

2-5-2000

## Interview with Carolyn Hahnemann

Michael Davis

Carolyn Hahnemann

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digital.kenyon.edu/lak\\_interviews](https://digital.kenyon.edu/lak_interviews)

---

### Recommended Citation

Davis, Michael and Hahnemann, Carolyn, "Interview with Carolyn Hahnemann" (2000). *Interviews*. 20.  
[https://digital.kenyon.edu/lak\\_interviews/20](https://digital.kenyon.edu/lak_interviews/20)

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Life Along the Kokosing at Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Interviews by an authorized administrator of Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact [noltj@kenyon.edu](mailto:noltj@kenyon.edu).

Accession Number: LAK-MD-A020500.B  
Researcher's Name: Michael Davis  
Event: Interview with Carolyn Hahnemann  
Place: her house, 25106 Coshocton Road , Howard, OH 43028

MD: It's January, it's February the 5<sup>th</sup>, about 12:30 in the afternoon, and I'm Michael Davis here at the Rural Life Center at Kenyon College, and I'm interviewing Carolyn Hahnemann about what it's like to live in a house on stilts.

CH: I've been in Know County now for eighteen months, I think. I moved here two summers ago because I got a job teaching for Kenyon. So first I moved to Gambier and then six months ago I moved to Howard, the house on stilts.

MD: question from behind microphone.

CH: I love it, but that's easy because I'm a European and I don't have to—Americans have to be impressed with New York and Los Angeles and I don't have to. I was born in Munich and I'm perfectly happy to live amongst the cows.

MD: inaudible question.

CH: I lived in Providence, Rhode Island, and in Washington, D.C., and in Allendale in upstate New York, and now here.

MD: inaudible question.

CH: The people in Allendale would kill me if I said it was pretty close, but it was pretty close.

MD: inaudible question.

CH: I lived in Gambier in a sabbatical house.

MD: inaudible question.

CH: It's great, it's the most beautiful thing ever. I have a heron and a kingfisher, and the kingfisher is half-tame. But he won't come because he's a male and he doesn't like it if I have other males around, he's that sort of a kingfisher. His name is Elkimo. It's just nice. The only thing is that it's a big risk, there are lots of restrictions on the house—I can't change anything, I can't make anything larger, I couldn't change the driveway. Just lots of things I couldn't do. I also had to do a lot of things with the bank when I first got here, because the river does flood, and it actually did flood in January, and then it's a bit like living in an aquarium. But usually it's incredibly peaceful.

MD: inaudible question.

CH: The highest it ever came was probably in the June flood, and it came until two feet under the house, which means that the utility room, which has the furnace and the water pump and the place where we park the car and the staircase that leads outside were all underwater. In January it wasn't that bad, it just came up basically to where I park the car. But it's still quite amazing when it turns the field across the road into a lake as far as the eye can see. And the sound is real different because now if you open the window it has this wonderful, calming, rippling sound, sort of like a gargling laughter, and when it floods it can become quite noisy and not so calming. It happened right when I came back from my Christmas vacation. I drove through the rain for hours and hours, and I knew that there was going to be a problem by the time I arrived and there kind of was.

MD: inaudible question.

CH: Well, I'm in the flood plain, the house that you see up there, the white one, that's the last house on the flood plain. So there's a dam down near Coshocton, and if they ever back the water as much as that dam will hold, then I'd go under. And so we have this friendly arrangement between me, Knox County, and the United States of America, that they will have to send me a postcard which says, "We are going to flood, so move your house." And then I have to move my house. But it has never happened and the dam has been there since, I think, the 50's. And it also means that if by some accident, the house were to burn down, you can't rebuild. Because you're not allowed to live like this on the river, which is why it's so great, you're not supposed to have a house like this. So you can't add to the house—I couldn't even if I decided to, I don't know, change the space underneath the house into a room or something. I don't think they'd let me. It's supposed to be the way that it is. And everything that you do like with—I should show you what I did with the bank—I used a lot of recycled concrete elements. And you have to chase around a lot for the permissions because you're on a public river. And they're also right because it's scenic, and it's a river and it's beautiful, and you don't just want people to pour concrete down or something. But on the other hand then, of course, it can become quite complicated, because \_\_\_\_\_ charge. And I am, what I did was quite small by comparison, and kind of vital, because if I hadn't had it, the house would have gone under. So it has these kind of restrictions, which makes it hard for resale, they say. But when I bought the lawyers advised me, "Nobody will ever be so crazy again and buy this." But, well, I don't care because I'm actually not selling. So, I'll never give it up.

MD: inaudible question. Presumably, something about the Army Corps of Engineers.

CH: What can I say? They're very masculine. They're a whole lot of them and it's a nationwide thing, so the people in charge of me are somewhere in West Virginia or something. So basically I think they're in charge of flowage easement. When I bought the house I had to sign this elaborate contract and when I wanted to fortify the banks, I had to get their permission—and it was a bit like Kafka. There seemed to be all separate places there and they don't talk to each other much. But four or five of them were here, I think. They usually are terribly nice, except that they speak their own language and they don't understand because I don't know these words. And so they sort of walk around and

go humph, humph, humph, and I remember one person who said, looking over the river and a dam that had been built there that yeah, I really had a point and needed to do something, because if not, structure might fail. And I said, "You mean, my house going to collapse?" And he said, "Yeah, structure's going to fail." So they're funny.

MD: inaudible question.

CH: No, I don't think they own the house, but there are some things that you own where nevertheless there are restrictions as to what you can do with them. So they are in charge of the river, so one thing they did, up there is a concrete wall underneath the street. They've got to be sure that the river doesn't eat under the street or something like that, so I think what they do is they people in charge of all the rivers and they're supposed to come down once a month or every other one and you know, just kind of look after it. And altogether it's a good thing, because the house like this one here, was built when they weren't doing that. So you know how people are, they just put shacks by the river. And that's exactly what happened here. And since there was nobody there to stop them, if the stuff has been there for long enough, it gets grandfathered in and so I am here. I have no legal right to be here except that if something has been a certain way for long enough, the law cannot kick you out anymore. So I think that's what they're trying to do. (Preventing?) you from putting eyesores on the river. Not that I was going to do that, but I think that's what they're there for.

MD: inaudible question.

CH: When one thing is that they're really masculine, so they don't talk to women very well. That was weird. I also have a feeling that, in one or two cases, bribery would have been appreciated, not any normal form, but people would come here and say, "Gee, that's good fishing." And I don't let anybody fish here and I tell them that. So I thought, "You give me the permit and I give you the smallmouth bass," but I don't really know. They've been trying to be helpful. We learn from everybody. This bank fortification was very complicated, and everybody who came had something useful to say. So it took forever, because they also had fifteen unuseful things to say, but it was worth it altogether. So they were nice. It's kind of nice to know that there are people who are studying freshwater clams, so I can't \_\_\_\_\_ them "Because I'm doing freshwater clam study." And I always wondered whether those were grilled or boiled or, you know, whatever they did with them.

MD: inaudible question.

CH: Well, yeah, I didn't look it up. I took this one book out, it was so boring—I read the first fifteen pages and that was it. I just couldn't deal with it. Apparently, Tecumseh canoes down the river. A little bit further down the river and a little bit towards where the road forks left, there's a big field and there's a campground, like an Indian campground. And something important is supposed to have happened there and, I think, Tecumseh camped there. But that's really all I know about it.

MD: inaudible question.

CH: Well, the person who built it is probably the most colorful person in Knox County. And I don't know about him because he was dead before I came—he was called The Doctor. And he had invented something which had made him rich and he was also paralyzed from the waist down, and enjoyed life to the fullest. And he, I think, this house was just half a house, it was a shack for fishing, and it was way further down there. And he liked it. So he negotiated with the farmer to buy it on a lease on the land, so he didn't even own the land that it was on. And he got a carpenter to move it and put it up on stilts. However, the shack was really decrepit—I probably get some of this stuff from \_\_\_\_\_, but I think this is how it went—so they jacked this moldy shack up on stilts, this is part of the house. But once it was up, the carpenter said, “I'm not doing this, because it's in such bad shape that it will never be solid enough to be here, you know, I'm sorry. I just can't do this.” And apparently the Doctor said, “Ah, that's not a problem, you know, just throw it back down off the stilts, take all the measurements, and build me on exactly like it.” So they copied everything down and built a new one and put it onto the stilts and that's that part of the house. I think when they used the old it on, a flood had raised it off its foundations and it floated halfway down the river, and the Doctor decided he still wanted it, so he had it hauled all the way back up. He just really liked it, so he called it *sheboeye*, which is a Japanese word, means cool. And so that was a very strange idea. And this room wasn't there, but there was a deck and there were walnut trees growing through it, and you could open all of the side here so you could have a full view of the river. You could see the deck and the walnut trees and \_\_\_\_\_. But it wasn't a house, it was a \_\_\_\_\_ kind of thing. Basically, it had a kitchen and a whirlpool, so good for dinners and things like that, but not really all that great for anything else. I don't even know how he got up, as far as I know he was in a wheelchair, but he did, clearly. And apparently he loved canoeing around here, so he was quite an extraordinary individual.

MD: inaudible question.

CH: Well, it's sort of, I suppose, confidential information because Army Corps of Engineers doesn't even know this, or they do. But his widow, Gail Damaman (sp.?), asked to convert the porch, which legally I think is on the borderline of what can be done because of the \_\_\_\_\_. It might just be that you can't increase the square footage, in which case it was ok. But anyway, sort of a gray area. So basically what she said she was going to do was screen in the porch, and that's the room you're sitting in. She lived here for some time. And she always also had another place. And I don't think, well, she was never here in the winters because she always went to Florida. I think I'm the first person who really lives here and uses all the space and stays and actually tries to get out of the driveway in the middle of the winter. But yeah, I think she decided she wanted to have a small house here with her grandchildren. It's sort of a nice house where—she's a totally intrepid woman, so she had her children out on the balcony when they were five and seven, swinging out on wonderful swings way over the river, and watching the logs come down the river during the flood, which is quite dramatic, because they come directly at the house. And then they turn. But it's sort of like in a movie. And they

enjoyed that apparently, so they did. I don't know whether, I'm never really quite sure if the Army Corps of Engineers approved the change. So supposedly they said screening in the porch was just fine. And after they were done, they had to come and look at it and say it was fine. Which is lucky, because \_\_\_\_\_.

MD: inaudible question.

CH: Like try to get onto the property? Very rarely. The canoers come from Mark and he has them excellently trained. So sometimes he has to fish them out if there is a tempest coming or something. And you know, he just comes in and picks them out because I have a good place where you can easily get them out. I have up there where there is the concrete, kids like to jump off the concrete into the water because the water is quite deep. And it scares the living daylights out of me because the concrete has rebar (sp.?) reinforcements and under the water nobody knows what is there, so they could get mortally wounded that way. And I hate that and I have to tell them to get off. Or people try to fish there and I don't let them, so then I just have to be bitchy, which is hard. And they make it hard. And they say they've done this all the time. I have people asking me if they can pay me a dollar or two to park in my yard and go fishing, and I said, "Absolutely not." And it wasn't good and it wasn't a very nice incident. Not much after that, I got burglarized and so we wonder if there isn't any sort of connection.

MD: inaudible question.

CH: And they all have to get out here, I love this. In the summer the river is quite low, you can see it anyway, it's really fairly low. And they're always, they're in a flow when they come around this corner, so they're usually in a very good mood and screaming and shouting and how wonderful everything is. And I can now here, because I know exactly what it sounds like depending on where they are. And there is this sort of kanoosh sound when they hit the rapids here because you actually have to get out and carry the canoe most of the time. So I like that, they always go paddling in full force, everything is going just fine, and then they come to sort of a standstill. Sometimes some people try to hang out under the house or in front of the house on the river, which is a terrible thing, because the river has incredible acoustics and I hear absolutely everything they say. That's not pleasant but it happens very rarely. And it's only in the summer. I mean, as soon as it gets a little colder, people \_\_\_\_\_.

MD: inaudible question.

CH: Well, there is the kingfisher, who isn't really a kingfisher, but he is something that has been turned into a kingfisher. I think he's a Greek poet, frankly, but he does stunts. It's too bad he is not here—if he sees you are here, he will do stunt diving for you, he is very proud. He also chatters all the time so that you know where he is at any given moment. If he fishes something, and you can see it, he will show it off or something. He's very cute and also really beautiful with his blue crest. And then I have, I have really only one heron, but there are two herons and they are kind of fighting over the territory here. So occasionally, I don't know whether they are a couple or not—at any rate they

kind of go together. I'm very fond of the mud turtles, which have these very cute long noses. Otherwise, they are just mud colored and flat, I don't know whether you have seen them. They are completely flat, they are so funny. So I really like those. Landa [her dog] has a sort of tendency to dig for those. I don't know, luckily, she has a very bad nose, so she rarely ever finds them. But then we have the beaver, of course, we have muskrats. The beaver you can only see from the traces, because he works at night. My neighbors tell me they can hear him swim, because he like flaps his tale on the water. But basically wake up in the morning and another tree is down or you can see how he was chipping away. And of course, I have an infinite number of birds. Down there is a field and so there are lots of deer. I have a raccoon that likes to be under the house—right now with the snow you can see them all, so I have all the little footprints from everybody. So the raccoon kind of—I think it's warmer under the house and he likes to be there. I don't have any trash. But I think that's about it. We don't have coyotes, I don't think, which is kind of a good thing. \_\_\_\_\_

MD: Do you enjoy having all the wildlife traffic?

CH: Oh yeah. I'm not good with neighbors, but I'm very good with wildlife. I excel with sheep and things like that, even stray dogs, no problem. But, well, I don't—I learned that from Greek history—neighboring states always hate each other, that's how all of Greek history works. If you're out in the country, it seems to make sense to me that you don't have any neighbors. Except that, of course, Mark is like the greatest neighbor ever and these people are, too. But I think that you have to be far enough away that if the son of your neighbors is taking trombone lessons that you can't hear it. Makes for mutual happiness, I think.

MD: inaudible question.

CH: I certainly think so.

MD: inaudible question.

CH: Not a happy story. It means river where the Koko owl hoots, right? And I am told that the best teacher ever, Professor McCulloh, in his first Greek class had two students. And after three weeks, he only had one student, because the other student had found out they were living on the Kokosing and that Kokosing meant river where the Koko owl hoots. And he proceeded to spend the rest of the semester climbing the trees by the Kokosing and imitating the sound of the owl until eventually, I think, he was taken away into mental care. But I always thought that if that happened in my first class, that out of two students, one would go nuts in the first three weeks, I would just quit my job. So that's the first thing I learned about the Kokosing

MD: What are some of your favorite sounds from the river?

CH: Oh just the river, just the river. I've learned a little bit the voices of the river, because it's not always the same. Usually it's a river that makes a cheerful, non-

threatening kind of sound. But one of the nicest things as far as sound goes that I have ever seen is that I had two people here who were, at night, who were juggling flaming torches. So of course, you couldn't see them because it was night. And I was far enough away that A) I couldn't see them, B) I couldn't hear them—I could only hear the river and see the fire. It was just spectacular. If you got closer to them you heard the cursing, you know, when they dropped the stuff. So that wasn't quite so cosmic. The sound of the river is just so beautiful. When I came home from New York and it was flooding, it was very hard for me to get used to the fact that it was rushing and it wasn't peaceful. Not at all, it was like driving through the pouring rain and you have your windshield wipers on extra speed, nothing peaceful about that. And I only learned then how much I'd been yearning for the sound of the river. Basically if you open up the windows and let the sound in the world's ok. There's nothing really terribly wrong as long as you can hear the river. \_\_\_\_\_ (too faint)

MD: inaudible question.

CH: Rivers are like deities. I mean, the power is incredible. And things just have to be prepared for. I mean, one thing I did right away was that in the little room under the house next to the furnace and all the other stuff, was also the electrical cabinet. So whenever the river flooded, the inhabitant would have to go down and switch off the electrical cabinet. And since Gail has about 250 guardian angels with nothing else to do, she would do that. But I don't, so one of the first things I did was I had the thing moved—there's no point, living dangerously like that. And that was a real worry. There's another thing that kind of bothers me—they didn't let me move the driveway. I wanted to move the driveway away from the curve, because the curve's so dangerous. And they didn't let me, because there are guardrails and people coming over the hill. And there have been lots of accidents and crashes right here. Cars have fallen onto my property just because they drive like maniacs. And it's a bad curve. And I'm kind of afraid because I have people coming in and out, friends, students, and whoever. I think I'm probably most afraid that \_\_\_\_\_... The river isn't so bad, you know. It will take stuff and then you have to put it back. You're never finished. I'm the world's master at sandbagging—I have more sandbags than most people. That's ok—it will take some and you will put them back. As long as you put them back, so that it can't erode under the house or something like that. [End of tape]

MD: inaudible question

CH: Three. Three, out of whom I only know two. I have Jim and Trudy down that way, and they're wonderful. And I have Mark Gilmore, whom you have met, so I need not say anything, except that I will have to call him and ask him to plough me out of my driveway. But Mark and I, we don't really border, there's a field in between, but there is a sheep farm in between us, which is a bit of a hazard if you have a dog. So there is another neighbor their whom I have never met because he lives further off. For some reason, I have never encountered him.

MD: inaudible question



CH: Yeah, I do. It is the same person who owns the field next to me. And that's one of the reasons why people didn't want this property, because it's very complicated and has a lot of right of ways. So the farmer has a right of way through my land because he has that field which he cannot access otherwise. And it's not a good field, so you don't want to go there because the seeds get washed out. But in the field there's also an oil drill, which is defunct. But nevertheless, the people who operate this also have to have a right of way to go through. And then also use of the railroad going along here. Just like the bike path, except that I think it was only a little railroad for gravel. So the railroad is also defunct, but they also have a right of way to go all the way across my property. So I definitely know the farmer, because he will come by and go and look after his fields. And there is another farmer over there whom I don't know. So there are two separate expanses of fields.

MD: inaudible question

CH: Oh yeah, they're not often there. Oh no. And people are just wonderful. They don't often come by. There's a different feeling of neighborliness if you're further apart. So I occasionally get calls—when I am where, did you expect a truck to come to your place? Particularly since I have been burglarized, \_\_\_\_\_. So they will take good care of things. I think they felt sort of mortified that I'd only been here not even half a year and some idiot decided to kick the door in. And they sort of felt like it was making it a bad neighborhood or something, so they really rallied to the defense. But it was nobody's fault...

MD: inaudible question

CH: I didn't do it. Gail wanted it, Jack made it. She wanted a shower outdoors somewhere, I think for the grandchildren to shower off after they come in all muddy from the river. And I think they considered doing it under the house, which for some reason they abandoned. I don't know why. And then he said, "Well, how about put it into the tree?" And Jack definitely like to try things like that and Gail was the perfect person to go along so, she said, "Yeah, the tree, that's just fine." So they built it in there. In the beginning it didn't have railings...so you wouldn't have caught me there. It even had—it looked really weird—it had shower curtains. So I don't know, it looked like a little Indian teepee in the tree or something. I suppose they really used it. It's not terribly useful because it is very exposed, so not even in the—so not only to the view of God knows, to the people driving down 36 and we have enough crash statistics as it is, but it's windy. So even if you are like in your bathing suit having a shower out there, it's never real warm, because there's not a lot of sun because it's a tree. And there's a lot of wind because you're in front of the house. It's not terribly, terribly pleasant. So it's nice, it certainly gets the attention of canoers.

MD: inaudible question

CH: Yeah, now we have snow, which is nice.

MD: inaudible question

CH: In the summer there was so little water that we had a drought for so long. So it got really piannissimo. And now it's different—it's hard—there's sort of a strange sound when it froze over. It didn't freeze over here because of the rapids, but it froze further up where my neighbors are. And it made sort of a different sound, maybe because the water was so very cold or something. And now in the morning you can barely see at all because of all the humidity rising from the river. So now it makes for these really enchanted views, because the heron's usually there. And it's all snow and mist and the heron sort of stalking majestically through the midst of it. It's all fun and games until you have to go to your 8:00 class. And it's a big, big difference, and I wish I were more observant than I am. It will take me years, years really, to learn all the sounds of the river. But I'm going to be here for years, so maybe I'll learn.

[tape ends as we go outside to walk around house]