

Wilkinson Wright

Ms. Deines: This is Ann Deines, and I am with Wilkinson Wright. It is September 5, 1996, we're in Miamisburg, Ohio, and this is our second interview session. I'm just going to follow up with some questions that I have about the Wright family and then also about what's going on now, just to talk about what's in progress with the national park and everything. And I figure we'll start with the past and work up to the present.

Mr. Wright: All right.

Ms. Deines: The first one is: When the family members would gather at Hawthorn Hill for the holidays, which holidays would you go to Hawthorn Hill? Because I know people would gather there at Christmas, were there any others?

Mr. Wright: Yes, Christmas Eve and Thanksgiving were the two that were regularly celebrated there.

Ms. Deines: Now, was it always Christmas Eve, or was it Christmas Day sometimes?

Mr. Wright: It was Christmas Eve. We had the whole family, everyone who was in town, went there: all of Lorin's children and grandchildren that is. Of course, his second daughter, Leontine, lived in Chicago and she wasn't here very often, but normally all

Wilkinson Wright

the family that was in town was there, and always on Christmas Eve.

Then Christmas Day Orville always came to our house for dinner at noon and Lorin went to Ivonette's for Christmas Day, so we divided up the older generation, if you will. Horace Wright and his wife Susan usually went to the Blair family—that was her family.

Ms. Deines: And what did the Christmas Eve celebration consist of? It was dinner, and then were gifts exchanged then too?

Mr. Wright: Christmas Eve? Yes. Well, Orville always gave money to the adults. There would be a folder at everybody's place with their name on it, and he would give money to the adults—well, to the kids too. But then sometimes, not always but sometimes, if he saw something that particularly struck his fancy . . . He'd also have presents for the kids, and I can't remember much about what they were. One that sticks in my mind, one year he gave my brother and me and my cousin Jack Miller boxing gloves, and then had a marvelous time while we were all (chuckling) flailing away at each other with the boxing gloves.

Ms. Deines: And then would gifts also be exchanged on Christmas Day?

Wilkinson Wright

Mr. Wright: No, not with Orville, no. The exchange was only with Orville and the family. Each one had their Christmas at home then, on Christmas morning usually, each separate family.

Ms. Deines: Okay, so then when Orville would go to your house, that was post-gift time, was it?

Mr. Wright: Yes.

Ms. Deines: Everyone always refers to these events but they don't really say who was where and what was going on. It's hard to figure out.

Mr. Wright: Yes. That's one of our favorite stories, when Orville came to dinner on Christmas Day . . . My mother made plum puddings, and she had a recipe that her grandmother had brought from England. She made plum puddings and we always served that to Orville, and she made a warm sauce that went on it that had brandy in it, I believe. And then when Orville went home, she always gave him one of the plum puddings to take home with him. He'd get home and Carrie would serve him the plum pudding for dessert, and he would complain that it didn't taste like Ann's did. He said, "The sauce you're putting on it isn't as good." (chuckling) He was really harassing Carrie, Carrie was very loyal to the other members of the family and didn't want to betray us, but finally in

Wilkinson Wright

desperation she told Orville, "I don't have all the ingredients."
"Well, why don't you have all the ingredients? Get the ingredients." And Carrie said, "Well, I believe they may put a little alcohol in it." And Orville said, "I don't believe it," and walked out of the room. (chuckling) But he continued to come on Christmas Day and to scrape up every drop of the plum pudding and the sauce that went with it. (laughter)

Ms. Deines: Well, that leads me into . . . I was wondering, was Carrie working with Orville full-time? Because I've seen some things where she'd take some time off to do family things, and then there were other employees up at the house, too. So I was trying to figure out . . .

Mr. Wright: Well, Carrie and Charlie lived there, in all the years that I remember. They lived in that section of the house. They had two rooms and a bath upstairs and they had that sitting room downstairs.

Ms. Deines: What years would that have been?

Mr. Wright: Well, all the time I can remember, from 1922 or whatever on. Now, they had bought a house out in the Watervliet

Wilkinson Wright

section of Dayton. Carrie did have a house, and I think they had that rented for a number of years.

Ms. Deines: Okay, because that's what was confusing me. I've heard the stories of them buying the house and her commuting.

Mr. Wright: Yeah, there was a time, I think, when she did, she may have had nieces living there with her at one time. If you want to pursue that, there's one of Carrie's nieces . . . I think maybe one or two of her nieces are alive, but they are very old. There is a grand-niece, Pat Clendenin, and she did work for the chamber of commerce. I don't know whether she still does or not, for the Dayton Chamber of Commerce. You might see if you could get an interview with her and see what she could tell you.

Ms. Deines: How do you spell her last name, do you know? That one sounds real hard to guess.

Mr. Wright: Well, I'm not sure that I know the exact number of Ns and so on.

Ms. Deines: Well, if we can get it close.

Mr. Wright: C-L-E-N-D-E-N-N . . . I-N, E-N? I'm not sure.

Wilkinson Wright

Ms. Deines: Oh, I can figure it out.

Mr. Wright: Well, wait a minute, let me see if I happen to have .
. . (sound of paper or cards being shuffled) No, I don't see it.

Ms. Deines: I can try and track her down.

Mr. Wright: Oh!

Ms. Deines: Is it there?

Mr. Wright: I've got C-L-E-N-D-E-N-I-N, and her home number,
according to this, is 879-4875.

Ms. Deines: Great! Thank you.

Mr. Wright: And she's a grand-niece of Carrie.

Ms. Deines: Okay. Because Carrie didn't have any children, did
she?

Mr. Wright: No. She and Charlie were married, for. . . I forget
how long.

Wilkinson Wright

Ms. Deines: It was a long time.

Mr. Wright: Yeah, I think it was 1910, 1912, along in there. I have an old cherry and maple rope bed, which I have now given to my daughter, that Carrie left to me. She said they bought it secondhand on a street market downtown in Dayton, and I think she said in 1912.

Ms. Deines: Oh, that's neat!

Mr. Wright: Yeah. She went to work for my grandmother when my Aunt Leontine was born, and worked for her for, I think, two years, and then went over to work for the Bishop, and worked there till Orville died in 1948.

Ms. Deines: Okay, and do you remember other employees that they had up at Hawthorn Hill? Because it sounded like, from at least the Bishop's diaries, they were coming in and out.

Mr. Wright: Well, Lottie—Charlotte Jones—and she was always just called Lottie. She was the laundress and she came, I think, a couple of days a week. You know, Orville had all these stiff collars and cuffs and so on, and she came there to the house and

Wilkinson Wright

did the washing. Then when the bishop died, he left the Hawthorne Street house to Katharine, and later, and I can't tell you the date, Katharine sold that house to Lottie.

Ms. Deines: I've just finished reading most of Katharine's letters.

Mr. Wright: Oh, did you really?

Ms. Deines: And there's some of those dates in there that she talks about selling the house.

Mr. Wright: Isn't she a marvelous writer? My, she really had a gift, didn't she?

Ms. Deines: Yeah.

Mr. Wright: Somebody ought to do something with those letters. They're great. Which ones? Did you get the ones from Kat to Harry Haskell, or the ones from Becky Rehling?

Ms. Deines: Well, I don't know who they would have . . . because someone, I think it was the Haskells, gave them to the University

Wilkinson Wright

of Missouri at Kansas City. They're on microfilm. That's what I looked at.

Mr. Wright: Well, now they've got a lot more of them out there now that Becky Rehling . . . or copies that Becky Rehling gave them.

Ms. Deines: Are they at the same university?

Mr. Wright: No, I'm talking about Wright State. Excuse me, the archives at Wright State have some others. Becky Rehling's mother was Agnes Osborn, who was Katharine's best friend.

Ms. Deines: Oh, okay. I'm going to have to check into that. Did she just give them to them?

Mr. Wright: No, it's been a year or two, I think.

Ms. Deines: Because they've never told me about them.

Mr. Wright: She made some sort of a deal where they were supposed to xerox them, and I don't know whether they got the originals or they are eventually to get the originals. She's been sending some xeroxes to me. Unfortunately, some of them are poorly done.

Wilkinson Wright

Somebody wasn't paying attention and was just letting . . . and you get some that are all black at the edges and so on, so you can't read it always.

Ms. Deines: I'm going to have to ask them about that, because they usually tell me what they have and no one has ever mentioned those to me.

Mr. Wright: Well, we also understand that somewhere in England there are some letters from Katharine to Griffith Brewer—some very, very emotional—I had heard that they were at the RAF Museum, which was closed when we were in England.

Ms. Deines: It was moving or something?

Mr. Wright: Yeah, they are redoing it or something, reorganizing, redoing their collections, yeah. But there were some very troubled letters after Orville and Katharine were alienated by her marriage—or Orville was alienated by it, rather.

Ms. Deines: So they were written after her marriage?

Mr. Wright: Yes.

Wilkinson Wright

Ms. Deines: Because I've never seen letters from her.

Mr. Wright: Brewer, whom she regarded as a good friend, she was writing to him telling him her problems. Unfortunately, I think the letters somehow came into the hands of Charles Gibb Smith, and he was such a gentle soul that he didn't think these letters should ever be published, or even revealed, and he may have left them with some sort of strictures on them because of that. I understand his feelings, but it seems to me that after all of the people are dead, what difference does it make?

Ms. Deines: Yes, and it sort of changes history if you have something that you can't use.

Mr. Wright: Sure.

Ms. Deines: Was there anyone else besides Lottie that you remember working at Hawthorn Hill?

Mr. Wright: There was, yes, a very fine black man named William Lewis, and I think he started working for Orville pretty young. I remember Bob Hadeler telling me that before he went up to Georgian Bay with Orville for the first time, and I think that was about in 1928 or around in there. Have you interviewed Bob Hadeler?

Wilkinson Wright

Ms. Deines: Not yet.

Mr. Wright: Well, before he went, they would take . . . I guess for some summers he took William Lewis with him. He always took some younger person with him because there was some fairly heavy work to do there and he couldn't do it, and so he would always take someone. But then William Lewis got married and didn't want to go there anymore. Then he got, I assume that it was through Orville's influence, he got a job somewhere at Wright-Pat[erson], and he eventually became a sort of a general supervisor, I believe, of the custodial corps there. Now, in the years that I remember as a kid, he didn't work for Orville on a regular basis. Orville was constantly after him, trying to get him to do things, but he would often be there to help serve Thanksgiving dinner and Christmas dinner and so on. He would come in on occasions like that. Orville also would try to get him to come and cut the grass or rake the leaves and so on, and as William got older and had a family and so on, he didn't have the time to do that.

Ms. Deines: So Orville must have had someone else doing those things.

Wilkinson Wright

Mr. Wright: Yeah. Well, he also had another black man named William Lewis, who would—

Ms. Deines: Two people with the same name?

Mr. Wright: Yeah, who would do work there occasionally. Now, he was a very eccentric, unusual kind of guy, and he would be there . . . You never knew whether he was going to show up or not when you wanted him. He was very eccentric. He had one bad eye, I can recall. He was a good worker when he worked, but you could never quite be sure whether he was going to show up when you wanted him or not.

Ms. Deines: Okay. Now, did Carrie have help in the kitchen?

Mr. Wright: No.

Ms. Deines: And what about housekeeping? Stretch your memory here.

Mr. Wright: I think occasionally they had outside help to do things like wash the woodwork, you know.

Ms. Deines: The big spring cleaning projects?

Wilkinson Wright

Mr. Wright: Yeah. Well, if you remember the woodwork in the main hall there, all that heavy stuff up around the ceiling with all those dentils? So help me, they would get someone that would scrub all that. (chuckling) But when NCR took over the house in 1948, the white enamel on that woodwork was the same white enamel that had been put on when the house was built. (chuckling)

Ms. Deines: When it was built?

Mr. Wright: Yeah, if you can imagine that. And it had been scrubbed, and it was as white and beautiful as you . . .

Ms. Deines: And still working. It was pretty good paint then. Was Thanksgiving dinner similar to Christmas dinner, minus the presents, I guess?

Mr. Wright: Yeah. There was always turkey, turkey and dressing. Carrie canned her own white corn, and then she made a perfectly marvelous corn pudding that was sort of a custard, and it was absolutely delicious. And with Orville, of course, always mashed potatoes. Orville loved mashed potatoes. And gravy and stuffing.

She was also famous for a molded salad that she made. It was in a ring, and there would be half a pear with a ball of pimento cheese in the middle of it, and then criss-crossed stripes of red and

Wilkinson Wright

green peppers. But the astonishing part of it was that the gelatin was made out of pineapple juice. We had the recipe, and we tried time and again to make it like she did; we never could. She said she strained the pineapple juice through cheesecloth. When she brought this molded ring to the table, the gelatin was absolutely water-clear, just perfectly . . . Well, we have strained through cheesecloth till we were blue in the face, (chuckling) and we could never get pineapple juice to come out that clear. I don't know how in the world she did it, but she just said you use lots of cheesecloth and you keep on straining it till it comes clear. Maybe we just couldn't afford that much cheesecloth, I don't know.
(chuckling)

Ms. Deines: Or you didn't last long enough. You got tired.

Mr. Wright: No.

Ms. Deines: This is something that Bill brought up. He's looking for anything that the Wrights might have done at their shops or anything for Christmas. Did they ever do anything outside of the house, I mean like at Orville's laboratory or anything, to celebrate Christmas? Put a wreath up or anything?

Mr. Wright: I don't remember it if they did. I sort of doubt it. That laboratory was always sort of an austere and dreary kind of a

Wilkinson Wright

place, maybe partly because of Mabel Beck's personality, but it was just not . . . (chuckling) I don't remember anything like that, no.

Ms. Deines: We'll find something somehow. From what I've read, Milton gave Katharine the house on Hawthorne Street sort of unofficially before he died. Have you ever heard anything of that? Because she referred to it in her letters that the Haskells gave to . . . would it be the University of Missouri?

Mr. Wright: Yes, I think it was the University of Missouri at Kansas City, in Kansas City.

Ms. Deines: Because a couple of the letters she talked about that she got the house earlier, and I hadn't seen that before.

Mr. Wright: Gee, I wouldn't think that she would have, unless he . . . Oh, unless he would have transferred it to her when they moved to Hawthorn Hill, but I don't know any reason why he would.

Ms. Deines: Yes, because the deed didn't reflect sort of what she was talking about, so . . .

Mr. Wright: It did not? I was going to say—

Wilkinson Wright

Ms. Deines: I mean, Katharine writes of many things, but sometimes she writes just a little bit and you want to say, "Katharine, write more details!" (chuckling) And she doesn't, so you don't really know what's going on, you just have some little hint of something happening.

Mr. Wright: Yeah. Well, she writes a lot like conversation. Often, you know, there are things that are just understood between the writer and . . .

Ms. Deines: Well, she didn't expect us all to be reading them many years later.

Mr. Wright: No, I guess not.

Ms. Deines: Now, do you know when they moved to Hawthorn Hill, if Lottie leased the house immediately, or do you know who was in 7 Hawthorne afterwards? Because I had always thought it was Lottie, and I went through the city directories and her address is somewhere else.

Mr. Wright: Yes, I would think that would be maybe too early. When they moved out, I think that neighborhood was still . . .

Wilkinson Wright

probably the majority of it was still a white, working-class neighborhood, and Lottie was black, and . . . I don't know. I don't know.

Ms. Deines: Okay. Some of these are just ones that I don't know if anyone knows. I haven't been able to find the information.

Mr. Wright: I'll try to remember to look at the diaries and see if there's any clue there.

Ms. Deines: Oh, I did finally talk to . . . I think her name is Nancy out at Wright State, the one that's _____.

Mr. Wright: Nancy, sure, yeah.

Ms. Deines: She was able to find the citation for me about the house on Second Street. She did find it.

Mr. Wright: She did find it?

Ms. Deines: Mm-hmm, it was . . . I think it was 1914, and he made a whole list of "My life and twenty things." That was one of them.

Mr. Wright: He stuck those things in at odd places; you never know right quite where you are going to find them.

Wilkinson Wright

Ms. Deines: Yeah. So that worked out good; she was able to find it.

Mr. Wright: You haven't found when the deed passed to Lottie, or you have found it?

Ms. Deines: It was sold somewhere between '22 and '25, somewhere right in there.

Mr. Wright: I think that sounds more probable to me.

Ms. Deines: I don't remember what the city directories had, but she didn't move in there much more before Katharine sold her the house, according to the city directories.

Mr. Wright: But who appeared in there after they moved out in 19 . . . ?

Ms. Deines: The city directories, they don't start . . . One of the neat things about the city directories is you could look up the address and figure out who was in it, but the Dayton city directories don't start doing that till 1922.

Mr. Wright: Oh, they don't?

Wilkinson Wright

Ms. Deines: So you have to have an idea of who was in the house to be able to find the address, so that sort of doesn't work in this case. It's a little frustrating.

Mr. Wright: Yeah, you might look at some of those familiar names, like Feight and Ed Sines and some of those, and see if any of those people or any of their relatives moved in.

Ms. Deines: Yeah. It basically comes down to reading a large phone book, which is not fun.

Mr. Wright: Oh, yeah.

Ms. Deines: I was reading something the other day about Fred . . . is it Kreuzsch, K-R-E-U-S-C-H, who worked for the Wrights starting in 1908, building the military airplanes. Have you heard of him?

Mr. Wright: Fred what?

Ms. Deines: K-R-E-U-S-C-H. He said he worked for them from 1908 to 1912.

Wilkinson Wright

Mr. Wright: I don't believe I know anything about him.

Ms. Deines: It doesn't ring a bell? Well, that's okay. What I was wondering is: He was hired to help build the military planes, and what I can't figure out is when they would have hired people, if it would have been before or after the demonstration flights, because that was a very busy year. I was wondering if you had any idea or knew of other people who they hired?

Mr. Wright: Well, the Wright Company started manufacturing late in 1909 at a rented plant. I think it was the old . . . was it Speedwell?

Ms. Deines: Speedwell?

Mr. Wright: Speedwell. Yes, Speedwell.

Ms. Deines: And this was pre-Wright Company because this man said he worked for the Wrights and then transferred over to the Wright Company. And I wish I had a lot of time, because he said he started working for them because he found an ad for a machinist in the newspaper, which would be a neat thing to find.

Wilkinson Wright

Mr. Wright: No, I don't see anything there. (Looking at *The Bishop's Boys*.)

Ms. Deines: Yeah, I had never seen his name anywhere, but they had a transcript for an interview with him at the University of Dayton. That's how I found out about him.

Mr. Wright: Oh, do they? Who did the transcript, do you know?

Ms. Deines: They only have initials for the people who are talking, so you know who the person is they're talking to but you don't know who did the interview. But they were done in the late '60s, early '70s.

Mr. Wright: Well, between 1905 and 1908 they built at least seven airplanes. Now those were the Model As, so-called, and that was before the Wright Company was incorporated, I think, and one of those would have been the military airplane, and, you know, it was different dimensions than the others. Well, then, of course, that one got wrecked and they had to build another one for the trials in 1909.

Ms. Deines: This man said he started working for them because they were manufacturing the planes for the military. It was an odd

Wilkinson Wright

time for me. I was trying to figure things out and I couldn't really fit him in the picture very well.

Mr. Wright: Well, of course, not all those people are telling the truth either, but there are people around still who can remember those days.

Ms. Deines: Yeah, I'm still looking. I had the summer people and then the intern I have now from the University of Dayton going through the financial ledgers, because I got the microfilm of what's at the Library of Congress, and we're trying to transcribe it so we can actually read it and use it.

Mr. Wright: Oh, really?

Ms. Deines: But we're only at 1898. But I'm hoping if we can get up further we can pick up these employees, because they have the paychecks in there sometimes.

Mr. Wright: Did you start at the beginning?

Ms. Deines: Mm-hmm.

Wilkinson Wright

Mr. Wright: You would have probably been better off to start at the end and work backwards.

Ms. Deines: Going backwards, yeah. We might try that. But I started at the beginning because they had the Hoover Block records, and I was trying to figure out how often Dunbar had been in there as a client and what they were doing at the Hoover Block.

Mr. Wright: Yeah, that's a real chore. The Wright Company . . .

Ms. Deines: You should have that all memorized by now.
(chuckling)

Mr. Wright: Yeah. Well, when was the Wright Company established?

Ms. Deines: It was 1909, but I don't remember what month. Or was it 1910?

Mr. Wright: I think it was toward the end of 1909.

Ms. Deines: It would have to be the end of 1909 or the beginning of '10, because I know the factory buildings opened in November of 1910.

Wilkinson Wright

Mr. Wright: Incorporation. Incorporation, there we go.
(reading) "The negotiation with New York financiers initiated by Clinton R. Peterkin, formerly with J.P. Morgan and Company, led to formation of the Wright Company on November 22nd."

Ms. Deines: Nineteen nine?

Mr. Wright: That's 1909, yeah.

Ms. Deines: Well, I'll keep trying to find out about this man and see what I can figure out.

Mr. Wright: Well, okay, (reading) "November 22nd, Wright Company incorporated with a capital stock of \$1,000,000, with Wilbur Wright as president and Andrew Freedman and Orville as vice presidents, Alpheus F. Barnes as secretary and treasurer." Well, my memory was late. So before that company was founded, they had built at least seven other airplanes besides the 1903, '04, and '05 airplanes—well, seven, maybe eight, because they had to replace the military flyer that Orville wrecked in 1908.

Ms. Deines: Because he said he was hired and he joined Charlie Taylor and someone named Bob Elliot. Those were the three—

Wilkinson Wright

Mr. Wright: Bob who?

Ms. Deines: Elliot. And those were the three that were working. And then I think someone else joined them. He talks about working with Wilbur in the shop, and Wilbur wasn't around that much that year.

Mr. Wright: Well, like I say . . . And then Charlie Furnas came in there somewhere, too.

Ms. Deines: Well, that's what I end up with: these guys working and Charlie Furnas dropped out of the picture all of a sudden. I'm having problems tracking employees and figuring out what was going on.

Mr. Wright: I wish we could get those Gertler Records that he's trying to sell.

Ms. Deines: Have you heard anything about those?

Mr. Wright: No. Have you talked to Dawne? He came to Dayton—Dawne Dewey—and she saw them, or saw some of them.

Ms. Deines: Did she? Some of them?

Wilkinson Wright

Mr. Wright: Yeah, and feels that they are authentic.

Ms. Deines: Yeah, I haven't talked to her in a while.

Mr. Wright: But I can't imagine their having that kind of value, because company records of that kind, ledgers and so on . . . The ledgers would certainly be very useful, but the letters and so on would not be signature copies; they'd be carbons or whatever, you know.

Ms. Deines: Well, they'd be valuable for early aviation business.

Mr. Wright: They are valuable to historians, but . . .

Ms. Deines: You could get one book out of them, but what do you do then?

Mr. Wright: Yeah, not to autograph collectors or whatever. I wouldn't think so.

Ms. Deines: Well, he'll surface somewhere maybe. I was wondering, a lot of Orville's later years were spent going to ceremonies and that type of stuff. How did he feel about those? Did he ever comment?

Wilkinson Wright

Mr. Wright: Well, generally speaking, he avoided them. (chuckling) He did not like ceremonies, and usually when he went it was only because some friend or someone that he knew and liked would be involved. He received a number of honorary degrees. You've probably read about the famous incident when he went to Washington with the understanding that Roosevelt was going to be there, and he wasn't, and they tried to put him on the spot and make him speak. He was absolutely furious about that. He did not like ceremonies, and he got acutely uncomfortable when he was at most of those things, when there was a lot of fuss, and he would sort of clam up and he would say only what good manners required him to say, but that was as far as he would go. Now, one exception I can remember to that was when they dedicated the house and the bicycle shop at Greenfield Village, and Henry Ford had invited, oh, I don't know how many people there were.

Ms. Deines: A lot of people.

Mr. Wright: But a lot of them were people that he had taught to fly or people that had learned to fly at the Wright School, and the Kitty Hawk people were there, Bill Tate and Etheridge and Daniels were there, people like that that he had known for many, many years and really liked, and in that kind of environment . . . When they

Wilkinson Wright

had the ceremonies they were outside, as I remember, and people were just sort of standing around in a group. They had a pavilion there and they had a full orchestra and chorus, and W. J. Cameron gave the address, but everyone was just sort of standing around and they were chatting and it was . . .

Ms. Deines: Less formal.

Mr. Wright: Yeah, and he thoroughly enjoyed himself at something like that with a lot of people that he knew well and liked. I was looking at some of that stuff today because I'm going to go down to Seymour Johnson Field next week for something at the . . . Well, the Commission is having a meeting there, and the Seymour Johnson Field is changing Wright Avenue to Wright Brothers Avenue, which . . . (chuckling) But in any case, I was looking up—

Ms. Deines: So they're having a big ceremony.

Mr. Wright: But I remember that at Greenfield Village General Foulois was there . . . Well, he was the one that . . . had three flying lessons from Wilbur Wright, and then he got orders saying: "Take your airplane and go to Texas." (chuckling) So he learned to fly by trial and error and by corresponding with Orville, and he used to brag about that, you know, that he learned to fly by a

Wilkinson Wright

correspondence course. But Orville still called him "Benny." This was a general in the United States Army. Orville called him Benny, and Benny didn't seem to mind that at all. (chuckling) So that's someone he had known for many, many years, you know.

Ms. Deines: Did he feel a sense of obligation to go to some that he didn't want to that he would go to, or was it mostly he had to have an interest in it, or the friend connection, to appear?

Mr. Wright: Oh, I'm not sure that I really know. If it was things that he supported or believed in . . . For instance, whenever he could he went to the NACA meetings and things like that; and probably some like the Aero Club of America and some of those organizations that he'd been associated with for many years, I'm sure that he probably did feel some sense of obligation. I need to find out more about some of the names that I put on that list, people like Earl Findley and Lester Gardner, because they were good friends. One of them at least published a journal.

[telephone rings - tape turned off]

Ms. Deines: The one day that Orville it seems couldn't avoid any ceremonies was the anniversary of the first flight. Did the family ever get involved in any of that, or do you remember specific events happening?

Wilkinson Wright

Mr. Wright: Of course, a lot of that time I don't know. I was either a kid in school or I was away at school, you see, and I don't really remember. It seems to me on at least one occasion I remember some sort of event in the NCR auditorium.

Ms. Deines: It seemed like NCR sponsored a lot of them, which would have drawn Orville out, but I wasn't sure if the rest of the family was involved or it was just a day he felt like he had to go do something that was required.

Mr. Wright: I remember the one occasion there when they had . . . and I don't know if this was December 17th or not, but on the stage was Colonel Deeds, Kettering, Henry Ford, and Orville. Now how's that for a lineup of people on one stage? (chuckling)

Ms. Deines: Yeah, that's quite a bit. Let's see what's next here. Orville's sciatica that you hear about, how much did that bother him? How much did it stop him from doing things? Because it's brought up occasionally. I wasn't sure how . . .

Mr. Wright: Well, I don't remember the times when it was especially bad, but that was, I think, in the teens, and you'll find occasional passages in the Bishop's diaries where he was literally bedridden and they had a special nurse come up from

Wilkinson Wright

Cincinnati. But then, I think it was in the early '20s he went to Mayo Clinic, and a young doctor there designed a brace for him, sort of a brace or a belt. Typical Orville, he came home and looked at that brace or belt and decided, "Well, I can make one better than that." So he bought leather and canvas and a riveting machine, and he made his own belts thereafter. But I think he wore those all the time, and he would still have problems. There were certain things he avoided. He didn't want to ride in anybody else's automobile because he was sensitive to vibration. When he traveled on the train, I can never remember whether he had to sleep long-ways or sideways, but he had to be oriented in the right direction or he had problems.

Ms. Deines: It was one or the other.

Mr. Wright: Yeah, it was one or the other, because he could stand the vibration the one way but not the other. And he had occasional spells with it, but nothing as severe as to . . .

Ms. Deines: As the earlier ones?

Mr. Wright: No.

Wilkinson Wright

Ms. Deines: Because you hear about the very severe ones, but I didn't know how often they occurred or if it was something he was always battling.

Mr. Wright: Well, he was something of a stoic, I think. If he was having problems of that kind, you wouldn't likely hear about it till my mother or my aunt or someone . . . they would talk to Carrie fairly often on the telephone and we'd get news that way.
(chuckling)

[End Side A]

Ms. Deines: How often did the families see each other, besides the holidays? I know Sundays were visiting days, at least for a while. I think a lot of the kids came over.

Mr. Wright: Well, we had a lot of family get-togethers on birthdays, for instance, so through the year there would be a fair number. Well, when we sat down at table there, there were, what, twelve or fourteen of us, so through the year usually there'd be birthday parties. Or you'd have my family, or Ivonette, or Bus and Sue would have a Labor Day picnic and a Fourth of July picnic and occasions of that kind.

Wilkinson Wright

Ms. Deines: Because it seems like, at least in the early years, Lorin's children came over a lot, and then as they had their own families, you all would be over at Hawthorn Hill visiting or doing something.

Mr. Wright: Yeah, they stayed very close. Orville and Lorin, I think, saw each other almost every day. That was when gentlemen would still go home to lunch at noon, and my grandfather would come home from the toy factory and have lunch, and sometimes after lunch Orville would drop in there. Sometimes my grandfather, on the way back to the factory, would stop down at the laboratory. Then Orville was quite often a visitor out at the factory. I worked there a couple of summers—I must have been in junior high school—and he would stop in there quite often, and was always interested in what was going on there.

Ms. Deines: Where was the factory?

Mr. Wright: It was on the corner of Fourth and Front Street, which is out . . . Front Street runs off of East Third Street about, oh, I don't know, five or six blocks maybe beyond the railroad overpass there. The last time I looked, that building was still there, although the end of Front Street had been cut off by some of the modern highway or railroad stuff, I don't know what.

Wilkinson Wright

Ms. Deines: That was the factory when they were making the airplanes?

Mr. Wright: Mm-hmm, airplanes and Flips and Flops and . . .

Ms. Deines: Did they make those at the same time?

Mr. Wright: The years I remember, they were making mostly just the airplanes. The strange thing was that they did extremely well during the Depression, and their biggest customer, I think, was Kellogg, and they would buy literally millions of those balsa wood airplanes, usually the smaller ones. You know, send in four box tops and we'll send you an airplane, that sort of thing. The Flips and Flops was earlier. I've got a Flips and Flops back there, but it's a later version and it wasn't made during the years my grandfather had the package. I'll show it to you.

Ms. Deines: I'd like to see it because I have a hard time imagining what it was.

Mr. Wright: Well, the reason I can remember Flips and Flops, when I was a kid—this was before I was nine years old because we moved to another house when I was nine—they used to bring these huge

Wilkinson Wright

boxes of these little wood turnings that had been enameled. They were white enamel, and it was a turning and it was a little sort of a clown figure, a very simple turning. It had a pointed head, like a hat as I remember, and those had been dipped so they were either red or blue paint. And my mother would sit there at the table with a pen and India ink and she would draw little faces on those clowns—you know, choo, choo, choo, very fast—with about . . . it must have been about four marks or five in a slash. She drew faces on thousands of those little clowns. I can remember her doing that.

Ms. Deines: Your father worked at the _____?

Mr. Wright: No, he . . .

Ms. Deines: How did your mother end up doing the faces? Who knows?

Mr. Wright: Just because they were . . . I don't know. My father was . . . I forget how that worked. Oh, the guy that my grandfather went into business with originally—I think Harold Miller connected them up—and I believe Harold Miller had a third and Lorin had a third and this other guy, whoever he was, had a third. And Lorin did not get along with the other guy, which is

Wilkinson Wright

sort of surprising because he was, I would think, one of the easiest persons in the world to get along with. So he finally bought him out then and gave a sixth to my father and to Horace. So my father was a part-owner, if you will, but he didn't work there.

Ms. Deines: Okay, because Horace worked there.

Mr. Wright: Yes, he was the factory manager.

Ms. Deines: How many employees did they have? Was it a large factory, do you remember?

Mr. Wright: Oh, well, it was a very up-and-down thing. It was a fair-sized building, but it was just a one-story building. When they were going full-blast, I don't know, there may have been thirty or forty people, something like that.

Ms. Deines: How long did the company stay in business?

Mr. Wright: Well, they sold it, I think, in about 1940, and it was doing little or no business at the time. And they sold it to the Riegers, I think their name was, who continued the business for a while, and I think they revived it some. A guy named, I think,

Wilkinson Wright

Lowell Rieger was involved. There's probably some of that in Ivonette's book, in *Wright Reminiscences*.

Ms. Deines: There was a little, but there wasn't . . . I had a few questions after I read it.

Mr. Wright: Well, what happened finally, they were just essentially doing nothing, and my grandfather was going down and withdrawing his savings and paying himself and Bus's salary every week, when finally someone said, "That doesn't make any sense at all." (chuckling)

Ms. Deines: The other—I've read about it in Crouch's book but I haven't really seen it anywhere else—was the reconciliation of Katharine and Orville on her deathbed, that Orville went to visit and talk to her before she died.

Mr. Wright: I don't know whether he talked to her or not, and I don't know whether it was a reconciliation or not.

Ms. Deines: I wasn't sure what the family story was.

Mr. Wright: Well, he did not go willingly. Lorin made him go and went with him, but I don't know what condition Katharine was in

Wilkinson Wright

when they got there. She was literally on her deathbed. But Orville only went because Lorin insisted that he go.

Ms. Deines: Dragged him along?

Mr. Wright: Mm-hmm.

Ms. Deines: Do you have a few more minutes, or is this . . . We've been going for a while.

Mr. Wright: Sure, sure. No problem.

Ms. Deines: I have one more historic question, then I wanted to do the present just a little bit to get it on the record. Was Orville actively involved in any way with what was going on with the military and the McCook and Wilbur Wright and Wright Fields? Because I've seen little bits of him doing some consulting or going out there for formal official things, but haven't . . .

Mr. Wright: Well, he visited there quite often, and I don't know whether he was doing it as an official thing. I think, first of all, that whoever was in command there almost always called upon Orville and invited him out and showed him what they were doing in the experimental line, and he was always very interested, of

Wilkinson Wright

course. It may have been some official connection with his work with the NACA, but he was always interested; and whenever they brought in a new plane or a new device that they were working on, they had him out there. You've seen the pictures of him visiting with . . . oh, Sikorsky was there and people like that. And when they brought the first . . . wasn't it General Craigie, I think, was the first American to fly a jet maybe. General Craigie was here for a while, and you see pictures of Orville and General Craigie. I remember one Sunday he took . . . Well, was it Sunday? I don't know what it was. He took my brother and me out there . . . You wouldn't remember the *Explorer* balloons. This was in the 1930s, I think, and it was sponsored by the *National Geographic*. There were these balloons, helium balloons, which went to extremely high altitudes. And Major Kepner and Captain Stevens and . . . oh, who was the third one? Well, anyhow, they did these. They were, I think, looking toward the day when they hoped to fly higher. This was the first time that anyone really got into the stratosphere. These balloons went as high, I believe, as 70,000 to 80,000 feet. They were a round, ball-shaped gondola. I can remember going out there one . . . I think it was a Sunday, and we met Stevens and Kepner. This gondola was sitting there and they were working on it, and Orville was intensely interested in what they were doing and the tests they were going to run.

Wilkinson Wright

Ms. Deines: So it might have just been a relationship of interest, right?

Mr. Wright: Yes. Well, and people, of course, were . . . If he was interested, people were delighted to have him. Now, one of those ended in a disaster. The balloon ripped at a very high altitude and the gondola started to fall, and it was falling so fast that they had trouble getting out because the air was rushing by so fast. If you look in some old *Geographics*, you could find those. And I think there are some . . . one of the gondolas, or pieces of one of the gondolas, I think is out at the Air Force Museum. Yeah, they're right there along in that section there where the space stuff is, you know?

Ms. Deines: I haven't been out there in a while, except for the movies or something, but not to look at the exhibits. I need to do that sometime. I wanted to talk a little bit about Aviation Trail and the 2003 Committee. When did you become involved with all that? I guess it would have been Aviation Trail first?

Mr. Wright: Gee, I'm not sure I can remember. Yes, I guess I've been with Aviation Trail as an advisor. I did not want to go on their board because their board is really a working board and I didn't have the time to do that. When I joined the 2003 group, I

Wilkinson Wright

think it was late '89 or early in '90, around in there. All of this was since I retired, which was January 1, 1985, that I've gotten into all this stuff.

Ms. Deines: Was Ivonette involved in any of these before she moved? Or have you been mostly the family representative?

Mr. Wright: No, she did not attend meetings or that sort of thing. Of course, they always let her know what they were doing, and they invited her to many occasions and she was sort of a sponsor, yeah.

Ms. Deines: So, in at least the initial work of Aviation Trail, there wasn't a whole lot of family involvement? They just let you know what was going on?

Mr. Wright: No, I think that Aviation Trail really got started . . . I think that Jerry Sharkey, I understand, was the guy that really got that . . . Well, Jerry Sharkey and . . . shoot, the doctor who died.

Ms. Deines: Meyer.

Mr. Wright: Yeah, Meyer. Well, I think the original spark came from Marlin Todd, because Marlin Todd is the one that identified

Wilkinson Wright

the building and the bicycle shop. And I don't know what his connection was or how he got those people started, but . . .

Ms. Deines: I've talked to some of them about the beginning, but I wasn't sure where the Wright family fit into the story, if at all.

Mr. Wright: I can't date it, I guess. People are very kind, they're always inviting us to things and showing us things and doing things.

Ms. Deines: Keeping you busy.

Mr. Wright: Well, yeah, and I appreciate it, I really do, but I haven't kept any record.

Ms. Deines: So your main involvement here in Dayton, at least with the Wright family—I don't know how to word this without chopping some things out of consideration—would be the 2003 Committee right now?

Mr. Wright: Yeah, and for awhile, I think, probably Aviation Trail before that, and then the 2003 Committee.

Wilkinson Wright

Ms. Deines: And then you're also . . . I don't know the official name, the commission that's in North Carolina.

Mr. Wright: Oh, it seems to me that wasn't started until late '94 maybe, or maybe their first meeting was about in February '95, I think. It's the North Carolina First Flight Centennial Commission.

Ms. Deines: So they're the ones working towards the 2003 celebration there?

Mr. Wright: Mm-hmm. The executive committee, which is the officers and the committee chairmen, they've created a First Flight Centennial Foundation, which is legally a separate entity and it's a 501(3)(c) corporation so they can accept tax-free donations and all that.

Ms. Deines: I was going to say, the name sounds like the fund-raising arm of it.

Mr. Wright: Yeah, well, that's exactly what it is. I left Bill Gibson a copy of it. They just have signed a cooperative agreement with the Park Service that gives the Foundation total authority almost to design and build a new visitor center. Now, some approvals are required, but not very many. The approvals that they

Wilkinson Wright

do have to get can be given at the superintendent's level. Russ Berry can do it, so it's an astonishing setup. Up to a point, it gives them a great deal more freedom than if the government did it itself. Now, once they start building on government property or spending government money, then you get tied to the whole nine yards of all the labor requirements and all that sort of stuff. But they can just hire an architect, for instance, and get a design, and when they get the design, they would submit it to the Park Service for approval. But they're not tied by government requirements on hiring the architect or getting bids or any of that stuff.

Ms. Deines: That will speed up the process a little.

Mr. Wright: Oh, yeah.

Ms. Deines: From your involvement with these different commissions and committees, what is the situation that you see or hope to see in 2003? We're going to go from the very far past to the future today. (chuckling)

Mr. Wright: Well, I would like to see Dayton's aviation history resources, if you will, unified somehow. I mean, I don't think they have to be a part of the National Park, but I think that

Wilkinson Wright

whatever we have up and running at that time, the Women's Air and Space Museum, the Air Force Museum, I think all of those things ought to be tied together, and I think they all ought to be cooperating and helping one another. I think their good health, and maybe even their very existence, depends on them all working together in a common interest, and so I would like to see . . . In 2003, I would like to see all those things . . .

Ms. Deines: Working together.

Mr. Wright: Working together, and with some sort of a . . . I hope some sort of a transportation system and some sort of unifying forces of some kind. If someone wants to go in their own car, for instance, I think we ought to have tapes or whatever, self-guiding tapes that would take you around the whole circuit if you want to go.

And then, of course, we want to have the mother of all air shows in Dayton in 2003, and I'm a little bit concerned about that at the moment. I think we have been sort of marking time because of the centennial, the CD '96, and I think it's high time we start getting professionals on board. I kind of think we ought to have a professional air show manager on board already. I think we should have had a professional outside firm do a feasibility study long

Wilkinson Wright

before this on what we should build and who the donors might be and what we can expect. That's something, in that, where the North Carolina group is way ahead of us. They have hired a consulting firm—I can never remember the name, it's Ross and two other names—but this outfit is a top-notch outfit. I mean, they've done feasibility studies for people like Stanford University, for instance, where you're looking at campaigns involving hundreds of millions of dollars, really. We're going to get a report from their feasibility study next week, their final report, in North Carolina. I think Dayton should have done something like this before. I think we still are going to have to do that maybe. I think all of our fund-raising efforts so far are aimed at the local community.

Ms. Deines: It seems to be.

Mr. Wright: And I think we've got to go broader than that. Well, because they are focusing much more, really, in a sense, on the national issues than we are at Kitty Hawk, and yet everything they've got there is all focused in one small place, if you will. (chuckling) But it's an economic thing. Ohio's economic health, much of it depends on the aviation and aerospace industry, and we need to brag about it, we need to publicize it. We need the whole

Wilkinson Wright

world looking to Ohio for the latest and best in aerospace technology.

Ms. Deines: To let people know it's here.

Mr. Wright: Exactly.

Ms. Deines: As a non-native, when I moved here everyone kept saying, "Why Ohio?" (chuckling) I'd go through the whole explanation.

Mr. Wright: Yeah. Well, maybe someday. I'm optimistic. I hope things are going to start moving at a greater rate of speed right now. Yesterday Richard Martin invited me down to lunch, and he's going to take over the chairmanship of the National Park effort.

Ms. Deines: Who is he?

Mr. Wright: Richard Martin? He's with Bank One, and he's their . . .

Ms. Deines: Okay, that's why I knew the name.

Mr. Wright: Yeah, he's a fun guy and very capable. He wants me to be co-chair, and I told him I have no administrative talents

Wilkinson Wright

whatever—I mean, I have no management talents—and so he wants me to be co-chair anyhow. So I'll be his co-chair, and Brad and Mary will be co-chairs of the air show or the centennial.

Ms. Deines: And you would be for . . . what was that?

Mr. Wright: For the National Park, as such, yeah. So I'm optimistic about that. I think what we really need though, and I'm groping for it, we need something conspicuous to do in the next year. I mean, 2003 Committee has been around since late in '89. Well, we've gotten some things built now, or things are being built, but we need something big, something that will get space in the newspaper to arouse interest afresh and to get people to participate, and within the next year I'd hope.

Now, the education . . . What do we call ourselves? The 2003 Committee has two subcommittees, one is Precollegiate, they call it, and the other one is Dr. Flack, and it's at the collegiate level. Now, there we're planning a mammoth aerospace conference or symposium for '98, and we're having a meeting on that here—I guess it's in October. We had one meeting in Washington at the Air and Space Museum. I hope we have something sooner than that.

Ms. Deines: To bring attention . . . ?

Wilkinson Wright

Mr. Wright: I don't know what that's going to be. I haven't a clue, so I don't know. (chuckling)

Ms. Deines: It will come to you someday.

Mr. Wright: Well, my cousin, Kate Hudec, right now she's back working for Nova—and there she's working, I think, three days a week—and they are trying to get money at the moment, trying to find money. They want to do a two-hour documentary, sort of a "how we invented the airplane" kind of documentary. They want to build replicas of the kite and the gliders and at least one flying replica of one of the Wright planes, and they want to do a two-hour documentary showing those being built and then being flown.

Ms. Deines: And the progression.

Mr. Wright: But they are planning that. They hope to release that sometime in '98. They haven't gotten started yet.

Ms. Deines: That's a big project.

Mr. Wright: Yeah, I think '98 is a bit ambitious. But this Ken Hyde is going to build the flying replica for them, if they come up with the money, which is something like . . . well, it's less than

Wilkinson Wright

three hundred thousand dollars but over two. (chuckling) And Rick Young is going to build the gliders and the kite.

Ms. Deines: That would be good, if they can find the funding. That's a good project.

Mr. Wright: Yeah, that'll be a great project, and I'd like to see that done. Imagine having a flying replica go to events, air shows and so on. They're talking about complete with the launching derrick.

Ms. Deines: Oh, the catapult?

Mr. Wright: Yeah.

Ms. Deines: That would be nice to see.

Mr. Wright: Yeah, wouldn't that be great? Wouldn't that be great? I think I persuaded them to build the Model A. I think that, in the first place, it was a very flyable airplane, apparently.

Ms. Deines: What were they looking at building?

Wilkinson Wright

Mr. Wright: Well, they had talked about building the first plane.

In the first place, it did not fly well; and in the second place, I think it would be dangerous. Then they were talking about the Model B. Well, I think the Model B is kind of ugly. (chuckling) I think that the Model A, or the 1905 plane, which was the prototype for the Model A, was a very graceful and pretty thing to see in flight, with that long, long canard and the tail out in back. And we've got some good . . . There is some good movie footage of that, as you know.

Ms. Deines: Good documentation.

Mr. Wright: Yeah, so I think that would be great.

Ms. Deines: Well, is there anything else you want to add?

Mr. Wright: No. Well, anything you're interested in, let me know.

Ms. Deines: I've got all my questions answered today. I'll probably come up with more, but for today we are done.

Mr. Wright: Okay.

Ms. Deines: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

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

Wilkinson Wright

5 September 1996
Dayton, Ohio

Interviewed by:

Ann Deines
Historian
Dayton Aviation Heritage National Historical Park
National Park Service
Dayton, Ohio