STAMP OF APPROVAL

How a local photographer made a career out of innovations in photography and eventually found his work on a USPS postage stamp.

By Daniel Jewett

"Summer Poppies"

WHEN BERKELEY artist, photographer, writer and educator Harold Davis was five, his parents gave him a box camera, which he loved, but the idea — and the technology — to make a career out of it were still a way off for him.

While in law school he decided he was more interested in being a writer and painter — skills that would later inform his photography in ways he couldn't yet imagine. But those talents weren't big money makers, so Davis hung up his shingle in New York, where he was renting a 1,000-square-foot loft that he turned into a photography studio, and had almost instant success making and selling commercial images and greeting cards.

"I had my first show of wilderness images that I made while hiking," Davis says. "And I thought, 'If I can do this with my life, what the hell am I bothering with this other stuff for?'"

But life is never a straight path and in the 1980s Davis and his second wife, Phyllis, turned to computer science after he got bored with photography. "I discovered that it was a lot easier making a very nice living part-time as a sophisticated

Photographer Harold Davis and his 1-cent stamp released this year.
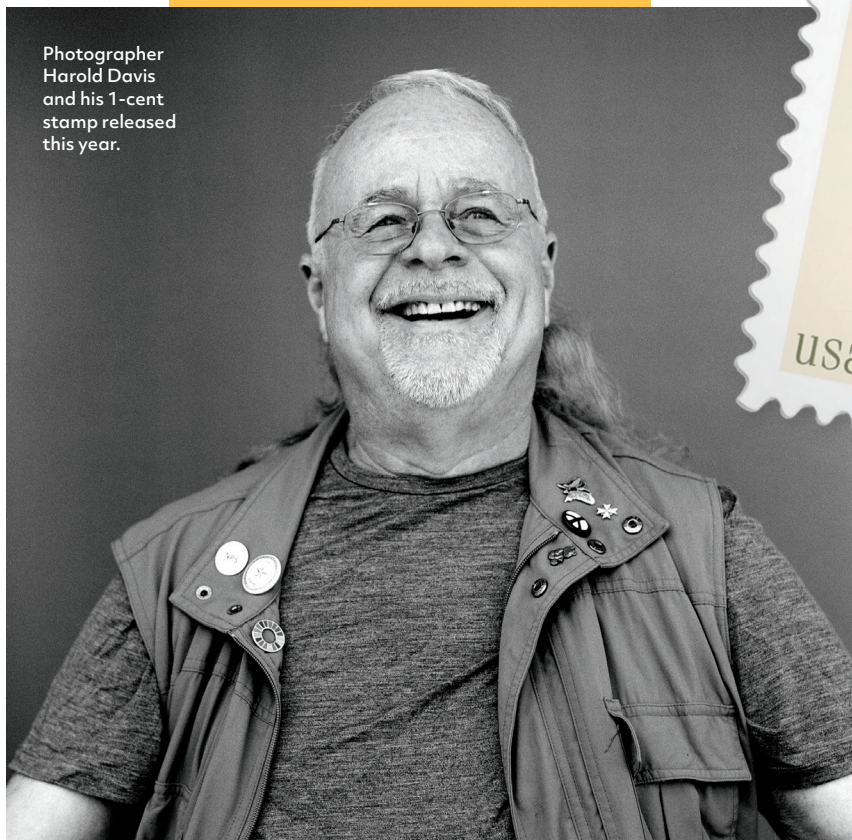
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A chance incident would direct him back to photography when he walked into a computer job in Menlo Park and was surprised to see one of his prints behind the receptionist's desk. At this point Davis was writing lots of books on programming languages and one of his publishers asked if he would write one on the new art of digital photography. "They said to me, 'We hear digital photography is an up-and-coming thing, do you think you could write a book about it for us?'" Davis recalls. "I went out to Best Buy and bought a Nikon D70. I liked digital photography far more than I liked film and I could do more with it."

And with that Davis found his calling writing many books on digital photography, teaching others at places like the Point Reyes field seminars and innovating new techniques in digital photography such as transparency.

His use of transparency (when the viewer appears to be looking through something like a flower) was honored by the Photographic Society of America as an innovative technique. Past winners have included the people who invented Photoshop, as well as Ansel Adams and Walt Disney. The process is complicated but involves using a computer to manipulate pixels, which are little points of light. "There really are innumerable ways to come up with pixels, but once you have the pixels, then there are all kinds of things you can do with them in post-production that aren't immediately obvious," Davis says, adding that the transparency process involves using as many as 5 to 10 exposures that will be combined into one image. He says it's the same kind of thing Ansel Adams did manually in the darkroom using chemicals to dodge and burn the image, only this process, once you master it, is much faster and has more fluidity.

And there is one more honor that Davis received this year: five of his images were used on postage stamps (he's had two others used in the past for a total of seven). He says he didn't submit work for this, but a USPS art director got in touch and thought his images would be a great fit — with that magical combination of looking good on something so small but also able to be blown up for posters.

To honor Davis, the post office held the "first day ceremony" in Berkeley — the first time in history it has been done there. "It was a very moving ceremony," he says. "And all the local post officials were here, including the postmistress of Berkeley, and she was in tears. The whole thing was really very compelling." ml