

THE WRIGHTS' TIME TO FLY:

THE FAMILY REMEMBERS HUFFMAN PRAIRIE

MS. SHARKEY: Good afternoon. I'm Mary Lou Sharkey again, and we're out here at Huffman Prairie. It's this beautiful farmland out here where the Wright brothers came to really perfect their flying skills. If you remember, they had a successful flight down at Kitty Hawk in 1903, but in 1904 and 1905 it was to this very land here in Dayton, Ohio, right now on Wright-Patterson's Air Force Base, that they came to learn to fly.

And with us today are some of the Wright relatives, the folks who really knew the Wrights and remember the Wrights. We have the niece and nephew of the Wrights, Ivonette Wright Miller and Horace Wright, and Ivonette's husband here is Harold Miller, and over here we have Sue Wright. And we've asked them to do a little bit of reminiscing with us today about that first flight. Harold, can you tell us a little bit about what happened here?

MR. MILLER: Well, after they made their flights in Kitty Hawk, they built a new plane to bring out here and to fly here in Dayton.

Torrance Huffman, who was a banker in Dayton, allowed them to use his farmland as a flying field, so they brought their 1904 plane out here, and this is where they actually learned to fly. They eventually made complete circles, came back and took off and landed from the place they took off from and made figure eights. And this

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is where the Wrights became pilots instead of civilians, you might say. (chuckling)

MS. SHARKEY: That was quite a skill in itself, don't you think, to learn how to fly as well as build the airplane.

MR. MILLER: As someone who has taken flying lessons, I am amazed that they were able to teach themselves to fly without any instruction.

MS. SHARKEY: (chuckling) And wasn't the first flying school nearby here where they taught others?

MR. MILLER: Also, I think it was 1910 they established a flying school here, and this is where they taught many of the Army pilots to fly.

MS. SHARKEY: Yes, and that Wright Flyer III, I understand, which is now . . .

MR. MILLER: Yeah, the Wright Flyer III, that's the 1905 plane. It is now at Carillon Park in Dayton. And Orville, I think, made the statement one time he thought that was just as important as the 1903 plane because this is the plane on which they learned to fly.

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MS. SHARKEY: Very interesting, so there's a lot that has happened here at Huffman Prairie. Now, Ivonette, you took a plane ride once with your famous uncle. Could you tell me a little bit about that first flight that you made?

MRS. Wright Miller: Yes, it happened in 1911. My sister had asked to be the first child to fly in this country. She had heard that Orville had taken up a little girl in France, and she wanted to be the first child in the United States. He didn't write to her and tell her that she could be, but when they came home and our cousin was visiting us from Kansas this came to pass. Uncle Orv called and said that he would take his three nieces up that afternoon if we'd come out. We were very much excited, and when we got on the trolley, the traction to go out, we just could hardly contain ourselves we were so excited about it. When we got there, we got off at Simm's Station—that was where the flying field was, right in this territory. And when we got off the traction and went across the road, and the hangar was on the other side of the fence and we were sitting there for awhile watching. Uncle Orv was out in the field working on the plane, getting it ready for the flight, or the flights. And when we heard the noise of the engine and the clap of the propellers, we went out to where he was working. My sister climbed into the passenger seat . . . And they had started

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the propellers and the engine, and they were going, everything was in readiness, and Uncle Orv gave the word that she should get in, so she climbed in next to him in the passenger seat. And they were off.

MS. SHARKEY: Oh, my!

MRS. Wright Miller: Then they were up about maybe ten minutes and came down, and it was our cousin who was visiting us from Kansas was the second one to go. She was our guest so she was second. And when her flight was over, it was my turn. I got into the passenger seat when the propellers and engine were going, and when I got ready and got in the seat, Uncle Orv gave the sign and we were off. As I looked out over the wings that were carrying us up and the ground that was falling away, I just realized we were in midair. There we were in midair, with our feet braced against a strut to keep us steady, and holding on to a vertical strut on the side. There we were. We flew around up over the hilltops and the trees, over the trees and the telephone poles, and went around the field several times. And one of the times around, Uncle Orv pointed to the electric trolley that was coming in the distance from Springfield and he said, "Shall we take it?" And I nodded. He turned the plane into the wind and we came . . . we turned off

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the engine and we landed, we glided down to a perfect landing in time to catch the trolley.

MS. SHARKEY: What a story! What a story!

MRS. Wright Miller: And that was my flight of 1911. I was fifteen years old, and I haven't been the same since. (chuckling)

MS. SHARKEY: Were you frightened, Ivonette?

MRS. Wright Miller: No. None of us were frightened. It wasn't a scary affair at all.

MS. SHARKEY: Very excited then.

MRS. Wright Miller: Very excited.

MS. SHARKEY: Tell me what you told your friends after that experience.

MRS. Wright Miller: Well, my friends just thought that was a flight of imagination, I think, because nobody was thrilled but myself. (chuckling) Nobody thought I really went up, did anything unusual.

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MS. SHARKEY: My golly. My golly. Tell me, Horace, here's where a lot of the experimentation also took place. Could you tell me a little bit about the experiments that you might remember that went on out here?

MR. WRIGHT: Well, no, I don't because, you see, I was only four or five years old during the early part.

MS. SHARKEY: Ah! That's true, that's true.

MR. WRIGHT: And I was interested in other things. (chuckling) And so, of course, I knew about it. I can remember they used to have a yardstick with two pointers on it and they'd take that and slide it on that yardstick to tell how high they were, and they had it calipered so they could figure right.

MS. SHARKEY: That's how they knew how high they were flying?

MR. WRIGHT: Well, it wasn't accurate but it was as accurate as they needed it.

MRS. Wright Miller: It gave them an idea.

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MS. SHARKEY: (chuckling) Thank you. Ivonette, what about you? Do you remember those early experimenting days?

MRS. Wright Miller: Oh yes, very well. They used to have a track when they first were out here, and they had a kind of a carriage that would . . . when you got up over a certain height it would go shooting out below you, and the plane would . . . it would give it an impetus.

MR. MILLER: They had a derrick with a weight on it which they allowed . . . It was like when they take off from an aircraft carrier. It was a catapult that threw them . . . put them into the air.

MS. SHARKEY: Oh! That must have been a new design also.

MR. MILLER: Well, it was their design. They had the plane on a two-by-four track and they dropped a weight which pulled the plane forward to give them enough takeoff speed. Later on they put wheels on it. This was before they had wheels on the front of it. They had skids on those planes.

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MS. SHARKEY: Oh, I see. I see. Okay, Horace, I wanted to ask you something. When the brothers were flying out here, what did people think about that?

MR. WRIGHT: Well, in the early flying they just thought a couple crazy guys and they thought anybody could do it. I don't think they thought it was unusual. In fact, they would . . . farmers saw them flying, and in 1904 they saw them make the circles. But that didn't mean a thing. And of course they'd had reports of dirigibles and those, and people didn't see the difference between dirigibles and airplanes.

MS. SHARKEY: That's right.

MR. WRIGHT: So I think that's really when they . . . it wasn't till '08 till they really began to recognize it.

MS. SHARKEY: Yes, yes. Now I understand you were telling me, Harold, that they stopped flying actually for a few years here.

MR. MILLER: After 1905 they didn't fly until 1908. They were trying to sell the plane and they couldn't. They were having difficulty trying to sell it.

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MS. SHARKEY: The U.S. Army wasn't very interested, were they?

MR. MILLER: They were not at all interested. They would write letters to the War Department and they would get back a form letter saying they didn't have any money for experiments. The Wrights would write back and they said they were not experimenting, they would meet the specifications of the flying machine, and they'd get the same form letter back that they didn't have any money for things like that.

MS. SHARKEY: (chuckling) The government hasn't changed very much.

MR. MILLER: And it wasn't until the Wrights flew in France that the United States became interested in buying the plane.

MS. SHARKEY: That's very interesting.

MR. WRIGHT: Well, it was. They also got a letter back saying that if they sent their drawings and specifications they'd decide whether it would be able to fly or not. (chuckling)

MS. SHARKEY: Oh, no way they could do that, huh? (chuckling) Ivonette, after the successful flight I think you told me earlier that they were hoping, I think, or certainly the family was

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expecting some sort of interest on the part of the press and the part of the community. Did that happen when they came home from Kitty Hawk?

MRS. Wright Miller: After the first flight?

MS. SHARKEY: Yes.

MRS. Wright Miller: Yes. People thought it was great. It was in the paper the second day, not the first day, but it was in the second day after the flight. But they were just good neighbors and they thought they were a couple of fellows just having a lark experimenting.

MS. SHARKEY: Did you have something to add to that, Harold?

MR. MILLER: No, I thought you were going to tell about your dad trying to take the telegram to the newspapers. You tell about that.

MRS. Wright Miller: Well, I can tell you, I was in the second grade, yes, and nothing happened that day. I went to school as usual, and I probably was thinking about Christmas, which was in another week, and nothing happened unusual until about four or five

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o'clock in the afternoon when Aunt Katharine came. No . . . Yes, Aunt Katharine came to our home with a telegram from Orville and Wilbur saying that they had flown.

MS. SHARKEY: Oh, that was wonderful.

MRS. Wright Miller: And, of course, Aunt Katharine was excited and my father was excited, and they said . . . in the telegram they said, "Inform the press." So my father said he would go to the press. So, after Aunt Katharine left to go home, he went down to the *Dayton Herald*, I think it was at that time, and asked for the . . .

MR. MILLER: Associated Press.

MRS. Wright Miller: Associated Press representative, that he'd like to show him the telegram. So, when he showed him the telegram, he was not impressed. He thought a flight of less than one minute was not newsworthy.

MS. SHARKEY: Isn't that something?

MRS. Wright Miller: So he didn't get anyplace there, so there was nothing in the paper the next morning. My father was very much disappointed, and there was nothing in it until two days afterward.

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MS. SHARKEY: Didn't they say the boys were coming home for Christmas?

MRS. Wright Miller: Yes, they said the boys were coming home for Christmas, and the man that he talked to did say they hoped they have a nice Christmas. (chuckling)

MS. SHARKEY: That was more important than the first flight, huh?

MRS. Wright Miller: Well, it was to us, too.

MS. SHARKEY: Certainly. Certainly. You bring up something interesting. That family support that the Wright brothers had was very important all the way around, wasn't it?

MRS. Wright Miller: The whole family supported it. And everybody, everyone down to the children, grandfather, everybody, knew that they were going to fly, because they had done their job so thoroughly from the very first that they were just sure that that would happen.

MS. SHARKEY: Isn't that wonderful? I bet the Wright brothers themselves depended on that support.

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MRS. Wright Miller: Oh, yes. They were a devoted family and they were all out for Orville and Wilbur because they knew they had something.

MS. SHARKEY: Yes, yes. I recall in one of the . . . I think it was the Wright State Papers, in one of the journals, in the back of the journal there is a little childish scrawl that says "Ivonette Wright." Do you recall that?

MRS. Wright Miller: No.

MS. SHARKEY: When you showed Uncle Orv your news?

MRS. Wright Miller: Oh! Well, that was when I was about six years old, and that was 1902, and it was over at my grandfather's house, and Uncle Wil . . . I was sitting on Uncle Wil's lap when he said, "Can you write your name?" And I said yes, I could. I just was in the first grade and I had just learned to write my name. He said, "Well . . ." He pulled out a little book, a little notebook out of his pocket, a very small notebook, and said, "Put it on the back leaf here." So I wrote it twice, "Ivonette Wright," in a child's scrawl. Well, I didn't think about it until many, many years after that when I knew that that little notebook had all the experiments of the Wright brothers in 1902.

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MS. SHARKEY: (chuckling) And there you were, captured for all time.

MRS. Wright Miller: And that's the way I got my name in the annals of the Library of Congress.

MS. SHARKEY: (chuckling) Oh, isn't that wonderful. Harold, this land here around Huffman Prairie has really seen a lot of history. After the Wrights first learned to fly here they taught others to fly.

MR. MILLER: They had a flying school on this site where they taught many of the early military fliers for the Army. They also taught a number of their exhibition fliers who went out and flew at county fairs, state fairs, and different exhibitions. And I might add, when Ivonette made her first flight here in 1911 she borrowed a leather coat from Captain Chandler, who was taking flight lessons from the Wrights at that time.

MS. SHARKEY: (chuckling) Was there a charge for flight school?

MR. MILLER: Well, the lessons went along. If you bought an airplane you got the lessons, free lessons to fly.

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MS. SHARKEY: You got free lessons, like a piano, huh? (chuckling)

MR. MILLER: When they sold a plane to the Army, they agreed to train their pilots so they could fly them.

MS. SHARKEY: Tell me about the safety out here. I have to imagine with as light as the first machines were that safety might have been a concern.

MR. MILLER: I don't ever recall them having an accident on this site, but they had a lot of . . . a lot of their exhibition fliers later on were killed in giving exhibitions.

MS. SHARKEY: That's a shame.

MR. MILLER: And that was a very sad occasion for the Wrights every time one of their exhibition fliers was killed.

MS. SHARKEY: I'll bet. I'll bet. Did they wonder was it their teaching, or they ever felt the . . .

MR. MILLER: Well, they thought they probably just tried to do too much with the airplane as it was at that time.

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MS. SHARKEY: Yes. Well, thank you, Harold.

We'd like to thank Ivonette and Harold Miller and Horace and Susan Wright for their gracious hospitality in sharing their hearts and homes, and especially their family remembrances of their famous uncles, Orville and Wilbur Wright.

The wonder and joy of the Wright brothers' accomplishments, man's first powered flight, born right here in Dayton, shines on through a loving family's recollections. Who could have dreamed, even the dreamers themselves, that two ordinary young men from Dayton, Ohio who ran a bike shop would have the courage to soar above the earth in their own homemade flying machine. Orville said it best on June 7, 1903, as he was approaching the wonder of flight he said, "Isn't it astonishing that all these secrets have been preserved for so many years just so we could discover them?" Thank you and good evening.

[END OF SEGMENT 2]

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