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IN MEMORIAM

Joseph Stancliffe Davis
1885-1975

Joseph S. Davis, Emeritus Professor of Economic Research and Director of the Food Research Institute, died at Pilgrim Haven Retirement Home in Los Altos, California, on April 23, 1975, at the age of 89. He first came to Stanford in October 1921 as one of the three directors of the newly established Food Research Institute. That Institute was his primary concern until his retirement in 1952.

Dr. Davis was born on a small farm in Chester County, Pennsylvania, on November 5, 1885. His father died in 1900, and young Joseph was obliged to support himself through normal school and college. He graduated from Harvard University summa cum laude in 1908 and was awarded the Doctorate of Philosophy in 1913. He served as a member of the Harvard faculty from 1913 to 1921.

The years from 1921 to 1952 were ones of great achievement both in scholarship and public service. Building the new Institute and molding its character were a primary concern in the early years. In 1970 Dr. Davis recounted how he and the other two directors set out to build an "accurate and increasingly comprehensive body of significant knowledge on world food production, distribution, and consumption." They took as their goals "to analyze, objectively, issues of public policy, and to express the findings clearly and forthrightly, orally and in print." The results of much of this research were embodied in twenty volumes of *Wheat Studies* that were published from 1925 to 1944; they contain 12 special studies and 31 survey and review issues of which Davis was author or co-author, despite the fact that he was away from the University for extended periods in government service. There were also books and very many professional papers. His first book, *Essays in the Early History of American Corporations*, was published in 1917; his last, *The World Between the Wars*, was published in 1975.

From his earliest years as an economist, Joe was able to combine scholarly research of the highest quality with the strenuous demands of public service. In 1918-19 he served as an assistant statistician for the American Shipping Mission to London and also as statistician for the Allied Maritime Transport Council. He was a member of the staff of the Dawes Commission on Reparations in 1924, a member of a team studying the Fiscal and Economic Position of Mexico in 1928, Chief Economist of the Federal Farm Board in 1929 to 1931, a member of the Food and Nutrition Board of the National Research Council from 1940 to 1945, and of the Institute of Pacific Relations from 1941 to 1947. In 1955, three years after his official retirement, he was called to serve for nearly four years as a member of President Eisenhower's Council of Economic Advisors.

The years were also not without their honors. Dr. Davis was elected President

both of the American Statistical Association and the American Farm Economic Association in 1936, and of the American Economic Association in 1944; and in 1957 he was made one of the first Fellows of the American Farm Economic Association. But he cherished just as much the "Distinguished Alumnus Award" he received two years ago from Westchester (Pa.) State College, where he graduated in 1902.

Dr. Davis used to say that he felt more at home in research than in teaching, and that he had no real gift for classroom teaching. He did in fact have a great gift for teaching, by a word here, a sharp question there, a turn of phrase, or an aphorism. And many young scholars found his probing interest in their research the finest reward they could wish for and the greatest possible stimulus to their best efforts. On the other hand, he hated to waste time on small talk, and those who did not know him were sometimes taken aback by the abruptness with which business conversations began and ended.

Various of his published works are landmarks. In August 1949 Dr. Davis presented a paper to the Farm Economic Association at Laramie, Wyoming, entitled "Our Amazing Population Upsurge," that was the opening salvo in his attack on accepted projections of the population of the United States, an attack that ended the interwar belief in a static American population. That paper resulted from Joe's thoroughness in research, his insistence on having the latest information, and his reluctance to trust standing estimates or received doctrine. He had been working for some time on a book on consumption economics, and as he reviewed population projections for the United States and compared them with current population figures he began to sense that something was wrong. As he probed more deeply into the matter, the book was set aside and he concentrated almost exclusively on the population question; it continued to be a matter of special interest into the 1960s.

An article of September 1934, entitled "Agricultural Fundamentalism," is a superb exposition and critique of beliefs then widely held—and still held in some circles—about the place of agriculture in national economies; and it is a model essay, balanced, thoughtful, informed, and lucid.

A third article was published in July 1932 and is particularly apt today. It was entitled "The Specter of Dearth of Food: History's Answer to Sir William Crookes." (It is not, of course, the only article that Dr. Davis wrote on this general subject. A particularly cogent statement on the same subject was "Adam Smith and the Human Stomach" in 1954.) Crookes was one of the most eminent scientists of his generation, and in his presidential address to the British Association for the Advancement of Science in 1898 he had forecast a crisis in world food supplies by 1931. Davis carefully examined all of the elements of Crookes's argument and the quality of his information as a way of getting a better understanding of why the forecast had been so wrong and how better forecasts might be made. He concluded that "political and social factors, not natural or economic limitations, are the principal obstacles to continuous advance in the plane of living."

Joseph Davis was a teacher as well as a devoted seeker after knowledge and a loyal servant of his society. As he taught himself, he taught others, and his

persistent emphasis on “expressing findings clearly and forthrightly” was an essential element in this teaching. He never lost his desire to know, and he was indomitable in overcoming ignorance. In a talk to a Stanford undergraduate group in 1961 he said “Life has been far tougher, but much richer, than I dimly anticipated when I was twenty.” He would surely have said the same thing fourteen years later.