

Disability History Podcast
Interview with Michael Davis
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Caroline Lieffers: Hello, and welcome to another episode of the Disability History Association Podcast. My name is Caroline Lieffers, and it's my pleasure today to be talking to Dr. Mike Davis. Mike is an Assistant Professor of History at Hampton University in Virginia, and he's currently working on his first book, a religious biography of the Wright brothers. Mike, I know you're working on actually a few different projects, but I wanted to start with the Wright brothers. What got you interested in this history?

Mike Davis: Well, that came from a few directions. My dissertation was about the history of American Anti-Masonry, and Orville and Wilbur's Father, Bishop Milton Wright, is probably the most famous post-Civil War Anti-Mason. A teenage Wilbur was actually Milton's right-hand man during this period, before he lost interest in becoming a minister and became a printer and mechanic instead. So I was familiar with the Wright family and religion, and about a year ago I read a blog post by Chris Gehrz at the Pietist Schoolman talking about the spiritual life of the Wrights, and I decided there was a potential book there.

Caroline: That's really neat. For people who don't know, what is Anti-Masonry?

Mike: Well, Anti-Masonry was the, in an American context, it's the American Protestant opposition to Freemasonry and the various Masonic organizations, seeing them as being anti-Christian and elitist. It has a particular relevance in the United States because there's a strong connection between Anti-Masonry and the abolitionist movement. Anti-Masonry is basically the gateway drug that gets these Northern Evangelicals like Wright politicized, and that'll get them involved in abolitionism and other political causes. [**Caroline:** Interesting] So it's, in some ways it's kind of seen as, well, it was those Southern planters getting together in their lodges and scheming against us good Northern Christians. And there's an attempt to revive Anti-Masonry after the Civil War by abolitionists who want to keep reforming American society. It's, it's a bust. It does not work. But Milton Wright is probably the most famous of the Evangelicals involved in that, largely because of his sons.

Caroline: That's really interesting. So, after setting that up and giving us that background, what is your book arguing about the Wright Brothers and their religious life?

Mike: Well, I argue that the Wrights really should be understood as a product of nineteenth-century Midwestern Protestantism. In particular of the clash between that movement and so-called scientific rationalism. Their father is a leading Protestant in post-bellum Indiana. He is the man behind today's Church of United Brethren in Christ. Both the Wrights grow up in a pious household. Wilbur considers becoming a minister like his father. They ultimately kind of veer away from, you know, quote "traditional Christianity" after reading the works of Robert Ingersoll when they're teenagers. Ingersoll is probably the most famous free thinker of the late nineteenth century. But they stay, what, to use the modern term, they stay culturally Christian all their lives. They don't drink. They don't smoke. They don't work on Sundays. They're considered, quote "good Christian gentlemen," even by people who know they

don't attend church. There's a great bit in one of Orville's letters to their father, Milton, when Wilbur and Orville are visiting Paris after Kitty Hawk, and Orville writes to their father, reassuring him that by the way we haven't started drinking wine here; we're still behaving ourselves. You know, this is when they're both men in their early forties. And so it's, their, their family correspondence is a real, really interesting to read. And I guess if I would sum it up I'd say the story of the Wrights and religion is maybe a story of being culturally religious, or spiritual but not religious, which is a pretty familiar story to those of us who live in the twenty-first century.

Caroline: So, by this point, listeners of the Disability History Association Podcast might be wondering, well where's the connection with disability? So I want to lead us into that. I understand that some people and, you know, most recently perhaps the novelist Tara Staley, and I hope I'm pronouncing that correctly, have tried to make the case that Orville, or perhaps both Orville and Wilbur, were on the autism spectrum. Do you think this is the case? How do you read this?

Mike: I'll say first that Staley's book is very interesting. I'm actually doing a romance novel challenge for the website *Nursing Clio*, where historians read a historical romance about their period and write about it. So that's actually one project I'm working on. As far as diagnosing the Wrights, it's hard to say. To me it's a bit like identifying someone as LGBT in retrospect. It's tough because in some ways these are both lasting scientific categories, and they're also contemporary social categories, and it's hard to fit people from the past into that.

I do agree there is some strong evidence that the Wrights and particularly Orville may have been neuroatypical. Orville is deeply, almost profoundly introverted through his whole life. There's a great quote I found from a 1931 *New Yorker* article about Orville. It goes like this: "The first man ever to fly an airplane is a gray man now, dressed in gray clothes. Not only have his hair and his mustache taken on this tone, but his curiously flat face, too. Thirty years of hating publicity and its works, thirty years of dodging cameras and interviews, have given him what he has obviously wished for most: a protective coloration which will enable him to fade out of public view against a neutral background." That's just so evocative.

And there's other stuff too, like, in 1926 Orville's sister Catherine, who had basically been his secretary/social manager, she leaves the family home to get married. Orville is completely infuriated. He calls her a traitor to the family. He won't speak to her again until she's on her deathbed, much to the alarm of the other surviving Wrights, Wilbur having died about a decade earlier. So it's clear there is something different about Orville. It's hard to say exactly what that was. Wilbur is better at socializing than Orville is. But even he'll write about how he, he feels that he has a hard time relating to other people, that he is much more critical of other people than, than they are. And if you look at some of Wilbur's correspondence, he is fairly critical. There is a great bit where he, when he's in Paris he goes to visit Notre Dame and he writes back to his sister and he says, you know, it's actually much smaller and much dirtier than they make it sound in all the books. He's very critical of this cathedral. I actually wind up arguing that if there was something kind of, you know, distinct about the Wrights in this way that it may have saved their lives--that the Wrights' desire for control and order in the world is probably one reason why they both survived all their flights, unlike many of their more, kind of, careless successors. Both Wilbur and Orville, Wilbur in particular, are very insistent that they will be the ones who build all the machines, that they will not tolerate mistakes made by other people. And it sounds like it made them difficult to work with sometimes, but it kept them alive.

Caroline: Was it their personality traits that got them into aviation and allowed them to make these sorts of developments in the first place?

Mike: Well, the path there is kind of interesting. They start out running a print shop in Dayton. Neither of them go to college. They both, kind of, go to the local high school and finish their education there. They started running a print shop. It's the 1890s. It's the height of the bicycle craze. They're kind of, you know, to use a, maybe a modern term, I almost picture them as being the equivalent of, you know, I don't know, modern, modern tech bros, or maybe modern hipsters, you know. They see this rising industry called the bicycle, this new tech hobby. They get in on that. They build a bicycle shop. They don't like cars. Wilbur will see an early automobile and say, OK, this is not going to work. This is a, this is a failed idea. But from an early age, well, once they become mechanics, Wilbur starts reading about this, kind of, growing aviation craze. He, he talks about it in almost religious terms, Wilbur does, of having heard the gospel of aviation and becoming a missionary of it, and converting Orville. And they kind of jump on this new thing and it's, it's a very kind of American story, because if you look at their contemporaries, the other people involved in the race to be the first to fly, almost everyone else has corporate financial backing or they come from money themselves. And the Wrights are just these two guys who never went to college, who run a bike shop in the Midwest. And they get there before all the suits because they're willing to put in the work and put in the, in the effort for it. Although, it's funny, I call them the suits; I say their opponents were suits. But if you look at Wilbur and Orville, even when they're down in the remote part of the outer banks, which is even more remote than it is today, they're going out, they're wearing their, their stiff collars and their Victorian, kind of, middle-class gentlemen's outfits. They are, you know, good upper-middle-class Midwesterners, even when they're working on machines around all these country folk in North Carolina.

Caroline: To go back to this issue of Orville, or Orville and Wilbur, being on the autism spectrum, or neurodiverse, or neuroatypical, do you think that there are positives and/or negatives to this kind of retrospective diagnosis or identification that some people are doing?

Mike: Absolutely. Well, I mean, I recognize disability representation is very important. Neuroatypical people deserve to be able to look at the pages of history and see themselves reflected there, just as much as everyone else outside the quote "mainstream" does. I do worry a bit about assigning labels to past figures when they themselves would not have used that label. I always feel a little weird about that. And honestly as someone who doesn't have any formal training in that kind of diagnosis I'm reluctant to do it.

So I'm comfortable saying there's some, some interesting evidence about the Wrights being neuroatypical. I won't contradict someone who would say, well maybe Orville was on the spectrum. I'm not comfortable saying it myself. It's not, not my wheelhouse.

Caroline: Yeah, yeah absolutely. Is it the Wright brothers that got you interested in disability history in the first place or was that through some other route?

Mike: Well, I'd say the thing that got me the most interested in disability history as a field was picking up Kim Nielsen's *Disability History of the United States*. I'm sure your listeners are familiar with that. I'll just say I found it very fascinating. A great text to use in class. It got me looking for other people engaged with disability history which led me to you fine folks at the Association.

Caroline: Well, thank you very much. And I agree Kim Nielsen's book is really wonderful, particularly for teaching. Let's pivot to your new project, which is a biography of Edgar Cayce. Can you start by just telling me and everybody out there who is Edgar Cayce?

Mike: Well I'll, I'll say first that since we last talked I have had the joy of signing an advance contract on that biography of Cayce so I'm feeling very, very excited about that. But to kind of pivot back to your question, the question of who Edgar Cayce is really is the big question. If you look at the popular memory, Edgar Cayce is either an enlightened sage and prophet whose teachings about past lives, holistic medicine, and the hidden history of the world can still inspire us today. Or he's a huckster and a con man whose pseudo-scientific legacy still haunts us today. I personally look at Cayce as a bit of a different way. He's really a bridge between the mysticism of the nineteenth century and the New Age movement of the twentieth century. He's a product of the New South who's primarily remembered by people outside the South. He's a self-described clodhopper from rural Kentucky whose works are still being read and discussed globally long after his death. He is an interesting guy.

Caroline: Oh my goodness. OK. You've given us a lot to unpack there. So let's start with just basic factual information. Where and when did Cayce live and what did he do that made him so famous?

Mike: Christian County is out in western Kentucky. It's near Paducah is the closest city of any size, and you know, I love Paducah but it's not a very big size. But he grows up at a time when, I kind of say, almost a small-scale apocalypse. The tobacco market in Christian County and everywhere is collapsing. Farm economies are dropping. People like his father loses all of the land he owns and becomes a tenant farmer, then moves into the county seat of Hopkinsville to try and find work. Edgar, before we even get into the mystic side of things, you know he, he grows up as somebody who wants an education, wants to learn more about the world. But he's denied this because of his family's poverty. He winds up working in the town bookstore in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, where he is selling books to all the college students in Hopkinsville. But he personally can't afford to go there. He moves around for a while. He lives in Bowling Green for a few years where he actually is the subject of a church trial for fortune telling while he's also teaching Sunday school. He goes to live in Selma, Alabama right around the time the boll weevil epidemic is hitting there, so it's another kind of apocalypse he's living through. Then in the 20s, by this point he's become known as a mystic, he gets a job to essentially be, have this wealthy client named Arthur Lammers in Dayton Ohio. He packs up his family, moves to Dayton. Lammers's business almost immediately fails. By this point Cayce has enough, kind of, followers/financial supporters that he's able to move out to Virginia Beach in 1925 which is what puts him in my neck of the woods. And there he kind of keeps working and builds up this association around him and dies in 1945. He doesn't become a household name actually until, well, posthumously until the 50s and 60s when the New Age Movement hits and you get this movement of people really nationally interested in hearing about past lives and reincarnation and hidden wisdom and that kind of thing.

Caroline: So this is really, really fascinating, and I want to pick up on what you've pointed out about Edgar Cayce being a mystic. So people apparently thought that there was a link between traumatic brain injury in his childhood and his subsequent powers? Is that correct?

Mike: Yes. That's one of the noteworthy things about, about Cayce. It's clear from his various biographies, most of which are from his own accounts, that he suffered multiple childhood head injuries, some of them severe. And it's about that time he starts having what he interprets as spiritual experiences. He starts seeing the little people, being visited by bright lights, hearing voices, et cetera. Some of the more materialistic of his believers will assert that it must have been the head injuries that unlocked his visionary powers, pointing to other twentieth-century psychics like Peter Hurkos who had similar experiences. I've actually read some anti-New Age writers who are equally materialistic but almost from an opposite direction saying that, well, it must have been when the young Cayce had the head injuries that the demons came in and possessed him and started giving him these visions.

Caroline: I'm wondering, what are some of the recommendations or advice or insights that Cayce would be able to give to people that made him so popular?

Mike: Well, there's a lot to say there. Cayce left behind almost fifty thousand pages of writing, you know, making him more productive than a lot of more famous American spiritual leaders. Almost all of what he left behind are recommendations about individual people's health and spirituality. So with all that advice, over more than twenty years of advice-giving, he said a lot. In general I think Cayce should be understood as the father of holistic medicine, so the idea of treating the whole person for illnesses. He'd recommend things like, like adopting a special alkaline diet, using particular kinds of alternative medicine like sulfur treatments. He was skeptical of things like vaccinations. You know, a physician today might be rather skeptical of what Cayce said, but we can at least say he believed it. For example, his son Milton actually dies of an illness in infancy because the family uses his diagnoses rather than conventional medicine.

Caroline: Do you think about or analyze Cayce's life in terms of disability history? Is this one of the lenses that you're using for your project?

Mike: Well, both Cayce's own arguable disabilities, as well as those of his patients, are in my mind. He does get a fair number of people coming to him looking for treatments for, oh, chronic disabilities. He works with people with paralysis quite a bit. For example, while doing the work, I've rediscovered the writing of a man named Thomas Joseph Sugrue. I have to stress by the way that this isn't the historian at NYU who has the same name. Sugrue is Cayce's first biographer. He's partially paralyzed college friend of Edgar's son Hugh, who becomes a world traveler, a journalist, a writer on Catholic issues. It's clear Sugrue saw Cayce's gifts as true, something that might eventually heal what he saw as his own disabilities even if that never actually happens. So I think there's a lot to say about Cayce and people with disabilities who did not find medical care in conventional medicine in the twentieth century looking for, looking for what today we would call alternative medicine. It's kind of hard to, to do the history of alternative medicine in a lot of ways because, you know, your, your impulse as a twenty-first-century rationalist is to say, oh, well, these people are being deluded by pseudoscience. But I think it's really important to, you know, take them seriously as people who could not find help, could not find solutions in conventional society. And so they kind of exercise their agency, they exercised what power they had, to find something meaning outside of the conventional.

Caroline: That's really interesting. I'd love to follow up on that, if you don't mind.

[**Mike:** For sure.] So, I mean, many historians have pointed out that people with disabilities in this period were often subjected to the quite violent curative focus of the medical model of disability, which is always seeking to sort of fix their disabilities in, in

the face of, in many ways, quite an intolerant society. So do you think that Cayce and his holistic approach offered people something that was perhaps less violent? Or less focused on purely cure? Can you just round this out a little bit for me because I think it's quite interesting.

Mike: Yes. I mean Cayce, a lot of what Cayce does is arguing that, for a rejection of traditional medicine. So he'll do things like he'll prescribe particular diets to patients, things like today would be called aromatherapy. He's one of the early advocates of, if you ever been into kind of a New Age store and seen, you know, crystals, he's a big believer in, oh, crystal power coming from Atlantis, and that kind of thing. And when you think about, you know, as you mentioned, the very harsh treatments that somebody with paralysis like Sugrue would have faced from conventional medicine in the 30s and 40s, oh, it's, it's no wonder that he found more meaning in this kind of spiritual/holistic stuff.

Caroline: Is it possible to generalize about how Cayce was received by the public or by the media? I mean was there skepticism? Was there popular interest in him?

Mike: There is definitely some interest in him. A lot of the conventional kind of press coverage about him will be, oh, actually fairly akin to what I've seen about contemporary news coverage about psychics, that, oh the, here's the miracle man of Virginia Beach, and here is what he does. He doesn't attract a lot of followers in the way somebody like Ellen G. White or Joseph Smith does. He's not interested in kind of building up a quote "church" around him, but he does actually from a fairly early age, is subject to national attention. There is a *New York Times* story about him, actually from before the First World War, talking about this man in, at that point in Hopkinsville, Kentucky and in Bowling Green, who can go into trances and make diagnoses of illnesses that can't otherwise be done. And again, you know, thinking about the context: you know, if you have a chronic illness in Christian County, Kentucky or in Bowling Green in 1910 or 1915 there is probably not a lot conventional medicine can do for you. So it's no wonder you're turning to somebody like Cayce. It's interesting, too, when you look at a lot of the press coverage about Cayce, especially when he's young, like that *New York Times* article I mentioned. He is described as being an illiterate boy from Kentucky, which is really fascinating because he's not illiterate. His, his writing is somewhat idiosyncratic because he never finishes the, he gets as far as the eighth grade and that's the end of his education. But he reads obsessively, both the King James Bible and other books he'd get his hands on. The press, the press and even people who know him are still calling him a boy even though he's in his early thirties and the father of a small child. A lot of that has to do with respectability. Visions and prophecies weren't really socially acceptable for people of Cayce's background and generation. There's a great quote from his autobiography where he remembers being told by a young woman he was courting that, you know, she can't marry him because visions are something black people have -- not, you know, respectable white people who are trying to get into the middle classes.

So Cayce is known to people in the mainstream in much the same way that we might know, you know, somebody like Dr. Oz or some other kind of alternative medicine/alternative spirituality person. Like I said, he doesn't really take off until the 50s and 60s, because that's when you get this kind of broader quote "mainstream movement" that's coming out of the New Age and is more interested in Cayce's kind of model of spirituality.

Caroline: That's really really fascinating. I'm especially interested in what you're saying about Cayce's visions, you know, his own neuroatypical-ness, as having

valences of racial discrimination, class discrimination. And it really speaks to disability's embeddedness in these larger social frameworks, right? Do you think that this kind of clairvoyance that Cayce has should be considered part of disability history?

Mike: I think so. As you can imagine it's a fraught subject. It should be studied, but it's something that has to be handled delicately, especially for talking about people whose spiritual movements are still active. But I do think there is really room for a deeper investigation, for a disability historians to go back and look at someone like Mary Baker Eddy with chronic illnesses, of Ellen G. White who may have been epileptic, and Harriet Tubman, who like Cayce had childhood head injuries and also slipped into trances where she experienced spiritual visions. It's a hard needle to thread because, you know, it's very easy if you study these people through the lens of disability history to maybe be a little more materialistic than a historian of spirituality should be. That, you know, if you simply medicalize matters and say, OK these visions were happening because of this person's neuroatypicality, then it runs the risk of, OK are you devaluing the movement that they spawned? And I don't really have an answer to that one yet. But it's kind of an ethical problem that I'm wrestling with in working on Cayce as a subject.

Caroline: There's certainly this overlap between disability history and the history of spirituality and spiritualism, and perhaps it is the, sort of, social and cultural aspects of both that bring them together. Would you agree with that?

Mike: Yes, I think there's definitely room for that. If you look at a lot of the histories of spirituality, a lot of the agency that you see in it is people who otherwise don't have a voice in society. I mean quite famously you had people like Catherine Brekus writing recently about how the history of American religion is the history of American women and vice versa. And I think there's really grounds, there's really room to talk about that in the context of disability history--that disabled people who might not otherwise have had a voice in society are able to get that voice by interpreting their experiences through the lens of spirituality.

Caroline: At the risk of over-medicalizing Cayce, did he have any other quote-unquote sort of "symptoms"? Was he, you know, trying to heal himself? Did he have other, sort of, psychological or cognitive things that he lived with, you know, that perhaps his spirituality and spiritualism helped him get through or resolve?

Mike: Well, the way Cayce worked, his day-to-day kind of life as a seer, was he would get the questions from people interested in him, and he would lie down and go into a trance, and he would say things, his longtime secretary would record them. He would wake up and would sometimes claim to, oh I shouldn't say sometimes, would often say, oh, I have no idea what I said, what's, what was the vision? It's hard to get a feel for Cayce because all of the biographies of Cayce are, they're essentially hagiographies coming out of the Association for Research and Enlightenment. You do often get people saying about Cayce, that, oh, he's really easy to exploit. We need to protect him from people who want to abuse, abuse his powers for financial gain. But it's hard to know how much of that is, you know, legitimately talking about somebody with cognitive trouble and how much of that is, you know, it's not uncommon for American, you know, spiritual leaders to present themselves as just a good old boy from the backcountry.

Caroline: Mmmhmm. So is Cayce still popular today? You mentioned an institute that's publishing his biographies.

Mike: Oh yes. The Association for Research and Enlightenment down in Virginia Beach, where his papers are, still has quite a few members. I have to recommend it by the way if any of your listeners are interested in any kind of esoteric topic from spirituality to Ufology to Atlantis even, the ARE has a huge esoteric library, it's been a real pleasure to visit there. Having said that there are hundreds of books, many television programs inspired by Cayce or directly taken from his writings available either physically or on the Internet. In many ways this is the, an age for someone like Cayce. It's an age interested in alternative spirituality and alternative medicine. If you go to the ARE these days, what they really will focus on is the alternative medicine angle, because that has a lot more resonance in our culture than, than maybe the, Cayce's stuff on Atlantis did fifty years ago. But it's continued. It's like a lot of twentieth-century American kind of spiritual/scientific movements that, you know, the challenge is always bringing in new people. But it's continued. I mean, part of what got me interested in writing a Cayce biography is here you have someone who has written more, and published more, and probably been the subject of a lot more attention than again, an Ellen White or Mary Baker Eddy, but has just not had the kind of scholarly attention they did, I, which I think is because, because Cayce winds up being remembered as a psychic. There's not really a lot of focused scholarly attention on psychics as kind of the twentieth and twenty-first century answer to the, the seers and the prophets of a previous generation.

Caroline: I'm going to ask kind of a difficult question but I hope you're game for it - which is, if you were or if I were to use Cayce in a disability history class that I was teaching, what are some of the lessons or insights that you think Cayce helps give us into disability history as a field and the history of people with disabilities?

Mike: Let's see - well, I think if I was going to use Cayce in a disability history class I would probably have students sit down and read some of his recommendations that have maybe not aged very well, and we would take a little while to say, OK, gosh, why did anybody believe this ninety years ago. And then we would sit down and look at, OK, what medical treatments were available to you ninety years ago. Maybe if mainstream medicine really is failing you, why are you turning to this? I think what I would really hope it would do is getting students to think a little more seriously about the connection between, you know, disability and spirituality and alternative medicine more generally. That, OK, we might understand these things as being scientifically flawed, but we can still respect people saying, OK, I'm not getting anything that will help me from conventional sources. So I'm going to exercise my power and turn to the unconventional.

Caroline: Mmmhmm. Thank you. That's really interesting and it's making me think I might actually use Cayce in my own courses on the history of medicine and disability. Thank you so much, Mike. It was such a pleasure and I really appreciate it.

Mike: Oh it really was a pleasure. Thanks so much for having me on.

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