My Father's America

3. Their Own Men

By FORREST DAVIS

This is the third in the Freeman's *series of true stories of yesterday's America and the heritage of freedom that it bequeathed to us.*

We buried Hugh Davis one dripping October afternoon in a little Ohio churchyard. His seven sons stood around in the unaccustomed attitudes of grief on the church porch between the funeral service and the burying. Two of the sons were farmers of the neighborhood, Uncle Will and Uncle John, carrying on Hugh Davis's immemorial occupation. One was an obviously prosperous lumber merchant from faraway Memphis, Tennessee—Uncle George, who lighted a cigar between the services. Uncle Charlie was the weakling of the clan. After failures at farming and at barbering, he was now working at a factory bench in Mishawaka, Indiana. Three of the seven, and they standing a little apart, were ministers of the gospel (Presbyterian), clad in sober professional raiment and unable even at this solemn moment to suppress the faintly propitiatory smile that often marks those who wear the evangelical cloth. These were Uncle Alex, Uncle Francis, and my father, Elmer Ellsworth.

I was nine years old and I held my father's hand while the country pastor consigned my grandfather's remains to the earth he had served so urgently and so faithfully. The memories of that day are indistinct after nearly half a century, but I do recall a surge of sympathy toward Grandmother Davis who stood, tall and unbending in stiff black dress and coat, under a tree that pelted rain upon her, her broad face graven deep with grief but not contorted. Grandmother Davis never bent during her entire 84 years. I respected her almost more than anyone I knew and it was only much later in life that I learned why. It was because of her sheer competence and fortitude.

Grandma Davis, of immigrant German stock not too highly regarded in this prevailingly Anglo-Saxon Ohio community, had been married to Hugh Davis, a taciturn, willful, stormy man, while in youthful bloom; had raised seven sons, spun flax, woven cloth, milked the cows, churned butter, baked, washed, put up endless preserves, and during it all set the best table in the township. Christina (that was her name) came from a family that believed quite literally that woman's place was in the kitchen. She had never learned to read until, far along in middle age, her preacher sons took turns one summer in teaching her to spell out her favorite stories and parables in a large-print Bible they provided her. Seldom tender but always kind, Grandma Davis was always at work. In her later years she often observed that "hardly anybody does to suit me," a maxim that I have found of abiding comfort.

Many years after we buried Hugh Davis, I heard of an incident that took place before the funeral. Two farmers, driving teams, met on the Ridge road that still forms the spine of the county. "Whoa," said one, "have you heard the news? Hugh Davis is dead." The other thought a moment, then replied, "Well, there wa'nt a meaner, nor an honester man in Van Wert County. Giddap." That judgment, which is a family legend, falls far short of a complete estimate of Hugh Davis. It will not do for an epitaph.

Hugh Davis served with an Ohio Volunteer regiment in the Civil War (when I pestered him for his war experiences, he always replied with characteristic self-disparagement that he had served his time as a cook, thus had seen no fighting; this being untrue), he admired General Grant, wore a beard resembling Grant's, smoked cigars and died of the same malignant growth in the throat. After the war Hugh Davis removed his young family to the Great Dismal Swamp in northwestern Ohio, where he doggedly cleared and drained hundreds of acres with the help of his sons and hired men. Hugh Davis installed the first sorghum mill in the neighborhood. The neighbors, depending upon molasses for their sweetening, as did the Davises, brought their sorghum to this mill and the youngest sons rode the horse around the circle to furnish motive power for the grinding. My father performed this chore as early as age four. Hugh Davis brought to the county the first McCormick reaper seen there. (My father scythed and cradled many a stand of wheat in his time.) Hugh Davis served many terms as county supervisor, taking his contemptuous stand on Saturday afternoons outside the courthouse where he alternated between a hard silence and a sort of bitter horseplay with his constituents and neighbors. He was, I supposed when I learned all this, a respected man but not much liked.

Hugh Davis hated trees. They preempted the rich black land that he wanted to work. He also hated the water that suffused that earth. A noble oak was the same to him as a sumach sapling, something to be felled and removed. Before he learned effectively how to drain the acres redeemed from the swamp, he tried five painstaking and expensive methods. I have heard my father describe them in detail.

Most of all I suspect Hugh Davis hated the general condition of his life. In this hatred he never relented. He sprayed all city folk, with their fine clothes, white hands and mincing manners, with a hoarse contempt. Especially he hated bankers, who were currently charging 12 per cent on mortgages and, in his opinion, inveterately bent upon foreclosures. He had a presumption against delicate women and I believe that he married Christina Nyehart precisely because she was not one of the uppity, bold-glancing daughters of the English, Scottish and Welsh farmers who held the best land and the prestige of the neighborhood. Although I passed many weeks in their household, I never heard him address an endearing word to his wife.

My mother was a town girl, the foster daughter of a prosperous doctor in nearby Delphos and the niece of a man of regional fame. Because my father, just out of college, was poor, they passed their honeymoon on the farm. Hugh Davis spoke to my mother just twice, once when she arrived, once when she left, both times gruffly; and occasionally at the immense supper table, crowded with sons, their wives, grandsons and hired hands, he uttered for her benefit some broad slur at town women who were presumably too good to work. Only one woman, so far as I know, ever mastered him. His mother was a McCoy, of the breed known as Scotch-Irish; she lived until her middle nineties, occupying an easy chair alongside the kitchen stove in the winter and gradually shrinking until about all that was left was her voice. This remained so strong and penetrating that my father once ruefully suggested that even toward the end it could be heard across the township. Hugh Davis never bested his mother; his main preoccupation with her was finding ways to avert her scorn.

He loved reading, especially reading aloud at morning and evening prayers, for Hugh Davis was an intensely, almost mystically, religious man. My father has spoken about how well he read, with clear diction and modulation, although he had little learning. He had his Bible, he had a book of Shakespeare's plays, he had Milton's "Paradise Lost" and "Paradise Regained," and he had, treasure of treasures, "Pilgrim's Progress." This latter book he commanded all his sons to read as soon as they had obtained sufficient familiarity with English prose at the log schoolhouse he had himself built on a corner of his farm. Hugh Davis likewise loved horses, the clean, compact lines of a trotter and the heaving girth of the work animals that in double teams of four hauled out stumps. As his life ran out he sometimes entered into friendly converse with his preacher sons, concerning whom he occasionally indicated pride; but, as my father remembers it, the discussions of faith and morals were never without a bitter taint somewhere.

I think the evidence is clear that Hugh Davis was a consistently unhappy and rebellious man, never resigned to his laborious and bare existence. I think also that the most revealing fact about him may be summarized this way: the seven sons who gathered to bury their bleak and tormented father that day all bore famous names. It was a crochet of Hugh Davis's to name his boys for men he admired. George, the eldest, was, of course, George Washington Davis. Then there were John Milton Davis and William Shakespeare Davis. Even the hapless Charlie was named for Hugh's favorite hymnalist, Charles Wesley. Uncle Francis was named for Francis Marion, the "swamp fox" of the Revolution, Uncle Alex for the financier and gallant soldier, Alexander Hamilton, and my father bore the name of the first Union officer to die in my grandfather's war.

This fancy of Hugh Davis's betrayed a strong sense of the historic and literary past. Yet concerning his own antecedents he was wholly uncommunicative and presumably deeply uninterested. When his sons, as the young will, asked him about their ancestors, seeking to find from what kind and condition of people they had sprung, he invariably cut them short. Until the end he refused to discuss any Davises beyond his own father.

A curious, and perhaps ambitious, member of the third generation of Hugh Davis's get delved into this matter a bit, centering his inquiries, I believe, around Philadelphia. He has related to me a story that Hugh Davis, born in 1832, was the grandson of a Davis, one of two brothers, who set out from Philadelphia around 1800 for the wilderness of the Ohio Valley and had never again been heard from by his kin back East. The other brother, reported this cousin, had gone to Kentucky and sired Jefferson Davis. The brothers of this romantic legend were themselves descended, and I still quote my informant, from the eleventh and twelfth sons of a Welsh baronet named Hugh Davis. They came out to Philadelphia around 1750 to make their fortune in the new world and thereafter propagated a numerous line. The report has one suggestive aspect, namely, that in each generation of this line one son was named Hugh. If Hugh belonged to this strain, we have seen that he honored that custom in the breach. I myself, perhaps because there is too much of Grandfather Davis in me, never have gone into this matter and I merely present my relative's findings as gossip of no importance to the late Hugh Davis and myself.

It was out of this backwoods America of the great swamp in northwestern Ohio that my father came, went to college, went to theological seminary, was ordained, preached, buried and married and baptized and had his spiritual being in a dozen box-like small-town churches, his day-to-day existence in as many graceless manses for forty-five years of his life. His boyhood and young manhood were passed under pioneer conditions of almost incredible crudeness. Nearly all the food and much of the clothing needed by the family, was grown and processed on the farm with tools familiar to farmers on the Nile three thousand years before.

The mud of winter and spring splattered them, the dust of summer coated them and they toiled from can-see to can't-see every working day. The nearest settlement was