The Happy Wanderer
Jan Sherritt

As I maneuvered our Ford to a halt in front of a typical rural frame house one mid-summer afternoon and crossed the yard fortified with pencil and paper, I felt a lump forming in my throat. Through my mind flashed the interesting persons I had encountered during previous interviews, and returning to reality I told myself that this story would mark my finale at the newspaper office.

Not until I ascended the porch steps did I glimpse the subject of my story. Seated on a glider that badly needed lubricating, with his feet propped up on the porch railing and his hat slid down over his face, Fred Davis reminded me of a Mexican enjoying his daily siesta. He presented a peaceful picture of domesticity and solitude—the average elderly gentleman alone, but in his own mind dependent on no one; a person groping for his lost youth with nothing left but a few pleasant memories, I calculated. I could almost feel the silken strands of a long snow-white beard which he would stroke lazily, and perhaps as a finishing touch to this “Indian Summer” atmosphere a pipe might be added. How wrong I was! He emerged beneath his “Panama” with effervescence that belied his sixty-seven years, and greeted me as warmly as if we had been the best of friends for a long time. I stood face to face with a bright-eyed, alert, erect, beardless, bespectacled man who grinned broadly down at me as if to say, “I surprised you, didn’t I?”

As he leafed through the yellow, memory-filled pages of a thirty-five-year-old scrapbook and reminisced, I listened transfixed to a life history that would have delighted Ernest Hemingway. “I’d lose interest if I had to go along on just one channel,” explained the immaculately attired Hoosier while I chatted with a farmer, railroad conductor, hospital attendant, barber, singer, journalist, advertising, real estate and oil salesman, club organizer, lecturer, and personnel worker without once diverting my attention from this single remarkable individual. These professions, each in itself all-consuming of time, are links in a colorful chain. My interviewee’s unsettled but full life has carried him into every major city in every state of the union where his magnetic personality has allowed him to count movie stars, governors, presidents, business tycoons, and average Mr. America among his closest friends. “The best way to get to know a man is to eat and play poker with him,” Davis claims, and he has done both with such personages as Johnny Weissmuller, Joe E. Brown, Wallace Beery, Tom Mix, and Bing Crosby. I did not need to know Mr. Davis long before attaching an easy-going manner and droll sense of humor to the list of his other characteristics. The humor is a perfect blend of the Will Rogers of yesterday and the Herb Shriner of today.
To fully explain his nomadic habits, Mr. Davis was born into a family where Christmas was "just another day," so the quest for adventure hit him at the very early age of fourteen. Since the time he bid his widowed mother goodbye, he has exemplified the type of dissent described in Howard Mumford Jones' essay "The Iron String." Jumping from one occupation to another, quitting or being fired, making and losing literally fortunes, and not knowing where his next meal might come from, this wanderer has done exactly what he pleased with no confining commitments. To the unimaginative individual Mr. Davis probably appears as a glorified "Bum"—a jack-of-all-trades who could not settle down—but there are several hundred veterans in Richmond State Mental Hospital now enjoying television through the efforts of this "gadabout" who would probably tear this theory into pieces. Likewise, countless Lion and Optimist Clubs in almost every city in our nation have him to thank for their very being.

My adventuresome friend spoke openly to me about his lack of education (he did not finish the eighth grade). "I spent seven years studying nights and depriving myself of many pleasures because I was sick and tired of being ashamed," he reflected. He believes, though, that there is a difference between being educated and being smart. "If the determination is there one can learn through observation, travel, and meeting people without once setting foot inside a university, but if one lacks determination, initiative, and a sense of humor, he's lost," emphasized a man who is no longer self-conscious when addressing a group. An enlarged heart (he kids himself about being "big-hearted") has in recent years limited his escapades, but to my query of future adventures, Mr. Davis said he dreams of organizing a national sportsman club. At present his work is far more down to earth, for this unselfish individual is acting as a counselor through the State Mental Health Association to aid patients in Madison, Indiana.

By his sincere manner Paul Davis made me feel that talking with me was just as much of a pleasure for him as meeting his famous acquaintances was, and I am certain I could not have felt more proud or impressed had I just interviewed Winston Churchill. Reluctantly I departed after promising faithfully to write him. All the way home I smiled to myself as I thought of his final words about the possibility of his retiring—"I've been to the matinee; now I'd like to witness the evening performance."

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Silence and Thought

Richard Fanestil

Silence seems to be provocative of thought; thought, of silence. Certainly, the greatest, wisest thinkers of times present and past are and were silent men. Many of those men must have become