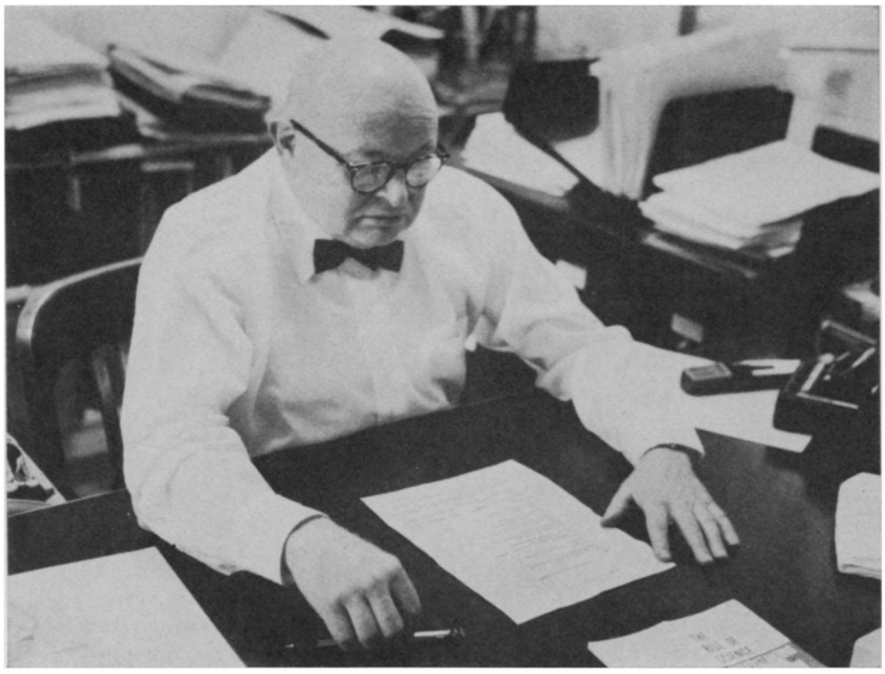
Watson Davis 1896-1967



I am very saddened to learn of the passing of Watson Davis. Watson Davis has done more for the popularization of science and the understanding of science by the general public than any other one individual. His continued inspiration of young people to undertake a career in science has had a very significant impact on the society in which we live. He has had an extraordinary career in these fields and our country owes him a tremendous debt of gratitude.

The breadth of his contributions is one so great that it is difficult at times to believe that any one man could have accomplished so much in one lifetime. He was the guiding force, since its creation some forty-five years ago, of Science Service—the sponsor of Science Fairs throughout the country, the Science Talent Search, a science news service, and many publications. Through Watson Davis' imaginative and forceful leadership, Science Service has grown to a position of great influence in many areas of human endeavor.

Watson Davis was my close friend over many years and I consider his passing a great personal loss.

The death of Watson Davis represents a serious loss to the American people and to the world.

Glenn T. Seaborg

Men were predicting telephone conversations between the continents; "wireless" was about to be officially replaced by the word "radio." The American Association for the Advancement of Science was preparing for its meeting in Toronto, Canada, when its proceedings would be reported for the first time by news wire.

It was 1921. Newspaper editors encouraged sensationalism in what "science" they did report. Scientists naturally avoided reporters, and reporters fell back on their imaginations.

"If one views the extensive and sympathetic play that science gets in press, magazine, radio and TV today, it is hard to realize that not long ago the scientist to the cartoonist was a funny old man with a beard, and the way to report a scientific meeting was to pick out the big words in the program and write a funny story," recalled the man who did the most to change this.

That man, Watson Davis, had been working to bridge the gap between the laboratory and the public since before he joined Science Service in 1921. He died last week in Washington at the age of 71. He retired from active directorship of the service a year ago.

"Watson Davis has done more for the popularization of science and the understanding of science by the general public than any other one individual," said Glenn T. Seaborg, Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission and president of the Board of Trustees of Science Service. "His death represents a serious loss to the American people and to the world."

As a reporter, editor and teacher of science writers, Dr. Davis' influence spread around the globe. His desk-thumping insistence on clear, accurate and interesting reporting of even the most arcane scientific material in words a layman could comprehend schooled generations of science writers who at one time or another worked under him.

Dr. Davis used newspapers, magazines, books, broadcasts, even kits of apparatus to spread knowledge of science—at first in a world that seemed little interested. His special target was young people; for them he created science fairs and competitions that honed hundreds of thousands of young minds, and rewarded many with scholarships and other help to allow them to pursue their careers.

For those who worked under him, he set high goals but no higher than he set himself. He seldom took a vacation, and barely understood why others might wish to.

"He was an inspired teacher," one long-time associate said. "What he liked best was opening people's minds."

"Watson Davis built his own unique memorial," said his successor as director of Science Service, E. G. Sherburne Jr. "His creations were in the minds and lives of young people for whom he helped to make science an exciting reality."

When Dr. Davis retired last year, President Johnson declared that "as guiding hand of Science Service for 45 years," the director had succeeded in "arousing public interest in the ever-expanding world of science."

Dr. Davis, the President said, had "awakened the minds and directed the energies of millions of young Americans toward the achievements in research and technology which are increasingly vital to human progress."

Vice President Humphrey at that time declared it would be "impossible to write the history of science education and information in our time without a

voluminous rollcall of your tremendous achievements and contributions."

Dr. Davis was born in Washington April 28, 1896. He earned a degree in civil engineering from George Washington University in 1920, and was awarded an honorary ScD degree from that institution in 1959.

He began his career as an assistant engineer-physicist at the National Bureau of Standards in 1917. Dr. Davis was science editor of the Washington Herald from 1920 to 1922, making him one of the world's first science reporters. He was one of the founders and later became a life member of the National Association of Science Writers.

Soon after Science Service was organized in 1921 by the late E. W. Scripps, Dr. Davis became managing editor and served in that capacity until 1933 when he was appointed director of the non-profit institution. He was editor of the weekly publication SCIENCE NEWS LETTER, now SCIENCE NEWS, and the monthly educational kits, THINGS of science. He also edited Chemistry magazine from 1944 to 1962.

He was vitally interested in education and developing scientific talent. In 1941 he created a science youth division of Science Service, a part of which—Science Clubs of America—involves about a million science-minded boys and girls in elementary and secondary schools throughout the world. He was one of the originators of the Science Talent Search for the Westinghouse Science Scholarships, and of the International Science Fair, the culminating event of local and regional fairs in nations around the world.

Dr. Davis traveled extensively throughout the world setting up science youth activities in numerous countries, including Japan, Sweden, Spain, Mexico, Guatemala, Chile and Uruguay.

President Roosevelt appointed him one of the original members of the National Inventors Council when it was formed in 1940. He served through 1966. He also served as a member of the Secretary of the Navy's Advisory Board for Educational Requirements, and as a member and chairman of the Secretary of Commerce's Patent Office Advisory Committee.

Dr. Davis was one of the first to see the tremendous possibilities of microfilm—a word he is widely credited with coining—and the revolution in documentation it created. He was one of the founders and president of the American Documentation Institute from 1937 to 1947, and a recipient of the National Microfilm Association Pioneer Model in 1959. He was chairman of the U.S. delegation to the World Congress of Documentation in 1937.

In his program "Adventures in Science" over the Columbia Broadcasting System network from 1930 to 1959, Dr. Davis interviewed some 1,300 scientists on the research they were doing in their laboratories.

The numerous awards and recognitions presented to Dr. Davis for his pioneering efforts in interpreting science to laymen of all age levels include the American College Publicity Association Award, Syracuse University Jounalism Medal, Westinghouse Science Writing Award, George Washington University Alumni Award, War-Navy Certificate of Appreciation, Eastern High School Alumni Award, Philadelphia Science Council Award, Thomas Alva Edison Foundation Award (twice), American Chemical Society's James T. Grady Medal, Science Pioneers Award, George Washington University Engineering Alumni Award.

Dr. Davis was a member of the Board of Trustees of George Washington University from 1949 to 1961; of the Jackson Laboratory, Bar Harbor, Maine, from 1949 until his death, and of the Executive Board of the National Child Research Center. He served as a member of the visiting committee of Harvard College Observatory from 1941 to 1954.

Watson Davis—1926

Watson Davis built his own unique memorial, for his creations were in the minds and lives of young people for whom he helped to make science an exciting reality. And his vision of science as having meaning for every man extended itself through the pages of newspapers all over the world and reached into the lives of millions of twentieth century citizens.

In Science Service he built an institution dedicated to making these ideals reality. And his activities, his contributions to society, will not cease with his passing, but will continue and flourish to serve the future.

Few leave such a living monument.

E. G. Sherburne Jr.

He was chairman of the Unesco Science Clubs committee in 1949 and a member of the Unesco Popularization Science Conference in Madrid, Spain, in 1955. Dr. Davis was a member of the Academy of Medicine of Washington, D.C., and its president for two years. He was active as well in the National Advisory Dental Research Council of the National Institutes of Health.

Other scientific societies to which he belonged are the American Association for the Advancement of Science, American Society for Testing Materials, American Eugenics Society, American Polar Society, American Concrete Institute, Philosophical Society of Washington, Geological Society of Washington, Washington Society of Engineers, Seismological Society of America, Population Society of America, Newcomen Society, British Association for the Advancement of Science, Association Francaise pour l'Avancement des Sciences, History of Science Society.

Dr. Davis was the author of "The Story of Copper," "Science Picture Parade," "From Now On," and "The Century of Science." He wrote thousands of stories for newspapers and magazines, and also wrote for scientific and engineering journals. He edited "Science Today," "New World Science Series, " "The Advance of Science," and "Atomic Bombing."

Dr. Davis was an accredited White House correspondent from before World War II.

Other professional associations included memberships in the Overseas Writers, Congressional Press Gallery, National Press Club, White House Correspondents Association, Sigma Xi, Pi Delta Epsilon, Sigma Delta Chi, Cosmos Club, Harvard Club of the City of New York and Torch Club of Washington.

He was the son of the late Allan and Maud (Watson) Davis, and was married to the late Helen Augusta Miles until her death in 1957. He is survived by his widow, the former Marion Shaw Mooney, 3620 Garfield St., N.W., Washington, D.C.; a daughter, Charlotte Davis Mooers, Cambridge, Mass.; a son, Miles, Baltimore, Md., a stepdaughter, Elina Mooney, New York City, and four grandchildren.

Other survivors include a sister, Evelyn Davis, Herndon, Va.; two brothers, Malcolm, also of Herndon, and Fremont, University Park, Md., and two nephews.