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**MS. DEINES:** This is Ann Deines and I'm with George Russel today here in Alpina, Michigan, and today is May 21, 1997. If you could, just tell me a little bit about yourself and how you're related to the Wright brothers.

**MR. RUSSEL:** Well, as you know, there were four brothers and a sister in the family, and the two older brothers married and had family; the two younger brothers, of course, Wilbur and Orville, did not. But my grandfather was the oldest brother of the family, Reuchlin, and so that makes me a grand-nephew of the Wright brothers. I was born and raised in Kansas, lived in Lawrence from the time I was about three till I graduated from college right there in Lawrence at Kansas University.

I had what I consider a very wonderful relationship with Orville. He had his summer home in Georgian Bay, which is just across the lake from here, in Canada, and he would go up there every summer around the first of July and stay the rest of the summer. He did this to get away from the hubbub of his everyday life, which could get a little hectic because of who he was. He would go up there, and he wanted to really be alone, so he would take normally only one person to do the heavy work around the place, a college boy usually. And I came along at just the right time. I started in 1932. I would go up there with him, spend the summer there doing

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the heavy work and dishwashing and that sort of thing, and some of the things that were difficult to do but somebody had to do them, like fishing and swimming and sailing and that sort of thing. Then I would come home about time to start school, college. For working these two months in the summertime, he would pay my basic college expenses for the year, which was really great because . . .

**MS. DEINES:** That's a great deal.

**MR. RUSSEL:** Yeah, I would have had difficulty getting through college otherwise. Now, as far as Orville himself was concerned, he had a very warm, family-oriented personality, and very easy to be around. I had a wonderful time, of course, with him there. I like to say that he loved to tease, and it was a nice tease, it wasn't one that would irritate you but one that was fun to be the teasee, so to speak. I think he got that from his father.

He liked to tell the story about when Katharine, his sister, was in Oberlin College and she decided she'd like to bring a friend home for the weekend, to spend the weekend there at their home there in Dayton. One of the things their father liked to do at dinnertime, he liked to crush up the crackers and drop them in the soup. Well, in polite society you just don't do that, of course, so she asked her father if he would refrain from doing that while their guest

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was there. "Oh sure," he said, "I won't do that while she's here."

So, came the first evening and they sat down to dinner, and sure enough, true to his promise, he did not crush up the crackers and drop them in the soup; he just dropped them in whole." (chuckling)

So that, I think, is where Orville got his love to tease.

**MS. DEINES:** What types of teasing did he do while you were with him?

**MR. RUSSEL:** Okay, the story he tells, this was before I was there, but he took a nephew out fishing. I think it was Bus [Horace Wright], and you probably have heard of Bus. He took him out fishing, and Bus caught about a three-foot northern pike, hooked one. Well, that's a pretty good-sized fish. So naturally Uncle Orv had to help him get this fish in the boat. Well, that was where the nephew made his fatal mistake was letting Uncle Orv help, because from then on it was not *my fish*—I'm talking about Bus—it was *our fish*. (chuckling) So they took it back up to the cabin. Of course, Bus decided he wanted to have a picture taken of this fish. So they get the camera out and Bus holds the fish out to one side, looks at it admiringly, and they take a picture. Well, of course, Uncle Orv has to have his picture taken too. So what does he do? He holds the fish out towards the camera. Well, if you're familiar with photography, something held towards a camera is going

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to look bigger than out at the side, so Uncle Orv's fish turned out to be bigger than the cousin's fish. (chuckling) He never missed an opportunity like that.

A story I like to tell, I would come from home in Lawrence to Dayton when it came time to go up to the island. Of course, I always would arrive there at about the same time, and a local young nephew had a birthday about this time. There were three young grand-nephews living in Dayton, of course Wick you know and his brother, and then there was another one who passed away shortly after that. I think it was Wick's brother [who] had a birthday just about this time. Well, the folks would have a birthday party for them out in the back yard of their home. This party was going on this time and Uncle Bus was one of their favorite uncles, and he was sitting in one of these lounge chairs, these foldable lounge chairs. Well, he decided he wanted to get a piece of cherry pie. So he gets up out of the chair, goes and gets a piece of cherry pie, comes back and sits down. The lounge collapsed, the cherry pie did a loop and landed right in the middle of his shirt. Well, after the laughter kind of settled down, it was discovered that one of his nephews had deliberately set this chair so that when he sat down it would collapse. Well, of course, parents being parents, they sent the boy in the house. Then, after a little more discussion, it was discovered that the other two nephews had tried but had failed. Well, Uncle Orv picked this up. He said, "See

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here what happened. You had three try, two failed and one succeeded. Who did you punish? Not the two that failed but the one that succeeded." (chuckling) So this was something that he always liked to do.

Another little fishing story at the island. Carrie, their housekeeper, which I'm sure you're familiar with her, came up to visit for a week, and we decided this one evening we wanted to have some fish for dinner. So Uncle Orv asked me to take Carrie out in the boat and catch enough trout. We had a lot of small-mouth black bass there that we could catch quite easily, so we went out to one of my favorite fishing holes. Of course, Carrie knew nothing about fishing, so I got her pole out and set it up, put the bait on it, got it down in the water and sat down and started taking care of mine. Well, immediately she caught one. So we brought that fish in, I set her up again and set it back down, sat down again. And before I could get mine set up, she caught another one. Well, this went on until finally she caught enough fish for dinner that night and I didn't catch a single one. Well, maybe you didn't think Uncle Orv didn't take that up: (chuckling) "Here you take a woman out who knows nothing about fishing, she caught plenty for dinner, and you who know how to fish didn't catch a single one!" (chuckling) So this was the kind of teasing he liked to do.

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**MS. DEINES:** Did you know him before you started going up to the island with him, or is that more when you got to know him?

**MR. RUSSEL:** Well, that's the only time I got to know him. See, I lived in Kansas, which is quite a ways from Dayton. Of course I knew of him, and he had taken the family up to the island during the '20s when I was in junior high, and I did meet him then, but that was the only time that I had met with him and knew him, up till the time I moved up there. The first summer I went there he also took Wilbur, a cousin of mine living in Wichita, Kansas. Both of us were in our teens. I was 18 and I think Wilbur was about 14.

So, to check us out to see if we would (chuckling) behave, the first time he took us up there he had a colored fellow—I can't think of his name right now. Anyway, he had him do the work and had us as I said, to check us out. William, I think his name was.

Just had us there to see, try us out. Well, of course we apparently turned out all right because after that just the two of us would go up there, Wilbur and myself.

**MS. DEINES:** So you two went together every summer?

**MR. RUSSEL:** Yes. Yeah, we would meet . . . I don't remember exactly how. He lived in Wichita, but we would get on the train and go to Dayton, where we would meet and get in the car and go.

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**MS. DEINES:** Is this one of those cars that Orville had fixed up?  
(chuckling)

**MR. RUSSEL:** Oh yeah. I like to claim he was the original hot-rodder. He loved to get a car and soup it up so it'd go—not just because he liked to work on engines, but he liked to drive fast, that was all there was to it. And I had a little bit of experience along that line. This one summer we arrived there, and I was down at his office that he had downtown, and for some reason he had two cars there. He had the old bug-eye Pierce Arrow, the first ones to get the lights on the fenders, and then he had a Hudson Terraplane (?). They had given him this first one off of a production line, and that was a going machine. Well, he, of course, had souped that up as well. He had both of them at the office and he wanted to get them home. So, we're ready to go, he threw the keys to me and said, "Here, follow me with the Terraplane." Well, I had never been in it. I was in my teens, I could drive all right, but in those days the switch was not always in the same convenient spot; you had to look around to find where they'd put it. Well, I got in the car and finally found the switch and turned it on and looked up; by this time, he was about a half a block down the street. Well, I took out after him like a scalded dog. I had to go like mad, and I finally caught up with him. We were going around corners, across railroad tracks, uphill, through signals. I didn't

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dare lose him because I didn't have the faintest idea how to get to his place. Well, that was a pretty wild ride, but needless to say, I got there successfully.

One of the trips coming up to Canada in the Pierce Arrow, of course we were loaded down and he had that car with special shocks on it because he couldn't stand too much vibration. But we were driving to the island, and in those days they didn't have the freeways, we had to drive the country roads, and we were driving along someplace just outside of Detroit I think it was, and the signs came along and said, "Slow, narrow-gauge track across the road." Well, he slowed down to about seventy, and we hit this track and the car kind of went like this. Then, when we got into town and looked at the back of the car. Now, these shocks I was telling you about were on the back, and they had a big chrome cap on top of them, and when we hit that bump, it had blown this one cap up; it turned upside-down and landed right on it, and rode all the way into town, which was really quite remarkable.

**MS. DEINES:** They must have worked then. (chuckling)

**MR. RUSSEL:** Oh yeah, it still worked, although I guess the car must have sagged a little bit to one side because that one shock would not have been working. I think later on when he drove home

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he had a problem with it because I think he hit some icy roads in Canada and that car actually turned over. But that Pierce Arrow was built like a tank, and the only problem he had with it, he spilled some battery acid on the seat, (chuckling) because they righted it back up and he drove it right on home.

But another way his hot-rodding showed up. He bought this boat there in Canada. This was the second one he had, and this was a pretty nice boat that he bought. It was about a thirty-foot boat; it had a canopy but it was not a cruising-type boat. But anyway, it was about twelve miles across water from town to the island, and we had to, of course, go get supplies with the boat. Well, when he first bought it, the engine turned something like 1,700 rpms and it took about fifty, fifty-five minutes, I guess, fifty-five minute to go one way. Well, this was not fast enough for him, so he redesigned the propeller. Now, this is a marine propeller, not an aircraft propeller, which is an entirely different philosophy. But this new propeller, he had it put on, and he cut down the rpm to about 1,200 and cut about ten minutes' time off it. So, even with his boats he would do that.

One thing I like to talk about is his cooking. Of course, he had to do the cooking up there, and he was an *excellent* cook. Of course, having to do the dishes I had an advantage. He claimed that for my size I could out-eat anybody that he had up there.

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What would happen is I'd eat at the table and eat until everyone else quit, then I'd clear the table and then get out in the kitchen where I'd finish up the dinner and do the dishes. (chuckling) So we didn't have any problem with scraps that way.

**MS. DEINES:** So he did the cooking and you would clean up?

**MR. RUSSEL:** Yes. Wilbur and I would do the cleanup, the dishwashing and that sort of thing, which was part of the job. No, I didn't mind that a bit. I loved that place up there. Every summer I would impatiently wait until time to get on the train to go up there. Even though, as I say, that was the jobs we had to do, but that was nothing compared to being able to swim and fish and canoe. He had a little sailboat that we'd sail in and that sort of thing.

**MS. DEINES:** So what types of jobs were you doing there?

**MR. RUSSEL:** At his place?

**MS. DEINES:** Yes.

**MR. RUSSEL:** Well, just any heavy work that we had. I'd do the cleanup work in the house. He had one cabin among others when he

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bought the island, it had this cabin out on a cliff, and there was quite a lot of wind and he was really concerned about it; in fact, he had tie bars down on all four corners. Well, he decided he wanted to move that. So one summer we cut the thing up in small enough pieces that we could move it across to another place on the island. But it was that type of thing that we did. There was nothing really left to do by the time I got up there . . . See, he bought the island in 1917, 1918, something like that. Of course, this was the early 1930s, so he had things pretty well established by that time, so there wasn't an awful lot to do except the cleanup work and hauling groceries up from the boat, and that sort of thing.

**MS. DEINES:** Were there lots of people that came to visit while you were there, or would it mostly be the three of you?

**MR. RUSSEL:** Not a lot. He wanted to be alone, but he would have some people there. In fact, I met Griffith Brewer. I met him there at the island. He would come to visit. In fact, he gave me my first sailing lesson in a sailboat, so I had quite an instructor there. (chuckling) But he was a wonderful person. They always kidded him about his shoes. He always wore white shoes and he had tremendous feet. You could always spot him because of these. (laughter)

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Another time he had visitors come up uninvited. It was a family, and they spent almost a full week before they left, and we had to go back in and get extra food and that sort of thing. But that didn't happen very often. Once in a while, as I said, he would have family up there, bring them up for a week or so for a vacation.

**MS. DEINES:** I talked to Susan Wright and she said they'd go up there a couple times, but she never got a vacation because she'd have to do the cooking when she got there. (chuckling)

**MR. RUSSEL:** Well, that was what they always kidded the ladies about: "If you're going up there for a vacation, remember you're going to do the cooking." (chuckling) Because if a woman stepped on the island, he stepped out of the kitchen. (chuckling) And you couldn't blame him. I mean, he had to cook three times a day, three meals a day; and with two husky boys like we were, it took a little cooking.

I like to claim that Wilbur and I did teach him one thing about cooking. When we'd go into town, he would buy a sack of oranges and come home and cut them up and make the most delicious orange marmalade you could imagine. Well, of course, we'd always have

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toast in the morning, so Wilbur and I would stack this marmalade up on the toast, you know. He finally got smart. He watered the marmalade down to the point where we couldn't stack it up. (chuckling) So I claim that's how we gave him some cooking instructions.

Incidentally, he had a potato peeler that he built. If you go up to Detroit at his home up there, that potato peeler is in that home there. I spotted it there. It's a little gadget that had prongs, you'd put the potato on here, and then it had sort of a piece about like that, that he would turn the potato and bring a blade across, and that would peel the potato as it went around. And if you're ever up there, watch for it. I think it's in the kitchen.

**MS. DEINES:** Would I even know what it is if I saw it?

**MR. RUSSEL:** Well, it probably stands about so high, and like I said, it has a crank and little forks that push out that you'd put the potato on. Of course, he liked to have his toast exactly right, so he built a toaster. The cooking facilities were not all that great. It was a Coleman stove because we had no gas or electricity. It was a coal oil stove. So he tried these old towers. I don't know whether you have seen them, probably before your time, but they were a metal tower that had four sides and you

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could put four pieces of toast on it and it would heat. It wouldn't exactly make good toast. So what he did, he made two plates and folded it so that they would come down exactly the thickness that he wanted his toast. So he'd slice the bread and put it in there, and then he'd put it over the stove and turn it both ways and it came out just beautiful. You can't buy a toaster today that'll toast like he did. (chuckling) In fact, that's one of my gripes is toasters. But he had little gadgets like that.

I claim he had the first spin-rinse washing machine for clothes. To get the water up from the lake. First, I'd better explain the water system. He had, of course, a big water tower in the building itself. Well, we'd drink the water right out of the lake. It had a charcoal filter, but that was all. In order to get this water up there, he had a pump and engine, what they call a Johnson engine. It had one cylinder with two great big flywheels on it, and then attached to this was a pump that would pump the water up. To start this engine, you had to just spin the wheels until it finally started firing. Well, that wasn't difficult for me to do, but anyway, when he wanted to wash clothes, what he would do would be the night before . . . Incidentally, I should tell you that I never saw him without a white shirt and a bow tie. I don't care what he was doing, it didn't make any difference how dirty he was working in or anything like that, he had a white shirt and a bow

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tie. Well, of course, this meant a lot of white shirts had to be washed.

**MS. DEINES:** Probably quite well. (chuckling)

**MR. RUSSEL:** Yes. So he would set up . . . He had this old metal tub, and he'd fill it with water the night before and put his clothes in there with some soap and let them soak. Then the next morning he'd send me down to the pump and I'd start it up. We had a hose there. Of course, the only way you could fight fire on the island was by a method like this. You had a lot of water around but you had to be able to pump it. So he had a hose with quite a large nozzle on the end of it, to be able to control the flow. Well, I'd go down and start the pump, and he'd tilt this tub up on the side and then he'd shoot water from the nozzle water at the clothes and it would make them spin like this. (chuckling) So that's what I called his spin-rinse washing machine. (chuckling) Now, another thing was getting supplies. The house itself, a cabin, was about sixty feet above the water, which meant everything had to be carried up from the boat. Well, the first time that we went up there, as I mentioned, my family up there, he had a little four-wheeled cart that he had set one of his old airplane engines on it. It was a six-cylinder engine, but he cut three cylinders out because he, of course, didn't need all that power. But it was

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one of these deals where it was attached directly to the wheels, and it was either go or no-go: When they fired the engine up, you'd better be ready to go. (chuckling) To steer it, he had a tongue out in front, and a very active person would have to take this tongue and guide it up to the cabin, hoping that by the time you got to the top you had enough energy and breath left to turn the engine off. Well, of course this wasn't too satisfactory, so what he actually did was to build a little railroad from the water up to the house. I called it the "Bay Shore Lambert Island Railroad." Lambert Island was the name of his island. But to show his precision, he had this built—of course, it was before my time—but it had been built with wooden ties, and he had two angle-iron rails for the track. Now, the cart itself had . . . I guess they call it pulley wheels that would fit on this rail, and he had to build this thing precision enough that the wheels would not jump the track going up. Never once that I was there did it ever jump the track, so he built it with enough precision to do that.

**MS. DEINES:** Was it run by the same motor?

**MR. RUSSEL:** No.

**MS. DEINES:** What powered it?

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**MR. RUSSEL:** I'll describe that. This was a little one-cylinder outboard motor that had gotten beyond its time, as far as pushing a boat was concerned. So he took the propeller and gearbox off of the bottom shaft and put a worm gear on that. Then this worm gear was attached to a gear on a wooden drum—oh, I guess the wooden drum was maybe this big around—and in this wooden drum he had a cable that would wind up, and we'd fire up the engine and it would wind the cable up. And this one-cylinder engine, he had it so designed that we could bring at least 200 pounds up on this cart. So that's the way we brought the groceries up. And it saved me a lot of work because the icehouse. The icehouse was down by the lake at the bottom of the railroad, and I could bring the ice up from there on the railroad. The refrigerator had to be an icebox because, of course, there was no electricity. So he would have one of the natives there cut ice off of the lake and store it in this icehouse with wood chips and that sort of thing and sawdust. Well, these chunks of ice would be, oh, three foot square, even by the time we were up there, which is quite heavy. So this saved me having to walk up the hill with that on my back; we could haul the ice up on that cart.

**MS. DEINES:** Which makes a nice difference. (chuckling)

**MR. RUSSEL:** Oh boy, it was a big help to me. (chuckling)

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**MS. DEINES:** So what did Orville do while he was at the island most of the time?

**MR. RUSSEL:** Just kind of puttered around. Yeah, there really was nothing you could do on the island that was there.

**MS. DEINES:** Relax?

**MR. RUSSEL:** Just relax. Once in a while he would go sailing. He had a little thirteen-foot single-sail dinghy. It was great fun sailing in the thing. They had a big, open area out in front of the island, and we could go out there and just have a wonderful time sailing that boat. But he would do that, and I don't know that it ever got tiresome for either one of us. All the time I was there, I doubt if he ever went fishing. He had done enough fishing by the time I got up there, I guess. (chuckling)

**MS. DEINES:** He was done?

**MR. RUSSEL:** Yeah. Oh, he would build a little wooden bridge for some of us to walk on where we were walking up and down. He had quite a workshop there, a lot of tools, which I used quite a bit just to make little things just to keep me occupied. We had a lot of cedar on the island, and I would cut off little slabs of cedar

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and build them into little jewel boxes for the family. I had nothing but a handsaw and a hand file to do it with, so it took a little effort to do it, but it kept me occupied.

**MS. DEINES:** Are some of those still around?

**MR. RUSSEL:** I would doubt it. I don't think that any are still around. No, that was a *long* time ago. Remember, that was back in the '30s. That's just a few years ago. (chuckling)

Back in those days, a dollar was really worth a dollar, and he liked to think up ways that Wilbur and I could earn a dollar. We had little rabbits, Canadian hare, and groundhog, and that sort of thing on the island. So he thought up the idea of designing and building a trap. We had to design and build a trap where we could catch these animals, deliver them to him out of the trap unharmed .

. . He said "the animal unharmed," he didn't really mention what might happen to Wilbur and me. (laughter) Then he would give us a dollar each time that would happen. So he helped Wilbur build it.

They had what they call a figure four trap. It was shaped sort of like a figure four. I am still not too sure how it worked.

**MS. DEINES:** But it did? (chuckling)

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**MR. RUSSEL:** It did, and you would put bait on that. Well, one day Wilbur came dashing up to us and said, "I've got a rabbit in my trap, I've got a rabbit in my trap." So we went up there. And these Canadian hares have got pretty strong back legs. I mean, they can really flog. Well, poor Wilbur, he had to get that thing out of there, and by the time he got it out of the trap and delivered to Uncle Orv, the rabbit just about beat him to a pulp. And Uncle Orville, I thought he was going to have hysterics laughing. (chuckling) I think that was the most entertainment he ever got for a dollar bill in his life.

My trap, I found a wooden box about like so that had a wooden lid on it. Well, I turned it over upside-down and I would prop it open with a stick. And they had a lot of what they call wild cherry saplings, I've got a few out here, but they were very springy. So I would set it up so that the stick would prop up the box, and I would find a wild cherry sapling, tie it down with a loop on the corner of a rock, then I would run this loop in through the box so that I could hang some bait on it inside, then another string on the sapling would be attached to the bottom of the stick of that holding it up. Well, this all happens faster than you can talk, but the animal would eat the bait, this would pull the loop off of the rock, the sapling would snap up, pull the brace out from under the box, and the box would fall down. Well, that was the easy

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part. I had to get him out. I would always manage to catch a groundhog, and they're vicious little animals. You just don't dare pick them up bare-handed. So what I did, I had a loose board in the top of the box, and I would make about a . . . oh, about a three-inch opening, a three- or four-inch opening, so that it would slide back and forth. Well, when I got an animal in there, I would make a loop, a slip-knot loop, and put it over this hole. Then I'd slide the board back, and when the animal stuck his head out I'd catch him with this loop and carry him that way. A time or two they would go through there so fast I wouldn't be able to pull it.

But Uncle Orv claimed I had one trained to get in the box so I could bring it up and get my dollar bill. (chuckling)

**MS. DEINES:** The same one just kept coming back? (chuckling)

**MR. RUSSEL:** (chuckling) Yeah, he kept coming back. I don't know other things that I might tell you about. Do you have any questions you might like to [ask]? Let me check some of my notes here and see. Oh, arriving at the camp in summertime was quite an operation, because he had to hide everything from the native Indians. They would come in there in the wintertime and take just everything they could carry away. So he had two or three ways of doing things. To hide his dishes and things, the cabin, of course, had an upper deck which we could open up and view all around—a

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beautiful setup. But going up the stairs, he had built sort of a cavity in which he would put a cover on the front and make it look just like the wall. So then he would take this off and put his dishes and things in there, and that worked quite successfully. Now, to lock his door on his room, because he'd keep clothes and things in there and not have to haul them all back and forth, he had quite an arrangement. I think you've seen these Yale locks, where they're about so big and they have a little plunger that comes in and out with a knob that'll . . . And it had a little trigger on it that you could lock it. So he would set this up with the trigger locked, and he would run a wire down the side of the door, with a very small hole drilled through the door right where he had this wire or string coming down. Then he could push a forked plunger through this hole and get the wire, and this would unlock it and then he could open the door. So, fortunately he was always able to find the wire through the small hole. (chuckling) It always worked.

I don't know what other things you might know about the island. The water supply was . . . I think I described it when I was telling you about his laundry. A pump would pump the tank full of water, and that was always quite an operation. To start that, you had to crank the wheels quite rapidly, these big flywheels. That was what would start it. You couldn't keep a battery because

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batteries would not stay charged. It had a magneto on it, so you had to pump it fast enough for the magneto to start to work.

**MS. DEINES:** Once you pumped it, did it stay operating or did you have to do that every so often?

**MR. RUSSEL:** Oh yeah, once it started firing and started going it would operate; that then, of course, would pump the water up to the cabin. Let's see, what else might be of interest? (pages turning)  
His washing machine, did I describe his washing machine?

**MS. DEINES:** Yes.

**MR. RUSSEL:** Okay, and I described the marmalade. Oh, the dock design. Of course, there's a lot of ice freezing there in the wintertime, it was quite cold, and the ice would grab the dock and lift it up and tear it out. So he designed the dock so that it was canted on the sides, and when the ice would lift up, it would simply lift away from the dock. So the dock that was there, I was there for six summers, that one dock stayed all summer long, which is really quite remarkable to have it stay there that long.

**MS. DEINES:** So most of the time you were there, he was constantly changing or upgrading what was there?

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**MR. RUSSEL:** Oh yeah. I mean, he just would putter around the island and try to find things to do just to keep occupied and busy. There wasn't much you could do. When I'd get my jobs done, I would get in the canoe and go off on one of the islands and just explore around, look around. Oh, I just loved it up there. I was kind of the loner type anyway, and I could spend the whole summer up there and just have a wonderful time. We would go in town for supplies about once a week and load the boat up and bring them back out.

**MS. DEINES:** Where was town? What was the closest town?

**MR. RUSSEL:** A place called Penetanguishene, Penetang for short. If you can get a map of the area, it's easy to find. It's one of the towns there. But we would go in and load the boat up and bring it back out. What were we talking about, the supplies?

**MS. DEINES:** Yes.

**MR. RUSSEL:** Okay, well, we'd bring supplies enough for the week or so that it would take to do that. Of course, we'd bring them up on this train that I told you that he had, and that was quite an operation loading that up and bringing it up. Fishing, I didn't

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appreciate the wonderful fishing then that I would do now, but you could always catch plenty of fish to eat. Whenever he'd decide he'd want some fish for dinner, he'd send me out and I'd catch enough black bass, maybe about ten, twelve inches long, what they call small-mouth black bass. Delicious fish! And he'd cook those and we'd have those for dinner once in a while for a change. He was a wonderful cook, just a fantastic cook.

**MS. DEINES:** What types of things did he cook?

**MR. RUSSEL:** Just about anything you can think of. I don't recall now specifically, but we never went hungry. (chuckling) As I said, I would eat . . .

**MS. DEINES:** (chuckling) The bottomless pit of the group, right?

**MR. RUSSEL:** Yeah. I would actually gain weight, but I'd be hard as nails by the time I got out of there. There wasn't an ounce of lard on me at all by the time I got through with the place. It was wonderful. I knew the little places. Every once in a while, he'd want to have some fish for dinner and I'd go out and catch a few fish and bring them in. Once in a while he'd take us for a ride in the boat, but not very often. Really, once you've seen the area, that's about all there is to see again.

George Russel

**MS. DEINES:** Now, to get the family straight, Wilbur went up with you, right? And you're cousins?

**MR. RUSSEL:** Yes, he was my cousin. My mother had a brother and he was Wilbur's father. My mother's father was Reuchlin, the oldest.

**MS. DEINES:** Okay, and then your mother was . . . ?

**MR. RUSSEL:** Helen. Yes, and her brother was Herbert, and Wilbur was Herbert's son. The two of us then would go up there, of course, together. We would be there together. Wilbur passed away some time ago, a few years ago. I've just about outlived everybody. (chuckling) In fact, right now I'm the oldest living member of the family.

**MS. DEINES:** Of the Wrights?

**MR. RUSSEL:** Of the Wrights.

**MS. DEINES:** It's hard because the family is spread out and it's hard for me to keep track of everyone, but especially Reuchlin's side.

George Russel

**MR. RUSSEL:** Yes, I'm the only one left in Reuchlin's family. None of Reuchlin's family had much in the way of children. No, I shouldn't say I'm the only one left. Ellwyn, who was the youngest of the three of Reuchlin's, his daughter is still living. She's living out in California. And I should take that back. Again, Wilbur's sister is still living, and she lives out in southern California, Kathy, Katharine. Ellwyn was Mother's sister. Ellwyn had two children: Charles, who has passed away, and then Margaret is still living in southern California. So there's still three of us left of Reuchlin's family.

**MS. DEINES:** Did you know your grandfather? Because I forget when he died.

**MR. RUSSEL:** Well, he died in 1920. I did know him some because I would be about five years old when he passed away. What I remember is we'd always have Christmas at their place in Kansas City, and he would always have a great big tree in one corner of the livingroom, where a sheet would be pulled across it so we couldn't see anything until the right time came. Come Christmas morning, we all had to sit down and have a good breakfast (chuckling) before we could get at it.

**MS. DEINES:** Sounds like my family. (laughter)

George Russel

**MR. RUSSEL:** Yeah, we always had to have a *good* breakfast before we could go in there. (chuckling) I'm sure he got a big kick out of that. They lived in Kansas City and I lived in Lawrence where Kansas University is. In fact, I lived there from the time I was about three till I graduated from Kansas University. Right now, as I said, I'm the oldest of the living relatives of the Wright family.

**MS. DEINES:** Did your family ever talk about Wilbur and Orville and their memories of them?

**MR. RUSSEL:** Not very much because they . . . My grandfather moved out to the Kansas area . . .

**MS. DEINES:** Early. (chuckling)

**MR. RUSSEL:** Oh, quite early. In fact, I'm trying to think whether Mother had been born before they moved out or not. Mother was the oldest of the three in Reuchlin's family. But they lived out there almost all the time. They didn't see much of the Dayton people, simply because in those days that was quite a distance and it was not easy to travel. We lived there, lived in Lawrence. I guess, as I told you, I lived in Lawrence from the time I was about three

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until I graduated from college, which is where the Kansas University is. I remember Grandmother quite well. I only remember Grandfather from pictures, because I was about . . . oh, I'd be five, I guess, when he passed away, and I didn't see him too often because we lived in Kansas City.

**MS. DEINES:** Yeah, that makes a difference. Before you went to the island . . . So you would take the train to Dayton?

**MR. RUSSEL:** Yes.

**MS. DEINES:** And then drive up to the island? Would you drive back with Orville and then take the train home?

**MR. RUSSEL:** No, he always stayed for . . . oh, as long as he could. As long as the weather would allow, he would stay after Wilbur and I left.

**MS. DEINES:** Okay, because you had to leave to go back to school.

**MR. RUSSEL:** I had to leave to go back to school, yes.

**MS. DEINES:** But you always went sort of the beginning of July?

George Russel

**MR. RUSSEL:** Around the first of July. We'd meet at his place around the first of July. And we'd always have this party, where as I mentioned, about the kids. (chuckling) I can remember that almost every time. The island itself, I have wonderful, fond memories of the island and some of the people that we knew up there. We had some nice friends. Once in a while we'd take the boat and go up a river—we'd have to do it by canoe, of course—and that would be quite an experience. But I was hard as nails. I could really canoe in those days. In fact, I got a kick out of it. I didn't realize what was happening at the time, but some friends of Orville's lived nearby and they had a guest there that was really quite an athlete, and we decided we were going to take a canoe trip up the river. Well, he, being a big athlete, you know, why, he wanted to take the back the canoe. You have to steer from the back and that sort of thing. I was in such physical condition that the back paddler, I don't know if you're familiar with canoeing, has much more affect on the boat itself. But I would be paddling in front. I would paddle so hard that he would have trouble just steering it. (laughter) And this upset him considerably. But I didn't realize really what was going on because I loved to get out in the canoe. I would get in the canoe and just . . .

**MS. DEINES:** Go and go. (chuckling)

George Russel

**MR. RUSSEL:** Go and go, yeah.

**MS. DEINES:** So how many summers did you go up there?

**MR. RUSSEL:** Six summers.

**MS. DEINES:** So it would have been 1932 to . . . ?

**MR. RUSSEL:** Thirty-two to thirty-eight.

**MS. DEINES:** Did you ever get to go back up after that?

**MR. RUSSEL:** Yes, not too long ago . . . I don't remember just how many years, but a couple who purchased his boat. When Uncle Orv stopped going up, he sold his boat to a man by the named of Wilf Frantz, who was the caretaker of the island in the wintertime when Orville was not there. Wilf just didn't really take care of the boat, just let it go all to pieces and that sort of thing. Well, his daughter married and they bought the boat from Wilf and renovated it and just put it back in beautiful shape. It's a beautiful boat.

George Russel

**MS. DEINES:** Wick has a picture of it in his study, so I've seen the picture of it since it's been restored.

[End Tape 1, Side A]

[Begin Tape 1, Side B]

**MR. RUSSEL:** Let's see, where was I? I've forgotten now what I was talking about.

**MS. DEINES:** About going back up there, and the boat.

**MR. RUSSEL:** Oh yes. This family, in fact it was Wilf's daughter who bought the boat, and her husband, bought the boat from Wilf, and they renovated it and it's just in *beautiful* shape now. They have a beautiful home out on . . . No, I started to say an island but it isn't. It's on the mainland, but the only way you can get to it is by boat. Canada is still wild enough that way. But they renovated the boat and it's just in beautiful shape now. I was up there . . . in fact, I've been there a couple times. I took my family, who live just next door, and we went up and visited. It was a thrill to see it because it's such a beautiful boat. It was about a thirty-, thirty-two-foot boat, but it's not a cabin, it

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just had a cover over the top. But it was a beautiful boat for the area up there, and I have very fond memories of it.

**MS. DEINES:** So did you get back over to Lambert Island?

**MR. RUSSEL:** Oh yes. In fact, the first time I was up there . . . It's owned by some people by the name of Shickedens, they're Canadians, and they bought it outright, and it's nothing like it was. He has a tremendous, big home, great big . . . It's nothing like the cabin.

**MS. DEINES:** Fancy now?

**MR. RUSSEL:** Yeah, nothing like the cabin that we had, and the same way with the boathouse and all that sort of thing. But it was interesting getting back on the island just to see it. It has so completely grown up, and I was really amazed because the island had been there a long time before Uncle Orv had it, but apparently it had burned off quite severely many years before Uncle Orv bought it, and it hadn't really grown up. When I went back . . . See, I left there in '38 which was my last year there, and I would have been there in about, oh, two or three years ago, but it had so grown up I just couldn't believe it.

George Russel

**MS. DEINES:** Completely different?

**MR. RUSSEL:** Completely different, yeah. The place where we had the little railroad that we brought supplies up on was completely covered over. He had eliminated that. He didn't have it there anymore. The paths that we used were completely grown over. It just amazes me because that island has been there for quite a few years. (chuckling) But it had grown up considerably. And then, of course, I was able to take my family up two or three years ago, which was really quite an experience for them to see the island. I couldn't get them on the island at the time, but we circled around it so they were able to see it and get an idea of what it was like when I was up there. I think the fondest memories of my life, I think, are wrapped around that island up there, the six summers that I spent there. It was really great.

**MS. DEINES:** It sounds like it. So, back to Dayton. You didn't spend much time there? You'd just be there for—

**MR. RUSSEL:** Just long enough to . . .

**MS. DEINES:** Pack up and go?

**MR. RUSSEL:** Pack up and go.

George Russel

**MS. DEINES:** So it would be like a day or two?

**MR. RUSSEL:** Yeah, it would be two or three days, at the most.

**MS. DEINES:** So you never got to see much? You'd just be at the house and pack, I guess?

**MR. RUSSEL:** Well, we stayed at his home, of course, for a couple of nights, but it would just be long enough to get everything packed in the big old Pierce Arrow that he had and then we could be on our way going up. I got to see his shop, of course. That was quite a shop. He had every kind of piece of machinery you could imagine. I don't know, is the shop still there? I don't know whether it is or not.

**MS. DEINES:** No, it got torn down sometime in the '70s. They tore it down to put up a gas station.

**MR. RUSSEL:** (chuckling) Oh, what a sad thing.

**MS. DEINES:** And then they never built the gas station, so it's just an empty lot.

**MR. RUSSEL:** Oh, what a sad thing. It was really quite a building that was there. I can remember being in there a couple times.

George Russel

Like I said, that's where my wild ride left from. (chuckling)  
From there, trying to follow him home.

**MS. DEINES:** Did he ever show you the inventions he was making at the shop?

**MR. RUSSEL:** Yes, he showed me one thing he was working on before cars had automatic shifts. He was working on a design for one that would shift automatically. He built a model of it, but it took too much to really go into production, but it was really quite a thing.

It was very smooth. It would go from low to high just gradually and not in sections. At that time they were coming out with what they called a Hydromatic, General Motors, but it very definitely had shifts. And this, he had it set up so he could load it up and you could see it working back and forth. That was interesting to see.

Yeah, it's sure a shame that they couldn't have preserved that shop because that was . . . He had every kind of piece of machinery you can imagine in there.

**MS. DEINES:** I've seen pictures, because National Cash Register took pictures of the inside when he died, so I have some sort of image of what it was like, but that's too bad.

George Russel

**MR. RUSSEL:** Yes, that was really quite a shop.

**MS. DEINES:** They tried to save it. For about five years they tried to get someone to move it, and no one could raise the money, so then they just tore it down.

**MR. RUSSEL:** Well, that's the problem. It's a costly thing to do something like that, and it's just too bad that they weren't able to keep it because, really, it was quite a historic shop.

**MS. DEINES:** Yeah. I think the worst part of the whole thing is they tore it down and then they never built what they were going to, so . . . (chuckling)

**MR. RUSSEL:** Yeah, that's the sad part there, yes.

**MS. DEINES:** Now we have another empty lot where the Wrights were.

**MR. RUSSEL:** Isn't that a shame? Oh, it sure really is, because that was really quite a building. I have very vivid pictures in my mind of it. At that time, see, I was taking mechanical engineering and that sort of thing . . .

**MS. DEINES:** It interested you?

George Russel

**MR. RUSSEL:** It really interested me, yeah.

**MS. DEINES:** Well, that's good. I think I've asked everything. Can you think of anything that I might have missed?

**MR. RUSSEL:** To tell you the story about taking Carrie fishing . . . You know who Carrie was?

**MS. DEINES:** Yes.

**MR. RUSSEL:** Well, they decided . . . Did I tell you this? I don't know. Well, anyway, I'll go on with it. Anyway, they decided they wanted to have some fish. Yeah, I told you this, about Carrie catching all the fish.

**MS. DEINES:** Oh, with Carrie fishing? Yeah.

**MR. RUSSEL:** Yeah, catching all the fish.

**MS. DEINES:** Now, when you were in Dayton, was she living there at the house?

**MR. RUSSEL:** When I was going up to the island? Yes, she was still living there. I knew Carrie quite well. A wonderful little lady.

George Russel

**MS. DEINES:** I've heard some things, where she had lived there for a time and then left and then came back, and I haven't been able to figure out where she is at what time.

**MR. RUSSEL:** Yeah, well, she was living in the home there when I was going through, the six summers that I went through there. Did I tell you about the dock design?

**MS. DEINES:** Yeah, with the ice?

**MR. RUSSEL:** Yes, and the sides. (chuckling) Oh, he liked to tell about his longest speech that he ever made. He was invited someplace for a celebration of the . . . I guess it was of the Wrights' flight, and they wanted him to give a talk. Well, you just couldn't get him to talk, that was it. But he said he would attend. So he did. He sat there at the head table, and the master of ceremonies didn't believe that he couldn't get Orville to talk, so he gave a little talk and then introduced Orville, saying that Orville would present a trophy to someone—I've forgotten the exact situation. (chuckling) So he introduced Orville, thinking he would give a talk. Orville got up, picked up the trophy, walked over and said, "Here," turned around and sat down. (chuckling) That was his longest speech.

George Russel

**MS. DEINES:** (chuckling) Because I've heard he was very shy.

**MR. RUSSEL:** Very shy.

**MS. DEINES:** Did it take you a while to get to know him, or as for family, it worked okay?

**MR. RUSSEL:** Well, no, family, he was not shy with family; in fact, he loved to tease the family. (chuckling) You knew you were in his good graces when he was teasing you. (chuckling) No, but he was shy. I guess you would call it shy. But when he was away from home and was around other people, he was very . . .

**MS. DEINES:** Quiet?

**MR. RUSSEL:** Quiet. That's a better way of describing it, I think. But with the family, he loved to tease the family. There was nothing shy about him around them. (chuckling)

**MS. DEINES:** So did it take you two a while to get to know each other, or did things . . . Was he that quiet when you met him? (chuckling)

George Russel

**MR. RUSSEL:** Well, not really. Yeah, not really. The only time I really got to meet him was the first time that he took Wilbur and myself up to the island. I had met him before, as I think I told you that he took the family up, or maybe not, during the '20s. My sister and mother and myself, he took us up to the island for about a week. That was my first experience up at his island. But I got to know him then. But I never had any problem being shy around him. I mean, he was a member of the family, no different . . . He didn't impress me at that point as being famous. (laughter)

**MS. DEINES:** It didn't matter who he was? (chuckling)

**MR. RUSSEL:** Yeah, he was just another uncle then. (chuckling)

**MS. DEINES:** Did you ever get a chance to meet Katharine?

**MR. RUSSEL:** No.

**MS. DEINES:** Had she moved by then?

**MR. RUSSEL:** Oh, I did, I met her just very briefly. She married a Mr. Haskell and moved out to Kansas City. Well, I lived at Lawrence, which is only about—

George Russel

**MS. DEINES:** Well, that's what I was just thinking while you were talking, that you had met her.

**MR. RUSSEL:** Yes, it was only forty, forty-five miles away, and I got to meet her just one time before she passed away. She didn't live very long after she had moved out there. We met at their home in Kansas City just once. But that's the only time I met Katharine.

**MS. DEINES:** So what was she like? Do you remember?

**MR. RUSSEL:** Well, the only picture I have of her, we walked into their home and she was coming down the stairs. They had a big, beautiful mansion, of course, there in Kansas City because he was one of the co-owners, I think, of the *Kansas City Star*, her husband. He was quite high up in it anyway, and they had quite a beautiful home there in Kansas City. The one picture I have of her is walking down those stairs and coming to the door to greet us. That's the only really picture I have of seeing her personally.

**MS. DEINES:** Well, you would have been sort of young then, huh?

**MR. RUSSEL:** At that time, yes. Well, I hadn't gone to college at that point, so I was still in grade school. In fact, the time I

was up at the island, I was in junior high, I guess, during the '20s. I started my college in '32, '33, along in there.

**MS. DEINES:** Okay. Well, thank you. Is that it? There's nothing else, right?

**MR. RUSSEL:** Well, I don't think of anything else right now, no.

**MS. DEINES:** Okay, well, thank you. I'll turn this off.

[End of Interview]

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW  
FOR THE  
HISTORIC RESOURCE STUDY OF  
DAYTON AVIATION HERITAGE  
NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

**George Russel**

21 May 1997  
Alpena, Michigan

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