

DAYTON AVIATION HERITAGE NHP
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEWEE: MILTON WRIGHT

INTERVIEWER: Ann Deines

DATE: September 26, 2000

AD: This is Ann Deines, and today is September 26, 2000. I'm in North Truro, Massachusetts, with Milton Wright. And if we could just start this by having you tell me a little bit about yourself, the day you were born, where, and how you're related to the Wright brothers?

MW: I was born July 3, 1920, in Dayton, Ohio. I'm a grandnephew of the Wright brothers. There were four brothers—the oldest Reuchlin, whose family are mostly in Kansas, my grandfather Lorin, who lived in Dayton, Orville and Wilbur—and a sister Katharine.

AD: Okay.

MW: Along with Otis and Ida, twins who died almost at birth.

AD: Okay. And your family did a lot with Orville Wright when you were growing up?

MW: Yes. He was very much a family-oriented man. We always had Thanksgiving dinner as a family at his house. He had a great fondness for practical jokes, and most people in the family preferred the dark meat on the turkey instead of white meat, so one of the funniest things he ever did, one year he had a pile of carved

duck behind the turkey and everybody . . . If somebody asked for dark meat, they got duck. And he thought that was very funny.

AD: But then he had enough dark meat for everyone, right? (chuckling)

MW: Yeah, he had enough that year. He had a very sort of playful sense of humor. He loved to play tricks on people, so . . .

AD: What types of things would you do with Uncle Orv when you visited there?

MW: Well, we often took walks around the place in Oakwood, and some summers we went to his island in Georgian Bay and went around from island to island on a little boat, exploring and talking. He and my grandfather, I remember, were very . . . much liked to talk and argue. They never got mad in an argument. They would go on for hours. It's said when Wilbur was alive the two would take two different sides, and before they got through they'd have switched sides, and never a raised voice. I remember one particular night when Uncle Orv and my grandfather got to arguing about two kinds of horses, a pacer and a trotter, and it ended up with the two of them down on their hands and knees demonstrating, lifting this leg and that leg and going at it for all they were worth. So . . .

AD: So they convinced each other? (chuckling)

MW: Yeah. He had a number of habits. For glasses, he would go into a dime store and pick out a pair he liked, go to the nearest trash can and break off one earpiece. He liked his glasses with just one earpiece so he could flip them on and off, and that would be his glasses—until they wore out. So he would do that.

AD: I never heard that one.

MW: Yeah, yeah. At one point on one of his cars, rather than unlock the car door, he would just take the door handle off and stick it in his pocket, and then come back to it.

AD: So was his driving as bad as I've heard it was?

MW: I think the police in Dayton had an agreement that when he drove by to look the other way. They didn't want to arrest him, but he was fast. And I remember one car, he had a great big Pierce Arrow with special air springs, and he liked to take us for a drive in the country and show how he could drive along a ditch and nothing would happen. But he had a lot of trouble, because of the injury from a plane crash, getting a car a comfortable ride. I think he had a Franklin for a while, then he had an Essex Terraplane, then a Pierce Arrow. His sister Katharine had a big Packard. They had a big Saint Bernard they named Scipio that they treated like a baby, and when they went for a ride Orville Wright would drive, Scipio got the front seat, and Katharine sat in the back seat.

AD: Did Orville do work on his car like he did with other things, to try and improve it?

MW: Yeah, one time he wasn't getting the right amount of air in the carburetor, and he was boring little holes and sticking pegs in it until he got it just right. His housekeeper wanted to hide any new appliances because he'd start messing with them, and it took an engineer to run them. Right up to the day he died, he didn't think electric refrigerators were well made and was using an icebox. I went over there once during the day and he was under the icebox spraying for termites or something. Any kind of household chore he did himself. He wouldn't hire

anybody for anything like that because he could do it better, he thought. And he was very ingenious. By himself one year when I was there, he decided he wanted the boathouse on the other side of his island in a little harbor in Georgian Bay, and he figured how to rig it up and tow it around to the other side. Then he built an inclined railroad with a cable car arrangement so we could haul baggage up and down from the . . .

AD: Oh, for where you arrived at the _____?

MW: Yeah, because it was a fairly steep climb. The island is mostly rock, and it was a good climb up there, so he did that.

AD: So the housekeeper you referred to was Carrie?

MW: Carrie.

AD: What was she like?

MW: Oh, she was a family favorite. I mean, the family were crazy about her, and her husband Charlie. They were like family members. I think Carrie had come as a little girl to work for my grandmother first, and then later went to work for Orville Wright and Katharine. Katharine then married a college sweetheart late in life, and Harry Haskell, who was editor of the *Kansas City Star*, was her husband. Orville Wright was quite resentful when she got married, because all these years she'd been the housekeeper, and he was quite put out about it, but he came around.

AD: And you said your grandfather got Orville and Katharine to talk again?

MW: Yeah. Yeah, he had to sort of get them back together. I think the bishop had something to do with it. He didn't want Katharine to go out. He wanted her to sort of be around and be the hostess forever for the family. But she had met Harry Haskell as a college student at Oberlin, and he was a widower and so they got married. Katharine didn't live too long after that.

AD: They were only married about four years?

MW: Yeah.

AD: When we were talking before, you said Carrie and her husband sort of lived at Hawthorn Hill and then had a house of their own?

MW: Yeah, they had an apartment at Hawthorn Hill, and then they had their own house, which they'd go over to occasionally. They always kept it over there, so . . .

AD: Do you know where they spent most of their time?

MW: I think just certain times for a day or two. Most of the time they lived right at the house there, although they didn't answer the door. If you rang Uncle Orv's doorbell, he answered the door. Nobody came to the door for him, he was there.

AD: _____.

MW: Yeah. So anybody who rang, any tradesman or anyone, would see him when they went there.

AD: So did Carrie's husband also work for Orville, do you know?

MW: No. I forget what his business was. He'd been in something else, but . . . He helped around there, but they had other help. They had this enormous kitchen back there. Carrie was an incredible cook, and so . . . all the family dinners there.

Christmas Day, Uncle Orv would always come to our house for sort of the middle of the day dinner, and my mother would fix roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, which he liked. And she would fix plum pudding. And Uncle Orv was a teetotaler, but my mother's plum pudding you could get a pretty good hit on just from eating the sauce, and he lapped it up. And she gave him one to take home, and Carrie served it. And he said, "It doesn't taste quite like it does at Ann's house. And Carrie said, "Oh, she might just put a touch of brandy in for flavor." "There's no liquor in Ann's plum pudding." Of course, it was straight . . . straight liquor. (chuckling)

AD: So then would your family go over to Orville's house for any part of Christmas, or did you just go over there for Thanksgivings?

MW: Christmas Eve was always a big family dinner. It was Thanksgiving and Christmas Eve. He would give a check for everybody in the family, and that family had a gift for him and so forth. So it was a regular thing every year. He would decide to drive around and visit. He never called up and said, "I'm going to come over." His car would just show up, and there he was when he went to see you.

AD: Now do you remember Katharine?

MW: Oh yeah, I remember . . . I was pretty much of a kid when she died, but I remember her very well, yeah.

AD: What was she like?

MW: Oh, she was awfully nice. As a matter of fact, she and my wife's great-aunt taught together at Steele High School in Dayton, Ohio, and were friends. But she was a very, very elegant lady, very . . . A perfect hostess for Orville Wright and Wilbur Wright and so forth. A very, very charming person, very nice to be around.

AD: Now did she do as much with the nieces and nephews, you all, like Orville did?

MW: Oh yeah, it was always all—

AD: Everyone together?

MW: Yeah, yeah. I remember my brother Wick when he was very little and there was a dinner at their house and they had pie, and Aunt Katten (?)—we called her Aunt Katten—said, “Would you like a spoon to eat your pie?” And my brother Wick in his usual way said, “We eat pie with forks at our house.” (chuckling) So I remember that very well, yeah.

AD: So you called her Aunt . . . ?

MW: Katten, mostly.

AD: Katten?

MW: Yeah, Katten. It's like . . . for Katharine, you know, when we were little.

AD: Just shortened?

MW: Yeah, yeah. And, you know, they were perfect fools about the dogs. I mean, they'd talk baby talk to every dog they saw. We had a dog, a fox terrier named Flippy, the name came from a toy that my grandfather's toy company made. The Miami Wood Specialty Company had a toy called Flips and Flops, and we had a

dog named Flips and my cousin Jack had a dog named Flops. But he would talk .

. . He would say, “Oh, Flipsy, Flipsy . . .” He’d talk to him like that all the time.

AD: You said Orville helped with the toy company?

MW: He helped design the . . . it was a little balsa wood glider that you shot with a rubber band, and it would do maneuvers. It would turn, it would do a loop-the-loop and so forth, and he would design them. And every time he perfected a design, he’d come over to our house with my grandfather and we’d go out to some fields there and he’d watch the kids try them out. So they had a toy designed by Orville Wright.

AD: And those were . . . ? How did people get them? They were through cereal?

MW: It was a premium. It was some kind of a premium thing. I forget what it was.

AD: In cereal boxes or something?

MW: Yeah, some way. But they worked quite well. And I had a summer job there once when I went to college, working at the toy factory. It didn’t go on too much longer after that.

AD: Because Orville helped design the Flips and Flops too, didn’t he?

MW: Oh yeah, yeah, all the . . . And I’m just wondering if any of those are around.

AD: Someone in Dayton said he’d just got one in an antique show, but I have never seen one.

MW: Yeah, I imagine they’re valuable if you can find one. Orville Wright had a way of . . . whenever he found wrong information about aviation or just planes in a book—in anybody’s house, I don’t care where it was—he’d immediately get out a

pen, cross out the things that were wrong, and write in the margin what was right.

When I was a student at Miami University, he came down for the day once to visit, and this was just before World War II, and they had a preliminary aviation course, a theory course, and a friend of mine was taking it. And Orville Wright said, "Let's see your textbook." And he showed him, and he started looking through it. He said, "Oh, no, no. Oh, no, no." And all these revisions. So my friend went back to class the next day and he said, "All this stuff is wrong." And the professor said, "Who said so?" He said, "Orville Wright." (chuckling)

AD: And did he believe him? (chuckling)

MW: I think so, yeah.

AD: Did you do a lot of things with Orville, where he was . . . where it was sort of official things to honor one of the inventors of the airplane?

MW: Well, there'd be these various ceremonies and we were part of them. I remember the ceremony at Kitty Hawk when they first dedicated the monument. I think I was twelve years old. I think the woman aviator Ruth Nichols made a speech, and the main speaker was then they called the Secretary of War, Patrick Hurley, a very distinguished man. He later, I think, was ambassador to China. Anyway, we were in a . . . It rained. We were up on a platform with a cover overhead, but it rained and rained. The Army . . . then it was the Army Band, the tubas filled up with water, they couldn't play. Right in the middle of Hurley's speech the tarpaulin gave way, and I thought that the secretary of war was going to drown on the spot. But it was incredible. Kitty Hawk in those days was just sand roads, a

house every five miles. There was nothing like now. I mean, it just was totally almost a desert down there, you know.

AD: Was that the first time you had been to Kitty Hawk?

MW: One of the two times I was there. Then I was there two years ago for a rededication of the monument. So I hadn't been there for a long time, yeah.

AD: Probably a large difference.

MW: Oh, what a difference! Yeah.

AD: So when you were there, did Orville tell you about their experiments down there or the flights or anything, or was it _____?

MW: They would come up in conversation. He had a lab in Dayton where he experimented with various things, and little wing foils and things used in their experiments would be sitting around the office. The world's first wind tunnel used to apply to aviation was sitting there in the office. He would take us down in the shop and let us play with . . . He had a lathe. We'd put things on the lathe and make things out of them. And just before the first plane was sent to England to . . . then the Kensington Museum, because of his argument with the Smithsonian, he assembled it in his lab there to see it all together. So I saw it then.

AD: What did he mostly do in his laboratory?

MW: I forget, he had a bunch of experiments. He made some revisions of things, I think, that were later incorporated on airplanes. He at one point was trying to make a record changer for his . . . You know they used to have the . . . There

were no long-playing records, and he had a record changer, and there was some lift in the thing, and every now and then one record would fly across the room, and he came around to the family getting old records to test until he got the thing worked out. But everything would be just sort of tailored to his uses. He had some kind of an aerial thing for radio reception there. His chair had a thing on the side to put books in front of him. It was tilted just the right angle for him, and so forth, in his house.

AD: That's the one that's in his study at Hawthorn Hill?

MW: Yeah, it's in his study.

AD: I've seen it.

MW: Yeah. If you went over in the evening, we usually sat there. Only for big parties would they sit in the living room, but that was the main place where people would gather.

AD: Then he'd use the study when he was there by himself?

MW: Yeah. And as that generation did, he always had a collar and tie on. On a warm day in Georgian Bay, he'd have a collar and tie. He did have a hat at one point. He cut a hole in each side of the felt hat and put mosquito netting over it so the wind could blow through the top and mosquitoes couldn't get to the top of his head.

AD: So did he make you all dress up too, or could you wear whatever?

MW: No. No, it was very informal. The only person that smoked in his house was his brother. Other people didn't, or they'd go outside for a cigarette. My grandfather would smoke a cigar; but he could do it, he was older.

AD: _____.

MW: He was the older brother, yeah.

AD: You were talking about the laboratory before, so that was a good transition to Mabel Beck. Could you tell me a little bit about her?

MW: Orville Wright thought she was a fine secretary, and there were all kinds of rumors about what went on. I don't think much. She was not dearly loved by the rest of the family, putting it mildly. Carrie would call up my mother and say, "You won't guess what she did," my mother would call Aunt Ivonette and say, "You won't guess what she did," and then it would go round and round and round.

AD: I've heard from other family members that when you went to the laboratory to see Orville she wasn't always very nice to you or didn't let you in right away?

MW: No, she wasn't. I remember I went once and he heard me, my voice, and she was saying something, and he said, "Oh, come down . . ." And then I had my dog in the car and she was barking, and he said, "Oh, bring ol' Flipsy in." So he brings the dog in, in the office. That didn't please Mabel Beck too much, I don't think. But she was always there.

But he was very, very fond of the family. He loved to argue with young people, loved to talk to young people. He liked to kid me about modern art all the

time, and I've got letters from him with diagrams drawn making fun of modern art which he did.

AD: So he was more traditional?

MW: Oh, he thought painting should be of pretty things, not unattractive looking things. He had some reproductions of things, Dutch Masters and whatnot around the house, mostly reproductions. But he liked to make fun of Picasso and Gertrude Stein and so forth. He was very, very traditional. I find many engineers or scientific people don't trust things that they can't sort of work out mathematically in a way. But he appreciated what I did. He would always go to exhibits, if I was in them. He loved to argue about it, and had a lot of fun.

AD: What types of things did he . . . ? Just the theory of art that he'd argue about, or the . . . ?

MW: Yeah, well, he . . . I've got a drawing of a bird in a tree, some kind of thing that's a takeoff on Gertrude Stein's "A Bird" or "A Bird in a Tree," and he would draw the diagram, little drawings on the paper. He loved to make fun of Picasso. He sent a comment on a Henry Moore sculpture once, and the sculpture had no head, and he said, "At least it didn't have her head so she had to die in shame looking at herself," or something like that. But he liked to do that.

AD: So when you were away at school, did you correspond with Orville?

MW: Yeah, and he corresponded when I was in the Army in World War II, and he was always sort of in touch with whatever the family was doing. You'd always find him there.

AD: He seemed to be very good at that. At least all the early letters that still exist _____ continued it.

MW: Yeah.

AD: Now, when Katharine got married, did she correspond with the rest of the family?

MW: She did, yeah, and kept very close contact with her brother, my grandfather, Lorin. But it just seems that she'd been used to . . . For so many years she was the hostess, and it came as a big shock to him that she would leave the house.

AD: That's a big switch after a long time.

MW: Oh yeah, yeah. But kids liked being with him. He was very . . . He never talked down. He would engage them in an argument in a very friendly way, and was really interested in whatever you were doing.

AD: You told me last night to remind you to talk about Orville at the art show in . . . Richmond?

MW: Oh, yeah. There was a little art museum in Richmond, Indiana, where he'd grown up, and an elderly lady was the director of the place. I can't remember her name now, but she had been a schoolteacher and kicked Orville out of school. Not only kicked him out of school, escorted him down the steps, I think. Luckily they were moving out of Richmond, so it didn't matter too much then. But there she was all friendly, and she's the one who'd thrown him out of school.

AD: (chuckling) So he probably wasn't the most well-behaved student as a child?

MW: I don't think [so]. He liked to play little tricks. There was a very playful side to him, I think. From what I've heard about the two of them, they would . . . Orville

would get an idea, and then Wilbur would sort of make him sort of nail it down and figure it out and work out the details. But he had a very, very brilliant mind.

AD: Did he ever talk much about Wilbur?

MW: Oh yeah, they were always talking, “Will did this and Will did that.” It was always . . . And my grandfather. There was a club of young men in Dayton called the TDB, the Ten Dayton Boys.

AD: Ten Dayton Boys.

MW: Orville was a few years younger and wasn’t actually in it, but Reuchlin was in it, my grandfather was in it, all their old friends. But they continued to meet once a year. Orville later started coming to their meetings, and up to the time the last one died, they would be at my grandparents’ house once a year for their meeting, yeah.

AD: _____ still have the minutes from those meetings. They’re at the Dayton Public Library now, _____.

MW: Yeah. I remember there was a picture that’s in several books that was always hanging in my grandfather’s study.

AD: Of the group?

MW: Of the group, yeah, the TDBs.

AD: I think he was one of the last two members.

MW: Yeah, yeah. But I didn’t see much of Reuchlin. Well, I didn’t see him at all. His widow visited in Dayton a couple times, but I didn’t really know that side of the

family too well. I guess my second cousin Wilbur would come up to the island in Georgian Bay, and George Russel was part of that branch of the family.

AD: About how many times did you go to Georgian Bay? Would you go for the whole summer to help Orville, or just for a visit?

MW: No, for a couple weeks. I don't know, I forget how many times. Two or three times, anyway.

AD: Would just the kids go, or would your whole family?

MW: The whole family would go. Rather primitive plumbing at first. Then he did get a bath outside where everybody could go to a regular bath. He had a camp cooking stove in the kitchen. When a woman would walk in the kitchen, he'd walk out, and the wives had to contend with cooking on not the best stove in the world, and so forth.

AD: (chuckling) But he was a good cook, wasn't he? Didn't he cook _____?

MW: Well, he liked to make certain things. One time he was making root beer, one time he was making popcorn balls, and various things like that, yeah. But you'll notice, if you look at those pictures of their camp at Kitty Hawk, how orderly it is. Each can is on the shelf in a perfect, perfect position, perfect row. Things weren't just thrown around.

AD: So was Georgian Bay like that, too, all in order?

MW: Pretty much. He developed a system for locking the doors so they couldn't be broken into. Some wire would trip down, then you could release it by doing

something underneath the door. He always had some kind of a gadget he was working on like that, yeah.

AD: Do you remember some of them?

MW: Hmm?

AD: Do you remember some of the gadgets?

MW: No. I remember how he'd shop for a pair of glasses at the dime store. But he was always out to improve things. He would never dream of hiring a mechanic or somebody to do something. I mean, it just was . . . If you had a problem, you'd just figure it out and do it, that's all.

AD: Now, did he try to get nieces and nephews involved in that, or would he just do it himself on his own?

MW: Oh, pretty much on his own, yeah. He positively would not give a talk at a public meeting. It was known you did not ask him to get up and say a few words. And I think everybody knows the story about Wilbur, I think in France. They asked him to make a speech, and he got up and said, "The only bird who can talk is a parrot, and the parrot doesn't fly very well," and he sat down. And that is the total collection of the Wright brothers' speeches. They would read a paper at a scientific meeting or something like that, but as far as speeches, out of the question entirely.

AD: I think because Orville didn't mind talking in public, did he?

MW: No, he wouldn't. During World War II, when Roosevelt came to Dayton, he was going to tour Wright Field and so forth. They did in the afternoon, and they were

taking Uncle Orv home, I guess, at the end of the afternoon. They were going to meet again later that night. And so the whole Roosevelt entourage was driving in the car with Roosevelt and my uncle, and they were driving him home and he said, "Oh, would you stop right here?" And Roosevelt didn't know and he said, "Sure," and they stopped the car. He said, "No use driving up there. I just live up the hill." And he skips out of the car and runs up the hill.

AD: (chuckling) Did he like Roosevelt? He liked Republicans, right?

MW: Well, in a way, though, sometimes he would have an offbeat opinion about certain people he didn't quite trust. More or less he was fairly conservative, I think, on a lot of things. And Roosevelt tried to get him to say a few words, and I think that got him, got him down, because that's something he just wouldn't do.

AD: Some people tell that story and say it sort of happened because Orville didn't want to be in the car very long with Roosevelt.

MW: Yeah. Well, he just thought it was too much fuss and whatnot. And Roosevelt had a way of . . . which I think . . . He called him Orville right away, and he thought that was a little bit . . .

AD: So, going to ceremonies and doing things like that is something Orville did because he felt he should, but he didn't really enjoy it?

MW: Yeah, he did when he had to, but he wasn't really . . . He was a member of the Engineers Club, and he sort of liked to go there and talk with people he knew.

AD: They just found a film of him, where [Colonel Edward A.] Deeds and . . . I think it's [Charles F.] Kettering, and talking on the film, and I guess Orville comes into

the room. But I think it actually recorded his voice. I haven't seen it yet. It may be the only recording of his voice that now exists.

MW: Yeah, yeah.

AD: Because he served as president of the Engineers Club.

MW: Yeah.

AD: It must mean he liked it, he was willing to do that.

MW: Yeah, he was very friendly with Kettering and Deeds. I met them a number of times as a kid. And I remember when Henry Ford brought the house and the bicycle shop up to Dearborn Village. We were up there for that. They were calling people in the family that remembered the house and details, to get everything right. My father, of course Uncle Orv was there, my grandfather was there.

AD: So actually when they were putting it back together they called the family ____?

MW: Yeah, just to be sure everything was what used to be there.

AD: So did they think they did a good job?

MW: Yeah, they did. And people thought they shouldn't go out of Dayton, but they were both on pieces of property that were being pretty much rundown. I don't think they'd have lasted too well if they hadn't taken them out.

AD: No, compared to what it is now.

MW: Yeah.

AD: But Orville must have thought it was an honor for _____.

MW: Yeah. Ford was very much after him to do this. I remember I met him and I met his son, Edsel, and all these people that we hear about. There was an Arctic explorer, Sir [George] Hubert Wilkins, up there. Orville would decide to pick up the kids to do things. I remember one time he picked up me and my brother, picked up Wick, and my cousin Jack, who . . . he died at thirteen, and took us out to Wright Field in the material testing lab, and introduced us to a friend of his from Switzerland, a Mr. [Jean] Piccard. And he had a steel ball, was having the metal tested. He was going up in the stratosphere, and he did set records for the highest in this ball. But the three boys were climbing around inside this ball that my uncle was talking to his friend out there. And at that age you don't know how significant . . . It was a friend of our uncles, he had a steel ball he was going up in. That was it, I mean.

AD: Did you realize how famous Orville was? Or was he just sort of _____?

MW: Well, it got to be, although he didn't get the attention when I was a kid that he got much later. And there's more talk about him now than when he was alive, actually. He, of course, had that long-standing feud with the Smithsonian, and finally, just before he died, gave permission for the . . . This Smithsonian did come around, and he gave permission for it to come back here, and of course the war was on. But it was in the Kensington Museum in London, which later became part of the Victoria and Albert, in that same building, I think.

AD: Is that the British Museum now?

MW: Well, the Victoria and Albert. And so when the thing was finally brought back, I remember we were in Europe then, we were living in France, and my father had to accept . . . make the speech for the family, presenting it back to the Smithsonian. I think he appeared with . . . Chief Justice Vincent and Alben Barkley were there for that presentation.

AD: So did Orville ever comment much on the controversy?

MW: Well, he'd talk about it, and he just thought that the people at the Smithsonian weren't playing straight. They were still trying to say that the Langley plane would have flown had it been properly launched. But the fact is, when they did get sort of a little launch of the thing, they had redesigned it, changed the whole thing completely, and it went not very far. And it wasn't until the Smithsonian admitted they had done this, and it was a favorite of some director of the Smithsonian and it was all involved. But when they finally came around and said they had been bad boys, he said the thing could come back.

AD: It must have been frustrating for him to find ways to _____.

MW: Yeah. I must have been ten or . . . I don't know how old I was when he assembled the plane in his lab, just before sending it to England. I can remember that.

AD: I don't remember what year he sent it over there.

MW: Yeah. I think it was probably in the . . . I'm pretty sure it was in the '30s it went over there.

AD: That's a lot of work to assemble it _____.

MW: Oh yeah.

AD: Making sure it could go back together. Because then he would have to un-
assemble it _____.

MW: Yeah, but he could put it exactly. I mean, when he did things, they were just
exactly . . .

AD: Good memory.

MW: Yeah.

AD: You weren't around then when he helped redo the 1905 airplane that's at Carillon
Park, were you? _____.

MW: Yeah. Well, that was assembled, I think, after he . . .

AD: He helped when it was dedicated _____.

MW: Yeah. Arnold, you know, who was head of the Air Corps in World War II, was
one of his students, [General Henry H.] Hap Arnold. But I remember some of the
early students. I remember Brookings—Brookie they called him—and some of
these early pilots.

AD: Did he stay in Dayton? Is that where you would have met him?

MW: No, I think a bunch of them were up at the celebration at Henry Ford's, but none
of them stayed around Dayton.

AD: A lot of the early pilots didn't make it to be around. (chuckling)

MW: Yeah. That book about the Aviation Trail in Dayton tells funny stories about the
early days of aviation. McCook Field was the government field, and they had
arrows on the runway: Chicago, this that, you head off in that direction. I like the

story in there about the first time a man ever saved himself at night in a parachute. It was an Army pilot. He was over Dayton and saw that he had to bail out. The parachute was brand new. He knew he was coming down. He threw a couple flares that didn't work. But he jumped in the parachute, and had a flashlight, it was at night, and waving the flashlight in circles, going down in somebody's back yard yelling, "Hello below! Hello down there!" And boom, he comes down in the thing.

AD: _____ surprised? (chuckling)

MW: Yeah.

AD: Who would you say, or who did you see, that were probably Orville's best friends?

MW: Well, some of them were around Dayton, some of the TDB. I think Ed Sines was one of them. He was a very close boyhood friend. He was very close with my grandfather. But there weren't too many of them around at that time when I was a kid. I think what brought on the stroke when they were . . . In fact, when he died he was running up and down the stairs trying to fix the doorbell in his house. It was very typical of him, he wouldn't hire people to do things like that. If it was anything mechanical, he could fix it, I mean.

AD: What are some of the other things that you did with him as a child, different types of outings or places you would go?

MW: Well, usually family parties, and, as I say, he would visit quite often. I remember best around Georgian Bay, going out to his . . . We used to go out to Hawthorn Hill to coast in the winter, because it had a very long good hill.

AD: It has a great hill.

MW: Yeah. We used to go out there for that at one time.

AD: And you lived in Dayton View at the time?

MW: I lived in Dayton View, yeah.

AD: Did your family drive over to Hawthorn Hill to Orville's?

MW: Oh sure. It was not a big drive.

AD: I was just thinking if there was snow on the ground _____.

MW: Yeah. No, people . . . In the East you hear about snow days and no school, there wasn't such a thing as a snow day in those days. I mean, school was open, you went, that's all. Of course, at Hawthorn Hill there was that big circular driveway, and . . . It was a very big house. And I remember when they redecorated the house, they . . . He had these doors stained with a particular stain he did himself, and they took all that off and put on white doors and all this.

AD: When NCR did it?

MW: Yeah, and it looked like a decorator had got hold of the place. It wasn't like he had it. He had those tapestried walls, and he had designed special things to hook and secure them. When it came time to clean them, he took them off the wall, he put them back on the wall.

AD: Those were in the living room area?

MW: Yeah, living room and most of the house, the big central room when you first went in. But, as I say, do everything yourself.

[End Side A, Begin Side B]

AD: Can you think of anything else you did with him?

MW: No, not right—

AD: Did you go on trips to places, or . . . ?

MW: We would go for a drive for the day, or go someplace. Sometimes the family would go to a . . . In those days people would go for a noon dinner at a country inn someplace, and they'd all go together.

AD: What did the family say? Did they ever talk about the bishop and what he was like?

MW: Yeah, he was very . . . He was very well-liked. He didn't want to say anything bad about somebody. If somebody, some kid was acting up, he'd say, "Well, they had a lot of human nature," or something like that. And my father spent a lot of time with him. He would go around . . . make his visit around . . . different parishioners out in the country. My father would go along with him, and he'd eat a chicken dinner every day. They got kind of sick of chicken. They'd always kill a chicken when the bishop came in.

AD: (chuckling) That was the special thing?

MW: Yeah. My father knew Uncle Orv's classmate in high school, Paul Laurence Dunbar, who's quite famous now. He died very young. His mother lived on in Dayton. She'd been born a slave, actually. But my father knew him pretty well.

AD: Did he ever say anything about him?

MW: No, he was . . . He wrote in two styles. He wrote in a classical style and he wrote in a dialect style. And he wrote, as a joke . . . Orville Wright printed his first books. They printed a paper, a black paper called *The Tattler*, which only went out for a few issues, that Dunbar originated. And Dunbar wrote on the wall of the print shop: “Orville Wright is out of sight in the printing business. No other mind is half so bright as his’n is.”

AD: One of the things that we have problems with is _____ how well Orville and Dunbar knew each other or if they did things together. We know they printed for Dunbar.

MW: Well, they printed for him. I don’t think any blacks and whites in those days got together for dinner in the evenings. Nobody thought why, they just didn’t do it—I don’t think.

AD: No, that’s why I wondered if your father ever said anything about him, because it’s just . . . It’s hard to document a friendship. (chuckling)

MW: Yeah. But no, they liked him. They found him kind of fascinating. He died, as I say, very young.

AD: In 1906.

MW: Yeah.

AD: Thirty-three.

MW: Yeah.

AD: Before anyone knew the Wright brothers had invented the airplane.

MW: Hmm?

AD: He died before anyone knew the Wright brothers _____ famous and knew what they'd done.

MW: Yeah.

AD: Can you think of anything else?

MW: No, not right offhand. (sound of pages turning) Here's one letter, I'll just read part of it, written in '46. "Dear _____, I'm writing you to let you know that I now in my old age am beginning to get an understanding of literature and art. I think when I've lost all my teeth, my eyes and my mind, I'll be able to understand it still better. I have read in a paper that it was Gertrude Stein who discovered and made Picasso and Matisse. Gertrude had a sensitive nose for discovering things particularly vulgar. I wonder whether Picasso and Matisse back at that time painted garbage cans or sewers depicting such a likeness as odors emanating from Miss Stein. The enclosed clipping will discuss Miss Stein's art and literature. _____ almost equally _____ to the art of Picasso and Matisse in painting." And then he's got a suggestion for making a painting more popular with the modern . . . "How could you divide your picture into panels like this? You've got a bird, two trees, then a picture of two trees with a bird in them. By the time you get back home, I shall expect you to have made a great name in art by carrying out these suggestions, and hanging a picture upside-down and on its side is now passé." (sound of pages turning) Oh, here's one, a letter about a Picasso. And he clipped this out of a magazine, and I think did some of the coloring himself.

Woman on a Beach. And after *art* he put _____ *crazy*. And here's the one he commented on Henry Moore's sculpture.

AD: Do you want to read it?

MW: Yeah. "I think Moore must be a real artist. At least he had enough sense to cut the poor woman's head off so she won't be having to blush in looking at herself. I wish some of the other modern artists had as much sense, but that's more than you can hope for."

AD: Those are good.

MW: Oh, there's a picture with him in . . . That's a boat before his bigger boat in Kitty Hawk. There's my mother. I'm there, Wick's there, my mother. And again the jacket and tie and the hat.

AD: Yeah, always dressed up. That's good. Because he got a large boat after that, didn't he?

MW: Yeah, it was a bit bigger. It had an enclosed cabin and . . . The man that acquired it eventually was up here. I think he just sold it. Will Franz's (?) father . . . The woman's father was Will Franz, who was sort of the man who did all the repairs around Georgian Bay. If you had a problem, you went to him. And that family eventually acquired the boat. And I think recently he just sold it to a collector. I'm not sure, but . . .

AD: _____. Did you go to the dedication of the memorial that's in Dayton? It would have been in 1940?

MW: Yeah, I'm pretty sure I did. I mean, we went to all those things. And I think they took a picture there with . . . Hap Arnold was part of it.

AD: Yeah, he was there.

MW: Yeah.

AD: No great memories, though? Just one of those things you did? (chuckling)

MW: No. Well, we went to many of these functions, and all friends of Orville Wright . . . And as a kid, we didn't fully appreciate what they were. We had some idea about it, but that was about it.

AD: Just something you needed to do? (chuckling)

MW: Yeah.

AD: Do you remember Orville's funeral?

MW: Oh yeah, yeah.

AD: Memorial service? Can you tell me a little bit about that?

MW: It was in the same church where they had Wick's memorial service, the Baptist church in downtown Dayton. He wasn't a churchgoer.

AD: Did he ever go at all?

MW: Well, when his father was alive, but—

AD: Oh, he did go to church then?

MW: Well, I guess his father was the bishop. But—

AD: Because I thought he quit going earlier.

MW: That wasn't a family where people went around saying, "The Lord will punish you." I mean, nobody discussed religion much. And he had heard that minister

make a speech someplace, and he said he's the only minister he'd heard that had made any sense at all when he talked, so they decided to have that funeral there, and after that they all went out to the graveyard. They stopped all the traffic on Main Street . . .

AD: The streets were quite crowded, weren't they?

MW: Hmm?

AD: The streets were very crowded, weren't they? _____.

MW: Yeah, but they stopped all the traffic, and they had . . . I remember when we passed a fire station, all the firemen were outside with their . . . at attention. They had a gun salute at the funeral. But . . . that's what I can remember about it, yeah. They got Carrie to come over to the hospital when he was there, to fix his food for him and so forth.

AD: That's special treatment. (chuckling)

MW: Yeah.

AD: That's good.

MW: I mentioned he had two little . . . actually student paintings of mine he had hanging in his study. I gave them to Carrie after he died.

AD: Carrie didn't have any children, right?

MW: No.

AD: So you have no idea where your paintings are?

MW: No. She had nieces and nephews and whatnot, so probably somebody there's got them. Charlie Grumbach, Uncle Orv used to kid him all the time. Nobody knows

why, nobody . . . He always rooted for the Pittsburgh Pirates. Nobody in Dayton had ever heard of the Pittsburgh Pirates, but Charlie rooted for the Pittsburgh Pirates, and Uncle Orv used to kid him about that all the time.

AD: Did he even follow sports very much?

MW: Oh, he used to like to go to football games. The—I've forgotten his name—then president of Ohio State always invited him down, with two tickets on the fifty-yard line. He often went down to watch the games at Ohio State.

AD: I had no idea.

MW: Yeah.

AD: I wouldn't have thought he watched sports.

MW: No, he enjoyed them, and listened to sporting events on the radio or . . . But he would drive down to Columbus for those Ohio State games. I think he probably went to some games at Miami, I'm not sure.

AD: It would make sense, with all of you going there.

MW: Yeah. But, of course, you know my father went to Miami, his brother Buss went to Miami later, Ivonette and my mother went to a college in Oxford, Ohio, which became part of Miami. Oxford College became part of Miami later, during the Depression. Katharine was always very involved with Oberlin because she went there. And my father's sister Leontine went to Oberlin.

AD: Did Orville encourage all the nieces and nephews to go to college?

MW: Yeah. Not with money. (chuckling) Although he helped Wilbur out quite a bit, because Reuchlin's _____. Well, because Wilbur's father married after his

mother his mother died, funds not available to Wilbur, I don't think, and so he had Wilbur . . . He sent him to military school for a while, then sent him to college at Oberlin.

AD: _____ because Carillon Park just got donated a printing press that Orville gave to Wilbur to help him raise money to go to school or something. _____.

MW: Yeah, he had a little printing business.

AD: Just little printing jobs he'd do?

MW: Yeah. I think Wilbur taught in college out in Colorado or someplace.

AD: Colorado College?

MW: Yeah, he did. Yeah.

AD: Never heard of him, but I never took a science course there.

MW: Yeah. And George Russel, who would also go to Georgian Bay, he just died about a year or so ago, I think.

AD: Oh, did he?

MW: Yeah, I think I'd heard he did. I saw him in '98 in Kitty Hawk, but I think he—

AD: Yeah, I saw him down there, because I actually went up there and interviewed him also.

MW: Yeah, I think he died in the last year or so. I vaguely remember seeing Wilbur's sister Katharine. I don't know what became of her.

AD: The two parts of the family were sort of separated? _____.

MW: We saw them some, but they were all around Kansas someplace.

AD: Which makes a difference _____.

MW: Yeah. And Reuchlin, in some way, didn't have too much contact with the family after a certain point, I don't think. I knew his widow but I never met him. My uncle, we called him Scribze, Ivonette's husband, had been a World War I pilot, and so . . .

AD: I didn't realize that.

MW: Hmm?

AD: I didn't realize that.

MW: Yeah, he wore a pin, people that had a pilot's license before 1918.

AD: Oh, the Early Birds.

MW: Yeah. And we met some of . . . Some of the Early Birds, the real early ones. We met . . . The New York Hall of Fame, when they dedicated the Wright brothers bronzes at New York University had a big presentation. I don't know what's happened _____, but New York University had this Hall of Fame and bronzes of famous Americans, and some of these real early fliers were talking there about things that happened, and . . . They would have a crash and they'd say, "Oh, well, so and so happened. Somebody would go down with . . ." They'd hang up some kind of thing to see which way the wind was blowing, and . . . It was really an adventurous thing, flying in those days. And the Wright brothers were always well-dressed. They would take off a formal hat and put on a cap maybe, but they were always well-dressed. You probably heard that my aunt Katharine and Mrs. Berg started the fashion fad of the hobble skirt.

AD: Yeah.

MW: Tying a rope around their skirt so it wouldn't blow in the wind.

AD: Makes sense. (chuckling)

MW: Yeah.

AD: Is that it?

MW: Yeah, I used to . . . I remember Uncle Orv had one friend from England who had been . . . he was very upper-class, Griffith Brewer would come to see him, very tweedy and English, periodically. Of course, he knew Rolls of Rolls-Royce and all those people, Edward VII, and pictures of him with them.

AD: Well, thank you. You can't think of anything else, right? (chuckling)

MW: No.

AD: _____ an hour. Just _____.

MW: But you saw in the other house the alligator from the funeral. I mean that was from a wedding.

AD: Tell me that again.

MW: Well, when Leontine and John Jammeson got married, they got married at his house, and I was about three years old, and there was an old dried baby alligator Uncle Orv always had in his study. And right at the most crucial moment of the ceremony, I speak up in this three-year-old voice and say, "Oh, look at the alligator!" and broke up the whole thing.

AD: I'd never heard that about that wedding. (chuckling)

MW: Yeah. He tried different automobiles to find one that was comfortable to ride in. I think Ford recommended he try a Buick at one time. That didn't work. Then

they had some kind of a presentation hooked in with Amelia Earhart for a Hudson Terraplane. He had that for a while. But he loved to drive _____. He drove very efficiently but very fast.

AD: Not dangerous?

MW: Yeah. Well . . .

AD: I guess he learned to fly an airplane before he learned to drive, right?

MW: Yeah. Well, you had to be an athlete to fly the first planes. You had a cradle on your hips to work the wings, you've got one lever to take you up or take you down, one's for engine speed. You had to be pretty adept physically just to do it, I mean.

AD: It wasn't anything that was instinct, you just had to work at learning how.

MW: You know, a lot of people have this concept of invention. They do some experiment and they say, "Whoopee, it flies." They knew it was going to go up. They'd worked out the problems. They had figured out the . . . The tables they figured out on wind resistance are still used to day, I mean, so they . . . They were the first ever to apply a wind tunnel to the problems of flying.

AD: Did Orville ever talk about why they got interested in trying to invent an airplane?

MW: No, it would just come up in conversation. You know, he was very curious about everything, very . . . So they would . . .

AD: And that was one that caught their attention.

MW: Yeah.

AD: No, his funeral was just before we went to Europe to live, then later on they dedicated the . . . brought the plane over. I remember the first time I went to Kitty Hawk as a kid. We went down to . . . I think on a boat from Washington to Norfolk and then drove. And one of the people on the boat was a very dashing Frenchman who had been a member of the Lafayette Espadrille, you know, and he was clicking his heels around the place. And Patrick Hurley got my father aside to listen to his speech before he tried it out down there. And that's just before he got almost drowned, I swear.

AD: Not a good day for a dedication. (chuckling)

MW: Yeah.

AD: That was a big event there.

MW: But Kitty Hawk was just a . . . it was almost a desert. I mean, the changes, what's happened there is just amazing.

AD: And all the buildings.

MW: Hmm?

AD: And all the buildings.

MW: Oh, it's unbelievable!

AD: Okay, well, thank you.

MW: Okay, you're welcome. _____.

END OF INTERVIEW

