

Joseph George Davidson, PhD
"The Cantankerous Chemist" from "The Deed of Gift"



Among the many positive adjectives by which Joseph George Davidson, Ph.D., is remembered two decades after his death are: inventive, ingenious, energetic, charming, generous, attentive, and honorable. But with Dr. Davidson

nothing was simple or one-sided, and so these negatives also emerge from the memories of colleagues and acquaintances: imperious, determined, stubborn, ornery, cantankerous, and even choleric.

This powerful individual, a pioneering American chemical executive, served for six important watershed years in the 1960s as chairman of the board of Putnam Memorial Hospital. He pushed the hospital forward with a zest and dynamism unmatched before or since. He set a pattern of leadership that was accepted and emulated by Robert D. Stout, the administrator he had a strong role in hiring, and with whom he worked, closely and usually amicably, for several years. Stout once wrote a brief biography in which he referred to Davidson as "this king of a man."

When Davidson retired to Bennington County in 1960 he was a veteran world traveler and recipient of several major chemical industry awards. He had been a vice president of the Union Carbide Corporation, and president and then board chairman of Union Carbide's Chemicals Company Division. He held twenty-eight patents on composition materials he had helped to develop, the best known being Bakelite (named for its inventor, Leo A. Bakeland, and regarded for its high chemical and electrical resistance). His other patents pertained to such diverse concoctions as lacquers, antiknock fuels, pickling inhibitors, and laminated safety glass.

Davidson had also been deeply involved in two of the most potentially destructive activities in human history. During World War 1, armed with a fresh doctorate in chemistry from Columbia University, he worked as an army first lieutenant in the

development of mustard gas. During World War II, he headed Union Carbide's immense and highly secret gaseous-diffusion project at Oak Ridge, Tennessee, which refined the uranium that was used in the fission of the first atomic bomb. Though he spoke little about the Oak Ridge project, even to his wife, he let it be known to acquaintances that he regarded the development of the bomb as a matter of extraordinary importance to the national interest, something that simply had to be done. As if in expiation, Davidson later founded and nurtured the first and only charterhouse in the United States of the Carthusians, a 900-year-old Roman Catholic monastic order devoted to silence, solitude, reverent contemplation of the human condition, and the quest for grace. For most of the decade of the 1960s, Davidson engaged in several dynamic enterprises on Mount Equinox, having purchased virtually the entire mountain, about 11 square miles, as he lived in vigorous retirement in a grand ranch style house he built not far from the summit and named, aptly, Windswept. He was called George by his wife and close friends, "Dr. Davidson" or "Doctor" by most others and simply "Doc" by Norton Barber, the Bennington attorney who was his close colleague on the hospital board. But by whatever name, Davidson was that rare breed of tough minded businessman who had become a dedicated conservationist. He was a sensitive listener but also decisive, hard driving leader. In today's terms he might be regarded as an environmentalist who sought to resolve imbalances between the worlds of business and nature.

Dr. Davidson's personal motivation seemed to derive from powerful need for self-sufficiency, expressed most clearly as a disdain for public utilities. He wanted to be in control, not dependant on someone else's generation of electricity or telephone network. So he designed and built both systems on his own mountain. Of course he had to depend on the existing telephone company: but long before the breakup of AT&T, when possessing one's own telephone equipment was unheard of, Davidson owned all the telephones, wiring, and related apparatus on his mountain. In his quest to remedy what he considered inadequate telephone facilities Davidson placed newspaper advertisements asking the public to provide him

with instances of "execrable" service. His squeaky wheel got greased. When New England Telephone was about to "go dial" in Vermont's capital city of Montpelier, the company decided instead to give priority to Manchester, where telephone numbers rather than being seven digits were, for example, "342-j" and handled directly by user and operator. So while Montpelier and all of state government waited, Manchester got dial service first and Davidson was rewarded with *numero uno*, 1234, in the new exchange known as 362. Davidson was born February 7, 1892, in New York City, a son of John Wellington and Theresa (Gahan) Davidson. The family moved to California when he was an infant. He received his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1911 from the University of Southern California, where he studied chemistry; he then earned a master of arts the next year.

Infused with a "because-it's-there" attitude, and using his "think big" approach, Davidson began immediately to forge a road toward the mountain's summit. Delayed somewhat by wartime shortages as well as by the couple's lengthy residence at Oak Ridge, then by recalcitrant Vermonter who refused for a while to sell a key parcel, the Equinox Skyline Drive was first opened to the public in 1947, and it was fully paved in 1953. Starting from Route 7, at the bottom of Bennington County's valley between the mountain ranges, the road soars upwards for five miles, twists around hairpin turns, and offers occasional turnouts for scenic views or as respites for vehicles that overheat. It is the longest paved toll road in the United States, and reputedly one of the best engineered.

Davidson investigated but never carried out two other lofty mountain projects. He abandoned the notion of a ski resort on Mt. Equinox after candid consultations with Fred Pabst of the Wisconsin beer-brewing family. In the early 1930s Pabst had started his own ski area in the Taconic range, a few miles north of equinox in east Dorset, but found the snowfall there insufficient; he then met with far more success at the higher, south facing Big Bromley in Peru, in the Green Mountains. Davidson also considered a cable-driven railroad between his mountaintop and the Southern Vermont Art Center. A funicular rail ride to the summit from the

art center, the former Gertrude Devine Webster estate on an eastern flank of Equinox near Manchester, could have been a grand tourist attraction. But its cost would have been prohibitive in relation to revenues gained during the brief warm-weather Season. In any case, Davidson always "thought big" about his mountain.

In the late 1950s, he began to ease up on his duties at Union Carbide, and took longer vacations and weekends in the first house he had built on the mountain. Upon full-time retirement in 1960, he built Windswept as a long, low two-story residence that was well set into the Mountainside. It featured expansive picture windows and a south-facing view so spectacular it seems that one can almost see the Atlantic Ocean.

He wanted to make sure he kept busy during retirement," as his wife understated it, and thus he indulged a veritable explosion of interests. In addition to his dedicated service as board chairman of the hospital, he was also director of the Warren Wire Company of Pownal, and of the Vermont Bank and Trust Company of Brattleboro (since renamed First Vermont Bank), which he persuaded to think far-sightedly in terms of computerization. As a director of National Life Insurance Company, he was instrumental in talking the firm into creating its new headquarters on a dramatic hillside overlooking Montpelier rather than hidden away down in the valley. As a trustee of the University of Vermont, he worked ardently to raise funds for its Given Medical Building. To give substance to his leanings as an outdoorsman and 1960s-style conservationist, Davidson became president of the Connecticut River Watershed Council. Typically, he asked, "Has anybody gone the whole length of it?" and he proceeded to do so, accompanied by Madeleine, in a canoe, from northern New Hampshire to Long Island Sound. not shy about publicity, the two paddlers put on gas masks to dramatize the river's impurities, and Davidson had a documentary film made of the experience. Titled "From the Source to the Sea," it was used to promote measures to improve the river's water quality.

Davidson became acquainted with Putnam Memorial Hospital in the late 1950s when he made an unrestricted letter, he was unhappy to learn that his gift had simply been dispersed into operating expenses. He gave another but with strings attached so it would remain as income-generating endowment. Gradually he became both interested in, and then somewhat alarmed about, the hospital's financial management as well as its medical direction. Soon he aspired to liken it to the Mayo Clinic at Rochester, Minnesota, as "one of the better medical centers in the whole country." Several colleagues remember vividly when he became chairman of the hospital board in 1960. The first meeting at which he was to preside was called for 7 P.M., and Davidson watched patiently as the trustees arrived late and straggled in amid chatter and diversionary conversation before they took their seats. He then lectured them sternly on the virtues of promptness, reminded them of the designated hour of the meeting, which he then adjourned without conducting any business. Any trustees who were not interested in arriving on time could simply turn in their resignations, he announced. It was no surprise, then, that at the next meeting everyone arrived promptly and earnestly, and there were no resignations. Davidson had made his point, had tested his new colleagues as to their seriousness of purpose, and had set the example for them. He was in charge.

As for the Equinox-Carthusian connection, Mrs. Davidson remembered that the first contact took place one day in the late 1950s, when Davidson received a visit from Brother Paul. The monk was a member of the Carthusian community then located not far from the big Harriman hydroelectric complex in Whitingham, where the Catholic order had been given some property by the Grace shipping lines family. Aside from his religious calling, Brother Paul held a degree in civil engineering and hoped to utilize a small stream on the property to generate electricity; he had heard about Davidson's talent for developing hydroelectric power. Davidson immediately concluded that the stream was insufficient for a turbine, but in the course of several visits, George and Madeleine became fond of Brother Paul, and often invited him to dinner ("he got good food at

our house, especially meat, since he had not yet taken his final vows," Mrs. Davidson remembered).

The friendship deepened, and the Davidsons came to know several other fathers and brothers of the Carthusian community, whose chief problem at the time seemed to be a lack of the seclusion the order required. A Carthusian charterhouse is ideally situated in "a mountain valley." The Whitingham site not only failed to fit that description, but a state highway brought too much traffic distractingly close to monks whose purpose it was to remain "far removed from contact with the exterior world."

As Father Raphael Diamond, Prior of the Carthusian Monastery for some twenty years, clearly recalled in 1990, it was Mrs. Davidson who first suggested because she and George had been unable to have children, it might be ideal to bequeath land on Mt. Equinox for a Carthusian charterhouse; surely several sites existed there that fit the definition of remote mountain valley. Davidson was Roman Catholic who had a kind of faith as Father Diamond put it, that did not need to be fulfilled by attending weekly services. But the couple's religious ties were strong. They were close friends of the Catholic Bishop of Vermont, the Most Reverend Robert F. Joyce of Burlington.

One of Davidson's few mistakes was the construction of a building he once intended to use as a ski lodge—was put to good advantage. It contained central rooms, kitchen facilities, and many suites under its twelve gables, and thus became a suitable structure for a temporary Carthusian charterhouse. Cubicles designed for transient skiers became hermitages for the monks. Despite Davidson's caution "I'm not easy to live with," the unused ski lodge was remodeled during the summer of 1960 and the monks moved in on a trial basis.

The experiment worked. Davidson began transferring land in fifty-acre parcels, for tax purposes, to the Carthusian Order. The eventual gift would total seven thousand acres. Plans were made to build a massive charterhouse designed by architect Victor Christ-Janer & Associates of New

Canaan, Connecticut; it was fabricated of stark Vermont Rock of Ages Granite, each of which measured 31/2' by 91/2' by 18 inches thick. These vertical blocks would become both interior and exterior, with spaces between filled with concrete.

The new monastery was substantially completed by the time Davidson died. He made plans to be transported by ambulance to participate in the first mass in the chapel of the new charterhouse, but he was too ill for his wishes to be carried out. The monastery opened in the spring of 1970, when it's first and only public open house was held--after which no woman, not even Mrs. Davidson, has been allowed inside.

In October 1969, suffering from a respiratory condition, Davidson became the first patient admitted to Putnam Memorial Hospital's new fourth-floor extended-care unit, built with some of the few federal funds ever granted for the hospital construction. He was visited by, among others, Dr. W. Philip Giddings, the surgeon and former hospital chief of staff, who observed that Davidson's bed had been moved so he could have a grand view from the north facing window of "my mountain"-- a minor infraction of rules that was overlooked for the former chairman of the board.

Another visitor during that final illness was Father Diamond, who said he was able to leave Davidson with the comforting thought that in 500 years he would probably not be remembered for his work at Union Carbide or his role in the development of the atomic bomb, but he would still be known as the founder of the first Carthusian monastery in the United States. Davidson was affected deeply by that idea. The night before he died, Davidson verbally turned over management of the mountain to Father Diamond and Father Stephen Boylan, who accepted the responsibility on behalf of the Carthusian order. The next morning, October 9, 1969, he spoke in cheerful spirits to a nurse, read a newspaper, and then died in peace, unattended.

When Davidson's obituary was published, the Banner editorialized that he was "a pioneer not just in the uses of technology but in the conservation of natural resources by means of that very

technology." He was, the editorial allowed, not a Vermonter, but nonetheless was "worthy of the name of the truly independent Yankee." His devotion to Vermont was such that he was buried in a plot in the Dellwood Cemetery in Manchester. Mt. Equinox itself would be his mausoleum.

1) Among the memorabilia still present in the Davidson's home is a framed letter from U. S. Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, bearing the historic date of August 6, 1945, the day the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. Stimson thanked Davidson for his "work essential to the production of the Atomic Bomb, thereby contributing to the successful conclusion of World War II." Davidson also was given an honorary doctor of science degree by his alma mater, the University of Southern California; was honored for his "energetic and searching inquiry into all aspects of the company's operations" by National Life Insurance Company; received an engraved silver plate "for his inspired leadership and faith in the development of vinyl plastics" by the Society of the American Plastics Industry; received the Chemical Industry Medal in 1955 "for successful application of chemical research to industry"; and was applauded by his associates in the Carbide and Carbon Chemicals Company in 1956 as a "chemical trail blazer extraordinary whose vision, daring and drive converted test-tube dreams into tank-car realities and whose dynamic leadership instilled in his associates a continuing sense of dramatic adventure, dedication and accomplishment," among several other honors and awards. He was also commended by formal resolution of the board of trustees of Putnam Memorial Hospital in January 1968.

2) Surely the anecdote that most endures about Dr. Davidson's residence in Bennington County involves the shooting, on November 24, 1955, of his beloved twelve-year-old dog, Mister Barbo, a mixture of Norwegian elkhound and Siberian husky. Davidson offered rewards and pleaded publicly for information leading to apprehension of the person who killed his dog, but to no avail. To the dismay of the local populace, he immediately posted the mountain against hunters and hired sheriff's deputies to enforce the ban against

trespassing. Mrs. Davidson, asked during the summer of 1990 to recall the incident, said that Mister Barbo always accompanied her husband on his regular rounds of mountain. Near the powerhouse, during deer-hunting season, the two probably encountered a hunter, and the dog, always extremely protective of the master, must have lunged for the hunter, who probably had no recourse--out of self-defence, Mrs. Davidson thought ---but to fire his gun. Davidson, getting out of his car, heard the shot, found the dog dead, and became enraged. He had but a fleeting glance at the face of the hunter, who quickly disappeared into the woods. I remember George saying, "I'll kill you if I get to you," Mrs. Davidson quoted him.

As a child, Davidson never had a dog because his family favored cats, so Mister Barbo (the dog's name when Davidson acquired him) was his first and only dog. "He bought the dog for me", his wife remembered, «but it ended up being George's dog." A further irony, she said, was that in despite Davidson's intense attachment to Mister Barbo, she developed an allergy and could not live with the dog in the house.

Nonetheless, the legend of Mister Barbo remains strong: a granite monument inscribed to his memory is visited by thousands of tourist who travel each year to the summit. The mountain is still posted against hunting , not so much because of Dr. Davidson's lasting rage but because the Carthusians , who wear habits that are virtually the same color as deer, often take walks or work in the woods cutting and hauling firewood, and it would be dangerous to allow hunters armed with rifles anywhere near them.