

The Marriage of D. P. Davis and Elizabeth Nelson

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David P. Davis led a passionate life. He was an adventurer, thrill seeker, gambler and a fierce entrepreneur. His intensity sparked both his personal and professional life, helping him reach great heights in the business and real estate world, but also contributing to his downfall and eventual death.

It is safe to say that he was in love with at least three women during his life: his first wife, Marjorie Merritt, whose 1922 death in Miami forever changed Davis; Hollywood starlet Lucille Zehring, who Davis dated off and on from 1923 until his own death in 1926; and Elizabeth Nelson, the young Tampa socialite who married Davis in October 1925.

One of the enduring stories regarding Davis' life centers on what seemed at the time an absurd assertion, allegedly made by Davis over a glass of champagne on New Year's Eve in 1924, that he would marry the next Queen of Gasparilla – who had yet to even be named. As the legend goes, Davis once again showed he could accomplish anything he truly desired, marrying twenty-two-year-old Elizabeth Nelson, Queen Gasparilla XVII, on October 10, 1925 (a month shy of his fortieth birthday).

Assuming the story is true, how did Davis manage to fulfill his daring boast? The naming of the Gasparilla court is a secret, and is decided in advance of the February Coronation Ball. Davis had a number of connections within the Krewe (some sources list Davis as a member), and it is quite likely that he knew Nelson would be elected queen. The real questions are: did he already know her and did they have a secret relationship;

did he have an unrequited desire for her, using his boast to gain her interest and attention; did he even care who it would be? We will probably never know.

What we do know is that in the afternoon of October 10, 1925, Davis and Nelson were wed at the “Presbyterian manse” in Clearwater (possibly Peace Memorial Presbyterian Church on Fort Harrison Avenue and Pierce Street). The only people to attend the hastily planned wedding were Nelson’s sister, Mrs. C. G. Rorebeck and Ray Schindler, one of Davis’ business associates.

Tampa’s two daily newspapers, the *Daily Times* and the *Morning Tribune*, each ran stories about the wedding in the following day’s editions. Both papers related the basic facts, including the status of Nelson as the reigning Queen of Gasparilla. The *Tribune*’s headline “D. P. Davis and Elizabeth Nelson, Prominent Tampan, Are Married in Clearwater; Surprise Families” topped that day’s Feature stories. The *Times* addressed the secrecy behind the marriage, stating, “There were occasional rumors of the romance, but the marriage ... came as a complete surprise.” The paper further alluded to her age, stating that she was “one of the most popular members of the younger set here.”

Elizabeth Nelson was not the only young woman in Davis’ life. According to D. P.’s brother, Milton, the marriage to Nelson was designed to make Zehring, whom Davis continued to see since his Miami days, jealous. Davis and Zehring maintained a long distance, on again – off again relationship, which apparently was in an “off” phase. Whatever the reason, it is clear that the marriage was an unsteady one. Davis and Nelson divorced and remarried in the span of eight weeks. Rumor and innuendo flew as to the reasons why the couple’s relationship was particularly stormy.

By this time, Davis had developed a substantial drinking problem, an unintended consequence of prohibition colliding with the Jazz Age. Like many men of his time, Davis enjoyed the advantage Florida's coastline provided bootleggers who brought illicit alcohol into the state. While no evidence exists showing Davis' drinking affected him professionally, contemporaries acknowledge that it brought out his melancholy side and greatly affected his personal life.

Further compounding any problems Nelson and Davis had was the fact that her family, her parents in particular, did not like Davis marrying their daughter. They were not very fond of Davis as a person, either. No doubt his relationship with Zehring made the situation that much more difficult. What is known is that Davis and Zehring did maintain some kind of contact, culminating with Davis' ill-fated trans-Atlantic journey.

Despite – or possibly because of – his success in Tampa, Davis grew restless once again. The same day Davis completed sales on Davis Islands lots, and just five days after his marriage to Nelson, he announced plans for a new development in northeast Florida on St. Augustine's Anastasia Island. Clearly, Davis' attention to Davis Shores proved disastrous to his relationship with Nelson. Davis Shores also pushed Davis into financial ruin, which in turn forced him to sell Davis Islands.

Thus the stage was set for Davis' ocean voyage to Europe. He was accompanied by Zehring, his oldest son George, and a number of business associates. Stories conflict as to whether Nelson was in Paris at the time, and if so, why Davis was going to see her. One of Nelson's grandchildren, John Rudolph, relates that his grandmother had both of Davis' sons with her in Paris and they were all awaiting his arrival so they could tour the

country. This is in direct conflict with what members of the Davis family have said, including both of Davis' sons, as well as some other contemporary accounts.

Davis' death in October 1926 left Nelson a widow. She was courted by a St. Petersburg physician named Council Rudolph, who read about Davis' death while riding the train that was bringing him to the south Pinellas city. According to John Rudolph, his grandfather rode the ferry to Tampa so he could meet and date Nelson, and they were finally married in 1929.

Rudolph's grandmother did not speak of her relationship with Davis, though his grandfather did mention it on occasion. Rudolph also recalls that all Nelson got from her relationship with Davis were "some dishes, her coats and some stocks that she owned before they were married." The memories, it seems, she kept to her self.