

**Mary Ann Johnson**

**MS. DEINES:** This is Ann Deines and today is February 21, 1996, and I'm in Dayton, Ohio, with Mary Ann Johnson. And let's just start by you introducing yourself and a little bit of background on your relationship with Aviation Trail.

**MS. JOHNSON:** All right. At the beginning of Aviation Trail, which came out of an economic development conference, at that time I was an economic planner with the Miami Valley Regional Planning Commission, and we had some economic development money from the federal government to do something to promote economic development in the Miami Valley region. I happened to be the staff person for that and we had organized a committee to work on some project, and the project they decided to work on was this conference, which was held in November, at the end of 1980, out at the University of Dayton.

In addition to us, as co-sponsor we had the Dayton and Montgomery County Chamber of Commerce. The two of us sponsored it. It was, as I said, at the University of Dayton. We had some outside speakers, we hired a couple of consultants, we organized a two-day process where people came together, then went into some small groups to discuss some ideas, and at the end of the conference, everyone agreed on several of these ideas is what should be the focus of the efforts out of the conference.

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One of the ideas was to use our aviation heritage to market the region.

And John Dussault, who was a member of that group, and he was also head of the McCauley Propeller operation here in Dayton, he organized a committee at the beginning of 1981 to carry out that particular idea. He asked people who were in the small group, plus others that he knew, so he formed the original committee to work on this idea.

It just so happened that in that particular year the chamber of commerce, visitors and convention bureau of the chamber of commerce, the co-sponsor of this conference, had put an item in their budget to do something with aviation, so they were in a position to offer some financial and staff help to get us started. So, for that first year, that was very helpful.

The group decided to organize two aviation trails, one for business and one for tourists. The tourists' is the one that they picked up on, and that's the one we followed through mostly. The idea was to identify aviation-related sites and then link them together in a trail. That's where we got that name.

**MS. DEINES:** Who all was on the commission?

**MS. JOHNSON:** What commission?

**MS. DEINES:** Or the committee. I got the wrong name.

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**MS. JOHNSON:** I would have to look that up.

**MS. DEINES:** Okay, don't worry about it then.

**MS. JOHNSON:** Anyway, that was how I became involved, but I'll keep going because . . . how I became more involved. (chuckling) Okay, so after the committee was organized, they decided to become a nonprofit organization, which they did in that summer; and at that point I had left the Regional Planning Commission and I kept on as a volunteer. So, ever since, I have worked with them as a volunteer. So that finishes how I became involved.

At the time, actually I didn't know that much about aviation history, so what I have learned has been working with this group. So, in that first effort, we put out a brochure for the ten sites we thought would be of most interest to the general public, and we had a big bus tour of local dignitaries, leaders, where we took them around to see that. While we were developing this list we came up with a whole lot of sites, but maybe it was just something happened there or it would be more interesting to an aviation, what we call "buff."

So we had all these other sites. We said, "We ought to let people know about them," but putting them in a brochure was just not feasible, so I volunteered to do something about that. And the result of that

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is the guidebook, *A Field Guide to Flight*, which I spent about five years working on it. So that's how that one came about.

**MS. DEINES:** The initial list that you had with the brochure, how did those sites get identified?

**MS. JOHNSON:** How did they choose them, you mean?

**MS. DEINES:** Yes.

**MS. JOHNSON:** Well, a lot of this was some staff work with the chamber of commerce and some input from the members of the committee made up this long list that ended up in the guidebook.

**MS. DEINES:** They were just sites that people knew about?

**MS. JOHNSON:** Right. And then once we got organized as a nonprofit corporation—and at that point when we became a nonprofit corporation—our purpose became to preserve and promote Dayton's aviation history, which is a little bit different than the idea that came out of the economic development conference. But still we were interested in using it as economic development, and we also, as part of our purpose, was we would do capital projects as well as just promotion like we were doing in the beginning. So, anyway, this

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committee decided from this list what should be in the brochure. I might have some old brochures, or maybe you have one, I don't know.

But the list, we are now in our fourth edition of the brochure, and it has changed over the years.

**MS. DEINES:** With additions and deletions?

**MS. JOHNSON:** Right. Okay, in the course of developing this list, this original list, we found there was this big hole—and nobody was doing anything about it—and this was the neglected West Side neighborhood where Wilbur and Orville Wright lived and worked and invented the airplane. So we said, "Okay, nobody is doing anything about it. This is really important to our history, so we'll take it upon ourselves to do this." There was some discouragement because it was sort of a bad reputation in that neighborhood, and businesses had moved out, and vacant houses, that kind of thing, a lot of which was due to the disturbances in the 1960s when the neighborhood over there had had a couple days of rioting. In committing ourselves to this neighborhood, then we went around—and I personally did because I was working on this book—to see what else . . . what all was there. Like we knew that the house where they lived was there and we knew the last bicycle shop was there—the sites where they were, not the buildings.

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Well, my son, when he was younger, had had this little model airplane kit, and along with it came the Kelly biography of the Wright brothers, and so we took this little pocket book . . .

**MS. DEINES:** You still have it?

**MS. JOHNSON:** I do. And in there were listed these various addresses. So my husband and I went around and looked. (chuckling)

Well, we knew what happened to the last bicycle shop. We found where Orville's laboratory had been, we found where the first printing shop outside their home had been, we found the first bicycle shop, the second bicycle shop across the street, 1005 and 1034 West Third Street, we found 7 Hawthorn where the house had been; and I also used the Williams directory to verify, since these buildings weren't actually there. So, between the two, the address in the book and the address it said in the Williams, and all kind of other evidence, we identified these. Well, when I got to the 22 South Williams one, there was a building there. Fred Fisk and Marlin Todd—I had been put in touch with them—and they had published an article about the Wright brothers' bicycles in a bicycle magazine, and included in that was a picture of the 22 South Williams shop that belonged to Marlin Todd, the picture that is. After I made contact with him, he also had found a picture of the Hoover Block. The Hoover Block is next door to that.

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**MS. DEINES:** Okay, but at that time neither of them were involved with Aviation Trail?

**MS. JOHNSON:** They were just a source.

**MS. DEINES:** Okay.

**MS. JOHNSON:** I think I know the sequence where I got in touch with them, but I'm not positive; anyway, someone did give me their names to talk to. As far as we know, these two pictures that Marlin Todd had are the only pictures of those two buildings that are still standing, the ones that are still standing, so that we can verify them. Did you find any others?

**MS. DEINES:** I found others of the Hoover Block but not at the time that the Wrights were in it.

**MS. JOHNSON:** The only ones that were at the time when they were there, which was important because if you're going to restore them you want to know how they were at that point.

Well, I'll continue on writing that book. There were other things I found in this Williams directory, and two of them—and they might have been referred to also in the book, I'm not sure—but I do know

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I found their addresses in the Williams directory. And I never could locate these streets, and they were where they had the Wright Company to manufacture their airplanes, but they were listed in there. Oh, and 1127 West Third Street is listed in there under the airplane company. There's a lot of information I got from there. So people gave me these different places where they thought they were, and I finally verified that the street . . . well, one of them is on Wisconsin Boulevard, and it said in the directory, "South of Miami Chapel Road," or something like that. And that's where at that time it was General Motors Delco Marine, and one of them was off West Third Street, south of West Third Street, and that turned out to be GM Inland Division at the time. So, eventually, through a lot of asking around (chuckling), and I think I finally found a map that showed where some of these streets were, an old map . . .

**MS. DEINES:** Well, especially they didn't always have street addresses or street names, so they'd just say "South of this street . . ." and there could be a vast area that—

**MS. JOHNSON:** Right. That was the two things, my two clues. Okay, then another person, I forget, someone . . . Again, people would give me people to talk to as I started doing this. Another person gave me the picture of the first Model B leaving the factory, so it showed the factory.



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**MS. DEINES:** Oh, okay.

**MS. JOHNSON:** Okay, so that was another clue. And then there were pictures of the factory off West Third Street, that was another clue.

So when I identified these places, then I just wrote cold to the two General Motors plants—like to their community relations department. And neither one of them were aware of this history. So they became very interested, and through a lot of visits and talking to them and different kinds of research, we got a story of these two factories. Now, the consisted of two buildings at Inland was still standing, so that was easy, but we couldn't figure out where the Speedwell Motor Car Company—where the Wrights had rented space—was down at the Delco Marine. So eventually somebody told me they thought it was one building, and I don't know . . .

**MS. DEINES:** All different opinions. (chuckling)

**MS. JOHNSON:** Right, just like all the rest. So finally I got onto the Sanborn fire maps and was able to identify from that, and it has a shape to the front of it . . . Well, it had a shape that was distinctive and so therefore we could identify it, and that building had been torn down. But then eventually the fellow I was working with found some pictures of it before it was torn down, so we know

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that that was where it was because it matched the building in the photo showing the first Model B leaving the factory. Because you wanted to know about how I found all those.

**MS. DEINES:** Yeah. Well, that worked out real well.

**MS. JOHNSON:** So that took me quite a while. All right, so in doing this research . . . Do you want any more on that?

**MS. DEINES:** If you think there's something important to tell. You covered what I was interested in, but you know what happened, so I might be missing something. (chuckling)

**MS. JOHNSON:** Well, I might think of it later. So, in doing this research, we found these two factories (2 buildings at Inland) that were still standing. We found the home had gone to Greenfield Village, the last bicycle shop had gone to Greenfield Village. Orville Wright's laboratory around the corner on Broadway had been torn down—we started in the beginning of the '80s—just the middle of the '70s, not that long before we started, but the bricks were reportedly saved somewhere. They were going to put a gas station there and tore it down, but then they never built the gas station.

**MS. DEINES:** Disappointing.

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**MS. JOHNSON:** The first printing shop outside the house had been torn down. The second bicycle shop, the 1034 West Third, the building it had been damaged by fire, and I think it had just been torn down maybe in the '70s. It wasn't that long before we got there. And 1005, the first one . . . Even though Fred thinks there might be a 1015, I will say I have never found any other evidence, so I . . .

**MS. DEINES:** For 1015?

**MS. JOHNSON:** Right. And I've found some evidence where . . . well, some other evidence that I just feel it's a typo. But that has to be decided. So we may or may not include it. I don't include it, other people do. But then we found out that 1005 had been incorporated in the building that's there now. So that's what we found out, and we said, "Okay, these two buildings are still standing there right next to each other," and the Hoover Block was for sale. So we started with the bicycle shop because that was the most important. The people living there were renters. It was a rental property. The people that owned it were not particularly interested in selling, so one of our board members bought it in the name of a property company he had, with the idea of saving it until we could pay him back—which we did. We bought it from him, but it was a

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difficult deal to make because the couple the board member bought it from had separated and one was living in another city.

**MS. DEINES:** Oh, the ones that owned 22 South Williams.

**MS. JOHNSON:** The ones that owned it, yes. It was a difficult deal and they didn't want to sell.

**MS. DEINES:** So how did you convince them to sell?

**MS. JOHNSON:** Well, Tony Harker, who's a board member, managed it for us. I don't know how he convinced them, but they finally . . . We got to a standstill and I think it ended up that he didn't even get his commission. I'm not just sure how that ended up, but anyhow it was around \$10,000 that we paid for it. I'll do the two deals. And these were both . . . we started in '81, so these were in '82 that we bought these two buildings. We had some very exciting meetings because this was a *big* step for us when we decided to do this. The one that was for sale, the Hoover Block, belonged to three brothers who had had a grocery store there. There had been grocery stores there, I guess, from the beginning, really, on that first floor. And they had expanded into the building next door, the Setzer Building. They'd closed the business and they just wanted out. So, even though the Setzer Building wasn't historic, we didn't want

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it, they wouldn't make a deal unless we bought the Setzer building too.

**MS. DEINES:** It was all or nothing?

**MS. JOHNSON:** And we didn't have any money for any of this. So we went to the city . . . Well, eventually they came down quite a bit on their price. Eventually we went to Citywide when it looked like we could make a deal, borrowed the whole thing from them, which was about \$30,000. They had come down from \$100,000.

**MS. DEINES:** A big difference. (chuckling)

**MS. JOHNSON:** Yeah. They were eager to sell. Oh, and in the meantime in making the deal one of the brothers died, so neither of these deals were easy.

**MS. DEINES:** It doesn't sound like it.

**MS. JOHNSON:** No, they were not. So we got the money from Citywide Development, and interest rates were pretty high at that time, so we had a big monthly payment schedule we committed to, but we were always able to meet the monthly payments and eventually paid it off.

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**MS. DEINES:** Was there any idea within Aviation Trail of what you would do with these buildings once you acquired them?

**MS. JOHNSON:** Oh yes, we didn't acquire them just to acquire them. Once we got into this we were making a big commitment, and our idea was to acquire them, own them, restore them, and open the Wright Brothers Museum Complex. To restore the bicycle shop the way it was, the Hoover Block, well, to restore it too, to restore . . . make on the second floor the thing like the printing thing they had, and then use the others for offices. The first floor we would have more on the Wright brothers—that would be a museum.

**MS. DEINES:** Sort of a general exhibit.

**MS. JOHNSON:** Right. The third floor was an assembly, a large assembly area; and after we owned it, I'm not sure what year, we acquired the Dave Gold Parachute Collection. A man out in California had been in the business, he died, and the estate donated this collection to us. So that was an ideal place to put a parachute museum—it had all these high ceilings and open space—so those were our plans. On the bicycle shop, we wanted to make it like a bicycle shop on the bottom, on the first floor, but then we really couldn't take the public up to the second floor through the restored stairway, which is the way it was originally. And also originally that had been an apartment. Before the Wright brothers rented—they rented

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these places—the owner had lived up there with his family, so we were going to make that into an apartment and then we would have that for someone to look after the property. It would be not rental property but somebody that would . . .

**MS. DEINES:** Like for a caretaker?

**MS. JOHNSON:** Caretaker, ranger, whatever. (chuckling) Someone involved with the project \_\_\_\_\_. Well, like I said, we knew we were making this commitment, and we knew the neighborhood had deteriorated, and there really was very little interest in it and there was a lot of negativism [from] other people about us going in there, but we said, "This is where it happened, and this is very important, important history. So with this commitment, we expect this to act as a catalyst and we will bring the neighborhood back around us." That was our plan. And we had plans of what could be done with all these other sites. We had a document—maybe you even have a copy of it—but we wrote out a plan.

**MS. DEINES:** I was just reading about it in the ten-year history, but I've never seen the actual document.

**MS. JOHNSON:** I can't give you one, but I have one. Okay, so we wrote out a plan, what we would do with all this and what it would

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be good transportation-wise, the whole . . . We wrote out a plan.

And then we just started doing it. (chuckling) I mean, we just did. With the bicycle shop, we got \$5,000 from the City of Dayton, and matched by \$5,000 from Montgomery County, we were able to buy it from our board member. We got another . . . I think about \$25,000 from the City, with which we could hire a historic architect to draw up plans. It was a Cleveland firm and they did a historic study on what was there.

**MS. DEINES:** For the bicycle shop?

**MS. JOHNSON:** Right. And as far as we know . . . I'm not sure about the apartment upstairs, but as far as we know, the downstairs brick part is how it . . . Well, anyway, it had been partitioned off into rooms and things, and as far as we know, this was the configuration when the Wright brothers were there. Now, the back half, the wooden part—that wooden addition on the first floor—was too deteriorated, so we could not use that, and that's a replica and that's just to make our office and rest room back there. Anyway, that got us the architect, and then we were able to get some money from the state through a fellow who had been appointed to fill—I'm not sure if it was in the Senate or House—a term, and he got interested in our project and was able to use some influence, so that money came to us.



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**MS. DEINES:** To get some funding?

**MS. JOHNSON:** Right, to start working on it. We also got money from a few foundations and some other places. So we started on phase one, and I have slides of this, to put the outside back the way it was in the picture we have and to restore the first floor.

**MS. DEINES:** That's a big phase one.

**MS. JOHNSON:** Mm-hmm. All right, now while this is going on, because this took a while to get the rest of the money to get all this going and to do the work, someone at Monsanto who had a plant out in Miamisburg at the time got interested and arranged that we get some money—I think it was a thousand dollars a semester, or term, they're on quarters—to involve Wright State history students, and this went on for a couple of years. And if you give the money to the university, they take a little cut, so we arranged somehow the money came to us and then we could hire the student through a temporary help place.

**MS. DEINES:** So the university didn't get their cut.

**MS. JOHNSON:** Right, and Pat Nolan was head of the archives and special collections in the library at that time, and he was a board

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member, so we worked through him, and it was because of him that these people got interested in doing this. So one of the things they did was prepare a photographic exhibit, because Wright State owns this Wright Brothers Photo Collection. Because we were just doing the building, we didn't have anything to put in the museum at this point to show anybody. So they arranged this, and some of those pictures are still on the wall. Those are the ones that are . . .

**MS. DEINES:** \_\_\_\_\_.

**MS. JOHNSON:** There was more than that and they had some on . . . There was more than that, but it made a nice exhibit telling about the neighborhood, the three businesses, and . . .

**MS. DEINES:** That's interesting.

**MS. JOHNSON:** That's how that occurred. They did some research, they did some other things, but that was a good involvement, and that's the thing that you can still see that came out of that.

Okay, now, one of our board members, Roger McClure, was very interested in putting a bicycle shop-type exhibit on that first floor, and he and another interested person, Howard DuFour, did some

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research. Well, we have some photographs of the Wrights working in that shop. We feel sure they were in that shop, although again there can be controversy. (chuckling)

**MS. DEINES:** Discrepancy, yes. (chuckling)

**MS. JOHNSON:** Oh, we even found a picture of their motor—remember they had a motor?—standing by the doorway that we can identify as our shop. I think Ivonette maybe had that. So, anyway they hunted around, and this Howard Dufour, he's real interested in the machinery and the engines—that's his part of it—and Howard is interested in Charlie Taylor, who was the Wrights' mechanic, and Howard and Roger unearthed the same model that shows in the picture. And they did a lot of work, because all these different pieces of machinery they got different places, and then they had to clean it up and restore it and get it in working order and install it in the bicycle shop.

So that was a major effort. And that makes an exhibit that brings the story more alive when you can see that. Roger also had his own idea how to set up the exhibits, and it was his idea to put that office in there.

**MS. DEINES:** The office in the bicycle shop?

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**MS. JOHNSON:** That represented the bicycle shop office, although we're not sure that that's how it was. And various people contributed. Like the Hamburger sisters had that desk restored at a large cost and people made contributions. Horace Wright gave us . . . he donated to us the desk that's in there. That's an original—I mean, not desk, drawing board—that's an original Wright brothers. At least the bottom is. We may have located a top that's more original at Greenfield Village, but we can't probably get that. But anyway he donated that. Now we have two work benches in there. Those came from Orville Wright's laboratory. He donated those. Some of the tools on that display came from Orville Wright.

**MS. DEINES:** From the laboratory?

**MS. JOHNSON:** Through him. There's the Miami Valley Regional Bicycle Committee, and this is a bicycle shop, so we could interest them in helping, and they provided a grant early on to buy a collection of the period bicycles. None of them were Wright brothers', but they are of the period. We still have some that aren't on exhibit. The floor is the original floor, some of the woodwork is. There's a lot of original structure in the building. So, when you go in there, you're walking on the same floor once trod by Wilbur and Orville Wright in the place where it all began.

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**MS. DEINES:** It's amazing, we get questions to that extent a lot by visitors at the park. That's one of the first questions, I guess because the floor looks old, but they think that's probably what they're standing on.

**MS. JOHNSON:** Right. I'll back up a little bit. After we got the architect hired and he's working on the plans . . . No, I'm backing up even more. (chuckling) See, if I'd gone in sequence . . . But anyway, you can sort it out because you've probably heard this.

**MS. DEINES:** Yes.

**MS. JOHNSON:** All right, after our board member bought the bicycle shop, about two or three weeks later . . . and I have a copy of this in my minutes book. I think maybe you've got it.

**MS. DEINES:** Yeah, I did.

**MS. JOHNSON:** He received this, in the mail, list of all these things that would have to be corrected from the building inspector. I think they actually put a sign on the building that it was condemned. Now, I went in there, I think Jerry was in it too when we were buying it, and I do remember remarking, "If the building inspector ever got in here, we're in trouble." (laughter) These people were welfare . . . they were on welfare. They had no furniture, they

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had these little naked children running around. (chuckling) The upstairs was not rented at that point.

**MS. DEINES:** So they were in the downstairs only?

**MS. JOHNSON:** They were in the downstairs. (chuckling) So we were all in a panic because we kind of thought we'd keep on renting the place and get some money until we were ready to restore it. We go to the City of Dayton. Well, they had no idea what we were planning to do; they just went in there and inspected and found these problems.

So they helped us . . . Well, they did it. They had to move the people out, and get some furniture so they could move them out, and then that took a little while. But then they agreed . . . they boarded it up for us so that it wouldn't be a nuisance and then we could hold it until [such] time when we had the money to do something with it.

**MS. DEINES:** Who was the person that loaned Aviation Trail—

**MS. JOHNSON:** Oh, Jerry Meyer. He was a retired surgeon, and he owned some property and he had it under a company, some kind of a holding company.

**MS. DEINES:** So he was able to use that?

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**MS. JOHNSON:** So he used that to buy the bicycle shop. So the people selling may or may not have known what it was. I mean, we didn't keep it from them but we didn't tell them either.

**MS. DEINES:** Tell them.

**MS. JOHNSON:** Okay, then while the architects were . . . So we solved that and we got the money to pay Jerry back, we got the money to hire the architect, and so while he was working on that, or they are, we decided, well, we can save some money by cleaning out the building ourselves. And that's when we had the big clean-out day that I have pictures of. And there was a lot of trash and old furniture, and we tore out the linoleum and appliances and everything.

Upstairs we threw them out the window, and downstairs they carried them out, and we filled . . . I think it was four trash truckloads of stuff.

**MS. DEINES:** That's a lot.

**MS. JOHNSON:** It was a lot. Oh, and down in the basement we found this wooden table that was similar to some we had seen in photographs with the Wright brothers. We have no way of knowing if they actually used it, but we did save that, and that's in the reception area where we have the brochures, so that's where that came from.

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**MS. DEINES:** Oh, okay. I never knew where that came from.

**MS. JOHNSON:** Yeah, so it's to us important.

**MS. DEINES:** Yes, linked to the building.

**MS. JOHNSON:** Well, at least to the Wright brothers. (chuckling)

**MS. DEINES:** Yes.

**MS. JOHNSON:** Well, we hope to the Wright . . . Well, it's linked to the building, no doubt about that, but we hope it's linked to the Wright brothers. Okay, so then we got the money from the state and then we got other money to help out. Siebenthalers came in on it, the nursery, with the landscaping. They donated the outside landscaping.

**MS. DEINES:** Now, these places like Siebenthalers that donated landscaping, did they approach Aviation Trail or did Aviation Trail go out searching for people to help out?

**MS. JOHNSON:** A lot of this is just knowing people. One of our board members knew Siebenthalers very well, so through that connection.



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And like Pat Nolan, this lady knew Pat Nolan, and through that connection we got Wright State. Mainly it was having connections, some kind of connection.

**MS. DEINES:** Through networking, I would say.

**MS. JOHNSON:** Yes, and the senator that got . . . I think he was a state senator, that got involved, I think that came through Inner West. In the very beginning we made connection with Inner West Priority Board. And Jerry Sharkey, I think, was pretty instrumental in starting that, because he had me come down—that was the first time I gave any little side show thing—to one of their meetings.

So they were aware of what we were doing and backed us. Well, you know what that is, the neighborhood here. So that was good. Let's see, we got the thing . . . Eventually we had enough in there and enough done that we could open it to the public and there would be something to see. We had this exhibit from Wright State; the machinery came later but we had that. So the Urban League had an employment program where they'd provide someone for six months but it had to keep changing, and so they provided a person to hold the bike shop open on weekends.

**MS. DEINES:** For people to drop by and see it.

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**MS. JOHNSON:** Right, so that's how we first got it open.

**MS. DEINES:** Okay. Do you remember what year that was?

**MS. JOHNSON:** I can find it.

**MS. DEINES:** After I told you dates aren't all that important, (chuckling) I pin you down here.

**MS. JOHNSON:** I'll also mention as my involvement, I'm a board member and have been from the beginning, but for most of the time I've also been the secretary, so I have those secretary notes that I can refer to. I think we had a ribbon cutting or something like that when that happened, although we weren't really done with the inside.

**MS. DEINES:** But it was a start. It was something visible to \_\_\_\_\_.

**MS. JOHNSON:** We didn't have the money to get the wallboard, and at some point somebody was on our board, and I think it was the head of Citywide at the time, came in with enough money to finish off the walls.

**MS. DEINES:** I can't think of the name. The drywall? Is that it?

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**MS. JOHNSON:** I think that's what they used. I wasn't in on the construction, so I don't really know. To finish the walls. It might not have been . . . I don't know what they did. So that must have happened before Wright State came in, because the walls were up at that point. But anyway, that was another piece somebody brought in. So it's been piece by piece by piece; all these things have come in to make what we have now.

Well, then a teacher at MacFarlane School got interested. She got my book, and she had some grant money to do some kind of project.

MacFarlane is an intermediate school on the same street but south of Third, on the same street as the Dunbar House but south of Third, so they're in the neighborhood. And they did some really neat projects. And one of them they had a couple days' program where you came to the school, and the children had set up sites like . . . Well, in my book I cover the whole Miami Valley. We're just talking about the neighborhood now, but we covered the whole Miami Valley in five segments. So one of the segments is called "The West Anchor" and includes these places I've been talking about, and it's set up as a trail that you can follow. So they set up a trail that you could follow and they had students dressed as the characters in the school.

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**MS. DEINES:** Oh, at each of the sites?

**MS. JOHNSON:** And you followed the Aviation Trail around. It went through their auditorium, and some boy had rigged up some string so they could float an airplane up and down. It was very impressive what they did.

**MS. DEINES:** It sounds like it.

**MS. JOHNSON:** Okay, sometime after they got all involved in all this, we found out that the roof we thought we were going to be able to use—the original roof—started leaking, and so we were going to have to replace the roof. And again, we never have the money.

**MS. DEINES:** Right.

**MS. JOHNSON:** So this teacher, she's very energetic, Judy Haller I think her name is, she's no longer at that school but she's great. She got a project going to roof the Wrights with these students at MacFarlane School. A couple of the teachers came down as the roof was being torn off and thrown in the dumpster. They got all these pieces of the original roof out. They had some plaques made saying where these came from. Judy wrote an article for some national magazine explaining about the project and she got orders from all

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over the country and they eventually had at least \$2,000. It might have been more than that.

**MS. DEINES:** That's great!

**MS. JOHNSON:** To roof the Wrights. (chuckling)

**MS. DEINES:** That's a good idea.

**MS. JOHNSON:** They did some other projects, too, but that was their main project. Okay, it was 1988 by the time we felt we could have a grand opening where we had pretty much to show.

**MS. DEINES:** Finished the restoration?

**MS. JOHNSON:** And I'm not sure when, but at some point, having to have these people just stay for six months from the Urban League was turning out to be not very satisfactory because they didn't have time to really learn about it. And at this point I think we had paid off the Hoover Block—I think that's how we managed it—so that the monthly expense of that, paying off that, we used to hire Mike Nelson.

**MS. DEINES:** To have the shop open on weekends?

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**MS. JOHNSON:** To have an employee there who would be responsible to us, would meet our qualifications, and could stay and learn it.

So at that point, that was our only hired employee, and we did that through a temporary help place so they could take care of the income tax and all that kind of stuff. (chuckling)

**MS. DEINES:** And he kept the shop open every weekend then?

**MS. JOHNSON:** Every weekend throughout the year. He was very faithful, and occasionally if he had to be gone, one of the board members or some volunteer would fill in. So we are now ready to start on the Hoover Block, because we haven't finished the upstairs but everything else is up and running, you might say. And there's vacant land in between that we've been using for a parking lot. So we got another . . . Well, it might have been the same. I think it was the same architect. I'm not sure.

**MS. DEINES:** I think it was.

**MS. JOHNSON:** I think it was the same architect but the personnel had changed a little bit, out of Cleveland—historic, that was their expertise—to draw up plans for the Hoover Block. And then we were going to have some parking connecting these two, but also some sort

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of a little plaza. We had a plan for that also. And again this time we had several days when we carried out the trash from there. There was a lot of trash.

**MS. DEINES:** A lot more?

**MS. JOHNSON:** A lot of trash, especially up there in that Hoover Hall on the third floor.

**MS. DEINES:** On the third floor?

**MS. JOHNSON:** And that was hard because we had to carry it downstairs.  
(chuckling)

**MS. DEINES:** Down the stairs.

**MS. JOHNSON:** Right.

**MS. DEINES:** That's probably why it was all up there.

**MS. JOHNSON:** Right, and there were some extraneous structures on the back that we took down, and we had to re-roof. We had to repair the roof because there had been some water damage, and at one point there had been a little fire up, I guess, on the third floor. There

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was some fire damage. But basically the architect felt the building was in quite good shape and worthy of restoring.

[End Side A]

I think we even got to the point where we had some meetings over on the first floor, but there wasn't any systems and there wasn't any electricity or anything like that.

**MS. DEINES:** You had to do it during the day.

**MS. JOHNSON:** Yeah. We complained. (laughter) Then we got another grant from the state, a capital grant, and I think that . . . I forget how much it was, but that was . . . we asked for enough to work on the outside and get something done on the first floor. So, at that point . . . I'm going to back up.

**MS. DEINES:** Okay.

**MS. JOHNSON:** We had gone pretty far on the bicycle shop by 1988. In 1989, a group of people started floating an idea that we should have a national park in Dayton. I know you're going to interview the three people that started that, but this idea was floating around and these three people decided to do something about it. And out



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of that they organized what is now called the 2003 Committee. And their initial idea was to bring a national park to Dayton, which they worked on diligently, and then they also became involved with Dayton's bicentennial, and then they also took on . . . They just sort of took it on because it seemed natural, I guess, to be responsible for the centennial of flight in 2003, and that's where they get their name. Well, eventually they got that park.

Now, see, here I don't have the dates for you, so I don't know when.

At some point they got enough money to hire an executive director, which was Madeline Iseli, and she thought it would be neat to have her office in our office in the bicycle shop. So this gave us no office, but . . . I guess mainly she took over the office but we could keep our records there or something like that, but mainly she was in there. And the agreement was we just figured out what the extra utility costs would be, so they rented it for the utility costs.

It was a little inconvenient because we couldn't use the office, but the advantage was we now had someone on-site the whole time, and she said she was perfectly willing if someone dropped by that she would show them through. So that was to our advantage.

**MS. DEINES:** It gave a little more of a presence there.

**MS. JOHNSON:** Yes, yes, and then they eventually hired some more people and it got too small for them and they moved up to where they

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are now. I think they must have still been there when Bill came.  
I think they were.

**MS. DEINES:** I think they were.

**MS. JOHNSON:** So eventually they got the park. Now, I don't know if you want me to do this one or not. I was involved in taking the Park people around to begin with.

**MS. DEINES:** Yeah, why don't you?

**MS. JOHNSON:** Okay. It wasn't exactly Aviation Trail doing it and it wasn't exactly 2003 doing it; it was pretty much, I guess, Jerry Sharkey's connection because he was president of Aviation Trail at the time and also one of the three originators of the 2003 [Committee].

**MS. DEINES:** So he had two hats to wear.

**MS. JOHNSON:** So we were sort of all in this together. Well, they got this idea to get the national park—and you'll hear this, I'm sure—and so Jerry Sharkey called up . . . I think it was the Denver office? Whatever the region was.

**MS. DEINES:** Omaha.

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**MS. JOHNSON:** Omaha. Talked to someone there who seemed receptive, and it was just a few weeks later Jerry called me and said, "They're sending a Park Service person down from Columbus who just happens to be there, would you help take him around?" to me. So that was our introduction. And it just turned out that that very same day was the day the three organizers were having their first meeting. We just took him for a few highlights, but I did give this person our guidebook, *A Field Guide to Flight*, which he took back. Let's see, well then they had to get the legislation. Oh, I know, we had the landmark study. I think that came next.

**MS. DEINES:** I think so.

**MS. JOHNSON:** So this whole team that was going to do the landmark study came to town and were here for a whole week, and so I organized so that they could see all of the sites in the *Field Guide to Flight*—there were forty-five—and I set up the schedules and took them around and so on.

**MS. DEINES:** A busy week.

**MS. JOHNSON:** Well, it was. (chuckling) Out of the landmark study, and that seemed to be important because if you're going to have a national park it has to show national significance. I believe 2003

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paid for that study because they wanted to get on a fast track is why it was happening so quickly; otherwise you had to wait till the funds became available. Well, at that time we kind of thought that the Wright Company out there at the General Motors Inland Plant would be of national significance and could be a landmark, and GM were very excited and they took it clear up to GM in Detroit. And they were all excited because they felt people always were criticizing them, but this was something they had done right. (laughter) They still had those buildings. But anyhow, when it actually came down to it, very few of these under consideration were made landmarks.

The Dunbar House was considered, and it was already a landmark; Hoover Block was considered, it wasn't made one, (whispering) which they now regret; (speaking normally) our bicycle shop, Aviation Trail Bicycle Shop was made a landmark. It was already on the National Register of Historic Places, as was a two-block area where the Hoover Block was. That was a National Register Historic District that we had worked on. Huffman Prairie, which was on Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, was made a landmark; and the airplane, the Wright's 1905 flyer, and the building in which it was in at Carillon Park was made a landmark. And I don't think anything else was, out of that study, but anyway—

**MS. DEINES:** Hawthorn Hill was.

**MS. JOHNSON:** I thought they wouldn't let them do it.

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**MS. DEINES:** It's a landmark, it's not part of the park, but they did get landmark status.

**MS. JOHNSON:** They did make it a landmark?

**MS. DEINES:** Yes.

**MS. JOHNSON:** Okay, and then they got it, got consent. Okay. Well, anyway, I was involved with taking the people around, not in doing the study, and then some other groups came in on these other studies, the alternative study, so I was involved with taking those people around, too.

**MS. DEINES:** So you're the famous tour guide. (chuckling)

**MS. JOHNSON:** I think that's about it, but I was involved in all of that from the beginning.

**MS. DEINES:** Okay. I know we've been going for a while, but I just want to wrap it up with I know that the establishment of the National Park has changed Aviation Trail's plans. Maybe if you can just talk on that for a little?

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**MS. JOHNSON:** Yes. Okay, so 2003 accomplished their objective of having a national park in Dayton in 1992. Oh, I want to back up to the Hoover Block. So, while this park thing is going on and they're trying to get the park—or maybe they already had the park—we got this money where we were going to fix the Hoover Block, and a lot of that got diverted so that we were not able to do what we wanted to do. I'll just let it go at that. (chuckling) So we were stopped on the Hoover Block. We still had this parachute thing, we had all these things in storage, we still had our idea of promoting the Wright brothers' neighborhood, all the other Aviation Trail, we needed an office. We needed a lot of things. And once the legislation was passed that said the Park Service would acquire the bicycle shop at 22 South Williams and the Hoover Block and the land in between, we were out of a home. So what are we going to do? Now we're looking around in the neighborhood. We're still committed to the neighborhood. Let's look around. What can we do? Suggested getting the 7 Hawthorn lot and putting up a replica of the house, or maybe doing something where Orville Wright's laboratory was. And we also had this Setzer Building that we had to buy with the Hoover Block. And most people, that's what they wanted to do was move over there to that Setzer Building, but it was going to take a lot of work to restore it. It had also been cited by the building inspector.

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**MS. DEINES:** As a nuisance or condemned?

**MS. JOHNSON:** No, just that we should do something with the roof or something like that. No, it wasn't to where they were going to—

**MS. DEINES:** Not to that extent?

**MS. JOHNSON:** No. And this did become a problem. Then one day it fell down. (chuckling) And that became an even greater problem. But through various sources we were able to preserve the facade, with the idea that eventually we would put a new building behind it to answer our needs. And we are now in the process of building that building.

**MS. DEINES:** So you're going to incorporate the parachute museum in there, and the offices?

**MS. JOHNSON:** The building is going to be two-story. It will abut the Hoover Block on the east side, so that the Park Service will be in there and we'll be right next door. If it works, which has been discussed, we might share an elevator, because we're planning our construction that that would be possible. The first floor is going to be museum space and a gift shop; the second floor is going to be offices, a meeting room, probably a library. Possibly . .

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. I think we would like to rent out some of the office space to help with the expenses, but we would also have an office there, and the parachute part would be a major part of the museum, though I personally hope that we will . . . I think a lot of us want to promote the whole Aviation Trail. And I'd like to emphasize: Aviation Trail is the whole Miami Valley region, and the Park Service is a part of Aviation Trail. When we do promotions, they are a site we would promote.

**MS. DEINES:** A part of it.

**MS. JOHNSON:** Yeah, because they are in these sites that are part of Aviation Trail. So it's not like you're outside of it and we're outside of it, but that . . .

**MS. DEINES:** It's working together.

**MS. JOHNSON:** It's all part of this same thing. Would you like anything else on that?

**MS. DEINES:** I can't think of anything. Was there anything that we missed that you wanted to talk about?

**MS. JOHNSON:** I wanted to finish off the bicycle shop, once I did the Hoover Block. After the national park became a reality, Bill



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Gibson was appointed superintendent, and he wanted to have his office be a presence in where the park was going to be. The three other places in the park were owned by people who, for lots of reasons, did not want to give up ownership. They all had very legitimate reasons for not wanting to do that, but to have the park they were going to have to own something, as I understand it.

**MS. DEINES:** I don't know.

**MS. JOHNSON:** That was told to us, but I don't know, I mean, whether that is true or not. (chuckling) Anyhow, that's how it came out in the legislation. So that's the reason we had to give up our two properties and the other people still keep owning and operating the ones: even though they're part of the park and they're also part of Aviation Trail, it works together.

After that, Bill wanted to have his office in the bicycle shop. And we'd never finished the upstairs, and I think Madeline was still there in the downstairs, and we'd talked about finishing the upstairs.

So we did this *big* push to finish the upstairs, and there was a lot of volunteer labor and reduced-price materials, and we scrounged around to find the money, and so we finally completed the upstairs.

I've got to do this one. Then it turns out if we have federal employees up there they have to have a second emergency escape.

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**MS. DEINES:** An exit, yes.

**MS. JOHNSON:** And they don't want to wreck the outside of the building by putting in a fire escape because that would really mess up the historic aspect. So Jack Darst and I . . . Oh, by this time we were working with Paul Brown and Son—then his son Steve Brown—Architects, to do something with the Setzer Building. Well, they found this escape system used in California, and in doing our restoration we put back a balcony on the second floor at the side that originally was used to bring the furniture up to the second floor, and so we were able to fit the emergency escape into the floor of the balcony so the historic appearance was not ruined. And I just have to tell that. (chuckling)

**MS. DEINES:** I didn't realize that they had to look so hard to find one of those escapes.

**MS. JOHNSON:** Yes, and then it turned out when it came that somebody hadn't measured right and it didn't . . . (chuckling) the ladder didn't fall down long enough. So then we had to get another model, which cost more. (chuckling)

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**MS. DEINES:** I missed out on all that. That was about when I started was when they were installing it.

**MS. JOHNSON:** Yeah, because he was going to have him . . . I guess somehow they didn't care about Bill, but when he had employees he had to have this. (laughter)

**MS. DEINES:** We had to have it.

**MS. JOHNSON:** Something like that. (chuckling) Well, I think that's about it. No. So we've since had our fourth edition of the brochure, which features the sites . . . At the time we did it, we didn't know they were going to be part of the park, but they feature those sites and they will in the future. And we put out a video last year about twenty of the sites, and through that tour of those sites, which isn't geographically . . . but chronologically we can tell the story of aviation in Dayton.

**MS. DEINES:** Okay, is there anything else?

**MS. JOHNSON:** Let me look.

**MS. DEINES:** Have I covered everything?

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**MS. JOHNSON:** You don't need to have it on.

[tape turned off]

**MS. DEINES:** Okay, you're set.

**MS. JOHNSON:** Okay, so now we are up to 1996. At the end of 1995, in November, we had the groundbreaking for our Setzer Building, which is where we're planning to move in hopefully about a year. Oh, and it looks like our dream when we came in here fifteen years ago will actually happen by the year 2003, which is bringing back the neighborhood. And that was our idea, if we could just bring it all back, make everybody aware by 2003. It looks like that is well on the way to happening.

**MS. DEINES:** Good.

**MS. JOHNSON:** That's all.

**MS. DEINES:** Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW

Added after reviewing the transcript the following material was added by Mary Ann Johnson:

We also organized three annual events to carry out our preservation and promotion aims.

1. McCook Field - Wright Field Luncheon. We were asked to take over this on-going event by the current organizers. In the beginning it was mostly for McCook Field alumni to get together. As they aged, we expanded it to include McCook's successor, Wright Field. Then it became more community-wide as a way to commemorate Orville Wright's birthday, August 19.

2. First Flight event. We were asked to take over the First Flight Luncheon/Dinner by the current sponsors, the Chamber of Commerce.

WPAFB organized the ceremony at the Wright Brothers Memorial in the morning, followed by a luncheon organized by Aviation Trail. Last year Aviation Trail organized both parts. It commemorates the First Flight on December 17, 1903, made by Orville Wright at Kitty Hawk, N.C.

3. Trailblazer Award and presentation dinner. This was originated by Aviation Trail as a fundraiser. One or two organizations or individuals who contributed something to aviation in Dayton are selected to receive the award each year. This year the fundraising aspect was dropped and the award aspect was emphasized. The dinner also commemorated Wilbur Wright's birthday, April 16.

O R A L   H I S T O R Y   I N T E R V I E W  
F O R   T H E  
H I S T O R I C   R E S O U R C E   S T U D Y   O F  
D A Y T O N   A V I A T I O N   H E R I T A G E  
N A T I O N A L   H I S T O R I C A L   P A R K

**Mary Ann Johnson**

21 February 1996  
Dayton, Ohio

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