. She tells about how they rented out rooms. They weren't very well fixed. They rented the upstairs out and they, she and her mother, slept downstairs you know. They made it—she has a lot of money today. They saved every cent they made on the roomers. Then she worked for the Library of Congress.

[Several sentences omitted at request of interviewee]

STEIN: I want to ask you a little about your daughter's life, when she was here and going to school.

C. DAVIS: Well we were just so thrilled that she went to Peabody, because of the girls next door, she could walk with them. Of course when she was just a toddler and going, she went to pre-school there. And she loved it, and you know she was really; we were just thrilled, because it was so close to our house and we knew...

STEIN: You felt that the teachers were good?

[ed: next section included some comments by Larry that were omitted.]

C. DAVIS: Yes, she had very good teachers. She didn't want to go to St. Peter's. It was wonderful, we were just thrilled, because you know we wanted to part of a community so much and that did it. And then, she did go to St. Peter's. I just thought, my conscience was bothering me that we weren't sending her to a Catholic school. But she didn't get along too well over there. The next two grades she went over to Hobson.

STEIN: And Hobson was a good school?

C. DAVIS: Oh, yes, she did fine at Hobson, and she loved it. She loved all the children, you know, because she was used to being around these children.

STEIN: So she was a minority, she was in the minority in these schools?

C. DAVIS: That's right. And she has a real thing about that now in that, you know, you just say something about black people, she just cringes. It's just not—you know, she just has a good feeling about them. And they were excellent. I mean we, you know, we just were very cooperative with her teachers and we did everything they asked us to do. You know we always attended the PTA meetings.

STEIN: Were the PTA meetings lively?

C. DAVIS: Oh yeah lively and it was such a mixed...

[phone rings; tape probably stopped temporarily]

STEIN: Just talking about the racial relations in the schools and so your daughter felt comfortable with...?

C. DAVIS: Oh she felt very comfortable, more comfortable than she did at St. Peter's. And we liked the teachers. We got very involved with them.

STEIN: Oh and you said the PTA was an active one?

C. DAVIS: Oh it was I mean, I forget the name of the principal. I didn't think I would ever forget [ed: Veola Jackson].

STEIN: What about the politics in Washington?

C. DAVIS: Well, we loved that too. That's one reason we were—of course we were both Democrats and we just, you know, we really enjoyed... And he was working pretty close in the government when he was up there in the House. And the Indian Claims was a different type. He had worked with the Navajo Indians in Tucson, Arizona for about five years, so he was very interested in the Indians. So we've had a wonderful life so far.

L. DAVIS: Actually the Navajo Indians have a reservation which is—the largest part's in Arizona, and part of it is in New Mexico, almost as large. And then it spills over into Utah, a narrow strip. And I'm trying to think if it has a corner in Colorado. I don't think it has. I guess just the three states. I don't think it has anything in Colorado. But I was there off and on for how many years? At least five years, maybe longer, five or six.

STEIN: Very interesting part of the world.

L. DAVIS: Well it is for a brief tour, but it's sort of repetitious after you've been there a couple of years [laughter].

STEIN: Yeah, well, I wonder whether there are any things about the Hill that you might mention that I haven't asked you about that you think would be important to talk about.

C. DAVIS: Well, it's just such a convenience to live here, I feel. You know, I mean, and I like it because it's like a small town. I came from a small town. Larry and I are walking now. People seem to know us, but we can't remember their names [laugh]. But they're always smiling at us. They see us a lot because we're walking a lot; we're out in the neighborhood. [an exchange between Larry and Claire was omitted]

STEIN: Well thank you so much.

END OF INTERVIEW