

# Rev. Maurice “Cotton” Davis (1901-1965)

By Jerry Long



Rev. Maurice Davis (1901-1965). Picture on left is a police mugshot taken prior to his becoming a noted radio evangelist.



Maurice Davis was a popular and controversial evangelist. His full name was Paul Maurice Davis. He was also known by the nickname of Cotton. He was born 3 May 1901 at Madisonville in Hopkins County, KY. He was the son of Ulysses Scott Davis & Willie Myrtle Garrett. His grandfather, Elijah Albert Davis (1831-1894), was a Methodist minister. In the U.S. federal census reports he is listed in:

- 1910 Hopkins County, KY
- 1920 Johnston City, Williamson County, IL; his occupation was reported as coal miner
- 1930 Johnston City, Williamson County, IL; his occupation was reported as salesman
- 1940 Madisonville, Hopkins County, KY; his occupation was reported as interdenominational preacher

- 1950 Evansville, Vanderburgh County, IN; his occupation was reported as minister

During World War I Maurice Davis served in the U.S. Army (co. A, 149th Infantry) from 16 April 1917 to 8 November 1917. He married Clarice D. Harris (1902-1994) on 7 August 1920 in Johnston City, Williamson County, IL.

As a young man he led a life of crime. During the 1930's he resided in Evansville, Vanderburgh County, IN. At the Evansville Rescue Mission in 1931 he reportedly was converted. He soon became a speaker about his conversion and for five years he acted as the custodian at the Evansville Rescue Mission. After studying two years at the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, IL he embarked on a career as an evangelist in 1936.

During the 1940's Rev. Davis resided in Owensboro, Daviess County, KY. He is listed as Paul M. Davis (evangelist) in the 1943 Owensboro City Directory (p.95). After leaving Owensboro he resided in Evansville, IN and Dallas, TX.

He conducted numerous revivals and services throughout Kentucky Illinois and Indiana. His ministry as a radio evangelist was extremely popular and controversial ministry. He broadcast weekly programs on the Owensboro, KY radio stations WOMI (1939-1947) & WVJS (1947-1951 & 1961-1962). His missions and programs were advertised extensively. Thousands of newspaper ads and radio promos appeared. His pleas generated immense sums of money. During 1944-1949 he operated the Diana Orphanage near Cloverport, KY on Highway 60 near the Hancock – Breckinridge County line (incorporated on 2 September 1944). He had a passion for prison inmates, especially those on death row. He visited and conducted many programs from the Eddyville, KY penitentiary and local jails. He preached against the death penalty and the cruelty of the electric chair. If you lived in Owensboro during the 1940's it would be difficult to not be familiar with the name of Maurice Davis. During his heyday he was probably the most widely known minister in Western Kentucky.

He died at the Parkland Hospital in Dallas, TX on 24 January 1965 (several Owensboro articles mistakenly report his death as being in 1964 – a cousin had reported the wrong date and place of death). His death certificate indicated his death was due to heart disease. He and his wife, Clarice, were interred in the Rose Hill Cemetery in Marion, Williamson County, IL.

In 1994 he was survived by a daughter, Diana Englert, of Buckston, NC; a granddaughter, Melissa Crane, of Evansville, IN; and great-grandchildren, Raven Buss and Chelsea Crane, both of Evansville, IN.

It is difficult to judge the sincerity of Rev. Maurice Davis. Narratives about him and testimonials by several of his close associates suggest that his career as an evangelist was a ruse. However, even if he was a charlatan he did a lot of good – converting many and meeting the needs of many. This writer's grandfather being one of those converts, who believed in the prophet. Unfortunately there is a history of many charismatic and popular evangelists who did good but who at the same time fleeced their flock for their own benefit.



**Marion Weekly Leader, Marion, IL, 2 November 1933, p.3:**

Mr. and Mrs. Wm, Stephenson and Mrs. Scott Davis, now of Paducah, Ky., visited in Marion Sunday and Sunday night visited with Mrs. Davis son, Maurice Davis and wife of Evansville, Ind. Maurice Davis, who is connected with the Evansville Mission, spoke at the Johnston City Methodist church and told of his conversion and life.



**Courier and Journal, Evansville, IN, 29 March 1936, p.6:**

**Ex-convict, Former All-Around Bad Man Scores as Evangelist**

Maurice 'Cotton' Davis Whose Life Was Changed at Rescue Mission Four Years Ago Gives Home Town Tremendous Surprise as He Conducts His First Revival There.

By LEE HEIMAN



Evangelist Maurice Davis

MAURICE "COTTON" DAVIS – highway robber, drunkard, bootlegger –dragged his thin disheveled form into the Evansville Rescue Mission.

Outside an electric sign had hailed him "Jesus Saves," it said. And there was singing inside joyous voices exalting the Lord our God.

"Cotton" Davis went into the chapel and sank to his knees. There he sobbed his pleas for forgiveness. He asked God's pardon tor his wrong-doings.

**HIS NEW LIFE BEGINS**

His mother stood at his side weeping silently, joyfully. Nearby was the Rev Ernest I. Reveal, superintendent of the Mission, and his eyes wart misty too.

Thus on an early fall day in 1931, "Cotton" Davis ex-convict, took the first step toward a new life.

For three years Davis and his wife worked in the kitchen at the Rescue Mission. Then Davis left for the Moody Bible institute, there to study for two years.

Davis' home town was little Johnston City, Ill. One day last month he returned there to conduct his first revival meeting, returned as an evangelist to the town he had left only a few years before as the No 1 "bad boy."

The good folks of little Johnston City in years before had shaken their heads wisely but solemnly when "Cotton" Davis passed along the street.

They'd shuddered as each new chapter in his life presented itself — his drunken brawls, the terrible beatings the police were forced to give him when he became unmanageable, his addiction to drugs and finally his repeated attempts to take his own life.

Now to see "Cotton" Davis as a powerful evangelist — well to the people of Johnston City it was nothing Short of a miracle!

Harris Jones editor of the Johnston City Progress, in a recent issue of his newspaper expressed the thoughts of the townspeople by comparing the life of Davis with the Biblical story of Jonah and the condemned city of Nineveh.

### JONAH AND DAVIS

Here is what he wrote:

"1, The Heavenly Father came unto Jonah saying 'Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me."

"1, Seven years ago Maurice Davis' father said to him: 'Some day I hope you will become a minister and preach to the people of this city. A city, state or nation cannot survive that does not recognize the hand of God.'

"2. Jonah went the opposite from Nineveh. He was in the belly of a whale for three days before he changed his mind. A miracle was performed in his deliverance.

### LIVES HELL ON EARTH

"2. Maurice Davis went the opposite direction. He lived a hell on earth for three years after his father's conversation before he changed his mind. Many Johnston City people believe a miracle was performed in his deliverance.

"3. Jonah thanked the Lord for his deliverance and then went to preach in Nineveh.

"3. Maurice Davis thanks the Lord for his deliverance and has come to preach in Johnston City, which he believes is the Lord's will.

"4. Nineveh was condemned by God.

"4. Maurice Davis believes God has a hand in the flood waters that threaten our coal mines and the economic destruction of Johnston City.

"5. Jonah preached The people of Nineveh believed God repented and the city was saved.

"5. Maurice Davis is preaching to the people of Johnston City. Will the city be saved from economic destruction?"

### EDITOR'S LIFE CHANGES

The return of Davis to Johnston City was a turning point in the life of Editor Jones, who has left his newspaper to travel with the evangelist and serve as his agent.

Davis now is conducting a revival meeting at Mt Vernon. He is accompanied by his song leader Hans Stalder, a native of Germany who one time was headed for a career on the stage.

Stalder dedicated his life to the ministry after taking part in a number of musical productions in Germany and in this country A friend associated with the Metropolitan Opera company In Philadelphia encouraged him to come to America to continue his stage career.

In the Rev. Reveal's opinion Davis stands a good chance of becoming one of the nation's most prominent evangelists, possibly reaching the heights attained by the revered Billy Sunday, who died only recently.

The Rev Reveal said the dramatic transformation of Davis' life was the j most dramatic he has ever seen.

Davis began his notorious life as a drunkard. For 11 years he grew steadily worse.

#### OFFICERS OFTEN BEAT HIM

He was arrested frequently. "And 'after the first few times" he recalled yesterday, "I began fighting back at the officers, they tell me.

"One time in West Frankfort they had to beat me so terribly they thought I would die, so they called for my mother and father.

"I was often beaten in the Johnston City jail until I was so bloody my wife would have to bring me clean clothes before I could go home."

Johnston City policemen tell how Davis attempted suicide by jerking the handle off a tin cup and cutting his wrist. He still carries the scar today.

#### DRIVES INTO TRAIN

One time, while drunk, he drove in front of a train and was dragged 250 feet past the Johnston City depot, luckily escaping with his life.

Glenn Young, Williamson county Klan leader, once caught Davis with a load of illicit whisky and almost succeeded in hanging him to a nearby tree.

Davis was sent away twice to be cured of a drug and liquor habit and at one time was committed to the Illinois state hospital for the insane. He served a term in the Bridewell at Chicago.

Davis' wife finally separated from him. His mother was afraid to ride in an automobile with him.

Urged A flood of joy filled my heart and I got up off my knees into the arms of my mother.by friends to try once more to change his life. Davis consented to visit the Rescue Mission at Evansville His mother followed him here secretly In another car.

#### TELLS OF SALVATION

Inside the Mission men and women were singing. Davis paused outside and listened lor a moment.

"There is a fountain filled with blood, drawn from Emanuel's veins; sinners plunge beneath that flood lose their guilty stains..."

The rest of the story is in Davis own words:

"Something began to pull at my heart as I stood there. Something seemed to say to me, "That is what you have been looking for all your life."

"I went forward and cried unto God that I had made a mess out of my life, but if He would lift that great load of sin, I would give Him my life.

"A flood of joy filled my heart and I got up off my knees into the arms of my mother."



**Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY, 14 January 1940, p.5A:**

## Evangelist On the Air



The Rev. Maurice Davis and Mrs. Davis, who are heard each week day over WOMI on the "10 O'clock Evangelistic Hour," are pictured before the microphone in the studio from which they broadcast. The Rev. and Mrs. Davis live in Madisonville, where they have a tabernacle, and drive to Owensboro each morning for the evangelistic broadcast. They have many listeners in Kentucky, Indiana and Illinois, according to the mail received each day.



**Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY, 16 February 1940, p.14:**

### EVANGELIST TO TELL LIFE STORY

Rev. Maurice Davis Being Heard By Large Crowds . At Gospel Mission.

The Rev. Maurice Davis, of Madisonville, evangelist at the Gospel Center Mission, in Hall street, will tell the story of his life at services to be held at 7:15 p.m. today. Good crowds are attending the revival, the congregation often including friends from Livermore, Madisonville, Henderson and other neighboring cities in which the evangelist has conducted services. The Rev. Mr. Davis has a large tabernacle at Madisonville, where he directs a program of religious work. The Rev. Hans Stahlder, of Chicago, has charge of the song services.

A sermon on "Jonah" was delivered by Evangelist Davis at the Mission Thursday evening, which was heard by a large crowd. Special music included selections by the Waters sisters.

Services will continue at the Gospel Mission at 7:15 p.m. daily. The Rev. Marshall Conway, religious director of the Mission, is assisting with the services. The public is cordially invited to attend.



**Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY, 2 April 1950, p.7B:**

**Maurice Davis Fasts To Help New Yorkers Get Needed Rain**

New York City, April 1 – Hold on to your clouds, scientific rainmakers. And hold on to your bonnets, ladies. Come Easter Sunday the rain of all rains will rain upon our reservoirs.

Come Easter Sunday and the devastating downpour, Maurice Davis, radio and tabernacle evangelist, will eat a hearty meal and return to his home hi Owensboro, Ky. Until then, Mr. Davis has vowed to remain in his room in the Lexington hotel in a state of fasting and prayer to save us droughted New Yorkers.

"I will eat nothing," he said today. "But I will drink plenty of water. New York water is very good. Best water I've ever tasted."

Mr. Davis, 48. a man of rotund proportions and profound faith, was converted to evangelistic preaching 18 years ago after "a life of wickedness and sin."

He said "the Lord spoke to me then – Sept. 27, 1931 – Just as He speaks to me now."

The evangelist confided that "people back my way say that New York is infested with drought now because it is a city of wickedness.

"But, I told them there's not a living soul can throw a stone. And I'm going to New York and bring on the rains."

Mr. Davis says he won't be satisfied with Just a drizzle. "It's going to be a real rain." he said. "And it won't stop till the reservoirs, are filled."

Mr. Davis listed the pour-by-prayer productions of his past. Once a \$5,000 gospel sign which Mr. Davis erected on the Indiana-Kentucky line caught fire. It was a clear night. Not a cloud in sight. But, while fire raged and hundreds of motorists stood by, Maurice Davis got down on his knees and prayed for rain.

"In 15 minutes," he recalled, "it was pouring."

Then there was that dry day here last July when Mr. Davis walked through Times Square and prayed for some gentle rain. He said:

"Why, it rained so hard that day that it washed out the ball game."

As for the scientific rainmakers –

"If a man fools around with scientific rain instead of prayer the Lord's gonna shut it off.



**Princeton Clarion-News, Princeton, IN 1 May 1950, p.1L**

**Minister Fined On Intoxication Charge Sunday**

Rev. Paul Maurice Davis, Evansville, and Ronald Dunn, Owensboro, Ky., were arrested here by Sheriff Maurice Wood about 4 a. m. Sunday morning after their car left the road and ploughed into an embankment near the Haubstadt junction on highway 41, according to the sheriff's report.

Rev. Davis was arraigned Sunday and pleaded guilty to a public intoxication charge. He paid his fine and was released. Dunn was also arraigned before Justice of Peace Ross Ritchie on three charges, driving a car without an operator's license, reckless driving and public intoxication. He was fined \$5 and costs on the public intoxication and no operator's license charges, but failed to pay the fine on the reckless driving charge and was held in custody of local officials.

According to the report here today, Dunn, after the accident, made his way to Evansville where he hired a wrecker to pull his car in. He was arrested by county officers after he returned to the scene of the wreck.

Neither Dunn or Rev. Davis were injured in the accident.



**Evansville Press, Evansville, IN, 25 January 1965, p.4:**

THE REV PAUL MAURICE DAVIS, 63, former Evansville and Owensboro resident died in hospital in Dallas Tex. Yesterday. He and his wife. Clarice, had moved from Evansville to Dallas three months ago.

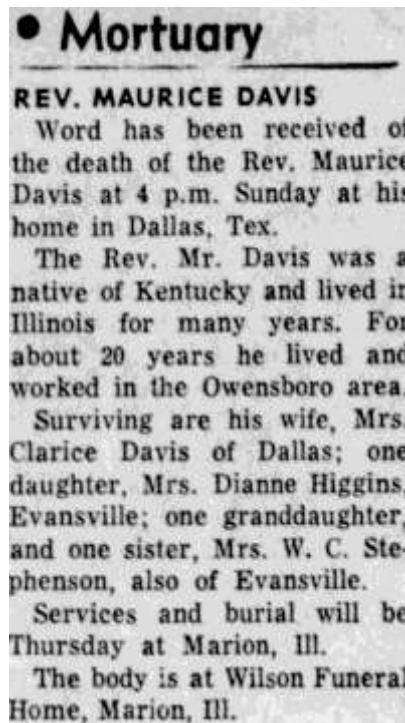
The Rev Davis a Presbyterian by faith, had been an interdenominational evangelist for 40 years. He traveled throughout the country in his ministry.

Besides his wife he is survived by a daughter Mrs. Dianne Higgins, one granddaughter, a sister Mrs. W. C. Stephenson, and an uncle R. C. Garrett, all of Evansville. An aunt Mrs. Byrd Simpson of Carbondale, Ill., also survives.

The body will be brought to Wilson Funeral Home in Marion, Ill., with services Wednesday at 2 p.m. Burial will also be in Marion.



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, 25 January 1965, p.8A:**





**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, 2 April 1978, pp.1E & 2E:**

**‘Cuss me, but don't ignore me':  
Fiery radio preacher caught public's ear**

By Keith Lawrence, Messenger-Inquirer

Sunday night, Sept. 27, 1931. The old Evansville Rescue Mission. The choir is singing, "There Is A Fountain Filled With Blood." Sinners are coming down the aisle to seek salvation.

One drops to his knees and cries out, "O God, I've given the best that I had to the Devil. I'm just a physical wreck. If there is anything that you can do with what is left – any way you can use me – here I am."

He was 30 years old that night. He had seen it all and done it all. A drug dealer. An alcoholic junkie. A confidence man. A Chicago gangster from the "Roaring 20s." A man who had done time in jails, prison and two mental institutions. A man who was just recovering from an attempted suicide.

Owensboro knew nothing of the conversion of Maurice "Cotton" Davis that night. But the "glory, road" he followed from the "Jesus Saves" neon-sign at the mission was to run through Owensboro like an eight-lane super highway. And no one who ever heard the Rev. Maurice Davis preach a sermon will ever forget it.

He was, they say, both colorful and controversial – spelled with a capital C.

From the day in December 1939 that he signed on the air at WOMI until 1951 when he left WVJS, Davis was the top radio personality in the tri-state. Some say no one will ever equal his popularity.

At his peak he was drawing 81,000 a day in donations mailed into his radio ministry. On Jan. 30, 1948. in a test of his strength, he received 13,000 cards and letters from his listeners.

But when he died, there were hardly-enough people at his funeral for pallbearers.

Grandson of a circuit-riding Methodist preacher. Davis grew up in Madisonville, but the family-moved to Johnson City [sic – Johnston City] , Ill., in what came to be called "Bloody Williamson" County (because of gangland violence ) when he was still young.

By the time he hit his knees at altar call in the Evansville mission. Davis had a string of more than 150 arrests. "I had been in jail so often that I felt almost at home in a prison cell," he said.

Although he ran for a time with a gang of southern Illinois bank robbers. Davis was primarily a minor league hood. At one time in the late '20s, though, police in West Frankfort, Ill., reportedly had instructions to "shoot Davis on sight."

He narrowly escaped death in a shootout there when police, chasing bank robbers he was with, shot out the doors to the house they were in.

Years later, he recalled. "I lived most of the time in the 'red light district' and became a confidence man in a blackmailing racket of a type so low that I hesitate even now to confess I was a part of it "

For a time, Davis pushed drugs in Flint, Mich. "I went into the racket for gain and I attempted deliberately to make dope addicts of the inhabitants of the tenderloin (mostly prostitutes), because I knew they would be easy victims."

He bought morphine from Detroit gangsters at \$18 an ounce and sold it on the street for \$90 an ounce, he said. Then he discovered a more profitable way to push it – by the grain.

There are, he said. 480 grains of morphine to the ounce. He charged \$5 a grain on the streets – making \$2,400 for an \$18 can.

By 1928 Davis was he said, "a confirmed drug addict and was drinking whiskey with it." One night he and some friends were shooting cocaine and drinking whiskey when they were arrested on suspicion of murder. The charge was eventually dropped.

Drugs and liquor took him inside the walls of at least two mental institutions.

He came out of the Keeley Sanitarium in Dwight, Ill., after five weeks saying he had "lost my craving for liquor and drugs and was in better physical condition than I had been in for months."

Within a week, he was hooked again.

Another time he was judged insane by reason of his addiction and committed to the state hospital in Anna, Ill., for four weeks of a "cold turkey" cure.

While there. Davis recalled, "I resembled one of the hoboes I had seen around the 'jungles' that I used to haunt in my childhood days at Madisonville."

Again the cure didn't last.

In 1930, Davis was running a speakeasy in northern Michigan, bootlegging liquor and pushing narcotics. His mother called to tell him his father was in serious condition. So Davis took a drink of whiskey, gave himself a morphine shot and caught the train for Carbondale, Ill.

There he learned that his father had put a .38-caliber pistol against his head and pulled the trigger. The elder Davis was said to have died praying, "O God, save my boy."

Davis was plagued with guilt. Later he wrote, "I had murdered my father. I had murdered him as definitely as if I had sent a bullet into his brain or plunged a knife into his heart."

From the funeral, he moved to Chicago and "teamed up with one of the most reckless gangsters and began playing many rackets "

One night he was picked up for drunken driving and attempting to run away from the scene of an accident. After a brief stay-in Bridewell Prison, Davis appeared before a judge who told him, "You killed your father just as definitely as if you had pulled the trigger of the gun that shot him. Before I'd live the life you're leading, I'd tie a rope around my neck and hang myself."

With those words, the judge set him free for the last time.

Davis went to his apartment and drank until he was paralyzed for a week, he said, from too much whiskey. Later he moved to Marion, Ill , to live with his mother.

One day in 1931 he drained another bottle of whiskey and proceeded to slash his left wrist with a razor. His mother found him and called a doctor who sewed the wound up before Davis could bleed to death.

The following Sunday night, Davis lay in bed unable to sleep. A radio was playing in an adjoining apartment and he recognized the song. "In the Garden" – his father's favorite hymn.

As Davis listened to radio station WGBF in Evansville, the Rev. Earnest I. Reveal, pastor of the Evansville Rescue Mission, came on the air.

Davis became intrigued with the message he heard that night. One week later, he walked beneath the neon sign on an Evansville street, read the words "JESUS SAVES" and walked inside the mission.

When he walked out beneath that sign again, Davis was a changed man. "To me," he said, "conversion was a heavenly charisma – a cleansing of the soul. I felt my old life dropping away from me like a soiled and discarded garment. I was clothed with a new and radiant robe. For the first time in years, I slept as sweetly that night as a babe."

For five years, Davis stayed at the mission as its night supervisor. In the late '30s, he went to Chicago to study at the Moody Bible Institute .

While there he did some street-corner evangelism, debating the communists and atheists, who were to become his "pet peeves."

Later, he said, "I resented their attacks on religion and on the flag under whose protection they were being permitted to speak. Since that day, I have had no use for these termites who have been, and are, trying to undermine the church and government and usher in a reign of anarchy."

Then he went on an evangelistic circuit. "I was on fire with a message," he said. "I was interested only in the salvation of souls."

Davis returned home to Johnson City, Ill., to conduct a revival in the town where people knew so much about his past.

From there he went to Bowling Green, Ky., then into Ohio and finally to Flint, Mich., scene of so many of his arrests.

"I held meetings in all parts of the country in churches, coliseums, halls and tents," he said. He claimed his greatest revival came in Providence, Ky., where he preached for six weeks to crowds that averaged 5,000 a night.

About that time he established a tabernacle in Madisonville. In 1939, Davis drove to Owensboro to see about getting some time on radio station WOMI, which had signed on the air a year before.

That was the step that brought him fame throughout the tri-state.

Leroy Woodward, who worked at both local radio stations in the era of Davis' popularity, recalls that Davis told his listeners on his first broadcast that he didn't have the money to pay the toll on the bridge at Calhoun and his car needed a heater.

The next morning, Woodward says, Davis announced that the tolltaker at Calhoun was no longer charging him and someone had given him a heater for his car.

The man seemed to work a form of magic with his 10 a.m. daily broadcast – "The Ten O'clock Evangelistic Hour." There were thousands who swore by him and probably as many that swore at him.

But at 10 a.m., a large percentage of area radios were tuned to WOMI to hear what the "fire and brimstone" preacher would say next.

And his sermons frequently dealt with the sins of the flesh he knew so well from his days in the "red light" districts. One local woman recalls driving through town wearing a new pair of red shoes listening to Davis on the car radio.

"He said, 'Any woman who wears red shoes is a whore,'" she says.

Before long Davis' daily mail to the station was bringing \$1,000 or more a day. He called the greenbacks "snowflakes" and made frequent appeals to keep the "snowflakes" coming.

But, he said, "Every dollar that came, I gave away for charitable purposes. I did not consider this my money. The Lord had sent it and I used it for his work."

Before long he had a direct line hookup with radio station WJBF in Herrin, Ill., further extending the reach of his radio ministry. The hookup cost \$500 a month.

Davis said the "snowflakes" provided "food for the hungry, clothing for the poorly clad, medical treatment for the sick and indigent. I paid the rent for many families who were about to be evicted. I even bought homes for some. I paid the burial expenses for many who otherwise would have been buried in the potter's field."

He told of watching a grave being dug in Potter's Field during a rainstorm. As water rose in the grave in the pauper's cemetery, Davis said he halted the funeral and told them to take the body back to the funeral home.

"I purchased a grave site in a better part of the cemetery and we gave this Christian mother a decent burial," he said.

"Snowflakes" also provided medical treatment for underprivileged children, paid for operations and for dental treatment. He also told of buying dog tags for the pets of poor children.

Once, he said, he bought tags for 70 dogs about to be executed, fed them a meal and turned them loose.

Then he extended his ministry to billboards, erecting more than 100 of them. The largest of these was a huge sign erected across from the entrance to Dade Park (now Ellis Park) Race Track between Henderson and Evansville, an area that then boasted seven wide-open road houses. At night the sign's lights were reportedly visible for miles.

Davis said he paid an artist \$1,000 to paint the crucifixion scene on the sign. The sign itself cost \$7,000: It was 50 feet high, more than 100 feet long and had its own power plant for the lights.

At least one man who planned to commit suicide on the bridge over the Ohio found a new life as a result of seeing the sign in the distance, Davis claimed.

During World War II, Davis opened a prayer center in downtown Owensboro and continued holding tent meetings around the area. As criticism of his style and bluntness grew, he said, "Christ once said, 'Woe is me when all men speak well of me.'"

When WVJS signed on the air in 1947, Davis moved his program there, keeping the same time slot but changing the name of the program to the "Hour of Inspiration and Devotion."

On July 4, 1941, Davis launched one of the great crusades of his life – to abolish capital punishment.

At that time, he said it wasn't his purpose to "argue the rightness or wrongness of capital punishment."

At that time, he said, "I do maintain that prevention of crime is a thousand times better than the punishment of the criminals after the crime has been committed."

By 1960, he had watched 21 men die in the electric chair at Eddyville. By then, he was fighting to abolish the death penalty.

"I never was able to reconcile myself to seeing a man with whom I had talked and prayed and eaten a few minutes before being strapped into that chair and having 2,200 volts of electricity sent through his' body," he said.

He told of the nights he spent on death row (electrocutions were at midnight). He recalled the last meals of fried chicken, hot biscuits, gravy, banana pudding, ice cream and coffee. He told about the prison choir that came into the cell block singing "What A Friend We Have In Jesus," progressing through "In The Sweet Bye and Bye" and closing with "God Be With You Till We Meet Again " And he told of walking the "last mile" past other cells draped with heavy black curtains so the inmates couldn't see what was happening.

The worst of his stories was of the night two men were burned alive in the chair because of inexperienced executioners. He told of an odor of burning flesh so strong it could be smelled all the way to Eddyville and smoke so thick he could barely see the next man waiting to die. It took 30 minutes for the men to die, he wrote.

Davis said he never saw an execution that he didn't think "But for the grace of God, there is Maurice Davis."

His greatest success in opposing executions was the case of William Elliott, sentenced to die for the death of a Whitely County deputy jailer in 1940.

Elliott spent five years on Death Row with eight stays of execution one only 45 minutes before he was to die. Through the efforts of Davis and his listeners, the sentence was commuted to life in 1945. Nine years later Elliott was pardoned.

Davis had raised more than \$10,000 to free Elliott.

His prison ministry also included weekly services in the Daviess County Jail for a number of years.



An advertisement from the mid-940s expresses Maurice Davis's philosophy

In 1944, Davis decided to extend his ministry to include an orphanage. "Snowflakes" bought 148 wooded acres on the banks of the Ohio near Cloverport the estate of the Louisville and Nashville Railroad.

He called it the Diana Orphanage in honor of his daughter. The orphanage lasted a decade or so, but was never as successful as some of his other projects.

About 1951, Davis pulled up stakes and left Owensboro. Nobody is really sure why.

Woodward recalls that a lot of "snowflakes" seemed to be sticking to Davis' hands. He had a big house on Griffith Avenue and a chauffeur-driven car (the chauffeur doubled as a trumpet player), Woodward says.

One day a man from the Internal Revenue Service came to the radio station, Woodward recalls, and asked for Davis.

"This agent said, 'Rev. Davis, I've been checking your banking account. You haven't been paying any income tax. You haven't even been withholding Social Security on your employees.'

"'Oh,' he (Davis) says, 'that's not my money.

That's the Lord's money.'

"The agent said, 'That might be, but it's not in the Lord's name. It's in your name.' So he made him pay some tax."

Davis' cousin, Arleigh Ashby, who still lives in Johnson City, Ill., isn't really sure why Davis left Owensboro, either. "Rumor was that the Internal Revenue Service was after him," Ashby says.

"These evangelists that collect a lot of money on radio and television, the government keeps pretty close check on them They're not supposed to use any of that money for personal use. They claim they're giving it all away and the government says they're not. I understand that's why he left over there."

Ashby agrees with all of Davis' accounts of his early life. Davis had been as bad as he ever claimed, he said.

By 1960, Davis was in Nashville writing a book, "Ten Years on Death Row." His cause then was to save Kelly Moss, a Henderson man was sentenced to die for the murder of his stepfather in 1957.

Davis lost that fight. But Moss' death in the electric chair on March 2, 1962, was the state's last execution.

Ethel Ashby says the family kind of lost track of Davis after he left Owensboro. In the early '60s, she says, "He got sick and had to have some surgery. When he got well, he moved to Texas and got into revivals down there."

It was Saturday night Nov. 14, 1964. Davis was preaching in a revival tent in a small west Texas town. Suddenly his heart gave out, and Mrs. Ashby says, "he fell dead in the pulpit." They shipped him back to Marion, Ill., for burial in a family plot beside his parents.

Ashby was one of the pallbearers. He recalls, "There wasn't enough people there to make up enough men for the pallbearers."

Davis had been the most popular radio minister in the history of Owensboro – 13,000 cards and letters in one day. But when they buried him on the hilltop in New Rose Hill Cemetery back there in "Bloody Williamson" County, he was a forgotten man.

A prophet, they say, is without honor in his own country.



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, 2 April 1978, pp.1E:**

**‘He knew the Lord’**

Friends and co-workers remember  
Hellfire and brimstone on the air

Charlotte Clark, retired secretary of the Evansville Rescue Mission: "He was a powerful preacher. Yes he was. He knew the Lord. He of course had an awful life but he got away from it. Many times he kinda slipped but he always came back to the Lord. He was a good man."

Leroy Woodward, record store owner and a former employee of both local radio stations: "I was at WOMI the day he came over from Madisonville to buy time. At that time every preacher had a program asking for money and we weren't too hot on it.

"I was trying to discourage him. He said, 'A dairy company over at Madisonville wants to sponsor me.' Well, I got interested. But, he said, 'I talked to the Lord. The Lord said if he couldn't take care of me, no milk company could take care of me.'

"He started asking for what he called snowflakes (money) and I swear to you he used to get bags of money. I've seen the mailman bring bags of mail to the radio station and him open them up and get out fives, tens and twenties.

"During the war (World War II), he put up a prayer wall. If you sent him a snapshot of your brother, husband, son or something, he'd put him on that prayer wall, pray for him and he wouldn't get killed in the war. He was always saying none of them had been killed. I don't know whether that's true or not.

"He started a thing against electric chairs. He'd go to Eddyville and take pictures of guys in the electric chair, put out a little ole pamphlet and sell it.

"He said he was going to have a great big shindig up at Rainbow Gardens, up by Bolivar Street, and re-enact an electrocution. He had a 110-watt electric chair with a little ole bulb over it. Malcolm Greep painted him a prison backdrop.

"He had a drunk he had converted in jail put on a convict suit with white and black stripes. I was the (radio) engineer. He built up to this thing and took up a collection. The guy got in the

chair. They clamped on the leg bands and arm bands and put the thing on his head. The dramatic moment came.

"They pulled the switch and there was a short in the thing somewhere. At the top of his lungs, (the drunk) yelled out, 'Lemme outta this damn thing.' That broke up the meeting. I tried to get the knob turned off but it was too late. It was already on the air.

"He would just do anything or say anything on the air. He had the listeners. Everywhere I would go if they found out I was from Owensboro they would ask me about Maurice Davis. A lot of people really believed in him. He had a tremendous following.

"I think both radio stations were getting scared to have him on. He would say, 'The mayor took \$100 from the gamblers yesterday. There's going to be dice shooting again downtown.' The stations were a little scared of him.

Malcolm Greep, executive vice president and general manager of Owensboro On The Air: "The last thing I remember him doing was trying before Jack Ruby died to get him to convert his nightclub into a tabernacle.

"He was very popular. He was the most popular personality here at that time. I never could figure out the key to his success. I know he got 13,000 letters one day on something he put on to show his strength. They brought them up in big mail sacks. I was so surprised I made him let me run my hand down in one of the sacks and pull out a letter and look at the date on it. He actually got that kind of mail.

"I think he was discouraged because he didn't seem to get the support for his orphanage (near Cloverport) that he felt he should. That might be the reason he left here. He could get support for other things but he never seemed to have much success with his orphanage.

"He was very controversial – a fire and brimstone preacher. But I always thought of him as a good and honest man."

Marshall Bruner, Owensboro Municipal Utilities public relations manager and a former WOMI employee: "He would get in lots of money. Then he would blow it all and have to call for snowflakes – he called them snowflakes – to come back in. He was a funny guy.

"He was stocky, very blond and heavy-set. He had been everything and done everything, he said. He had a lot of the con man in him. He had tremendous energy and a tremendous evangelistic fervor about him that just grabbed people.

"It was early in the business and there weren't many of them (radio evangelists) around here. He had what he called a 'Ten O'Clock Evangelistic Hour' on WOMI for years. He would go into jails or pick up a bum on the street, you just name it and, by golly, he would do it.

"He'd have music, his wife would sing and play the piano. He would have other groups come out and put on a little singing. Then he would get on for about the last 15 to 13 minutes and make his pitch.

"He'd dredge up hellfire and brimstone. He was a volatile man, shot off sparks in every direction. He had unbounded energy, and did a lot of work in the jails. He didn't have a church as far as I know.

"He had a tent meeting one time in a big vacant lot at 14th and Triplett. We broadcast it every night and I happened to be the guy that drew the assignment to put him on the air.

"I was sitting there one night and all of a sudden he says, 'I want every woman in this audience to cross her legs.' He paused a minute and something alerted me. I reached over and cut the mike switch. Then he said, 'Now the gates to hell are closed.' I never will forget that.

"He would flirt with that kind of stuff at the station. Another time I was in the control room and he was skating on getting dirty on the air. I reached over, flipped the switch on him and put a record on. He got so mad he came through there and swung at me, you wouldn't believe how hard he swung at me. I ducked, somebody grabbed him and he cooled down.

"I suppose he did a world of good, but, like anything else, when he would leave, they'd probably slide right back where they were before.

Olus "Tex" Justus country singer on WOMI at the time Davis was at the station: "He was a friend of mine. He came on right after me. One day he was in a hurry to get someplace. Some little girl came in there and said , 'Rev. Davis, my mother wants you to say a prayer for her.'

"He said. 'Aw. go on little girl. I haven't got time. We're in a hurry.'

"She said. 'Well, she sent you this \$5.' He grabbed that \$5, put his hand on her head, mumbled a few words and says. 'There's a prayer for you.' "I never did have any respect for him after that. That just chilled me. He sold that prayer for \$5 and I doubt if he even mumbled God's name.



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, 2 May 1996, p.1C:**

**Colorful minister's crusade against death penalty lives on**

By Keith Lawrence, Messenger-Inquirer

Susan Sarandon won an Oscar this year for "Dead Man Walking." Sharon Stone is hoping for her own in "Last Dance," which opens this weekend.

And Congress has passed legislation designed to speed up executions.

The death penalty is making a comeback in the '90s. And it's a shame the Rev. Maurice "Cotton" Davis can't be here to fight it.

He'd at least make it interesting.

Davis, a self-described drug dealer and Chicago gangster before he found the Lord, was unquestionably the most colorful minister in Kentucky history.

From the day in December 1939 that ho signed on the air at WOMI to 1951, when he left WVJS, Davis was the most popular radio personality in the history of Owensboro radio.

He was both loved and hated. But Davis was never ignored.

At his peak, he drew \$1,000 a day in donations – "snowflakes," he called them – from his listeners. And Jan. 30, 1948, in a test of his strength, Davis drew more than 13,000 cards and letters in one day.

Some said he was a crook. Some said he was a saint.

But both sides agreed. There was no one else like Davis.

Yet when he died in 1964 at 63, there weren't enough people at his funeral back home in southern Illinois to even serve as pallbearers, a cousin said.

"Colorful" didn't begin to describe Davis. By the time he found the Lord in 1931, Davis claimed a rap sheet with more than 150 arrests for drug dealing, blackmailing, bootlegging and such.

And it was among prisoners, on July 4, 1941, that Davis launched the greatest crusade of his life – to abolish capital punishment.



By 1960, he had watched 21 men die in the electric chair at Eddyville. And he could describe each death in graphic detail.

"I was never able to reconcile myself to seeing a man with whom I had talked and prayed and eaten a few minutes before, being strapped into that chair and having 2,200 volts of electricity sent through his body," he said once.

Davis described the hours leading up to the midnight executions. The fried chicken. Hot biscuits. Banana pudding. Ice cream. And coffee. The prison choir singing, "God Be With You Till We Meet Again."

He told of walking the "last mile," past cells draped with heavy black curtains so the other inmates couldn't see what was happening.

And he told in graphic detail of the night two men were burned alive in the chair. The odor of burning flesh so strong you could smell it miles away. And smoke so thick you could barely see the next man waiting to die.

Davis managed to save a few men from the chair – most notably William Elliott who spent five years on Death Row in the 1940s with eight stays of execution – one only 45 minutes before he was scheduled to die.

Elliott's sentence was commuted to life in 1945. And he was pardoned in 1954.

They say Davis was so committed to his fight against the death penalty that once he even went to the local dog pound, bought tags for 70 dogs about to be killed, fed them a meal and set them free.

In 1960, Davis launched his last big fight to save Kelly Moss, a Henderson man convicted of murdering his stepfather in 1957.

He lost that battle. Moss died in the electric chair in Eddyville on March 2, 1962.

Davis won the war.

Thirty-four years have passed since anyone has died in that chair.

That's the legacy of the Rev. Maurice "Cotton" Davis, who they say fell dead in the pulpit in a west Texas revival meeting Nov. 14, 1964.



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, 11 March 1999, p.1C:**

**Rainbow Gardens deserves a historical marker**

By Keith Lawrence, Messenger-Inquirer

... The late LeRoy Woodward, former Owensboro mayor and radio personality, told me once about the time in the '40s when local radio evangelist Maurice "Cotton" Davis rented the Gardens. Davis was campaigning to abolish the death penalty. And he announced plans to re-enact an electrocution at the Gardens. "Maurice had a 110-watt electric chair with a little ol' bulb over it," Woodward said, chuckling at the memory. "He had a drunk he had converted in jail put on a convict suit with white-and-black stripes." The service was being broadcast live. Woodward was the engineer. "Maurice built up the crowd and took up a collection," Woodward said. "The guy got in the chair. They clamped on the leg bands and arm bands and put the thing on his head. "The dramatic moment came. They pulled the switch, and there was a short in that thing somewhere. At the top of his lungs, (the man) yelled out, 'Lemme outta this damn thing.' That broke up the meeting. I tried to get the knob turned off, but it was too late. It was already on the air."

[note: The Rainbow Gardens was Owensboro's RiverPark Center - and the Sportscenter - of its day. It was located in the Equity Tobacco Warehouse at 602 E. Second St. in downtown Owensboro.]



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, 9 July 2015, pp.1C & 3C:**

**'Cotton', radio evangelist, left mark on Owensboro**

By Keith Lawrence, Messenger-Inquirer

In the past 200 years, a lot of interesting people have passed through Owensboro. And those who were here in the 1940s will tell you that the Rev. Maurice "Cotton" Davis was definitely among the most interesting.

Davis' life would make a pretty good movie.

The way he told it, by the time he found salvation at the Evansville Rescue Mission on Sept. 27, 1931, he had been a drug dealer, an alcoholic, a junkie, a confidence man, a low-level Chicago gangster, a man who had done time in prisons and mental hospitals and a man who was recovering from an attempted suicide.

And he was only 30.

By the time Davis signed on the air at Owensboro's WOMI radio in December 1939 until he signed off the air at WVJS in 1951, he was the top radio personality in the tri-state.

At his peak, they say he was drawing \$1,000 a day in donations mailed to his radio ministry — worth about \$13,000 today.

On Jan. 30, 1948, in a test of his strength, Davis received 13,000 cards and letters from his listeners.

The late Leroy Woodward, who worked at both local radio stations during that era, said once that when Davis signed on the air here for the first time, he told his listeners that he did not have the money to pay the toll on the bridge at Calhoun and needed a new heater for his car.

The next morning, Woodward said, Davis told his listeners that the toll keeper at Calhoun was no longer charging him and someone had bought a new heater for his car.

His radio show, "The Ten O'clock Evangelistic Hour," was so controversial that thousands swore by him and thousands more swore at him.

Davis was a man who specialized in hellfire and brimstone.

They say he liked to preach on the sins of the flesh, the ones he knew so well from his years of living in red-light districts.

One listener recalled years later that she was driving through Owensboro wearing a new pair of red shoes, listening to Davis on the radio.

"He said, 'Any woman who wears red shoes is a whore'," she said, still mad at the memory.

Davis asked listeners to send him "snowflakes" — dollar bills.

But he said he always used it for "God's work."

Davis was said to have had 100 billboards spread across the region in his heyday.

One across from the entrance to Ellis Park was 50 feet high, more than 100 feet long and had its own power plant for the electricity to keep it lighted.

When WVJS signed on the air in 1947, Davis moved his radio program there at the same time, but changed the name to "Hour of Inspiration and Devotion."

His biggest crusade was against the death penalty.

By 1960, Davis said he had watched 21 men die in the electric chair at Eddyville.

He talked about men being burned alive in the chair, of the smell of burning flesh.

At one time, they say, Davis had a big house on Griffith Avenue and a chauffeur-driven car.

But then, they say, about 1951, he ran into problems with the IRS and left Owensboro.

On Nov. 14, 1964, Davis was preaching a tent meeting in a small West Texas town.

They say his heart gave out and he fell dead in the pulpit.

When his body was shipped back home to Marion, Illinois, for burial in the family plot, there weren't enough people to even fill out the ranks of the pallbearers, one of his cousins told me nearly 40 years ago.

He may have been forgotten at home, but Cotton Davis is still remembered in Owensboro — a town he left 64 years ago.



Rev. Maurice Davis



Rev. Maurice Davis & wife, Clarice, in front of the WOMI Radio Station in Owensboro, KY



Rev. Maurice Davis at the Diana Orphanage

Cloverport, KY Museum Facebook Site:

# TO-NIGHT I DIE!

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