

University of Dayton

eCommons

---

Wright Brothers - Charles F. Kettering Oral  
History Project

University Archives and Special Collections

---

2-20-1967

## Interview with William Huffman

William Huffman

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ecommons.udayton.edu/archives\\_wrightkett\\_oh](https://ecommons.udayton.edu/archives_wrightkett_oh)

---

### eCommons Citation

Huffman, William, "Interview with William Huffman" (1967). *Wright Brothers - Charles F. Kettering Oral History Project*. 12.

[https://ecommons.udayton.edu/archives\\_wrightkett\\_oh/12](https://ecommons.udayton.edu/archives_wrightkett_oh/12)

This Transcript is brought to you for free and open access by the University Archives and Special Collections at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Wright Brothers - Charles F. Kettering Oral History Project by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact [mschlange1@udayton.edu](mailto:mschlange1@udayton.edu), [ecommons@udayton.edu](mailto:ecommons@udayton.edu).

WRIGHT BROTHERS - CHARLES F. KETTERING  
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON

Project Director, 1967: Dr. Wilfred S. Steiner  
Project Director, 1975-76: Johannah Sherrer

Editor: Kathy Kelto

WILLIAM HUFFMAN

Interviewed by

Susan Bennet

on

February 20, 1967

SB This is a tape of Mr. William Huffman, who knew the Wrights at the time when they were testing their planes. This is February...

WH Twentieth.

SB Twentieth, 1967. Okay, Mr. Huffman.

WH I entered Steele High School in the fall of 1903. One of my teachers was Miss Katharine Wright who taught Latin. The Wright Brothers made their first flights down at Kitty Hawk, on, I think, it was December the seventeenth. And they made four flights in one day. After those flights, they came back to Dayton, and were looking around for a field in which to conduct their experiments. It so happens that my father, Torrence Huffman, had a farm of something over four hundred acres, about seven and a half miles east of Dayton on the Dayton and Springfield Pike. One of the fields in this farm had something like eighty acres in it. It was a flat field, with a fence around the field. This seemed to be suitable for the Wright Brothers' experiments and they came to see my father about using it and he let them use it for a number of years, rent free. I took Latin under Miss Wright and after they started to, their experiments, on the field at the farm, she used to tell me when she thought they would be going to make a flight. Well, in the early part of 1904, I went out to the farm quite a number of times, but each time that I went out for some reason or another, they would be unable to make a flight. The field was located about seven and a half miles east of Dayton and the traction line ran along the side of the field. And the traction ran between Dayton and Springfield and the cars would leave Third and Jefferson Streets every hour and my father would quite often go out about three o'clock in the afternoon and I would go with him. And then maybe we would stay out at the farm a couple of hours and

then come back, get into town about five thirty or six o'clock. The Wrights made a number of short flights during the year 1904. In 1905, they made considerable progress and long towards September, made a number of fairly long flights. I happened to be out at the farm on October the fifth, and as we were walking up to the farmhouse, they started up in their plane, and the farmer's son came along in the wagon in which he was hauling corn, and I sat up on the wagon and we watched them while they were making this flight. They circled the field thirty-eight times, the total distance, I believe about twenty-four miles. And the flight lasted thirty-seven minutes. They came down because they ran out of gasoline. And that was the first time that they had ever made a flight when we came down because they were out of gasoline. Do you want to try to see if I'm sounding alright or...

SB Okay.

(break in tape)

WH Well, now, let me think a minute. See what...

SB Did you ever have any desire to fly with them? Did any of the kids ever ask them if they would go up? The boys?

WH Are we being recorded now?

SB Yes, yes.

WH No, I don't think so, well, of course, now in the early days, you better cut that off a minute, let me, let me think a little bit about this course...

(break in tape)

SB Now, we're recording.

WH It is my recollection that they made one more flight during 1905 and then shut down for the winter. Apparently, they had pretty well solved many of their problems, and after 1905, many flights were made at the field. Of varying distances. Let me shut it off.

(break in tape)



SB Did they, when you went up there as a boy, did they chase you away or were they nice to you?

WH Well, of course, my, my dad knew the Wright Brothers, and I met them and they were very kind to me. They let me come into the field and hang around the hangar there and watch operations. Of course, they didn't let the general public come into the field because they didn't want people doing that.

SB How did they get, how did they get rid of people. Were people that curious or were they not curious. I mean, if they came out, how did they really, how were they able to keep the crowd away?

WH Well, of course in the early days, there never was a time when it were many people there, and well, one thing, there was a barbed wire fence around the field, and they didn't seem to have too much trouble keeping people out as far as I know.

SB What, was there any particular difference between the two brothers, they're spoken of so often together. Did you notice in any particular difference in their personality. Do you remember? How Wilbur acted, and how Orville acted?

WH Well, they, of course, they were slightly different in build. Wilbur was the taller of the two and he was slender than Orville was. They were both quiet; they didn't have much to say. Both were very, always very nice to me.

SB Yes, did you ever want to fly the plane?

WH Well, back at that time. Of course, they didn't, they didn't take anybody up in the planes, there was just room for the, whoever was operating the plane. It wasn't until some years later on that they had room for more than one person on the plane.

SB It looks so scary, those things look so, so fragile and rickety. Didn't, weren't people impressed by the danger of it, flying around like that?

WH Well, I don't think people thought of it as being so fragile.

SB Oh, really?

WH I was always very much interested in watching them fly and I went out to the farm a good many times to see them go up before I finally saw it fly.

SB Is that so? Did they have any mechanics up there who worked with them at the time, or was usually just the two brothers?

WH No, they had one or possible two mechanics. I don't think that, during the early years, I don't think they ever had more than a couple of men helping them.

SB How could they have landed those planes without breaking them all up?

WH Well, they had sort of like sled runners underneath the plane.

SB How did they get it started?

WH How did they get it started?

SB Yes.

WH Well, they had a track just a single rail and they started up the motor and then they would go along the track for a distance of a hundred feet or so.

SB Did they push it?

WH And then, then they would just gradually take off. And later on, well, they found that was something of a chore starting it on the track. And they erected a tower at the start of the track and had a rope that went from that tower along the bottom of the rail clear down to one end, and back to the plane. And when they get ready to make a flight, they start the motor and then they would release the weight at the top of the tower and after, we would pull the plane along the track, and they got started in much shorter space. Maybe sixty or seventy feet. They would take off.

SB They were pretty ingenious, weren't they?

WH Yes, they were, very...

- SB Making all these things. Was your father impressed with, do you remember what did he think of them as, oh, as people who were dreamers. Or did he really, as a businessman or as a banker, do you think he had faith in the commercial possibilities in this, of the plane that they were working with.
- WH Well, I think he had, I think he had faith in them.
- SB As individuals?
- WH I think he was in, he was interested in them. I think he liked them both. I think he thought they were men of ability. I don't think anybody at that time gave them too much to the commercial possibilities of the plane. I think if anything they were more, well, if you go back and read Kelly's book, I think you'll read that in the early stages you saw them more connected with war than anything else.
- SB Yes, yes I just wondered from a businessman's point of view or a banker's point of view whether that plane would have been considered a good investment in those early days or whether that was just wild.
- WH Well, I never heard my father say anything about that angle.
- SB Yes, it seems so beyond the realm of imagination in a way, that many years ago.
- WH But as a kid, it fascinated me. I...
- SB I imagine so. Were most kids fascinated with it or was it too exotic? Were they more interested in bicycles and things like that?
- WH Well...
- SB I mean, the kids in Dayton.
- WH Of course, back in those days, you remember that there weren't very many automobiles around and it was seven and a half miles out there, and to ride out and back in a horse and rig, would take a good part of the, well, it would take all afternoon. And, of course, people could go out on the traction, I don't know. How many people did. But...
- SB I imagine the automobile had a lot more fascination to the younger generation than the airplane.



WH Oh, I don't doubt that, at that time, yes.

SB It seems logical that it would. Do you remember when Mr. Wilbur died, did Mr. Orville ever work on the planes with the same enthusiasm, do you remember that period?

WH Well, of course, the time when Wilbur died, the plane had been pretty well developed, he had been over to France, and made flights over there and he had made flights in the East, and made flights in Washington and all. And I don't know to answer you. I don't believe that he ever took the active interest or as much of an interest in it after Wilbur died than he did before. I think it's...of course was a shock to him, when Wilbur died. And they were, they had always worked very closely together.

SB How much time did they work on the planes, did they still have their bicycle shop at this time, didn't they? When they were working in planes.

WH Oh yes.

SB Did people buy bicycles from there here in Dayton?

WH Well, their bicycle shop was over on the West Side. And there were a couple of bicycle shops downtown, and most of the people that lived downtown bought their bicycles, I think, from those downtown shops.

SB Oh, is that so. They were not known as big businessmen, in other words, they were just another business here in town.

WH That's right.

SB How was Miss Wright as a teacher?

WH Oh, she was a very nice teacher. She was a good teacher.

SB Was she very hard?

WH What?

SB Was she hard?

(laughter)

WH Well, I flunked Latin.

(laughter)



WH The first year.

SB Well, that answers that. A number of people of...

WH (Of course I can't, what?)?

SB A number of people seem like they did. That first year of Latin must have been real tough.

WH Yes, I flunked and then I went to Miss Rotterman that summer and made it up and then I came back and took sophomore Latin the following year from Miss Myers.

SB She didn't mind, she didn't mind failing them. Yesterday, I talked to Mr. Stout there, and she flunked him too.

WH Oh, she did.

SB He said she made a big impression on him.

WH Well, I'll tell you I don't know from what, when I was in grade school there was about a half dozen of us that studied one summer. And we went from the sixth grade into the eight. And I think maybe I got into high school a little bit early on the early side. And I think that first year, it took me a little while to kind of get accustomed to studying and get into the groove of things.

SB Did the Wrights ever speak of a formal education. They didn't seem to be very much impressed with it.

WH I don't know.

SB They didn't seem to be.

(break in tape)

SB Wait a minute, now.

(break in tape)

WH See whether they're going to make a flight, whether they made a flight would depend a lot on conditions that particular day. If the wind...

SB You mean the weather.

WH Yes, if there was a high wind, why they wouldn't go up, or maybe it was a

dead calm they might not go up, they would have trouble getting off the ground. And after all, they knew when <sup>they were</sup> their making a flight they were taking risks and they were the type of individual they were not inclined to take undue resks if they didn't have to, which was good.

SB Yes, in fact they seemed to have been such quiet individuals that this almost seems like it was not typical of their other nature, that reaching out for something that was so entirely new and so entirely different and dangerous.

WH Yes.

SB It doesn't seem to be quite in keeping with their basic nature, this seems to be their great interest.

WH Well, no I don't think it's any question, but what it was was their great interest and I do think that they studied things very carefully before they did things.

SB Yes, they certainly did, and it's amazing that they were able to like building the wind tunnel. Did you ever see the wind tunnel that they built?

WH No.

SB Yes, that hadn't even been thought of.

WH Well, I think I saw a model of it out at the airport some day.

SB Yes, there's one out there.

WH But I never saw it when in the early days, no.

SB What did they have in the hangar besides the planes. Did they keep anything else out there?

WH No, the hangar was, was very plain. The first hangar they had was just a wooden shed about oh, I would say maybe thirty feet square, something like that. And then, after the year two, they decided they wanted a larger hangar.

SB Now, did they build it themselves, or did they have somebody help them or where did, I mean the physical building of the...Do you remember?

WH Oh, I don't know, I don't know about that. I suppose they had somebody come out and do it for them. It was a very plain framed building. And, they gave the old hangar to my father. And he took it and moved it up to where the other farm buildings were. And I don't know where the farm buildings were. (?) And then they built a larger hangar. But there was nothing fancy about them. They and all they had in them was just maybe parts and such tools that they might use and things like that.

SB How were those first engines were pretty simple, weren't they?

WH Yes.

SB But they were gasoline engines? I bet you were a nuisance out there in a lot of ways.

(laughter)

WH No, I don't think I was.

SB They made you stay outside.

WH Well, they didn't have to make me. My dad had told me if I wanted to go over there, why I had to behave myself so...

(laughter)

SB Do you remember the celebration they had for them?

WH Very well.

SB Could you tell me something about that?

WH Well, I was in school up at Grandville at that time, and it was held just about at our commencement time. I remember that we had a dance the day before the Wright Brother celebration and we stayed for the dance at Grandville and then we walked over to Newark to catch the train down to Dayton the following morning, and that was the distance of seven miles.

SB My goodness.

WH But we got down here in time for the celebration. And that was a very, very fine parade.

SB Who, what was in the parade?



WH They had arches, or I mean decorations on Main Street.

SB Who was in the parade? I mean, did they have a marching band, or something like that, like they do here?

WH Oh, they had, I don't know who was in the parade, but it was quite a parade. Probably different local organizations, I suppose, and bands.

SB Did the mayor come out.

WH What announcement? (?)

SB Who was mayor then? Do you remember?

WH Very good question. (laughter) I don't remember.

SB Yes, and they were both were here at that time, weren't they?

WH Yes, oh, yes.

SB Wasn't Wilbur and Orville here. Did people in Dayton finally become impressed with them, or were they still just the two fellows with the bicycle shop, do you think?

WH Oh, no, I think after, oh, by 19...by the end of 1905, people were pretty impressed with them, yes.

(break in tape)

SB Did they sit up and take notice?

WH Well, they weren't, to my knowledge, when you speak about dignitaries.

SB Well, I really meant that the friends came first. Didn't they?

WH Oh, yes. Well, I'm glad you bring that up because I (tape noise)... Something that I was going to mention to you. And I almost forgot about it. See the traction came in down here and it came to Third and Jefferson Streets. And my father, the bank that he was in was in the Northeast corner of Third and Jefferson there, and that building is still there. And...

SB What bank was that?

WH Fourth National Bank.

SB Fourth National.

WH They later sold out to Dayton Savings and Trust. The first people that



came over to this country, as far as I know to, were some French people. I think the French seemed to be more interested than the people in the United States were, I mean our own government. And the same way, and the British came next to the French, I think, in the interest, and it took our government quite a while before they really showed any interest. It took the French and the British to wake us up. Now, is this being recorded?

SB Yes.

(laughter)

WH Well, that's behind you, that's true. Well, actually, there was a Mr. Cabot. Of course, this is all in the book. But there was a, and he had an interest in it and he had a cousin, Henry Cabot Lodge and Henry Cabot Lodge had enough influence that he told the Ordnance Department to look into this, now the Wrights had written to the Ordnance Department. But they, you know, they got...

WH Well, even after that it took a long time for the...

SB Yes, it did, but that was the original thing. But, let's get back to the French.

WH Well, what I was going to say, there was some, two or three Frenchmen, that came over to this country and they came out to Dayton. And they talked to the Wright Brothers and then the Wright Brothers referred them to different people who had witnessed their flights. And among them they talked to my father; they talked to Benny Billman, he was just a youngster and he's the boy that told them about plane, short a tilly. And they talked to me. And I, they talked to me out there in my father's office, there in the bank. And at that time I was taking French in high school. They would talk back and forth to each other in French. They had somebody with them who could speak French and also speak English and he would act as the interpreter, and he would ask me questions and then I would reply and then he would tell them

in French what I had said. One of the principle<sup>a</sup> things that they were interested in seemed to be the ability of the plane to bank on the turns. And I didn't realize at that time, the importance of anything of that kind. I don't think I maybe emphasized that on their ability to bank on the turns. And when they saw this young Billman and he said about the plane flying around and swishing around, that was the kind of answer they really wanted.

SB Your, what was your impression of the Frenchmen, do you remember?

WH Well, they were very pleasant, they had a hunch I was taking French because I would be listening to them, you know, just other than talking to them. They asked me the question if I spoke French, and I told them I was taking it in high school.

SB Oh, did you think they didn't want you to know what they were saying?

WH No, no, no, I don't think so.

SB Well, were you doing better in French then you did in Latin?

WH Yes.

(laughter)

I liked French.

SB Yes, that's interesting. Were they big men or were they little men, or did they seem...?

WH Just medium size.

SB Yes, did they seem, oh, ill at ease here or did they...?

WH No.

SB Not at all?

WH Oh, no, they were very polished men.

SB Did they, how long did they stay?

WH Well...

(break in tape)

Well, I just saw them that one day. I don't know how long they were here.

SB I wonder why they, why they wanted to speak to you. They figured a youngster

would be more honest or I wonder why they, or was it just because you were there at your father's, with your father at the time.

WH Well, the Wright Brothers told them that I had seen a number of their flights.

SB Oh, I see.

WH ...and then they knew that I had seen this long flight, the one of twenty-four miles. Which was the longest flight that had been made up to the end of about 1905. And, of course, I had been out to the farm a good many times. And...see dad would go out there once or twice a week. And often times I would go with them.

SB Your father was actually going out on the farm business, I imagine, and you went along to watch them fly, is that it?

WH That's right. Well, I you see, my father owned this farm and he had two farmers on there with us. Something over four hundred acres in the farm and he had two farmers, one farmed the lower half and the other the upper half, and they farmed those shares. In other words, my dad got half of what they produced and they got half of what they produced.

SB Of that farm?

WH And this field, what they used for a pasture, of course, the farmer had his cattle in this field, and my father didn't have interest in the cattle and when he let the Wright Brothers have the field, why he said something to them about looking out for the cattle. The only reason he said that to them was because they belonged to the farmer, had certain responsibility in connection with it.

SB I imagine the cattle would hurt more than the plane, in those days too.  
(laughter)

He was interested in that. How long did the Frenchmen stay? Just a couple of days, or...?

WH I don't know.

SB They stay down in the hotel I suppose downtown?



WH All I know about the Frenchmen was that one day when I saw them and talked to them.

SB Did any other people approach your father after this about the authenticity of the flights?

WH Not to my knowledge.

SB Okay, alright, you said you had, you had Mr. Kelly's book and you took it over to Orville to autograph?

WH Yes, I took it over to Orville to autograph over at his laboratory over there on Broadway. And I had a very nice talk with him, and he wrote a little piece in there which I appreciated very much in which he referred to the fact that as a youngster, I witnessed a number of their early flights out there on the Huffman Prairie. I also have a postcard that Wilbur Wright sent to my father back in 1911, I think it was, when he went over to France. And this card has on it a picture of the light that was made there after the (tape failure)

...other side of the card, it's addressed to my father. And it says, "A reminder of old times, sincerely Orville and Wilbur Wright."

SB Oh, is that so?

WH Yes.

SB Did the book...

WH One of his prides.

SB Did Wilbur seem to be more of the leader at that time, of the two brothers in dealings? Or did they seem to work together?

WH Well, I have no way of knowing about that.

SB Well, that's very interesting. Tell me about when General Arnold came to fly a plane.

WH Well, of course, after they had the plane fairly well protected (tape failure) ...perfected, they had a team of young men who they trained to fly the planes and these young aviators would go around the country and put on exhibition



flights at county fairs and other places. And they were fellows like Walter Brookins, and Clifford Turpin, and Parmelee and a number of others that went around making these exhibition flights. Of course, General Arnold who came out to Dayton along about 1911, I think, received his training out at the field.

SB He was not, he wasn't in the service then, was he? He came as a civilian.

WH Oh, he was in the service at that time.

SB Oh, he was?

WH Yes.

(break in tape)

(end of side one)

(start of side two)

SB ...and all the paraphernalia that those early flyers wore.

WH I don't know.

SB Oh, you don't?

WH I think some of the, was in they had their caps on backwards, is that what you're?

SB Yes, yes.

WH Yes, yes.

SB The Wrights always flew in regular street clothes, didn't they?

WH That's right.

SB They didn't go into wearing extra dress or anything at any time?

WH No.

(break in tape)

(end of tape)

(some voices, but too faint to understand)

## INDEX

- Bicycle shop, 6
- Billman, Benny, 11, 12
- Brookins, Walter, 15
- Cabot, Godfrey Lowell, 11
- Clothing, for flying, 15
- Dayton, Ohio celebrations,  
9-10
- Dayton Savings & Trust, 10
- Derrick catapult, 4
- Flights, exhibition, 14-15
- Flights, Wright
  - 1904 (Huffman Prairie),  
2
  - 1905 (Huffman Prairie),  
2
- Foreign interests
  - British, 11
  - French, 11-13
- Fourth National Bank, 10
- Granville, Ohio, 9
- Hangars, Huffman Field, 8-9
- Huffman, Torrence, 1, 5, 10,  
14
- Huffman Prairie, 1, 3, 13,  
14
- Kelly, Frank, 5, 14
- Lodge, Henry Cabot, 11
- Myers, Miss, 7
- Newark, Ohio, 9
- Parmelee, Phil O., 15
- Public's interest in  
Wrights, 3, 5, 10
- Rotterman, Miss, 7
- Skids (landing), 4
- Springfield, Ohio, 1
- Steele High School, 1
- Stout, Henry, 7
- Turpin, Clifford, 15
- U.S. Board of Ordinance, 11
- Wind-tunnel, 8
- Wright, Katharine, 1, 6-7
- Wright Brothers
  - character, 3, 6, 8,  
14