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Morse Memo: Kenneth S. Davis, a distinguished writer

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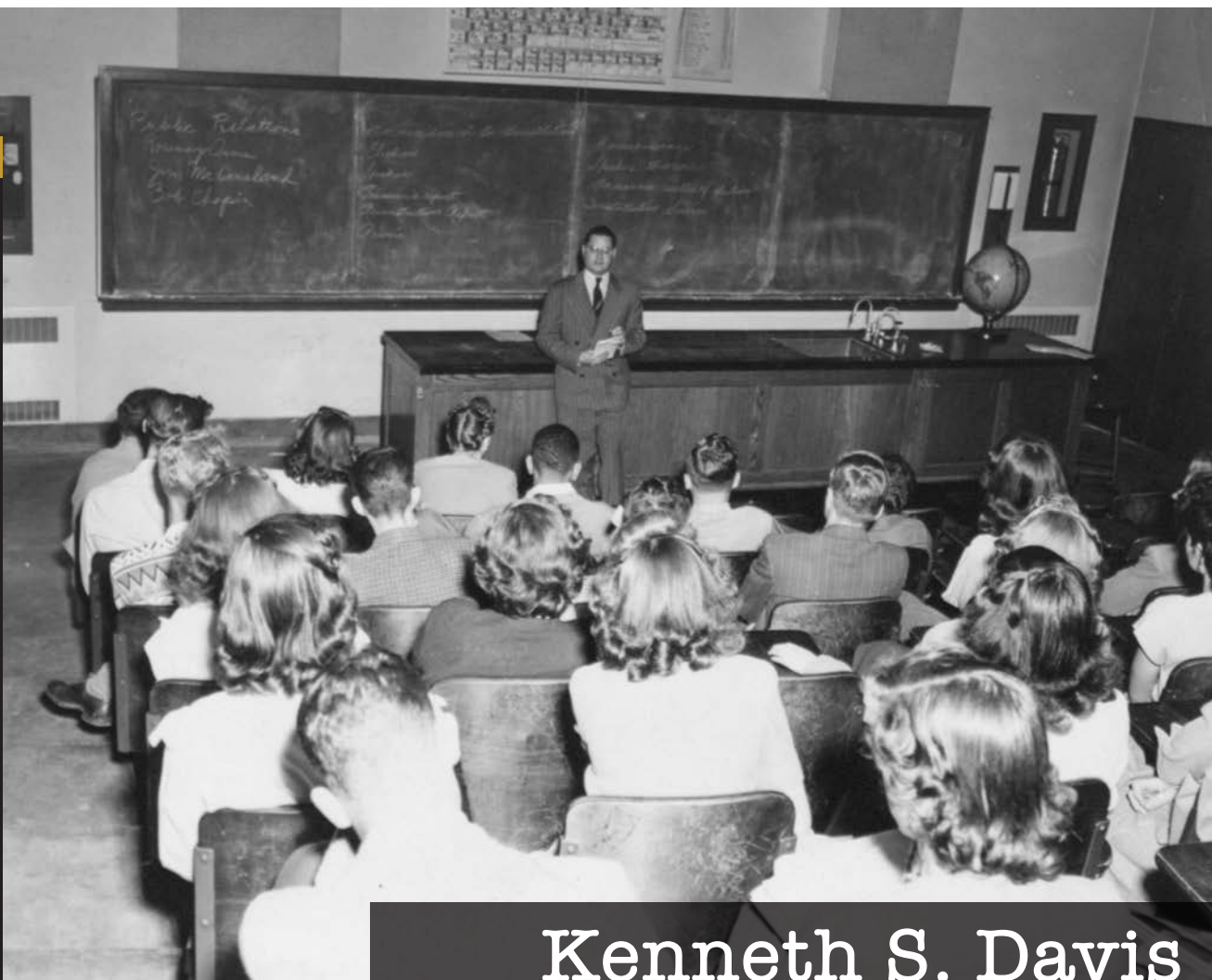


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Kenneth S. Davis a distinguished writer

BY CLIFF HIGHT

Kenneth Sydney Davis was born to Lydia (Ericson) and Charles Deforest Davis in Salina, Kansas on September 29, 1912.

When his father enrolled at K-State, Davis moved to Manhattan. After graduating, Charles Davis joined the faculty of the agronomy department and the family remained in Manhattan for many years. Davis eventually enrolled at K-State himself, majored in agricultural journalism and graduated in 1934. The following year, he attended the University of Wisconsin and completed his master's degree.



Davis' time in Kansas would spark the beginning of a rich career in journalism, the fruits of which would eventually become a large collection within the Morse Department of Special Collections.

Davis went on to use his journalism skills as an information specialist for the U.S. Department of Agriculture and as a war correspondent for the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force, the headquarters of Allied forces in London during World War II.

Despite these accomplishments, his writing career turned out to be the more fruitful pursuit. His first book, "In the Forests of the Night," published in 1942, earned him the prestigious Friends of American Writers Award. In the decades that followed, he published another 18 books and also wrote for publications such as New Republic, New York Times Magazine, Saturday Review and American Heritage.

Davis wrote several biographies of important public figures including Dwight D. Eisenhower, Adlai Stevenson, Charles Lindbergh and

Above: Davis lecturing at K-State about public relations, circa 1948.

Left: Portrait of Davis as a teenager.



Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Davis' five volume biography of FDR played a large role in establishing himself as a historian and writer.

Davis recounted that a particularly rewarding experience was his participation in K-State's 1997 event, "The Legacy of FDR: A Roosevelt Symposium," with historians James MacGregor Burns, Doris Kearns Goodwin, William E. Leuchtenburg and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. Davis reflected on his FDR biographies and whether or not he would have liked Roosevelt in real life: "He was one of these charmers. It's quite easy to have charm when you're in a position of dominance. But I'm kind of allergic to the kind of charm he had."

Davis remained committed to finishing his series of Roosevelt biographies even as his health declined. After he died of cancer in 1999, his close friends Ralph and Mary Ellen Titus worked with the publisher, Random House, to ensure his fifth volume got published posthumously in 2000.

Davis' collection at K-State Libraries, which encompasses more than 50 cubic feet of material, includes personal journals, early writing samples, drafts of published works, speech materials, photographs,

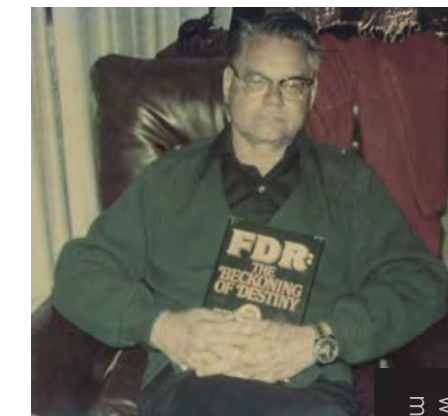


scrapbooks and correspondence with publishers, writers and friends. Because of Davis' talent for storytelling and biography, researchers can use his papers for many purposes, including analyzing his approach to crafting stories, examining how writing nonfiction works, understanding the publishing process during the second half of the 20th century and more.

After Davis' death, one former colleague reported that Davis was "the most distinguished writer among the many graduates of Kansas State University" and possibly the whole state." It should be no surprise that, because of his notable career and the donation of his papers, the Kenneth S. Davis Special Collections Seminar Room at Hale Library is a dedicated place of examination and discussion for students seeking to strengthen their information literacy abilities and primary source analysis skills.

Left: Davis with Doris Kearns Goodwin, Senator Nancy Landon Kassebaum Baker, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., at K-State in 1997 for "The Legacy of FDR: A Roosevelt Symposium."

Below: Davis seated with his 1972 book, "FDR: The Beckoning of Destiny," which earned him the Francis Parkman Prize. The award recognizes nonfiction works of history with significant literary merit.



Above left: Davis reviewing a draft at his typewriter, undated.

Above: Davis showing his wife, Florence, the honorary doctorate he received from Assumption College (Worcester, Massachusetts) in 1968. They married in 1937, a union that remained until her death in 1987.

In Morse Memos, the Richard L. D. and Marjorie J. Morse Department of Special Collections staff dig into the stories of our collections, which include archives and unique materials focused on the consumer movement, cookery, Kansas life and culture and more.