



Transcript  
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## Michigan Radio Stateside Interview with Mark Harvey and Rachel Clark | Batsuit

**Cynthia Canty:** 80 years ago, our nation experienced its first wave of "bat mania," and, no, it was not caused by the comic book hero. Bruce Wayne was still a few years away from being created. Rather, the country's imagination was captured by winged daredevils like Michigander Clem Sohn, daredevils who would jump out of planes wearing flying suits. The plan was to glide back down to earth and pull that parachute cord at the last possible moment to impress crowds at air shows. So here now to talk about our state's history, as we do every Wednesday, Mark Harvey and Rachel Clark, our partners at the Michigan History Center. So let's start at the very beginning. Michigan's birdman Clem Sohn, where in Michigan is he from?

**Mark Harvey:** He's from Fowler, Michigan, which is just north of Lansing, a small farming community, a beautiful place, just not where you'd expect the flying batman to come from. So, he wound up coming into Lansing and graduated from Lansing Eastern High School.

**Cynthia Canty:** And what time are we talking about?

**Rachel Clark:** In the late 1920s he graduated from Lansing schools.

**Mark Harvey:** Yes.

**Cynthia Canty:** Alright, just about the time that airplanes were becoming, you know, something that people accepted and got. But still, it was exciting to see airplanes. Do we know how Clem Sohn got involved in this new technology of the aircraft to become an aerial daredevil?

**Mark Harvey:** From what we've read, he crossed paths with the local aviator Art Davis, who did lots of interesting things. In fact, we have a photo collection where he has some promotional shots of a dog in a biplane with goggles on top of his head. So he was an early aviation pioneer, right along the time where the Capital City Airport opened up in

Lansing, and we're getting close to the time where Lindbergh is finishing his flight. He has Michigan roots, so this is a big deal, especially in Michigan, and so he (Clem Sohn) crosses paths with Art Davis and gets involved in aviation.

**Cynthia Canty:** And these aviation daredevil shows, I remember the movie *The Great Waldo Peppers*, so I mean they were happening all across the country, where people would come out. And what would happen at these daredevil shows?

**Rachel Clark:** A lot of times, what would happen is you would have a jumper who would come out of planes and parachute, or you would have aeronautics of a plane. So, as time went on, you saw more people who, like Clem Sohn, were jumping out of planes, parachuting, doing free-falls, and things of that nature.

**Cynthia Canty:** And I know I've seen pictures of the wing-walkers and think that I could never, in a million years, do that. Plus, as you said, all the circles and the loop-de-loops and things that the pilots would do. So, it is something! If you look at Clem's flying suit, it truly looks like something out of a Jules Verne novel, basically two large wings that spread out when he raises his arms and connected cloth between his pant legs. It almost seems like he took a look at a bird and said, "Ya know, if it works for that bird, it ought to work for me." What do we know about how and when he designed his suit?

**Rachel Clark:** The suit that he originally designed was about four feet wide, four or five feet wide, and about two feet tall, and it is steel tubing with heavy canvas wrapped around it. So, you have a steel tubing sort of skeleton with heavy canvas wrapped around it, and that's one part. The other part is a pair of twill or canvas pants, with a piece of material between his legs to act the same as a bird tail. Between the two things he could steer, he could float for a while, and those were the things that he used to entertain audiences.

**Mark Harvey:** Built for strength, not for lightness. Like, it's not like a bird, whose bones are hollow and light. Clem's suit was heavy and strong.

**Cynthia Canty:** I just think about the first tests, like what it took to say, "Okay, let's see if this works!" I mean, there was no uh, you know, you couldn't get on and do any computer-aided design back then to kind of have all the numbers to tell you, "Yes, this should work" or, "Yes, this shouldn't work."

**Mark Harvey:** I wonder if he ever got up on his garage and jumped off, like kids do with umbrellas.

**Rachel Clark:** I know he would throw flour bags out of the plane to see, for drop speed and where the flour would land. I don't know what that told him (laughter), but I did read about him throwing bags of flour out of the planes.

**Cynthia Canty:** So, how high would they be? And he would jump and, at some point, he would have to pull his parachute.

**Rachel Clark:** For the shows that he did, they would fly at about 10,000 feet, in and around, and then he would jump at 10,000 feet. He had two parachutes. He had his main chute and then his secondary chute that he, depending on conditions and all that, he would wait until he was about 1,000 feet or less from the ground before he would pull his chute.

**Cynthia Canty:** We're all cringing here. (Laughter) And he debuted this suit in 1935. How fast did it become a national sensation?

**Rachel Clark:** It became a national sensation pretty quickly. After he successfully did a jump, I think it was in Daytona, you have people that were attempting to copy him. There was actually an unfortunate incident of a young man from Flint who attempted to copy Clem's jump about a month later, and his chute got caught in his wings and he ended up killed at Bishop Airport. But you do have other people who are jumping and are being successful, but Clem held the record for the longest dive before he pulled his chute, and that was 18,500 feet.

**Cynthia Canty:** And they would compete, right?

**Rachel Clark:** Yes, yes they would. They would use float time as well as distance before you pull your chute.

**Cynthia Canty:** And was this also becoming a thing in Europe?

**Rachel Clark:** It was. He actually ended up performing in England, and then his final performance was actually in Paris.

**Cynthia Canty:** Now that you mention his final performance, one might suspect that maybe this Clem Sohn story did not end happily. So, what became of Clem in his final jump?

**Rachel Clark:** As his popularity increased, and then he had that world record, he was invited to France to perform. He and Art Davis were taking a ship over. The story is that they were delayed by weather, and so by the time they got there, Clem did not have the chance to check his chute. The theory is that the chutes got very damp. He jumped, appeared to be doing alright for a while, and then when it came time to pull his chute, neither his primary nor secondary chute deployed, or they didn't fill. He ended up falling in front of about 1,000 spectators.

**Cynthia Canty:** Okay! And I know there's actually an old British newsreel of footage of that, which I watched. You have to think, would these kinds of competitions even be allowed today, because it kind of seems like an aerial version of Russian Roulette.

**Rachel Clark:** There are actually a couple of international competitions. Red Bull sponsors one. They are wingsuit competitions. Essentially, it's the same design as Clem Sohn's original suit, just with better materials. They have various competitions, including speed and distance and aeronautics.

**Cynthia Canty:** Clem died this week in France 80 years ago, but we have to stop and think that Batman was not around at the time, you wonder how much inspiration. And then you think of cartoons we grew up with.

**Rachel Clark:** Yes, and looking at photos of Clem Sohn in his suit, I'm reminded of Wile E. Coyote's ACME batsuit that he purchases. And, it's actually a successful suit for him. It's one of the few items from ACME that he gets that actually works for him. He just doesn't use it well.

**Mark Harvey:** You can have a great historical conversation about the linkages between Clem Sohn and Wile E. Coyote.

**Cynthia Canty:** And so there's certainly no reason that the animators would not have been inspired by what they saw of Clem.

**Rachel Clark:** They would have been youngsters at the time of Clem's jumps.

**Cynthia Canty:** Well, Clem Sohn, you've given us something to talk about again. 80 years ago this week, Clem Sohn made his final jump, and that was over France. Michigan History Center's Rachel Clark and Mark Harvey, thank you so much for sharing this piece of Michigan's history with us.

**Rachel Clark:** Thank you very much!

**Mark Harvey:** Thank you!