

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

**Marianne Miller Hudec**

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Interviewed by:

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AD: This is Ann Deines. It's September 28, 2000, and I am in Newton, Massachusetts, with Marianne Miller Hudec. And if we could just start by a little background information on you, when and where you were born and how you're related to the Wright brothers.

MH: Okay. I was born in Dayton, Ohio, in 1935, and my mother was Ivonette Wright Miller, married to Harold S. Miller. Ivonette was a daughter of Lorin Wright who was the second-born of Bishop Milton and Susan Wright's five children. Therefore, my mother was a niece of Orville and Wilbur Wright, and I am one of the brothers' grandnieces.

AD: So you, in your life span, just knew Orville.

MH: That's correct. Wilbur, who died in 1912, had been long deceased when I was born in 1935. But I heard a great deal about him at my mother's knee.

AD: What would she tell you about him?

MH: Well, she said that he was very contemplative. He could be very talkative, but he was always thinking. He would sit quietly to the side in deep thought. She said that both uncles often played with them when they were children, but that Wilbur would not play as long (chuckling), that he would play and then get tired of it. He was very tall and would sit in a chair with a child in his lap, reading aloud or playing with a toy. When he got tired of playing he would straighten out his legs and the child would slide off. That was their signal to find something else to do.

Uncle Orv was, I think, more patient with them, and would sit for hours and play. Both uncles loved to take the children=s toys apart or repair them. My mother felt that the uncles chose toys that aroused the gift giver=s curiosity. After the children had opened their presents, Uncle Orv and Uncle Will spent the rest of the day taking the toys apart to see how they worked. Sometimes they would be able to put the toys back together again and sometimes they wouldn=t. Both uncles, I think, loved the intellectual challenge that toys could offer, and so enjoyed playing with them.

Uncle Orv, and I think Uncle Will, too, liked to make candy with them, especially fudge. This activity usually took place on Sunday afternoons at 7 Hawthorn Street. Sometimes my mother would say, AWell, we should make something different.≡ She was always the one that wanted a little variety in life, (chuckling). So they would make the same candy, but he would change its name. Uncle Orv would perhaps give it a French name to satisfy my mother=s desire for something different. I think they occasionally made other kinds of candy, but the most popular variety was fudge. After Uncle Orv died, Mom inherited the candy thermometer that they had used in those candy making days. They were vivid memories for her. For example, she recalled a time when she was quite small. She was dressed up, and Uncle Orv didn=t want Mom to get her dress dirty. So he sat her on top of the ice box, where she was able to watched the candy making

and remained tidy. The Lorin Wright children spent a lot of time over at 7 Hawthorn Street.

My mom always said that Valentine=s Day was a big occasion. The children would put their hand-made Valentines on the front door step, ring the bell, and run to hide in the bushes. One of the uncles would come out the back door and try to catch them.

Wilbur entertained them with his harmonica, which he played while sitting on the lower stairs that went to the second floor from the front hall. Both uncles manufactured shadow puppets at the bicycle shop, and gave plays for the children.

So they were always thinking of what would be fun for the kids.

There were many children=s books in the 7 Hawthorn Street house. I inherited Burgess= AGoop Books,≡ parts of which my mother knew by heart into old age. When the children misbehaved, they were sent for a Atime out≡ to the closet under the stairway, which had a window and was filled with books, puzzles and other quiet time toys. When their behavior was especially bad, the Bishop would turn a straight-backed chair over the top of them, and sit on it. There they would stay until he felt they had had enough.

AD: What did your mother say about Katharine?

MH: I think my mother may have had a somewhat complicated relationship with her. I learned this late in life. I never heard this in my early years. When I was young, she told me that Katharine was jolly. For example, Katharine was greatly amused when my mother got into some mischief when she was a student at Oxford College. She and her friends went to an afternoon movie, which was against the college rules. As a result, they were confined to their rooms. Mom was a vocalist, and was scheduled to sing with a group at a college function. Since most of the members of the grounded group were in the singing group, they were kept in their rooms and ushered down to the party to sing, then ushered back up to their rooms again. Aunt Katharine thought that was funny. She laughed and laughed and laughed. But my mother didn't think that Katharine particularly approved of her. I've never seen any evidence of that in her letters to Harry that you've read. She always spoke warmly of both my parents in those letters. I don't know. I know my cousin John Jameson, the son of Mom's sister, Leontine, did not care for Aunt Katharine. Now, I don't know if it was her school-marmish ways or what. I think my mother probably thought Katharine was wonderful when she was a child, but maybe in her adult life she felt that Katharine had reservations about her. I know my mother supported Katharine's desire to marry. She was to sing at her wedding, and because of Katharine's disagreement with Uncle Orv, nobody in the Dayton family went to Oberlin for

that wedding (except for Leontine, who then lived in Cleveland). Mom was to sing and then felt dis-invited. It may have had something to do with that, because I=ve never fully understood why Mom felt as she did about Aunt Katharine.

There was another event which may have clouded their relationship. When my mother was graduated with a degree in Music from Oxford College, Aunt Katharine offered to pay her tuition to study voice at the Conservatory of Music at Katharine=s alma mater, Oberlin College. Mom then dreamed of studying in New York, but Katharine was not inclined to send her there. Perhaps Katharine did not approve of the New York idea, and thought Mom was unwise or ungrateful not to accept her offer. That perhaps could have put their relationship on uncertain footing.

The brothers complained about Katharine=s propensity to spend a lot of money. They indulged her, but felt she was not very economical with their funds. After the invention of the plane, when Orville and Wilbur had more money, it was Katharine who urged them to buy my grandfather, Lorin, a car. I=m sure there were other such examples of generosity to other members of the family.

But she was a very proper woman and wanted everything to be *comme il faut*. Her decoration of Hawthorn Hill shows that. She dressed beautifully and wanted everything to be of high quality. I still have some of her linens, guest towels with the *KW* monogram. She was a Victorian lady, I think. Neither

Orville nor Wilbur would have planned a house like Hawthorn Hill. That was Katharine=s idea. She wanted it as a base for entertaining the visiting dignitaries who came from Europe and elsewhere. She felt the brothers needed a proper stage, so to speak, on which to entertain them. But I think she probably liked it, too. Of course, I never knew her. Wick would have known her, but probablyX

AD: He couldn=t remember much. He said he remembered her like this vague person in the room, but he couldn=t remember any particulars. Milton remembered a little because he was a couple years older. But so far he=s the only person that I=ve met who can remember her at all.

MH: Well, does he describe her in these terms? Does he catch anything about the school-marmish ways?

AD: No, he just had good things to say. And he was a little boy \_\_\_\_\_.

MH: She was obviously very bright. That=s obvious from her letters--those to Harry Haskell and her wonderful letters to *the boys*, as she called them, when they were at Kitty Hawk. The three of them were very close, I think. And they wrote wonderfully warm letters to her as well. I think Tom Crouch did pick up something which had not been picked up before, which is that Katharine felt closest to Orville. Their letters, the letters that she wrote to him at Kitty Hawk and the ones that he wrote back to her, captured Orville and his personality best of any letters he wrote. They had a playful relationship. It was in those letters that

he drew pictures of himself and Wilbur up on those bunk beds, hanging high in the rafters of the hangar and fighting the mosquitoes. They were written not in a complaining tone, but a playful way about the woes of living on a beach in North Carolina. They're very animated and wonderful letters, I think. That's sort of the Orville that I remember.

He had a twinkle in his eye. He would always have a question to ask, and his eyes would be smiling when he asked it. He was trying to elicit some fun with you, so to speak. He wasn't a dour man, at least not with children, even in his old age. What would he have been? He would have been about sixty-three when I was born, so he was in his late sixties and seventies when I knew him. And he was an elderly man then. He wasn't out sledding down Hawthorn Hill the way he would have been with Wick, Milt and my brother, Jack. But there was always a playful aspect to him. One time he gave me a magic trick after he had demonstrated it to me. It was comprised of a series of about five graduated nested containers. Each container was secured with rubber bands, and the smallest contained a penny. Then, abracadabra: he made the penny disappear. I was mystified. When I got it home, I searched in vain for a secret compartment. I used to take it apart time after time after time, trying to figure out how he did it. He obviously slipped the penny out before we secured all the containers with rubber bands. But I never saw him do it.

AD: So he never showed you?

MH: No, he never showed me how he did it. (laughter) And I=d talk to him about it from time to time, and there would just be this smile, these smiling eyes.  
(chuckling)

AD: Were you and your parents frequent visitors to Hawthorn Hill?

MH: Oh yes. We went there quite often. He also came to our house for dinner occasionally. We also would go on Sundays after church to his lab . . . We went to First Baptist Church in downtown Dayton, and we would go over there afterward to see him.

AD: Over to his lab?

MH: Over to his lab. He was always there on Sunday. That was not quite as much fun for me. I don=t know, I wasn=t allowed to go out into the lab and poke around, because he and my parents would be sitting in the office in some comfortable chairs talking and he couldn=t let me loose out there with all those machines. There were occasions when I would go out into the lab with him, but I was never allowed to explore.

AD: Wander?

MH: Wander out there on my own and poke around. I was much more confined there, whereas at Hawthorn Hill I=d go out into the kitchen and talk with Carrie, who was always great fun. She was marvelous. She gave her life, really, to Uncle Orv. She was married but never had children. She and Charlie Grumbach lived at Hawthorn Hill, and Charlie worked at a small grocery on Harmon Avenue. They

lived in an apartment separated from the rest of the upstairs by a door. She worked first for the Bishop, then for Uncle Orv from the time they lived on Hawthorn Street until Uncle Orv died.

She always called him AMr. Orville.≡ After Uncle Orv died, Carrie told my cousin, Leontine, that she never encouraged him to buy mechanical objects for the house. When something broke, he would take it apart, try to fix it, and then lose interest in it and go on to something else. Carrie tried to fix things herself rather than mention to him that it wasn=t working properly. He had his last heart attack while trying to repair the front doorbell, which worked unreliably for years. Leontine and I wondered if he had always had a problem finishing a project. Perhaps it was Wilbur who enforced more discipline of that sort. Uncle Orv always had a dozen interesting projects on his plate at one time, and must have had trouble deciding what to do first. As for Carrie, she evidently preferred to have an object which worked imperfectly rather than one that wouldn=t work at all because it was disassembled!

A friend of my parents in Dayton, Betty Lilly, said that she had spoken with Carrie once about Uncle Orv. Carrie told her that Uncle Orv had experienced a lot of pain after the Ft. Myers crash which accelerated in his later years. Sensing that he needed help, she would wait at the bottom of the stairs for him to come down for breakfast in the morning. By then, his back prevented him from being able to tie his shoes. As he came to the last few stairs, he would pause, and

Carrie would bend down and tie his shoes for him. No words were ever spoken by either one of them about it. After so many years, she sensed his need for help, and he knew she understood.

She was wonderful. She was such a delight and full of fun, with the map of Ireland on her face. She, too, smiled with her eyes. They twinkled.

Wonderful to everybody. Uncle Orv=s and Aunt Katharine=s friends who visited Hawthorn Hill knew Carrie and loved her. Some corresponded with her. She was especially beloved by the family. After Uncle Orv died, she was part of our family Christmas celebrations every year. She always came. After Charlie died, somebody would always go and pick her up to bring her to the Christmas Eve family party.

AD: So when you all had Christmas Eve at Hawthorn Hill, would she participate in that, or \_\_\_\_\_?

MH: No, there she didn=t participate. By that, I mean she did not join us in the living room for conversation. As far as I was concerned she participated, because I spent a lot of the evening out in the kitchen with her. (chuckling) But no, she did not participate except she was responsible for putting on the feast. In addition, every member of the family would go individually to the Grumbach dining room, next to the kitchen, to wish them a Merry Christmas and chat awhile. I think we also gave them gifts, but I=m not positive about that. Certainly we gave them both gifts after Uncle Orv died. But she was a constant presence. She cooked

for days beforehand. One of the things I got rid of when we moved was the ice cream mold. (chuckling) Every year she prepared an ice cream dessert fit for kings, made with three nested molds.

AD: It sounds big.

MH: It was. It was probably two feet long, eighteen inches to two feet. Perhaps it only seemed that large to me! Each of the three molds contained a different flavor of ice cream, two of which were fig and chocolate. It must have been a huge project to assemble such a dessert. She made the ice cream from scratch and somehow froze it without benefit of an refrigerator! Uncle Orv had only an ice box at Hawthorn Hill, so she prepared all these feasts in spite of this fact. She also made an outstanding pear Jell-O mold. I think I gave some of Carrie=s recipes to Melba Hunt for her book. The Christmas eve parties at Uncle Orv=s house were highlights in all our lives

Everybody in the family preferred dark meat. Every year the problem was the same: one big turkey didn=t have enough dark meat to serve everybody. One year, Uncle Orv carved the turkey, then began asking each person whether they would like dark or light meat. He served each person accordingly. No one said a word, but everyone wondered how this turkey could have so much dark meat. Everybody began to suspect that there was some trick afoot. Uncle Milt then said, ATastes like duck to me.≡ Uncle Orv began to chuckle, and his sparkling eyes darted about, seeing whether anyone was going to figure out how there could be

so much dark meat. And that was in fact what they did. Carrie had cooked a duck, and disguised it underneath the turkey. She must have worked a whole day to get that all put together. (laughter)

The Christmas Eve dinner was always beautifully served in the dining room of Hawthorn Hill. All the leaves were in the table with a beautiful damask tablecloth and napkins for all, even the children. Of course, I was much younger than all my cousins. Sometimes the Jamesons would be there from Chicago. As I recall, we always sat in the same place at the table year after year. I can still remember approximately where each member of the family sat. Of course, it varied a bit from year to year, depending on who wasn't present. When my cousin Wick was high school age, he would be put in charge of me. I was sort of the pest, the little pest.

AD: Are you like fifteen years younger?

MH: Oh, let's see, he was about thirteen years older. He used to contrive all these games for me to play that would keep me out of his hair. There was a huge rug in the front hall of Hawthorn Hill which had a repeated design. He would assign me the task of counting the designs in the rug. I also counted the spokes in the banister. One year he had me wrap up in the velvet curtains that hung between the rooms to prevent drafts. (chuckling) I would wrap up for a half hour or more and pretend I was a pea in a pod, or a carrot. (chuckling) And I was so gullible that I did what he said. So all of that was going on. While Wick was

entertaining me in the front hall, there was a steady stream of the men in the family to the front porch to smoke a cigarette. Uncle Orv disapproved of smoking, so anyone who wanted to smoke had to go outside. These events were all part of the scene at the Christmas Eve parties. Uncle Orv always gave everybody a gift of money in a money envelope which served double duty as a place card at the table. He owned stock in the American Chicle Company, which gave its stockholders a little box of all their gum flavors for a Christmas bonus. As the baby of the family, I always got that in addition to my money envelope.

In addition to my escapades with Wick, I played with a collection of dolls and doll furniture that Uncle Orv kept on hand. It was kept in the bottom drawer of the left built-in buffet in the alcove off the dining room. As a young child, it entertained me for hours. The Hawthorn Street tradition of having toys available for visiting children continued until he died. I saw this furniture again many years later at Aunt Sue and Uncle Bus's house--they must have inherited it after Uncle Orv died.

Uncle Orv had slightly left of center political views, and my father was slightly right of center. I wouldn't say either of them were extremists, but Uncle Orv loved to bait my father. He'd get my father going, and Dad would start getting hot under the collar arguing with him about politics. So that was always going on on Christmas Eve. That went on at other times, too. Uncle Orv loved a heated discussion!

During World War II, Aunt Sue would bring him eggs. She and Uncle Bus had an egg farming business as their contribution to the home front effort to replace the farmers who were enlisted. Eggs were scarce, and Aunt Sue delivered eggs to most of the family each week. She often arrived with her eggs at Hawthorn Hill just before lunch, and if Uncle Orv had arrived home from the lab, he often invited her to stay for lunch. He would then draw her into a discussion about Uncle Bus: he=d ask her if she didn=t think Uncle Bus was a dreamer, for example. She would predictably defend Uncle Bus vigorously. When she left, he would say to Carrie, AOh, Sue was in good form today.≡ (chuckling)

My mother recalled that during her childhood, Uncle Orv was quite a tease--so much so that those being teased would sometimes be close to tears. She remembered that, when things began to get out of hand, it would be Uncle Will who would say, AThat=s enough, Orv.≡ As he got older, he learned to be careful not to tease so mercilessly.

So he loved that. It was Uncle Will who said, AOrville is a good scrapper. I love to scrap with Orville.≡ Nobody outside the family saw this side of him. To the world he was a reserved, remote figure. To us, he loved intellectual, verbal fun. With his family and a few close friends, he could relax, be himself and not have to behave as a famous man should. It must have been a strain for him to play that role.

AD: Do you think part of that was because he was shy, or just didn't enjoy playing that role?

MH: I think he was slightly shy, but he wasn't as a kid. The picture you get from Tom Crouch's book is of an exuberant boy. Tom Crouch says, "Every family has one like Orville." I think his reserve probably began with Wilbur's death, and the responsibilities that were thrust upon him. He just didn't want them, and felt he was ill suited to handle them. I think he was quite happy to have Wilbur be the public face. I'm sure there was some shyness connected with it. You see him as a young man in the photographs of Katharine's parties, sitting off in the corner observing everybody. He just didn't want to participate. But he could be quite talkative.

In addition to some shyness and a reluctance to be in the limelight, one has to attribute some of Uncle Orv's reticence to the fact that many in the aviation community at that time refused to give the Wrights credit for their invention. Some even called them liars. Words of that sort to the members of a family in which honesty was a hallmark must have been very hurtful. The Wright brothers were modest men, but they knew what they had accomplished. Uncle Orv was certainly unprepared by life to deal with the accusations which came his way. Because of Uncle Will's death, he was left to deal with these men alone. He had discovered that the world was a not particularly friendly or trustworthy

place, and so he retreated into a more solitary life with his close friends and family.

My father always said that there was no question that Orville regarded his older brother Lorin as the head of the family, and always deferred to him.

AD: Really?

MH: Absolutely. My father said, "There was never a question in Orville Wright's mind that Lorin Wright was his older brother." And my mother did not disagree. Lorin was the one who made the family decisions, and Orville followed his lead. Of course my grandfather died when I was five, so I could never say I saw this myself. But even intellectually, Lorin, at the family parties, would often direct the conversation. He would bring up a topic that interested him and get the others to say what they thought about it.

When the monument at Kitty Hawk was dedicated and the family all went, Mabel Beck, Uncle Orville's secretary, arranged things so that she didn't have a way back to Dayton. My mother thought Miss Beck had hoped Uncle Orville would drive her back. Lorin was very upset. He made Uncle Orville understand, in no uncertain terms, that she was to be delivered with dispatch to the Norfolk train station, period. He was a true Victorian, and didn't want reporters assuming a romantic relationship. This message was delivered with finger shaking and fury. Lorin was the keeper of the family position.

AD: That's interesting, because for all those years he worked for Wilbur and Orville

\_\_\_\_\_ socially he took on that role.

MH: That=s true. In his family role, he was the older brother. I was very touched in some of Katharine=s letters to Harry Haskell, that after her mother died, it was my grandfather, Lorin, who braided Katharine=s hair every morning so she would go off to school clean and tidy. She didn=t say it, but that fact made me realize that it was probably Lorin who got the household organized every morning. The Bishop, from all one can see, would have been totally inept at that kind of activity. I think it was Lorin who assumed the responsibility because he was the oldest child still at home.

I got a big kick out Katharine=s observations about her father in her letters to Harry Haskell and about the role of men in the world generally. She loved her father, but she was under no illusions about him. (chuckling) He made life very hard for her. He wanted all his kids to stay home to take care of him, and felt no guilt in trying to arrange it. He needed somebody, I guess. I think they all loved him dearly. But Katharine certainly knew what he was in that regard, and wasn=t going to be cowed by him. There is that remarkable story of Wilbur when he was flying in France. The Bishop took exception to the fact that Wilbur had drunk a glass of wine. He was then about forty years old! (chuckling) AFather, you needn=t worry.= (chuckling) AWe will never forget what you and Mother taught us.= (chuckling)

AD: You probably met Mabel Beck, then?

MH: Yes.

AD: What did you think of her?

MH: Well, you know, I never saw these other sides of her, although I believe they existed. I didn't have much of an opinion about her one way or another. She seemed like a mousy woman to me. I remember her. I never saw her saying some of the things that she did that caused so much anguish. I know my mother often fretted over the most recent outrage. I certainly realized she was not interested in me, but many adults are not interested in children. My father observed that it was a sad situation. Here poor Uncle Orv was. He had Carrie at home, a woman of generous spirit whom everybody adored, but who said, "The minute Mabel Beck walks in the front door, I'll walk out the back." So he had Carrie at home and he had Mabel Beck at the office. I think he didn't know how to extricate himself. If Miss Beck bothered him, I don't think he knew how to get rid of her. My father had interesting insights into Miss Beck because he had to work with her in the early days of settling Uncle Orv's estate. After Uncle Orv died, she immediately demanded a raise. Since the executors needed to know what she knew about Uncle Orv's belongings, they kept her on for awhile. But as soon as they could, Dad fired her. He felt that Uncle Orv was incapable of firing her. So he lived with this difficult situation.

AD: For what, thirty years? (chuckling)

MH: Oh, a long time. But that was Uncle Orv. You know, there was a time in the 1930's when Leon Bollee=s wife announced she was coming to town. Madame Bollee was by then a widow. Uncle Orv was probably right to suspected that she was interested in romance. He was beside himself. He didn=t know what he was going to do with her. So he called my mother to ask her to bring my father and brother to stay at Hawthorn Hill and act as his hostess during her visit. Mom was happy to help, and the family did move out to Hawthorn Hill until she left. This has nothing to do with Mabel Beck, actually. It really has to do with Uncle Orv=s inability to manage his life. He just didn=t know how to tell her no, it wasn=t appropriate for her to come. He just couldn=t do it!

AD: Figure out another way.

MH: Yes. So that was Uncle Orv. My mother, and also Wick=s mother, my Aunt Anne, always said Uncle Orv loved to have company at Lambert Island because the women would do the cooking. (chuckling) Aunt Anne would limit the time that they were going to be there before she would agree to go. Wick told me that she made blueberry pies all day long. So, after Katharine=s marriage, he had a problem of how to take care of his needs. He needed Carrie at home and he needed Mabel Beck at the office.

He had a large number of historical records that he had kept all those

years, because museums were not yet interested in them. He, of course, appreciated that one day they would be valued. Mabel Beck had been there from the beginning and knew what they all were and where they were filed. To train somebody else to deal with these archives was beyond him, I think. It was clear to me that he viewed her as a necessity, nothing more.

But one never heard Uncle Orv say anything bad about Mabel Beck. Roz Young, a journalist for the Dayton Daily News, has written a number of columns about the supposed romance between Orville and Mabel Beck, and I don't believe it. I never heard him call her anything but Miss Beck. I can even hear him say it, and it was said in a very professional manner without any emotional tone to his voice. She sat in her office and he sat in his office. Young wrote about an occasion when Orville came to her house to lay out her driveway.

AD: I haven't seen that one.

MH: She asked him to come. She had built a house. As I recall, it was sort of a mini-Hawthorn Hill, a smaller version with a circular driveway. Because Uncle Orv had designed and laid out the driveway at Hawthorn Hill, she wanted him to lay out a similar driveway at her new house. He agreed to do it. A neighbor of Miss Beck reported years later that he had seen Uncle Orv working in front of the house, laying out the driveway. From knowing Uncle Orv, I have a vision about how the project proceeded. I think he would have completed the job and left. I think he would have called her Miss Beck when he spoke to her during the laying

out of it. I never saw any attraction to her on his part. She was very efficient and was valuable to him because of that and her familiarity with the aviation materials. I never found her a very interesting person. I was somewhat sociable and would have tried to talk to her if she would have allowed it. I found her to be a forbidding person. She didn't want to talk to anybody, and she didn't want anybody from the family at the office. That was her territory. She made life difficult when the family came to call.

AD: That's what I've heard.

MH: I never really saw that. I was a kid. Aunt Sue recalled a time when she was on the West Side on an errand, and stopped to see Uncle Orv. Miss Beck opened the door, and informed her that Uncle Orv was busy. Uncle Orv heard Aunt Sue's voice, and interceded to invite her in.

AD: Well, she probably didn't work on Sundays when you were there.

MH: No. My mother always said that's why we went then. Carrie also had that day off. He could stay at home, I suppose, but I think he liked being at the office without Miss Beck around. That was what my mother thought. This was a place where he could putter around and do what he wanted at the lab without Miss Beck hovering. So he liked to go to the lab on Sunday.

AD: Did he ever show you around the lab and the types of things he was working on, what \_\_\_\_\_?

MH: I have two recollections about that. One was in 1948, near the end of his life. He had been working on an improvement for an automobile automatic gear shift. He had the drawings on the drafting table behind his desk. He explained them to us, but I wasn't a scientist and didn't understand much. The other event took place at the house. He was trying to develop an improved automatic record changer. He showed it to the family one Christmas as I recall. It was kept in the front hall closet, to the left of the front door. We all knew he was working on it because he had called around to ask for old records that we didn't want anymore because they might get broken! Evidently the record changer didn't always work, and the records got thrown across the floor. So those are the only inventions that I remember hearing him discuss.

I never quite knew what he did at the lab on Sunday, because he was always dressed in a suit when we arrived. Of course he never got very dirty. He seemed to have the ability to do dirty work but not look dirty. My mother said that no matter how dirty the task, he always looked like he had stepped out of a bandbox! He took off his jacket and wore a shop apron when he went to work in the lab. The lab was a marvelous place. The NCR took photographs of the lab before it was broken up after Uncle Orv's death, and I've located so many familiar objects in them.

AD: Oh, in the photographs?

MH: In the photographs. I've located the trunk that Mary Mathews now has in which

the brothers shipped plane parts and tools back and forth to Kitty Hawk. I've located a thimble cabinet that I have inherited in which they kept small objects at the lab, and probably at the bicycle shop before that.

AD: I think that was a storage place for him, too, because a lot of the artifacts were there.

MH: Yes. And supposedly, according to my father, my 1904 propeller and the 1905 propeller were out there lying on the floor in a corner. I have, with my magnifying glass, tried to find them without success. Ken Hyde was interested in seeing where it had been stored. I have an oak typing table that one of them made which Uncle Orv used for his typewriter at the lab. I have treasured many of these objects. When the estate was being finalized, the family took what they wanted, and my father brought home what was left. For example, I have his postal scale, his ruler, his desk dictionary (now donated to Wright State), his scissors, letter opener, telephone number roller, and so forth. Nobody in Dayton then was interested in these objects. Dayton then had no archives or museums to receive these artifacts. My parents took these objects with the intention of preserving them. My father told me he knew that eventually somebody would want these things.

Ken Hyde has been inquiring about a propeller at Camp Kern. I recalled to him that there was a propeller given to Camp Kern after Orville's death. Ken heard that they had it hanging over a fireplace. I recall that someone who was

interested in Camp Kern thought it might inspire youth there, and asked if they could have it. I have no idea on which plane it flew. It was probably found in the corner of the lab with the other propellers.

AD: He=s been really good about researching and finding where some things are.

MH: He=s gotten interested in Wright propellers: how each succeeding propeller improved on the previous one, etc. There has been almost no research in the last 98 years on this topic. I have always felt that figuring out the aerodynamics of a propeller was the most remarkable achievement of the whole plane. I agree with Charlie Taylor, who felt the same way. Uncle Orv and Uncle Will argued and argued about that. It was to be the biggest intellectual challenge they faced. They made a tremendous leap of imagination to conclude that the propeller was a horizontal wing.

[End Side A, Begin Side B]

AD: Do you remember much of the dedication of the Wright Memorial?

MH: Oh yes! Yes, I remember a lot about that even though I was only five years old. That was great. It was a great day. I=ve gone back many times since, and I=m so impressed with the statement that=s on the front of the memorial.

I remember that many dignitaries came. I remember Uncle Orv. He would have been about sixty nine or seventy then, and was quite sprightly. He was happy that day, I think. He enjoyed the presence of his friend, Col. Deeds, and the many members of the aviation community who came long distances to be

there. My cousin Leontine Jameson and I unveiled the monument. After pulling the cord, I hopped on one foot down the steps! Don=t ask me why. After the ceremony, a photographer took of picture of Leontine and me with Uncle Orv, which I still have hanging in a prominent spot. It was a memorable occasion. Isn=t it a fact that the monument was built through the efforts of Col. Deeds?

AD: Pretty much, yes.

MH: I was interested at the time in the Indian mounds. It=s wonderful that the Olmsted firm kept them and planted all those beautiful oak trees that are now so mature. It=s a lovely spot. The monument looks so beautiful in its setting and the beauty continues as one walks out on the terrace and looks over Huffman Prairie. I=m only surprised that it doesn=t attract more visitors.

AD: I don=t think a lot of people know it=s there.

MH: I=m sure you are right. It needs better signage, and I=m sure that will come.

AD: Do you remember Orville=s funeral?

MH: Oh yes, I remember that very well. What can I say about it? After the funeral service at First Baptist Church, there was a big cortege down Main Street en route to the cemetery. I was in the first car with several cousins and Carrie and Charlie. The rest of the family were in the next group of cars, followed by out of town attendees and friends. Throngs of people lined the street.

AD: There was quite a reaction in Dayton, wasn=t there?

MH: Oh yes, and all the family came. There are photographs of every family group. The Western Wrights, Reuchlin=s children and grandchildren, were all there. There were calls from Washington to the Hawthorn Hill house during the planning of the funeral, getting the names of all the survivors so that the President could send a telegram of condolence. Col. Deeds met with the family the morning after Uncle Orv=s death and took over the arrangements for the funeral. The press was calling constantly.

After the funeral was over, several days passed before the will turned up. It was finally found in the hands of the lawyer who wrote it, Charles Funkhouser. Dad was stunned to learn he had been named a co-executor. I think most people thought Mabel Beck would be the executor. The other executor, Harold Steeper, was married to a member of the Reuchlin Wright family. I think Uncle Orv=s choice of executors was a surprise to everyone in the family and elsewhere. Members of the aviation community were concerned about the artifacts and what was to become of the 1903 plane which was in England. It was unexpected that two unknown nephews-in-law were named as co-executors. It caused some ruffled feelings. The executors were in an awkward position.

When the will was finally read, the world heard that the plane would remain in England unless Uncle Orv had notified the Kensington Museum to the contrary. Then there was the question of whether such a letter had been written. So a second search began to see if Uncle Orv had written such a letter.

AD: And Miss Beck wasn't completely cooperative, was she?

MH: No. She didn't on her own volunteer the information that she had the letter.

When my father finally asked her if she knew whether Uncle Orv had written such a letter, she said that he had, and that she had it at the lab. When Dad went to pick it up to deliver it to the court, she requested that my father sign a receipt for it before she would give it to him.

AD: For the first plane, right?

MH: It was for the letter from Uncle Orv to the Kensington Museum, telling them that he intended to bring the 1903 plane back to the United States at an appropriate time. Yes, it was the necessary document to bring the 1903 back to the United States. But in the interim, before the presence of that letter was known, there were many museums that wanted the plane and were sending full photographic records of their museums and other dossiers, trying to convince the heirs to donate the plane to their museum. I remember the University of Chicago Science Museum, the Field Museum in Chicago, sent a huge packet of material. So it was a very turbulent time. None of the people who were dealing with all this were used to national publicity, so it was quite something.

One of the things I came across in my parents' files after their deaths was a letter from Lester Gardner, the head of the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia at the time of Uncle Orv's death. He was one of Uncle Orv's friends who was concerned when two unknown nephews-in-law were named co-executors. He

wrote a letter to my father long afterward saying that all the Uncle Orv=s friends in the aviation community had been dubious about my father when we was named co-executor, and had felt that Dad would not be equal to the task. But they had been pleasantly surprised. If they=d known my father, they wouldn=t have worried. He was a man of action who regarded Uncle Orv=s wishes as sacred. He was a small businessman, but he was a very good businessman, and honest, a no-nonsense person. He was very straight. What he said is what he meant and what he did, and he followed through. So I think, from that perspective, they needn=t have worried. Nobody knew anything about him except that he ran a small business in Dayton--not a great recommendation in their eyes. (Chuckling) You know, he wasn=t a major corporate president or anything.

One of the two co-executors lived in Dayton (my father) and the other, Harold Steeper, in McLouth, Kansas. Because Steeper could not move to Dayton while the estate was being settled, most of the work necessarily fell on my father=s shoulders. Harold Steeper came to Dayton occasionally and did what he could. Fortunately, Dad owned his own business, and was able to get away to attend to the business of the estate.

AD: \_\_\_\_\_.

MH: Yes, that=s right. People didn=t know him, so there were a lot of undercurrents. For example, the probate court judge wanted the lawyer who had written the will

to be the lawyer for the estate, and my father said, "Well, he's not representing me. In my opinion, Bob Landis is the best lawyer in Dayton and he is the man I want to represent me." So the probate judge said, "Well, we'll have two lawyers." My father said, "That's fine with me, as long as the man I have chosen will be able to represent me. This is going to be a difficult case. We've got the first plane coming back to the United States. I want a first class lawyer representing the estate." It turned out that Bob Landis was everything my father thought he would be. Dad worshiped him. I've often wondered how he knew about Bob Landis. He was not a small businessman who was familiar with lawyers, or was often in court. He was enough of a man about town that he knew who was the best lawyer in Dayton, I guess. So it was interesting. He knew who was supposed to be the best guy, and that's who he insisted he would have.

So many decisions needed to be made. At the time of his death, Uncle Orv was working on a new will, but at the time of his death it had not yet been signed. In this new will, he named the museums where he wanted designated items to be placed. This told the executors his intentions. The big question was: how can we carry out Uncle Orv's wishes and spread knowledge of the Wright Brothers at the same time? Dad and Bob Landis came up with a plan. Dad went to the Library of Congress, which was designated in the new will to inherit the letters and documents and said, "We'll give you these archives if you publish

them.≡ Since the Library of Congress wanted all the papers relating to the invention of the plane, they were willing to publish them in order to accession them. If Uncle Orv had signed the new will, the executors would not have had the necessary bargaining power to get such an agreement. The result of these negotiations was Marvin McFarland=s marvelous two-volume annotated The Papers of Orville and Wilbur Wright.

When it came to the 1903 plane, the executors said to the Smithsonian, AOrville designated you as the recipient of the plane in his new will. We will give it to you if you put our label on it.≡ I can remember the family sitting in our living room for many evenings to come up with the language of the label. Drafts circulated to a number of Uncle Orv=s aviation friends, who also contributed to this effort. I still have a copy of the signed agreement with the Smithsonian which specifies that if the Smithsonian changes the label, the heirs have the right to take the plane back. After all that had happened in the controversy with the Smithsonian, Dad was taking no chances.

These efforts to develop a label for the plane mobilized family and friends. Everyone felt Uncle Orv and Uncle Will had been wronged, and worked together to see justice done. This is probably too emotional a statement. But it was touching to see the effort that it took. Even I, at age thirteen, was impressed. Everyone wanted their accomplishments to be clearly stated, a goal also

successfully accomplished by the inscription on the monument at Wright Hill.

Both leave very little to the imagination.

Since these gifts were not specified in the old will, all the heirs had to sign away their rights to their share of the fair market value of all these archives and objects. Can you imagine signing away your rights to the value of the 1903 plane? Yet every single person did sign so that Uncle Orv=s wishes could be honored. Each institution that received historic papers or objects Apurchased≡ them for a sum of \$1.00. My Dad kept these checks, and wrote a check of his own to the estate. So I now possess the \$1.00 check from the Smithsonian for the 1903 plane which was never cashed. One day, they, too will become museum pieces!

My father always felt that Uncle Orv had been shortchanged by the Smithsonian, and he was going to see that injustice rectified. He felt that the more publication that was done, the better it was going to be for the Wright Brothers. Dad remembered that when the subject of the Smithsonian would come up in conversation, Uncle Orv=s face would sink into a pained expression. In his last illness, Dad expressed his wish that Tom Crouch write more about the Smithsonian controversy. Crouch had written an article before then, but Dad hoped for something more. It really was shocking that the Smithsonian perpetuated such falsehoods for so long. In my high school science book in 1950, it was stated that Langley developed the first plane capable of flight!

AD: Yeah, and I don't remember when it was.

MH: I want to tell you about my one Wright related experience I had after twenty-eight years of living in Minneapolis/St. Paul.

AD: Yes, \_\_\_\_\_. (chuckling)

HM: A few of my friends there knew of my relationship to the Wrights, but not many. It wasn't anything I told everybody about because nobody knew much about them and nobody really cared that much. I had felt it was a problem growing up in Dayton to be related to the Wright brothers at a time when I didn't want to be different from everybody else. So I have never talked much about it over the years. My dear friend Martha always said, AYou've never told anybody anything. You've hidden in a box.≅ (chuckling)

As we prepared to move away from the Twin Cities, I thought AWell, is there any aviation museum here?≅ I didn't even know. I made some inquiries, and learned about the Minnesota Air Guard Museum. A friend put me in touch with their curator, who invited me out.

I took along a few photographs and a small piece of fabric from the wing of the first plane. My mother used to tell me how excited people were to hear her talk about her uncles. I thought that only Daytonians would be so impressed. But these people were overwhelmed by the stories I told. After my informal visit, they had a Acelebration,≅ a Sunday open house for the public. I thought perhaps

twenty-five people might show up. But it was sixty or seventy people. They introduced me and asked me to speak of my memories, in front of a microphone, no less. Until that moment, it had not occurred to me that I would be asked to speak. It was a new experience for me.

After my speech, people crowded around to ask questions. As they slowly filtered away, a man of 60 or 65 came forward. He had a framed picture in his hand. He introduced himself to me as Orville Wright Johnson. When he was a kid he had written a letter to Uncle Orv, who had sent him an autographed photograph of the first flight, inscribed, ATo Orville Wright Johnson,≡ and signed AOrville Wright.≡ I said, AYou know, after Uncle Orv died, we had his files of correspondence that the Library of Congress didn=t want stored in our basement. I used to sit down there by the hour and read them. There was a file there labeled >Letters from Children.= I remember your letter!≡ I then went on to tell him, AIf you write to Wright State University, I=m sure they have your letter, because I remember it.≡ Well, he was just overwhelmed. And he said, AYou know, I was disappointed at the time I got it. I wanted a picture of him.≡ I replied, AWell, he never would have sent you a picture of himself. The only thing about himself that he valued was that he and Uncle Will invented the airplane and made the first flight.≡ He then said, AI came to realize that when I was older.≡ I said, AHe wouldn=t have given a hoot about a picture of himself. He wouldn=t have cared

about that.≡ Well, we were both overwhelmed with emotion. I mean, here was somebody who was born and raised in Minneapolis whose parents had named him Orville Wright Johnson. (laughter) I was just dumbfounded to meet somebody that had had that contact with him so long ago.

I also met another fellow, a commercial airline pilot. He handed me his card and it said, AWright Archives≡ He=s a collector of Wright stuff! (chuckling) He had the Wright family genealogy under his arm, and had look me up in it! That there was somebody in the Twin Cities who collected Wright related material amazed me. (chuckling)

My mother used to come home after events like this one and talk about the people she met. I never appreciated how moving the experience could be. When your not present at the event, its difficult to catch the atmosphere, I guess. I had an interesting time recently visiting the Royal Aeronautical Society in London where the papers of Griffith Brewer and Alex Ogilvie have been deposited. Both were great friends of the Wrights, so there were some wonderful letters, mostly from Uncle Orv. The prize letter was from Uncle Orv to Alex Ogilvie. It was a perfect example of Uncle Orv=s sense of humor. The topic was not related to aviation matters, but an amusing story about his nephew, my Uncle Bus, who was then a mere child. The point is there is still a lot to learn about the Wright Brothers. New material is turning up all the time. It=s exciting to discover it as one goes through life.

AD: That sounds good.