

# An Artist's Legacy: A Visit to the Randall Davey Audubon Center and Sanctuary

By Brian D'Ambrosio

*Mr. Davey is that rare being, a man who loves life in just about all its phases, in all its various and conflicting passages – even in its teeming idiocies – just so long as it continues to leap and glow and throb as he does himself every day, day after day. – Robert Bright, writer and illustrator of children's literature (1902-1988)*

Santa Fe painter Randall Davey eschewed the larger art world, knowing that he could have had greater success in bigger markets out East and elsewhere.

However, he preferred to paint for himself; take a portrait commission now and then; live in Santa Fe, the place that invigorated him; and get by financially with his teaching and the little amount that came from raising chickens and selling their eggs.

Although Davey, who experimented in several mediums – from oil, encaustic, and pastel, to charcoal, ink, and watercolor – has never accrued the status enjoyed by

a number of his contemporaries in the hall of American 20th-century art, he flourished in his community, and he was completely in accord with the artists of his time who self-identified as “modernists.”

## Sliver of Santa Fe's Cultural Heritage

The curious life and history of this passionate, prolific artist can be seen by visiting his home and studio on Upper Canyon Road in Santa Fe. It is preserved at the Randall Davey Audubon Center and Sanctuary, where the complete experience may be appreciated in many forms.

“A lot of people from town come to sit in a nice, quiet space,” said Carl Beal, center director at the center. “It’s as much of a sanctuary for wildlife as it is for people. Being just three miles from the plaza is convenient for a lot of folks in town.”

At 7,500-foot elevation, the property sits ensconced in quietude at roughly 500 feet higher than the center of the Santa Fe city plaza. Dozens of wild turkeys often roam

the grounds of the Davey property, and the acreage has developed into a popular destination for birders and bird walks. Offering a typical pinyon-juniper woodland habitat, its common flora and fauna include native apache plum, currants, chamisa, yucca, cholla, and three-leaf sumac.

Some of the birds most commonly sighted on the grounds include spotted towhees, scrub jays, Steller’s jays, canyon towhees, robins, northern flickers, mountain and black-capped chickadees, house finches, grosbeaks, and cedar waxwings. In the winter, dark-eyed juncos are frequent, while summer sees ordinary visits from various hummingbird species.

The Davey property also served as the location for the first sawmill in New Mexico. It was there that the timbers were cut to support the U.S. Army’s construction of Fort Marcy in the late 1840s. The site eventually became a grist mill and changed ownership a couple of times before the Martinez family endowed it with modern agriculture. Crops were harvested and extensive orchards of apples, pears, and apricots were planted. This shaping of the landscape can be seen to this day.

## Independent, Spirited Artist

Born on May 24, 1887, in East Orange, N.J., Davey studied architecture at Cornell University for three years before receiving an honorable dismissal in 1908. He then briefly enrolled at the Art Students League in New York City.

In 1909, he began studying with Robert Henri at the New York School of Art. Henri was a profound teacher and one of the principal members of the Ash Can School, an artistic movement that painted commonplace city scenes and objects. The next year, Davey traveled with Henri in Holland and Spain and participated in the Independent Artists group exhibition.

In 1913, Davey exhibited one painting in the International Exhibition of Modern Art, organized by the Association of American Painters and Sculptors. He later spent several months painting in Havana, Cuba, to avoid the U.S. draft.

It was a 1919 motor trip from New York to Santa Fe with his first wife, modernist sculptor Florence Nicks Sittenham and painter John Sloan and his wife, Dolly, that

would forever change his life. Within one year, Davey purchased 135 acres in Santa Fe for \$3,000 (about \$115,000 today) and began converting an 1847 Army-built sawmill into his home and studio, moving permanently to the New Mexico capital.

He organized the Santa Fe Art Club and then became an associate member of the Taos Society of Artists, issuing his only portfolio of etchings.

Professionally, he completed a mural for the New Mexico Military Institute in Roswell, a government commission (now in the New Mexico State Capitol) and also painted murals for the Will Rogers Shrine of the Sun in Colorado Springs, Colo. The U.S. Treasury later commissioned him to paint a mural for the post office in Claremore, Okla., honoring Rogers.

Soon, Davey became known for his pulsating racetrack scenes and vital and effervescent portraits of female nudes. Perhaps his most famous nude, a large depiction of his second wife, Isabel Holt, titled *Nude with Geranium*, is the focal point of the upstairs family parlor. Holt had been a student of his at Broadmoor Art Academy in Colorado.

In painting racing pictures, Davey told the *American Art Review* in March 1937 that his interest came from the “nervous excitement and intensity of the occasion” and “through the balance of static and moving shapes to develop sensations of suspense, anxiety and moods.” He was intensely interested in thoroughbred horses and their use in composition, specifically “their sensitive and vigorous movements, their jockeys, the crowd,” he said in the interview. Davey also said that his favorite event was the Kentucky Derby.

Davey taught painting at the University of New Mexico and was once a member of the Board of Directors of the Santa Fe Opera, designing posters and covers for the 1961 and 1962 seasons. His passion for painting, hosting parties, taking motor trips, and attending horse races never diminished.

Davey died on November 7, 1964, from injuries sustained in an automobile crash, near Baker, Calif. He was 77.

“Apparently, Randall was at a party in town and he got a wild hair,” Beal said. “His wife had died the year before. He was having an

(continued on next page)



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