

Elmer Ray Davis (1888 - 1928)

Elmer Ray Davis was born in Bement, Piatt County, Illinois, on October 6, 1888.¹ He was the eldest son and one of six children born to Oscar and Katherine (Trout) Davis. Elmer had a total of five siblings: two older sisters, Anna and Nettie; and two younger brothers, George and Charles; and one sibling that died in infancy.² His parents were married on October 4, 1887, in Macon County, Illinois. The family lived in several locations including Bement and Urbana, Illinois, before finally settling in Bloomington in 1902 when Elmer was about 13 years old.³

At this point, the record of the family (especially that of Elmer) becomes somewhat fragmented. However, the *Bloomington-Normal City Directories* offer a coherent picture of the activities of the Davis family spanning over the course of about twenty-five years. The first appearance of the Davis family is in 1905, where Alfred (also known as Alva B., Alvia, Albert B.) Davis (Elmer's uncle who had lived with the family in Urbana), worked at the Kinloch-Bloomington Telephone Company in the 202 Evans Building.⁴ He worked as a lineman with this company until at least 1915.⁵ Living with him in 1905 were also his niece, Anna, and nephew, George. Anna worked at the Bloomington Soft Water Laundry at 407 South Madison Street and George was a waiter at Welch's Chop House at 109 West Front Street. Elmer appears in 1907, working under Herman Marx, a meat market provider located at 802 West Washington Street.⁶

By 1909, Elmer was working as a driver (one who guides animals pulling a two or four-wheeled cart) and then in 1911, was a general laborer.⁷ He married his first wife, Dorothy M. (last name unknown), in 1910.⁸ Elmer does not re-appear in available records until June 5, 1917, where he was living in Michigan and registered for the draft instituted as a result of the United States' declaration of war against Germany on April 2, 1917 which entered the U.S. into World War I. Elmer, still married to Dorothy, lived at 11 Green Street in Battle Creek, Michigan, and worked as a lineman for the Michigan Telephone Company. As a young man living with his uncle Alfred, who was a lineman himself, the latter may have influenced Elmer to follow that career path. Elmer was described as a man of medium height and build, with blue eyes, light

¹ "Elmer Ray Davis," Ancestry.com. *Illinois, Deaths and Stillbirths Index, 1916-1947* (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011).

² "Elmer Davis," Ancestry.com. *1900 United States Federal Census* (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2004); "Elmer Davis," Ancestry.com. *1910 United States Federal Census* (Lehi, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2006). No other information about the last unknown siblings had been discovered as of yet; "Elmer Davis, 39, Dies From Lock Jaw After Being Kicked by Horse," *Pantagraph*, August 4, 1928.

³ "Elmer Davis, 39, Dies From Lock Jaw After Being Kicked by Horse," *Pantagraph*, August 4, 1928.

⁴ *Bloomington and Normal City Directory 1905* (Bloomington: Pantagraph Printing and Stationery Co., 1905), 151-52; *Bloomington and Normal City Directory 1907* (Bloomington: Pantagraph Printing and Stationery Co., 1907), 290.

⁵ *Bloomington and Normal Illinois City Directory 1915* (Bloomington: Pantagraph Printing and Stationery Co., 1915), 207.

⁶ *Bloomington and Normal City Directory 1905*, 151-52; *Bloomington and Normal City Directory 1907*, 213, 334, 357.

⁷ *Bloomington and Normal, Ill. City Directory 1909* (Bloomington: Pantagraph Printing & Stationery Co., 1909), 203; *Bloomington and Normal City Directory 1911* (Bloomington: Pantagraph Printing and Stationery Co., 1911), 205.

⁸ "Elmer Davis," *1910 United States Federal Census*.

brown hair, and no discernable disabilities.⁹ Eventually, Elmer was called up for service, and at the age of 29, served in the 85th Division as a Private in the School for Bakers and Cooks at Camp Merritt, New Jersey.¹⁰ At Camp Merritt, a transit camp, “1,302 buildings were built to house, equip and train 50,000 men at a time. . . . The first troops arrived in August 1917.”¹¹ Elmer was likely among this group of men and may have played a supporting role, helping to feed the many troops that passed through the camp on their way to France.¹²

Two manuals, one for Army Cooks and another for Army Bakers, offer insight into what Elmer may have learned during his time as an enlisted man in the Bakers and Cooks School. The Army Bakers’ manual includes definitions on the various types of wheat, flour, and yeast and descriptions of their uses in making bread; numerous recipes; information on different types of cooking gear; and instructions on how to cook in the field. The Army Cooks’ manual provides definitions of cooking terms; explanations on how to ration food; describes the importance and principles of cooking, field cooking, and nutrients; and explains how to organize the serving of food in camp halls or mobile stations.¹³

According to some contemporary accounts, Elmer served in Company K of the 339th Infantry Division, a subunit of the 85th, though no evidence has been found to corroborate this claim. The 339th Infantry Division came into existence on August 5, 1917 and was organized on August 31, 1917, at Camp Custer, Michigan, not far from Battle Creek. It was originally made up mostly of men from Detroit, Michigan, and was known as “Detroit’s Own.” The 339th made up part of the North Russian Expeditionary Force between 1918-1919. The unofficial shoulder insignia of this force depicted a polar bear, and so the name stuck.¹⁴

The 339th (“Polar Bears”) were among the American troops that joined the siege on Murmansk and Archangel, Russia, in early September 1917. They were also joined by one battalion of the 310th Engineers, the 337th Field Hospital, and the 337th Ambulance Company.¹⁵ The troops were “issued Russian weapons and equipment and sailed for Archangel, a Russian port on the White Sea, 600 miles north of Moscow.”¹⁶ This American intervention in northern Russia has been nicknamed the “Polar Bear Expedition,” beginning when the 339th “joined an international force commanded by the British that had been sent to northern Russia for purposes

⁹ “Elmer Davis,” Ancestry.com. *U.S., World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918* (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2005).

¹⁰ “Elmer Davis,” Ancestry.com. *U.S., Headstone Applications for Military Veterans, 1925-1963* (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2007).

¹¹ Kevin Wright, “Camp Davis,” *Bergen County Historical Society*, accessed April 10, 2018, <http://www.bergencountyhistory.org/Pages/campmerritt.html>.

¹² Wright, “Camp Davis.”

¹³ *Manual for Army Bakers 1916* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1917), 4, archive.org; *Manual for Army Cooks 1916* (New York: Military Publishing Co., 1917), 5-6, archive.org.

¹⁴ James Sawicki, *Infantry Regiments of the U.S. Army* (Virginia: Wyvern Publications, 1981), 488-89. Their motto stood out uniquely as it was in Russian. The motto “shtuk ryshayet” translates to “the bayonet decides.”

¹⁵ “American Intervention in Northern Russia: 1918-1919,” *Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan*, accessed April 9, 2018, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/p/polaread/history.html>.

¹⁶ “American Intervention.”

never made clear.”¹⁷ They were sent under the pretense of preventing a German advance and helping reopen the Eastern Front, but instead the troops found themselves fighting Bolshevik revolutionaries for months after the war had ended. After continuing to fight the Bolsheviks during the winter of 1918-19, many troops wondered why they continued to fight when peace had officially been declared. This led to numerous problems, ending with the arrival of an American commander in April 1919 and his orders to withdraw. American troops left northern Russia in June and the 339th Infantry was fully demobilized on July 22, 1919.¹⁸

After Elmer was discharged from the Army, he continued his work as a lineman at an electrical company in Michigan. It is not known whether Elmer’s first wife died or if the pair divorced, but he married his second wife, Grace Cain, in Detroit on January 2, 1920. She worked as a waitress. However, Elmer’s post-war life in Detroit did not last, nor did his second marriage. They lived (at least initially) in a tenement building at 322 Michigan Avenue.¹⁹ Eventually, Elmer returned to Bloomington in 1926. By then, he married his third and final wife, Anna Bell (Weaver) Harper, in Clinton, Illinois, on June 6, 1926, at 3:30 p.m. at the home of Lillian La Rash. “The single ring ceremony was performed by Justice of the Peace J. H. Horse.” Numerous friends and family, including Elmer’s sister Annie, were present at the ceremony. A wedding dinner followed the ceremony and the new couple returned to Bloomington. The *Pantagraph* reported that the “new home will be made at 209 East Division street.”²⁰ The newlyweds may have initially lived on Division Street, but they changed homes twice, living at 609 West Monroe Street in 1926 and 1409 S. Mason Street at 1928.²¹

Elmer worked as a laborer from 1926 until his death in 1928.²² On July 21, 1928, Elmer was kicked in the leg by a horse. The wound did not appear fatal, nor did it initially show any signs of dangerous infection. However, a tetanus infection (then known as Lockjaw) quickly flared up and Elmer was rushed to St. John’s Hospital in Springfield, Illinois, “in the hopes that injection of quantities of anti-tetanus serum would save his life.”²³ The disease itself is transmitted via spores found throughout nature, but particularly among top soil layers and in places frequented by animals. Tetanus received the name “Lockjaw” from one of the symptoms that can cause someone’s neck and jaw muscles to lock, making it difficult for them to swallow or open their mouth.²⁴ Scientists developed a vaccine for tetanus as early as 1914, during the beginning of the First World War, and it effectively reduced the mortality rate of soldiers in the

¹⁷ “American Intervention.”

¹⁸ “American Intervention.”

¹⁹ “Elmer Davis,” Ancestry.com. *Michigan, Marriage Records, 1867-1952*. (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2015); “Elmer Davis,” Ancestry.com. *1920 United States Federal Census*. (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010).

²⁰ “Married in Clinton,” *Pantagraph*, June 7, 1926.

²¹ *Polk’s Bloomington and Normal City Directory 1926* (Peoria: Leshnick Directory Co, 1926), 158; *Polk’s Bloomington and Normal City Directory 1928* (Peoria: Leshnick Directory Co, 1926), 155.

²² *Bloomington and Normal City Directory 1926*, 158; *Bloomington and Normal City Directory 1928*, 155.

²³ “Elmer Davis, 39, Dies from Lock Jaw After Being Kicked by Horse,” *Pantagraph*, August 4, 1928; Elmer Ray Davis Death Certificate.

²⁴ “Tetanus,” *Vaccines.gov*, accessed April 12, 2018, <http://www.vaccines.gov/diseases/tetanus/#>.

First and Second World War. However, for Elmer Davis, the serum proved ineffective.²⁵ He died on August 3, 1928, due to “tetanic convulsions” and “general tetanic infection from [the] injury on [his] leg.”²⁶ At the time of Elmer’s death, both his wife and sister were at his side at the hospital.²⁷

Elmer was buried on August 6, 1928, in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery at 2 p.m. in a blue striped suit. The burial was carried out by the John A. Beck Co. and the services were held at the Beck Chapel, ministered by Reverend Leys.²⁸ Elmer’s headstone is interesting in that it has a Star of David above his name, though there is no indication that he or his family were Jewish; indeed, his obituary notes that he was a member of the First Christian Church at 401 W. Jefferson Street.²⁹

Upon request, the Department of Veteran Affairs provides “a [free] headstone or marker for the unmarked grave of any deceased eligible veteran in any cemetery around the world, regardless of their date of death.”³⁰ The VA offers headstones in the traditional style, a ‘bread slice,’ and they are made out of marble or granite. Today, markers are also flat bronze or granite (though bronze is the most popular choice). Information such as the branch of service, rank, and the war or conflict involved in, can be included on the monuments. Additionally, one of 98 emblems of belief can be added too.³¹ However, during Elmer Davis’s time, you could only choose from one of three emblems: Christian Cross, Hebrew Star of David, or nothing.

Elmer and Anna Bell had lived at 812 Chestnut Street at the time of his death. He was survived by his father, living in Jacksonville, IL, his sister, Anna, in Bloomington, and his brothers who were living in Detroit.³² Elmer’s widow, Anna Bell, married Harvey Dillman in 1929 and both are buried next to Davis in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.³³

By: Ryan Owens, 2018.

²⁵ Peter C. Wever and Leo van Bergen, “Prevention of Tetanus During the First World War,” abstract, *Medical Humanities* 38, no. 2 (2012):78-82, accessed April 25, 2018, doi: 10.1136/medhum-2011-010157.

²⁶ Elmer Ray Davis Death Certificate.

²⁷ “Elmer Davis, 39, Dies from Lock Jaw After Being Kicked by Horse,” *Pantagraph*, August 4, 1928.

²⁸ “Funeral of Lockjaw Victim Set for Monday Afternoon,” *Pantagraph*, August 5, 1928; Bill for burial services by John A. Beck Co.

²⁹ “Elmer Davis, 39, Dies from Lock Jaw After Being Kicked by Horse,” *Pantagraph*, August 4, 1928; *Bloomington and Normal City Directory 1928*, 15.

³⁰ “Headstones, Markers and Medallions - National Cemetery Administration,” *National Cemetery Administration*, accessed April 24, 2018, <https://www.cem.va.gov/hmm/>.

³¹ “Headstones, Markers and Medallions.”

³² “Elmer Davis, 39, Dies from Lock Jaw After Being Kicked by Horse,” *Pantagraph*, August 4, 1928.

³³ Record of marriage occurring found at McLean County Clerk’s Office in the Government Center in Bloomington, IL (see their McLean County Marriage Index).