

*Avis D. Carlson (1897-1987):
Not Simply an "Obscure Housewife"*

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Summary: This paper examines the life of Avis D. Carlson, a woman born in rural Kansas at the turn of the century and who went on to have extensive writing and community activism careers. This study includes analysis of Mrs. Carlson's written work and personal papers as well as information obtained from an interview with her son.

“And so, what possible reason can there be for me to suppose that the life and doings of an obscure housewife can be of interest to people outside her immediate circle”¹



Figure 1: Newspaper photograph of Avis D. Carlson circa 1927
 Source: *Avis Dungan Carlson Papers, 1927 - 1982*, series and subseries, *Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society*

Perhaps Mrs. Carlson was correct in her thinking, or maybe she was only attempting to appear humble. The life of a housewife pales in comparison to the adventures of Kansas native Amelia Earhart, the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic or that of Carrie Nation who set out on her famous hatchet-yielding crusade to destroy establishments furnishing alcohol. Yet, the true story of Kansas and its people would be

incomplete without studying the daily lives of ordinary women. In the early years of the state’s settlement, they toiled alongside their husbands, brothers, and fathers trying to extract a living out of the oft-times harsh

¹ Avis Carlson. *Small World Long Gone* (Evanston, IL: The Schori Press, 1975), ix.

landscape. They learned to make do with what they had and to fight for the survival of their families and community. Hard work, perseverance, and compassion for one's neighbors were values they developed and passed on to new generations of Kansas women who subsequently spread them around the world. These values have become the defining virtues of Kansans. This is what makes their stories worth telling and why the "life and doings of an obscure housewife," as Avis D. Carlson terms herself, are indeed an important part of history. Mrs. Carlson was not merely a housewife, however; she could also lay claim to an impressive writing career and a marked intelligence which landed her in the local newspaper, as seen in Figure 1 above. These two factors set her apart from many of her contemporaries, but much of her life, especially her upbringing, included the same experiences that a large number of female Kansans faced.

Born in the township of Belknap in Chautauqua County, Kansas, in 1897, just before the turn of the century, the future author was the first of four daughters born in rapid succession to C.O. and Mamie Dungan². The world into which she was born consisted of a small, self-sufficient stock farm located in the Flint Hills of southern Kansas, surrounded by a neighborhood whose human population fluctuated around one hundred. The white framed school and church, "externally alike as bottles an assembly line," on which she relied for the pleasures of socialization were located two miles away, an enormous distance in a time before automobiles. Real civilization was even further away. A seven mile journey by wagon or buggy would carry young Avis to "a straggle of box-like buildings, a little town which had scarcely changed from its frontier days:" the town of Moline where the family retrieved their mail before the Rural Free Delivery Service was enacted,

² Avis Carlson. *Small World Long Gone*, 43.

purchased necessary items from the mercantile, and conducted other necessary business.³ It was as “a child’s world restricted, and restricting,” but “also the world of most adults in the neighborhood.”⁴ Her memoir recalls moments of wishing for something more out of life even from an early age: in her heart there always existed a “questing and uncertainty which has plagued me throughout life.” This was a feeling that may have stemmed from her own mother’s restlessness and expressed desire that her children move beyond the boundaries of Belknap Township.⁵ Throughout much of her early childhood, she lived in isolation, having little contact with those outside her family circle and surrounding neighborhood. Because of this, the earliest and strongest influences upon the values she developed were undoubtedly her parents and grandparents.

Avis spent much of her childhood in the home of her paternal grandparents, pioneers who arrived in Kansas just after it opened for settlement. Her grandfather was a devout Methodist and a religious leader in the local community, introducing her to a church membership she would maintain throughout her adult life. An even greater influence in her life was her strong, hearty grandmother, “undoubtedly the most unfrail woman in the neighborhood,” who was also active in the community, serving as neighborhood midwife and caretaker in times of serious illness. Avis passed through youth listening to her grandmother champion the cause of women’s suffrage because women were just as intelligent as men, in some cases more so, claiming, “she was every bit as smart as her husband and second, that her daughters-in-law were a good deal smarter than their

³ Avis Carlson. *Small World*, 3-5

⁴ *Ibid*, 7

⁵ *Ibid*, 14

husbands.”⁶ Thus, it comes as no surprise that the woman’s granddaughter would not allow her gender to hinder her intellectual pursuits later in life. Both grandparents advocated the importance of education, a value that Mamie and C.O. also encouraged in their children^{7 8}. In an article published in the Moline Advance, Avis’ sister Hildred wrote, “ Nearly all young people of today deserve an education and I think every one should have an education, because it not only makes life better and higher for a person, but it gives them a great many more opportunities.”⁹ Although siblings do not always share the same opinions, this was one topic that both sisters seemed to agree upon, do doubt influenced by the encouragement of both their parents and grandparents.

Avis’ educational pursuits began early; she was reading at the age of four and, once she finally reached school age, quickly raced through her lessons, a process which led to many days spent in boredom in an age where special programs for highly intelligent students were unheard of¹⁰. Greedy for the written word, she filled in where her school curriculum was lacking by attacking her father’s small book collection, perusing deep works of literature such as *Pilgrims Progress*, *Paradise Lost*, *Vanity Fair*, *The Inferno*, and the *Plays of Shakespeare*.¹¹ Because they so valued education, and also presumably understood the high intelligence of their eldest daughter, Avis’ parents willingly sent her, at the age of thirteen, to live with her grandparents, who had by then removed to the city of Winfield.¹² It was there that she attended a private high school located on the campus of Southwestern

⁶ Avis D. Carlson. *Small World Long Gone*, 14-22

⁷ Ibid, 23

⁸ Ibid, 31

⁹ Hildred Dungan. “Notes Edited by the Moline High School,” *The Moline Advance*, January 1, 1914. Kansas State Historical Library.

¹⁰ Ibid, 2

¹¹ Avis Carlson. *Small World*, 78.

¹² Ibid, 107.

College, the institution from which she later earned her bachelor's degree and graduated first in her class¹³. The disappointment that Avis caused her parents when she chose to marry fellow university classmate Harry Carlson just months after graduating, instead of pursuing a career or going on to graduate school at Kansas University where she had been awarded a fellowship, also likely stemmed from their high esteem for education.¹⁴¹⁵ In a skit written for her 50th wedding anniversary, Avis quotes her sister Hildred as saying, "in those days it wasn't considered very bright of a girl to spend time and money getting a college degree if she was only going to get married after all."¹⁶ But, her future writing career would no doubt have given them pride and proven incorrect their unspoken opinion that a woman could not lead a successful intellectual life while also raising a family.

The fears that C.O. and Mamie may have harbored of their daughter becoming a disgruntled housewife very nearly became reality when, shortly after their marriage, Avis and Harry settled in to farming on his family's land in Western Kansas. According to Avis' son Eric, it took a jolt from old college friends, who admonished them for wasting their intelligence on farming, to send the two packing to graduate school in Illinois where Harry received his law degree and she undertook graduate coursework in English while teaching undergraduate courses in the same subject.¹⁷¹⁸ Upon Harry's graduation, they returned to Kansas, residing in Wichita until the onset of World War II when Harry's new job with the

¹³ Avis Carlson. "Application and Personal History Statement" March 12, 1942. Avis Dungan Carlson Papers, 1927 - 1982, *series and subseries*, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society

¹⁴ Avis Carlson, *Small World*, 141-142.

¹⁵ Avis Carlson. "Application".

¹⁶ Avis Carlson. "Skit by the 'I Waz There Club' in Those Days or Some Characters in Search of a Wedding," August 1967. Avis Dungan Carlson Papers, 1927 - 1982, *series and subseries*, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society

¹⁷ Eric Carlson, telephone interview, December 1, 2011, Manhattan, KS.

¹⁸ Avis Carlson "Application".

National Labor Board carried them first to Washington D.C., then Philadelphia, and finally St. Louis, where she would reside until her death in 1987.¹⁹

Avis as Mother: Author of an “Idyllic” Childhood

Compared to the large broods raised by her mother and grandmothers, Avis’ family was small, consisting only of two children, Eric and Jill, whom she and Harry adopted as infants in March of 1929, three years after their return to Wichita. Bringing up two children was a full time job in itself, but the young mother continued to pursue her newly budding writing career, successfully achieving a balance between the two despite the many setbacks and frustrations she faced. Like all young children, the siblings were prone to illnesses, especially Jill who suffered from dyslexia, a speech impediment, and “pigeon-toe,” a condition that would require surgery for correction.²⁰ Not only did these handicaps and illnesses require extra attention from Avis, they also required money, a necessity that was scarce during the Great Depression. In an unpublished 1960 article reflecting on the time period, she wrote, “But milk and utility bills for a family of four are horribly regular, and in a family which seemed to have one of its members in a hospital every few months, the financial struggle of those years was bitter indeed.”²¹ Despite her own fight to maintain hope, she never let her children perceive that they were struggling. Reflecting on his childhood, Eric could describe it as nothing but “idyllic” and reflected that he always felt

¹⁹ Eric Carlson, telephone interview.

²⁰ Avis Carlson. Daybooks. *Avis Dungan Carlson Papers, 1927 - 1982*, series and subseries, *Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society*

²¹ Avis Carlson. “First Draft of an Article Written in 1960,” 1960, *Avis Dungan Carlson Papers, 1927 - 1982*, series and subseries, *Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society, n.p.*

secure, surrounded by a loving family. Avis passed the love for the written word she had developed in her own childhood by taking the children to the local library every Saturday to check out books, which she would then read to them throughout the week, “eloquently and with expression.” Understanding the value of literacy, she sought out professional help for her daughter Jill, whose dyslexia impeded her from learning to read. She also sought to teach her children about the world around them, driving them to the poorest sections of town so they could witness the true effects of poverty and understand the violence that some families faced on a daily basis.²²

Throughout all the joys and heartbreaks of motherhood, Avis remained steady in her career, maintaining a balance with family life by renting a room in the home across the street where she could write uninterrupted and employing nursemaids to perform the domestic duties she must neglect. Yet, there were times in her life where she felt in despair and frustrated that she wasn’t making progress towards her goals of being someone “who counted in our small city,” and “to ‘grow in wisdom’.”²³ In her personal daybooks covering the years 1923-43, she often noted feeling depressed on days that she hadn’t accomplished anything scholastic and expressed joy when she was able to produce pages of written material.²⁴ Despite the small setbacks caused by the Depression and the strains of balancing motherhood and writing, she persevered and landed articles and short stories in many nationally ranked magazines and newspapers, including *Harper’s Monthly*, during the late twenties and thirties.

²² Eric Carlson. Interview.

²³ Avis Carlson. “First Draft”

²⁴ Avis Carlson. Daybooks.

Avis as Community Activist and Career Writer

Throughout her writing career, which spanned more than fifty years, Avis covered subjects ranging from child-rearing to social conflict and published many fictional short stories and poems, but it seems that her real interest lay in the community, its structure, and its people, an interest undoubtedly developed during her rural Kansas childhood.²⁵ In an article covering the technological evolution facing Kansas wheat farmers, she notes how the new technology has changed the rural landscape, stating, “The small wheat farm is vanishing...Western Kansas is seeing a curious reversal of functions. The countryman is going to town to work at whatever he can find to do, and the townsman is operating the farm.”²⁶ She was not only laying down the facts, but also commenting on the changes brought upon the rural community.

In almost all of her published work there exists a connection to community life. In other works that remain unpublished, she focuses exclusively on community life, most notably a piece serving as an instructive guide to community involvement and another providing commentary on the problems facing the nation in 1940. In her 1940 commentary, titled “Personal Program for the Times” Avis writes that in solving the nation’s problems to ensure the stability of democracy, “the battlefield extends back to every local community.”²⁷ She believed that if everyone worked to make a difference within their community, a place that is “accessible, familiar, small enough to give one some chance to

²⁵ Avis Carlson. “Application,” n.p.

²⁶ Avis Carlson. “The Wheat Farmers Dilemma,” *Harpers Monthly Magazine*, July 1931, 212. <http://harpers.org/archive/1931/07/page/0086>

²⁷ Avis Carlson. “Personal Program For The Times,” 1940, Avis Dungan Carlson Papers, 1927 - 1982, *series and subseries*, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society, 3

see results," the wider problems facing society as a whole could be solved.²⁸ She not only expressed a need for community involvement in her writing, but she also offered suggestions for practical means of doing so. In her guide to community work, she outlines "the best methods of working in a community."²⁹ The paper suggests that in order to be most successful in one's efforts a person must "have a clear picture of himself, his motivations, his abilities, and his situation in the community" as well as "feel that what [he or she is] doing is important in itself."³⁰

Avis Carlson undoubtedly possessed these characteristics as she had a successful career in community involvement. Because she grew up surrounded by parents and grandparents who were leaders in their community, it seems impossible that she would not have become involved in some form of activism, although she may not have actively sought to do so. She reflected on how her involvement began when she joined the League of Women Voters in the early thirties:

"I joined out of pure curiosity. I wanted to see what sort of an organization could arouse so much enthusiasm in and get so much work out of some of my acquaintances. I myself was not going to take on any work. No indeed. At my first general meeting the president nabbed me. I have had a job ever since-- and lucky if it was only one. Straight through the years I have liked the League well enough to find time for it."³¹

The League provided the outlet Avis needed to jumpstart her lifetime interest in community work. Working with the League, she was exposed to issues such as adequate housing, public health, and education. In the summer of 1940, she attended the Wellesley

²⁸ Ibid, 11.

²⁹ Avis Carlson. "Community Work," n.d., Avis Dungan Carlson Papers, 1927 - 1982, *series and subseries*, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society, I.

³⁰ Ibid, 10-11.

³¹ Avis Carlson. "I Like the League," *Member's Magazine, Sample Issue, May 1940*, League of Women Voters, 2-3. *Women and Social Movements in the United States 1600-2000*, Basic Edition.

summer institute for social progress in New York City, an activity that likely stemmed from her activities within the League. A local newspaper discussed her involvement noting, "The purpose of the institute is to attack social and economic problems from the point of view of practical improvement" and "is enrolling men and women from different fields of activity from all over the country in an attempt to obtain a true cross-section of American community life."³² Mrs. Carlson remained active in the LWV throughout her adult life, serving for a time as president of the St. Louis chapter. The St. Louis community benefitted from her activity in other community organizations as well, such as the Human Rights Commission and the Adult Education Council of Greater St. Louis through which she organized a literacy program in the city's public housing developments.³³

Avis' writing and community activist activities did not end until shortly before her death in 1987. In the early eighties, she wrote a column for the St. Louis Post Dispatch, titled "A Little Old Lady Speaks Up," a culmination of a lifetime career of speaking up and providing her opinion without the fear of any repercussions. Avis D. Carlson was a bold, driven, intelligent woman who sought to make her mark on the world by being a good mother, staying active in the local community, and using her intelligence in a successful writing career. Although she never climbed Mt. Everest, became a best-selling novelist, or flew an airplane over the Atlantic, she deserves to be recognized as a part of Kansas history. One cannot argue that she did not meet her goals of becoming one "who counted in our small

³² Veta M'Mahan. "Avis Carlson Chosen to Go to Wellesley," n.p.,n.d, Avis Dungan Carlson Papers, 1927 - 1982, *series and subseries*, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society

³³ "Avis Carlson; Post Columnist, Author and Community Leader," *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, January 3, 1987. Avis Dungan Carlson Papers, 1927 - 1982, *series and subseries*, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society

city” and growing in wisdom. By reaching these goals, the self-described “obscure housewife” serves as an inspiration to future generations of women who will continue to uphold the values inherited from their pioneering foremothers.

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