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Interview with James Wilbur Jacobs

James Wilbur Jacobs

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SB March 4, 1967. This is a tape of Mr....
(break in tape)

SB ...James
JJ W.

SB W. Jacobs
JJ W. is for Wilbur.

SB Okay, Mr. James Wilbur Jacobs, we'll get it official. And Mr. Jacobs knew Mr. Orville Wright when Mr. Jacobs was a boy. When do you remember the first time that Wilbur Wright came to your home.

JJ Well, well I never knew Wilbur Wright...

SB I mean Orville, pardon me.

JJ I knew Orville Wright as a very small boy. And since you've talked to me, I began to search my memory, it seems to me that the first time I can remember Orville Wright, was when I was about six years old. And this was in 1924 when the national air races were held in Dayton, at Wilbur Wright Field which is now the Harrison field portion of Wright and Patterson Field. And Wright Field, Patterson, Wilbur Wright Field then was the site of the 1924 air races and it was sort of a homecoming affair for the Wright brothers as I remember. I remember my father helping Orville put the first Wright airplane together, and it was taken out and put in a hangar at Wilbur Wright Field for public display. This was really one of the first times that, I believe, the Wright brothers ever showed their first airplane publicly, other than I believe at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology maybe back in 1915 or '16. But here they had the airplane out for public display and I remember them having a rope around it. And I crawled underneath
the rope and into the plane, and, of course, subsequently chased out by my father, and Orville Wright. But this was about the first time I can recall meeting Orville, of course he didn't mean much to me then. I was a very young boy, and he was just another person. But it was this event of the 1924 air races, that really sticks in my mind for several reasons besides that. Besides seeing the Wright airplane for the first time, they also had at the air races the big Barling bomber. Which was the largest airplane in the world at that time. It had six engines on it, six Liberty engines, and it was a tri-plane. It was a great thing to see then, because it was a mammoth airplane by comparison to other airplanes of the day.

SB Was this an American plane?

JJ This was an American plane but it was designed by Walter Barling who was an Englishman who came over and designed that airplane here and the airplane was tested and flown at McCook Field, and I believe it was flown by Lieutenant Harold Harris who later on became a force in developing Pan American Airways. But the gliding bomber was a great thing to see and it flew over Dayton many times, and it would thunder and roar and shake the houses it went over. But it was quite a sight for a young boy as I remember.

SB I bet that little Wright plane looked awful small.

JJ It was by comparison. And...

SB Do you remember if Mr. Wright was particularly careful with it, or did that make any impression at all?

JJ Of the first plane?

SB Yes.

JJ No, I don't recall that except I know they did have the plane roped off so that people obviously wouldn't climb aboard it or do anything else to it damage the plane particularly.
SB Was this in a hanger out there?

JJ It was in a hangar at the field, and rope around it. And people could go around the plane and look at it. Although I don't really believe that those days that people were really impressed by, or it had yet dawned on them really truly what, what had happened here in Dayton, what effect this was going to have on the world, and the world of transportation. I think that particularly Daytonians always felt or looked with the Wright brothers with rather an indifferent kind of eye. They never really gave them any hero worship in any great sense. I think that their achievements were recognized but not really appreciated in the sense that they felt that something tremendous had happened here, and this was the birth place of it. And unfortunately for many, many years that attitude has remained in the community. And only recently have we seen some interest in recognizing what happened here, and trying to save what is left of the memory and the artifacts of the Wright brothers. So that was my first recollection—recollection of Orville Wright. I always thought of him as a rather quiet kind of person with a sense of propriety about him. Never much outgoing but with a twinkle in his eye that kind of let you know that inside he had feelings which he didn't, as an individual couldn't, openly express. There was a reserve about him.

SB When he came to your home, would he speak to you or was he only interested in your father or...?

JJ The thing that I remember about Orville when he came to my home, and I remember several stories my mother would tell later on. He would come to my father's home, they were close associates. My father really, as far as I know, started with the Wright brothers about 1909 when they organized their Wright Airplane Company for the purpose of going into the manufacture of
airplanes. My father, prior to that time, had been working with the Barney
and Smith Car Works, and had acquired quite a talent in wood and in finishing
and in handling the woods. And of course in the early days, woods were the
primary construction materials for airplanes. So from this, my father went to
the Wright Company and went to work in their factory. Was foreman, I believe,
of their wood section for a while. And, over the years, developed a growing and
a more personal relationship, particularly with Orville Wright. And so through
the years, from 1910 up to his death, Orville Wright and my father were
associates in a sense, I wouldn't say that they were very, very close
friends in the sense that they would visit back and forth for social reasons.
Orville Wright was not this kind of person. He was always busy, always had
things of his own he wanted to do. He wasn't very socially inclined. But
when there were problems of one kind or another involved with some things
that Orville was working on, or some idea he had that he wanted to generate,
quite often he would come over to my father's house and they'd go down in the
basement, where my father had a sort of a work shop. We had tools, power
tools and things of this nature, and they would, together, sit down and
work out and make them of themselves some apparatus to demonstrate a
principle or something of that sort.

Was it with, with the plane. On the plane?

No, this is after the time of planes that I'm talking now. This would be in
the period probably from about 1927, '28, '29, '30, '31 in that area. Yes, but
even after that.

Well, he was not with the Dayton-Wright Airplane Company at that time.

Mr. Wright wasn't, was he?

Mr. Wright, after the Wright brothers established their factory in about
1910, I believe it was in about 1916, that they sold out their interest to
an eastern group of capitalists, industrialists, and formed I believe the
Wright Aeronautical Company. At that point Mr. Wright did not have any further connection with the interest of the Wright Company. But with the coming of the war, people such as Colonel Deeds, and Boss Kett, and Harold Talbott I believe, formed the Dayton-Wright Airplane Company. And the Dayton-Wright Airplane Company was formed specifically for the purpose of meeting the war requirement, the requirements of building aircraft. The thing they did here in Dayton was to take of the DH-4 design which was an English design, DeHavilland airplane, and redesign it here for the purpose of mass producing them. And at South Field, which was the area now which is Frigidaire, plant II area, they built during the war, some thousand DH-4's. At that time I believe Orville Wright was a consultant, aeronautical consultant, of that company. I don't think he had any financial participation with the company, but he was with the company as a consultant.

SB Now, after, after the war....?

JJ Well, then after the war, then the Dayton-Wright Airplane Company was purchased by General Motors corporation I believe somewhere in 1919, 1920, and General Motors operated the Dayton Wright Airplane Company as a division of General Motors for perhaps, four of five years, trying to commercialize the airplane, which had been developed during the war. After the war, there were tremendous surplus Jenny's and DeHavillands in this country and the things that the Dayton-Wright Airplane Company did at that time, was to try and develop these into commercial airplanes, by building cabin airplanes out of them, making ambulance airplanes out of them, of course they did some modifications of these airplanes for both the Army and the Navy and the Marine Corps. But...

SB Well, now was your father with the Dayton...?

JJ My father was with the Dayton-Wright Airplane Company and he was in charge of the experimental engineering work at that time.
SB Oh, I see. And then Mr. Wright was sort of a consultant.

JJ Consultant to them.

SB Yes.

JJ And then after the war they built airplanes such as, you know what they called them, the OW Coup, which was a commercial type airplane, as we view it today, and was two or three passenger plane, built for not for military purposes but for commercial purposes.

SB What ever happened to that?

JJ I don't know. I have some pictures which show it in its early construction stages but I might mention that in the early days it took a DH-4 airplane and they completely remodeled the cockpit area into a cabin area. And they made first a quarter scale model of this airplane, and this finished interior had little seats in it. The windows would go up and down, the seats would turn. It had controls in it, and the ailerons and rudder all worked and that airplane still, my mother has this model in her attic today, which was built back in about 1920. One of my hopes is to get it together again and show it. But then after, in about 1924, '25, General Motors recognized that the airplane wasn't here yet to stay as a commercial venture, and disbanded the Dayton-Wright Airplane Company. The personnel in that company then became the nucleus for forming a General Motors research group which, for many years, operated here in Dayton, and quite a few of its people were from the old Dayton-Wright Airplane Company. Then about 1926 or '27, the General Research group was moved to Detroit and my father went up there for a couple of years, and we maintained our home here but he commuted back and forth, for two years, and finally got tired of that, and decided to retire. He retired in the fabulous year of 1929.

SB (chuckles) That was a good time to do that.
JJ Yes, but then he went to work.

SB Wait a minute, let me make sure...

(break in tape)

SB Okay, now we're recording again. Get the right tone. Alright well, then after the Dayton-Wright Company was disbanded, what did Mr. Wright do then? What was his connection then?

JJ Well, I think for many years, he served on the National-Advisory Committee for Aeronautics in a position with them, as an honorary position in many respects. But he mainly, I believe, he retired to his laboratory on North Broadway, just off of Third Street, that building still stands today. And there he pursued his interests in aeronautics, but I think the thing we have to remember, from this period on, that aviation had passed Orville Wright by.

SB Now this was 1930.

JJ He would...

SB About 1930 or '27.

JJ No this would some, somewhere in the year of 1920 on, really.

SB Oh.

JJ He had made his contribution to aviation and the engineers and the, and the scientists who picked up his work had added so much to the knowledge of it that he was left standing you might say at the wayside, while the rest of the industry was going forward. I don't think he ever sensed this in any regret, I think he understood it. He had made his contribution, he and his brother, and I think that he quietly accepted the fact that he was sort of the, you might say, elder statesman of the aviation industry. He was looked upon with a certain amount of dignity and reverence, and in that capacity. But really he made no further great contributions to aviation beyond that. The one thing that was done, and I believe this was done in about 1920, the last stages of the Dayton-Wright Airplane Company, was that he and my father, jointly
developed the landing flap for airplanes. Now this is recognized at that
time, that as aircraft speeds were going up the ability to land the plane was
being impaired because landing speeds were going up so there had to be a
system developed for maintain the lift, of the increase in the lift of the
airplane really, while they increased the drag of the airplane, that in
effect they could land the plane on the same size landing field, to bring the
plane in a little slower than before. So they did a lot of development work
in this area of developing the landing flap as such. It is often called the
split trailing edge of the landing flap, so Orville Wright and my father
jointly obtained a patent on this thing.

SB Now, where did they try this out. Did they, you mean they engineered it on
paper, and then applied this...?

JJ Yes, it was developed on paper as a concept and then my uncle tells the
story of my father making models of this first, models for wind tunnel
work. Remember at this time, the wind tunnel had come into being. I
believe Orville Wright still had a small wind tunnel in his laboratory on
North Broadway. And when my father reported to Orville the results of the
initial tests, on the split trimmed edge landing flap, Orville was stunned
because of the results are far beyond what they expected. And so he asked my
father to bring the wind tunnel model over to the laboratory. And there they
ran the tests again and confirmed the fact that these landing flaps would be
a very valuable asset to the future airplane. The actual use, I'm not clear
on the actual first use of the landing flap. Although I believe that somewhere
along in 1923, '24, '25, the first experimental army planes, a few experimental
army planes, were equipped with these types of flaps. And then the flaps, the
development of a flap became quite a broad thing and expanded out to the whole
aircraft industry. The patent never was a bar in anyway to the future
development of, of the landing flap.

SB Did planes have any kind of a landing flap up to this time?
JJ No, they had no way...
SB Just skidded in until they stopped.
JJ Well, they had to come in and sort of side slip into the fields, in case the winds were wrong. So it was rather a tricky operation. And a lot of times the plane would ground open when it hit the ground. And damage the plane or kill the pilot. So it was a real problem that was developed. How to slow the plane down below its normal flying speed and get it down on the ground safely. Of course today's jets if you have ever been on today's jets, you'll see the big flaps come out, they look like they're bigger than the wing. But it's a very vital part of the airplane. Then, I believe my father in the subsequent days about this same time also worked in developing engines cowlings, cowlings around the radial engine to improve the cooling of the engine and reduce the wind resistance of the engine which was out in front of the airplane in quite an array of pins and apparatus. But then, I think Orville mainly retired to his laboratory and my memory, my recollections of Orville then probably disappear pretty much. Until about 1930. In the 1930's when I started to go to school, Steele High School. And one of my favorite ways of going to school was to go down Broadway; we lived on Grand Avenue in those days. Going down Broadway, past Orville Wright's laboratory, turning east on Third Street and going downtown to school. And while I was still very much interested in airplanes, in those days, particularly as a boy making models which was the thing that all boys in my age seemed to do. I can remember passing his laboratory many, many times and seeing Orville in the window, sitting at his desk, busily occupied with reading, writing or dictating to his secretary who was Miss Mabel Beck, who was secretary of the Wright brothers
all of her active life, I presume almost. And I often wanted I think inwardly
to stop and go into the laboratory and talk to him. I think I did it once,
but I'm not real sure of this. But I was probably a little bashful then. I
was more impressed with his brand new 1930 or '33 Hudson Terraplane, which
he had in front of his place. Every years, it seemed like the Hudson Motor
Car Company gave him a brand new car. And I was always impressed by the
fact that his license plate was OW-1. Now...

SB I wondered why they gave him a car. Had he done work for them or...?
JJ I think. No, I think in those days the terraplanes, so called,(terra
coming the word meaning land, latin word for land and plane), obviously the
play on words that this was still an airplane, it was a land plane. And I
believe that in those days, it was one of the first streamlined looking cars,
and I think they tried to capitalize on the fact that Orville Wright had one
of these, you know. The inventor of the airplane had one so they must be a
good, good automobile. And every year, I believe they gave him another car.

SB He was not the kind of man then that a boy would wave and then go in and talk
to.
JJ No, he had that reserve about him, that quietness that I often felt that
inwardly he felt all the emotions that we all feel, but he was, his background,
his religious background, the background of his father, his early training as
a boy, probably all these things left their mark upon him. He was taught to
be industrious and never waste a moment, life is precious, and its time is
precious and I think these things he learned from his parents. The only time
I remember, one time I do remember being in my father's basement, in the
workshop, and Orville and he were working there, and I came down and you
know, as a boy kind of inquiring what was going on and I forget what they told
me, but I do remember Orville, Orville saying to me, as a boy they always called
me Wilbur, because I was named after Wilbur Wright. I have a brother named Orville Wright Jacobs, so...

SB Oh, is that to? Isn't that nice?

JJ My father and mother always told us that we were named after the Wright brothers and by the Wright brothers. But I can remembering him saying, Wilbur, he says, what would you like to be when you grow up? And my obvious answer to him was, of course, to be an airplane pilot, which was to be his inspiration of many a young boy in the day. Then I can remember my father asking me after Orville had left, he said, why do you think that Orville asked you that? My father just left the question hanging in the air. He never answered it for me, and I've often wondered about it myself.

SB Your father always called him Orville.

JJ He called him Orv.

SB Orv, that was his name as far as he was...now the people that worked for him or worked with him...

JJ Called him Mr. Wright I believe I would gather.

SB Is that so?

JJ Yes, I would gather.

SB I wondered. Did he ever worry about the moral implications of developing the plane. Did he ever, do you remember, where he expressed that to your father.

JJ Not to my knowledge, no I think that, I don't think that in my own viewpoint that he would have deeply felt any moral implications for inventing the airplane because you have to put him, if you put the Wright brothers in the true context of aviation, they were neither the inventors of the airplane, per se. They were more the implementors of all knowledge plus their own to make this airplane successful. So had not the Wright brothers, as such, invented the airplane, I feel that in a year or so someone else certainly would have been flying the airplane. Their contribution was not the basic concept,
but one which made the airplane control life.

SB Yes, of course, now it has been said that they did feel that they very definitely were the ones who made it possible. They were there. Do you think that, did he ever express that idea, I mean his, his hassle with the Smithsonian and everything was really a matter of semantics....

JJ That's true.

SB ....that they wanted to be recognized.

JJ That's right.

SB Do you remember of his expressing?

JJ No, but I might bring another point out and I'll come to it. Obviously the Wright brothers in their development of their airplane, were in many respects, I wouldn't use the word secretive, but they wanted to be sure they had developed the airplane successfully and then afterwards, I think that they were very cautious in their approach to keep their contributions under control, under their control. And there developed in the early days, a hassle, not a hassle, but they had difficulties trying to convince our country, our government, our military people that they actually developed the successful airplane.

SB Yes.

JJ And they went through that problem, and then felt rebuffed by this country and finally got their recognition in France and in Europe and then they came back to this country. Finally, in about 1908 they did sell the government a military airplane. But because the Smithsonian Institution had sponsored the development work of Langley and Langley was at one time the secretary of the Smithsonian, the Smithsonian obviously had a viewpoint that the Langley Aerodrome which he tried to fly, which Langley tried to fly unsuccessfully in 1903 and failed twice, but it had the capability of flying, and the reason
they said this, was this, because in about 1914 when Glenn Curtiss, when the Wright brothers sued Glenn Curtiss on the infringement of their patents and they were suing because of the aileron which Curtiss was using for the warping of the wings, which was the basis of the Wright brothers was that warping the wings interconnected with operation with the rudder. They sued Curtiss and many others after that for infringing their patents, and Curtiss in defense of his position of using ailerons which, by not warping the wings but separately hinged moving things, took the Langley Aerodrome out, with modifications, and flew it off of Lake Keuka in New York. So this just heightened the, the controversy between the Wrights and the Smithsonian. And really all the Wrights eventually wanted to do was to, as you said in words, when the Smithsonian brought the airplane the Langley Aerodrome and hung it in the Smithsonian Institution and said that this was the first airplane capable of flight, it cut the Wrights, Orville Wright particularly pretty deeply, I think. And his was one of the not being willing to accept the fact that he was not first, that their contribution was not the first successful airplane. By implication the Smithsonian said that the Langley airdrome was first. So in about 1928, I can remember now my next, I come to my next observation of Orville Wright was when Orville Wright made the decision to send the first airplane to the Science Museum in South Kensington, England. This was about 1927-28. My father, Miss Beck, Orville Wright’s secretary, and Orville Wright put the first airplane back together. They recovered the airplane, refurbished the airplane completely they recovered the airplane in many places, they had to try to find some silk which was, or linen which was equivalent to the first airplane and finally through Rikes they were able to secure some more of this, so they recovered the first plane, and this is the next time I can remember, in detail, being in the Broadway laboratory. And
seeing the airplane being assembled, I used to go with my father every evening, and they'd put the airplane together. When they had it all together, I remember my father, who was quite a camera fan at the time, getting his flash out and taking a series of flash pictures of the Wright airplane just sitting in the laboratory. Orville was there, and I always had a feeling that Orville had a sense of, in his own mind, a sense of admiration for this airplane, and a sense of feeling that this was part of his life. But he never openly expressed this in any way. He never indicated this......

SB Was he particularly solicitous or anything about the plane?

JJ Never no, but I think, I sensed, I sensed that as I remember him a sense of feeling of pride in this.

SB Why did they assemble the plane first?

JJ Well, you see, up to this time, the airplane had probably been stored in a hangar somewhere, I'm not sure where, or it was in a state of disrepair really. In fact one time the Wright airplane almost got burned up. Ernie Dubel who I think you've talked to, may have recited a story of burning up the first, or I think the second Wright glider which had flew at Kitty Hawk in about 1902 or '03, probably 1901 or '02. But somewhere along the stages Orville felt that the first airplane was of no importance. He didn't attach great sentiment to it at that time, and he was going to burn it up. And I think Roy Knabenshue who was the great aeronaut and balloonist in his early day, and finally managed the Wright Brothers flyer team, which toured the country in competition with the Curtiss team, finally convinced Orville he ought not burn it up, that it had historic value. So the Wright plane was preserved and I believe it stayed in the hangar at South Field during World War I. I'm sure, now if this is correct as I go back in my memory, it set in the corner of the hangar back there, and gradually got to the state of disrepair and so about the time, I don't know where the airplane was stored from, after
World War I till 1928, but it might have been in the laboratory there on South Broadway, on North Broadway. But the airplane was put together completely to be sure that it was all there, functionally everything was right as far as being the first airplane capable of flight. Then he disassembled it and boxed it up and shipped it to England. This was Orville's answer to the Smithsonian. He was stubborn in many, many ways, he was; I think he had a very firm mind, and when he made up his mind no one dissuaded him very easily. So...

SB How was his attitude towards money, do you remember any conversations of that, financing and money?

JJ No, if I would use my feelings, I'd say that he was somewhat close with money... He was not a wasteful person. His total background was one of being, you know, close with his money, he has been taught this in his life. He never spent a lot of money, he was not to spend money on himself. I think the only thing the Wright brothers ever spent any money for was their home out in Hawthorn Hill. This was a really a large home, but...

SB They didn't travel at all did they, other than what they had to?

JJ I think the only travel, of course they traveled in terms as necessary as far as promoting the airplane in the early days, on 1905, '06, '07, '08, '09, '10 in those days, but from then on, no they didn't do a great amount of traveling. Very close homebody kind of person, Orville was. He didn't move out of Dayton very much. Just between his home and the laboratory.

SB Where did they go to church do you remember?

JJ I don't know that.

SB Yes, I was talking with people, and everyone, that he had this religious background and yet no one remembers seeing him go to church.

JJ I don't think he was a deeply religious person in his late years. I must decline from any comment, I don't know really.
SB Did, do you remember if there was any lady friend at that time. Was there anyone that he was interested in?

JJ No, no. I think, he led a very quiet unassuming kind of a life. There may have been those who thought there was some affection, you might say, between he and Miss Beck. But my recollection is no. Orville Wright was a very precise kind of person, very businesslike, very down to earth kind of a person, but not one that would show any great show of affection at all.

There was a quiet humor though, I would say, and I think the story my mother tells about the day that Orville Wright came over to our house for Sunday dinner. She would invite him once in a while just out of courtesy I suppose, because of the relationship of my father with him. Being six children in our family, our home was not one of great...

SB (chuckles)

JJ ...it was always in a normal turmoil for a family of six, five boys and a girl, and so consequently when our house was really cleaned up, it was a rare day. I can remember my mother tells the story that one Sunday she was expecting Orville Wright for dinner, and she tried to keep ahead of the tribe, and finally got the house cleaned up and we were all shoo'ed out of the living room and upstairs or out in the backyard. But anyhow, my father came home, and from somewhere, and as he came in the front room, he sat down in a chair and took off his shoes, and left them in front of the chair, and then I presume he went upstairs to prepare for dinner, get dressed for dinner, and shave. My mother came in the front room and saw these big pair of shoes sitting there so she in a fit of, I might say, anger, probably, well picked up the shoes, opened up the front door and threw them out in the front yard.

SB (chuckles)

JJ Well, it wasn't much longer after that that Orville Wright rang the front door
bell my mother answered, my father still upstairs getting dressed. In his hand he had a pair of shoes. And he had a quiet twinkle of a way in his eyes, I guess and he says Ruth, he says, these look like Jim's shoes, they were out in your front yard. So, this is one of the humorous things. I might tell one other story to illustrate this sort of quiet humor. And it was a very subtle humor that Orville had. In the early days, back in about '12 or '13 in that period, '14, '15, the Wrights were doing development work on then, what was then called the hydro-airplane, and we'd call it a seaplane. It had floats on it. And they did a lot of development work, and father worked with them, they flew down on the Miami River at Miami Shores what we call the Miami Shores today. Where there's a nice open spread of water and they could fly the plane off that water. They did a lot of work in developing the seaplane there, and Orville Wright tells the story and then my father has told the same story. And I remember Orville telling the story. Of the day that they were, my father and Orville, were flying in the seaplane. They're flying about a hundred to two hundred feet off the water, and cruising along. And then for some unexpected reason, something happened and the plane did a nose dive down towards the water, well the plane hit the water and they of course went into the water. And these were the days when the airplane was made of canvas, wood struts, and wire and so temporarily the two men, my father and Orville were trapped beneath the water in this by the wreckage of the plane. At this point Orville Wright told the story, that he became concerned about my father, and he says he yelled out, he says, Jim are you all right? Well, he left the story hanging there, because the thing you were to recognize, that you remember that they were about ten or twelve feet underneath the water, when Orville claimed he was yelling out Jim, are you all right? My father told the same story, and between themselves it was quite a humorous thing, that
they always kind of laughed, because only the person that, they always lead
someone on with this story, and you had to know what they were talking about.

SB That must have been pretty exciting, those old planes.

JJ It was, it was quite an era. My father, has, my mother has a log that my
father wrote, while he flew in the air with Orville, and I've looked at it
several times; she has it. And I hope you get to talk to my mother, if you want
to. They would write, my father would write, my father's purpose going up with
Orville was to observe things that were wrong and to make notes in the air as
they flew along and then, make observations, and then they would come down
and they would fix whatever was wrong. A couple of notes in the book would say
we must do something about this landing gear. Now remember we're not talking
about wheels, we're talking about skids out in front of the airplane. The note
said, every time we land, it always break off. So each flight in itself was
quite a hazardous thing. Although there is no record of Orville Wright ever being
injured in a airplane wreck, except that which occurred at Ft. Myer, when
Lieutenant Selfridge was killed, but then my father would make another note,
he'd make a little sketch and say how we're going to fix this or that. One
of the funny observations I thought, was, he said, there must be a better way
than lacing the wings together with rawhide. And the first Wright airplane, the
center set of wings were laced to, the center sections of the wings, with rawhide.
But you have to remember in those days, the one thing the Wright brothers were,
were skilled craftsmen. And I believe part of their success in the making of
the first flight was their skill as craftsmen, and woodworkers and in
building the airplane.

SB They had very little to go on, that's for sure. I wondered why didn't they,
why weren't they at all safety conscious. It seems like that at least they
would have something hold them in, why they didn't just actually fall off.
Well, or course the seat belt didn't come into being, till about 1912, '14, but the Wrights, you remember, first learned to fly their gliders by lying on the wing of the glider; they lay in a prone position, shifting their weights. They had to use their body, their feet, and their hands to manipulate all the controls in the airplane, because you see, the thing that they were trying to show, was that their control was by making or designing the airplane as a basically unstable device and using their skill as pilots, by adding controls to airplanes to compensate for all the air currents and everything else. A lot of pioneers before them tried to make the airplane stable by shifting the pilot's weight all over the glider. So they had to use their hands and feet and this airplane wasn't going to go very high. They got up to about twenty feet maybe in the early gliders, but there were accidents, there were wrecks. But, fortunately, the Wrights were never hurt in these. In the early days of flying the airplanes, again they were not flying at high speeds or moving pretty slow through the air, maybe thirty miles an hour, and there just apparently was no recognition of a need for any safety belt or any safety precautions for the airplane. Now, you remember the airplane had two speeds, the engine had two speeds. One was full on and the other was off. They had no throttle, the airplane was just full on, the engine was on or it was completely off. So it wasn't really till I believe one of the first accidents which demonstrated, and this happened in a Navy Wright in the Wright B-1 airplane, was when at Annapolis a young ensign by the name of Youngsley was flying with John Towers who later became head of Naval Aviation. And they were flying the Wright B-1 seaplane up off of Annapolis, and they hit a severe air down draft, and Youngsley was physically thrown completely out of the airplane at a height of about two thousand feet, fell to his death and Towers was flung from the airplane but his outstretched hands grasped a wing strut and he clung to this plane as it fell over two thousand feet to the water and the plane hit the water, and Towers fell among it
and he survived that fall. And at that point on then, the seat belt was part of standing naval requirement. Although there's another story that Benny Foulois tells, who was one of the first army pilots trained by the Wright brothers, that he suggested the seat belt in the early days, too, about maybe a year or so within the same period of time, in 1908, 1910. There was no great concern of the Wright brothers about. They didn't do that much flying when they were all done. They were flying at low altitudes, they're flying around and around and around Huffman Prairie Field out there. You remember when they flew at Simms Station, they weren't going cross country. There was no other place to land except at the field they took off from. So they, most of their flights, actual flights that the Wright brothers made, were very short flights and those of longer duration near twenty to thirty minutes were made by simply circling the same field around and around and around. So safety wasn't one of the great hazards. They had some hazards, the cows and the birds though at Huffman Prairie.

SB Do you remember what he wore when he came?

JJ Orville Wright as I remember wore what we might refer to today as a high celluloid collar. He was a very neat dresser. You never saw Orville Wright; I never say Orville Wright when he wasn't dressed in a business suit and a tie. He was always neatly dressed, he had, I think he had little stick pin and I remember he had a stick pin in his tie. I remember a derby hat, but I'm not, I don't know whether he wore that all his life, but in the early days, he wore a derby hat, but he was a very neat dresser, very precise person, and as far as dress is concerned. And usually a white shirt, with the detachable collar and a business suit and a vest and quite trim and proper you might even say dapper a bit.

SB Is that so. He was well dressed.

JJ Well dressed.
SB Then did he ever get his hands dirty, I mean did he ever work?

JJ Oh, he worked with his hands. One thing he was good at was working with his hands. And I often thought to myself, if the Wright brothers hadn't been successful with the first airplane they would probably have been a failure in everything else they tried. Because after the first airplane, you might say that he was a tinker, tinkerer or fiddler. He would work on small things, that would demonstrate some little principle he was more interested in than demonstrating a concept by making something to demonstrate this concept. He worked with his hands, sure. He was very deft with his hands, and that's one skill I think he had that made the airplane successful was the ability to work with mechanics with their hands.

SB More than theoretical? You think?

JJ Well, if you would read the papers of the Wright brothers, and explore those you will find that the Wright brothers were great experimentors; they were successful because they were great experimenters, and by that I mean, they didn't just go out and build the first airplane, they started with the concept of flying and they read all they could read about flying. But after they read everything they did, and started to follow what they read, they soon found out that they were in deep trouble because no one had found that really factually determined the things that were necessary, completely, for a successful flight. So after about two years of struggling they had to go back and start laboriously by detail testing, in a wind tunnel and on their bicycle, determine how an airfoil really worked. What its qualities were, what its physical properties were, what it would do. And they worked at each bit of the concept of an airplane on this same basis; they left nothing to chance, there was no, as far as I can see, nothing haphazard about their approach. They were sure that when they put the first airplane together, the first part of it, that it was going to fly, there
was no question in their mind. They had learned to fly the gliders, they had learned the techniques of control by wing working and interlocking, interconnecting the rudder. The only thing they didn't have was an engine. And when they tried to get an engine for their plane of course they found that none was suitable and so they finally hired Charlie Taylor who they knew, and the Wright brothers sketched out their concept of an engine and Charlie Taylor with a lathe and a drill press built a whole complete engine with just a lathe and a drill press and when they ran it, it was successful and put it in an airplane. I assume it went to Kitty Hawk. They were successful. The thing the Wright brothers didn't know, the only thing the Wright brothers didn't know, when they went to Kitty Hawk, in December, 1903 for the final test of their airplane, was how a powered airplane would fly compared to a glider. They assumed that the powered airplane would follow basic control responses of a glider and there's where they made their first mistake, because the powered airplane flew a lot faster and the first thing that happened was that when Wilbur took the airplane off for the first time, the front elevator, being pivoted about its center did a flop in the air and caused the plane to stall and they crashed the airplane in. And that was about, that was on December 14, but then when Orville took it up, when they got the airplane repaired, even Orville had this battle and the airplane did sort of a dip, sort of dips, dipsie doodles, that went on his first flight because the front elevator was operating on a much higher airstream then they had experienced in a glider. But other than that, I'm sure that the Wright brothers knew that they could fly the airplane when they took off. There was no question. With all the tests and all their laborious data, they were pretty confident. And that's why they approached the whole business of airplane. They paid on a personal basis knowing beforehand what was going to happen. At least enough knowledge to know what's going to happen.
SB Do you think that's one reason why they didn't get hurt also?

JJ Yes, I think definitely that would be one of the reasons, that they were very careful, and they were very skilled. They never took a risk in flying. And the one thing that they taught I think the whole aviation industry which followed them was the meticulous care in preparing the airplane for its flight. Nothing was left to chance. They checked everything out, every wire, every connection was thoroughly checked. Every control was checked and this they learned and this procedure they went through when they started to learn to fly out there at Huffman Prairie, procedures which actually became standard procedure for any airplane in the years to follow. Very thorough check of the aircraft. And that meticulous care I think is one thing that made as many airplane industries very successful. They left nothing to chance, nothing was left to chance at all. So he was in that respect, Orville and his brother Wilbur, were very cautious, very careful, very meticulous kind of a people. They had to be.

SB Did your father ever speak of or did Orville ever speak of his brother, oh, I'm, I'm trying to explore somewhat the difference in the personalities of the brothers. Did the brothers, did he ever speak of his brother?

SB No, I never recall Orville speaking of his brother Wilbur and I don't recall much of my father speaking about him. They were different obviously from each other. One of the reasons they were successful was because they each spoke their mind to each other. Probably there was very unusual relationship between them as brothers, I can gather. They loved to argue with each other, they would debate a point between them. And, in fact, they would begin an argument each taking the opposite side if the argument, and debate so long and loud and before you know it, they were on opposite sides of the argument, opposite arguing the other way. But there was a free exchange of conversation and expression of ideas between them. There was pointed arguments in their later
years, between them on various points of how they should approach the airplane business. There were disagreements among them. Never to the point of being I'd say, unpleasantness between them. But they were, they were willing to express their ideas to each other and hash it out pretty well not afraid to tell each other what they thought. So I think that among themselves, they, I would presume, between Orville and Wilbur, there was much more open communications between Orville and anyone else after that.

SB How about his sister, did she ever come to your home.

JJ No, I don't remember Katharine ever coming. I do know, his brother, Lorin who was Lorin Wright, lived on Grand Avenue, very close to us, and I mentioned some time ago that my father retired from General Motors in 1929. The Wright Brothers were as I said tinkerers in the sense, and that would include Lorin Wright as well, and somewhere along the line, Orville Wright I believe informed Lorin, came up with a little toy idea. Now this shows how the Wright brothers were. Developed a little toy which is a sort of vertical ladder kind of thing, and he had a little man at the top you put on the ladder, and it would do a flip flop down this ladder. It would. I'm not sure whether this was Orville's idea or not. But, anyhow, Lorin Wright, Orville's brother, went into manufacturing these toys. And he operated a little company called the Miami Wood Specialties Company which was over on Front Street. Miami Wood Specialty Company was making these toys, and experiencing I would say a difficulty in keeping itself above water.

Lorin Wright, incidentally, was city commissioner of Dayton. But about 1929 after my father retired from General Motors, as I mentioned, we as boys were quite interested in making model airplanes, and my father used to put berry boxes, strawberry boxes, we soon found that this was excellent wood for making little gliders so we appropriated these boxes when my father wasn't
looking, and make these model airplanes, well one day he discovered the
tberry boxes all gone, and upon questioning he found out we were building
model airplanes out of them, so he said, if you boys be good, I'll build you
an airplane. Well he set down to build us a model airplane, and this was a
glider made out of this flat wood. Well the first day he had one built it
wasn't so good, so he decided to make another one. Well, this start of
an idea started to become a full time hobby with him, and pretty soon he
had developed, well, a nice little model airplanes the kind that you shot
up in the air with a rubber band and a stick. And in fact he developed his
point where he thought there was some value, so he went over to talk to Lorin
Wright. And Lorin said, my gosh, he said, that's just what we're looking
for. And this is about 1928 or '29, just when the depression hit. And they
started to manufacture this little airplane, which was able to be disassembled
and put in a very thin sack, and the person that they sold it to was the
Quaker Oats company, and these were the first premiums ever put into the
breakfast cereal box.

SB Oh, is that so?

JJ And that little shop, that little shop, Miami Specialty Company, changed its
name to the Wright-Dayton, Wright-Dayton Company. Manufactured during the
depression this little shop, ran three shifts day and night, making these
little model airplanes. So while everybody else was on its back, the little
company was making more money in the premium business than anyone could imagine.

SB I imagine.

JJ So.

SB That was, what other businesses did Lorin go into? Did he...?

JJ That was his main business, and when he retired from business, I don't
know before that, but all the time I knew Lorin Wright, well he was in the
Miami Wood Specialty Company. Now, he, I think, had other interests, in
real estate or banking, but I'm not sure of that. He also had a son, Horace Wright, we always called Horace, Bus, who was also in the business with him. Bus still lives today down in part of Bellbrook, I hope you get to talk to him.

SB Yes, I hope so too. And your mother, but I'll get to talk to her later on, she has a...

JJ So I think this a side issue, it shows how, I believe, Orville's work in another area, that you never think of, started into a business, and my father became involved in that.

SB Now he had, he had just the one boy, or is...?

JJ Who?

SB Lorin.

JJ Lorin had one boy and one daughter.

SB Oh, yes.

JJ No, I think there were a couple of girls. There was Ivonette, and a couple in California, I can find those names for you.

SB Well, that's alright. I had a question I was going to ask about Mr. Wright, I can't remember it now what it was.

(break in tape)

SB Do you remember, did he work in civic things in Dayton?

JJ Not to my knowledge, as I mentioned before he served with the National Advisory Council of Aeronautics, Committee of Aeronautics, he did I remember as I mentioned the 1924 air race, I think he was a consultant on that. And I might mention something here about the 1924 air races which other than seeing the Wright plane, and the big Barling bomber, the thing that sticks in my mind, more than anything else vividly is the crash of the plane of Captain Burt Skeel who was flying in the Pulitzer race at the field that day. This
was the first person I've ever seen killed in an airplane crash and in those days, they were allowed to have a diving start across the start line, and in the race Captain Skeel gunned his plane and went into a shallow dive to gain speed on the start of the race and just as he crossed the beginning line of the race, his wings came off, it shivered the wings off the plane, and he crashed right into a river creek bottom on Patterson field. And was killed. I can only remember going past there, in the evening, as my father and the other boys, we left Patterson Field to come home, seeing the large search lights that the army had erected trying to dig into this creek bed to find the remains of Captain Skeel. His plane went thirty feet into the ground after his flight. That left rather a lasting impression at that particular time, the 1924 air races.

SB I bet that somewhat dampened your enthusiasm to be a flyer.

JJ Well, I was still then six years old so that didn't...

SB Oh, well now...

JJ But it left that first impression you know.

SB Yes, I think that would be (chuckles) quite influential. When he came to dinner, did he talk very much at dinner with all these six children, did he ever get a word in edgewise, or...(chuckles)

JJ Well, I think that coming to dinner was the dinner was only a matter of necessity, I think. Because when you have six children around the dinner table obviously there's not much, there's not much control goes on, and our, our family wasn't one that kept quiet at the dinner table, so I'm sure not much conversation that I would recall any particular conversation. But then afterwards, Orville usually would go into the living room with my father, and they'd close themselves off and they would have nice talks back and forth among themselves.
SB Did, do you remember did he ever talk politics? Or interest in the affairs of the day?

JJ Not to my knowledge no, I don't recall conversations.

SB Did he ever get into an argument with your dad, and they would sit there. Or was it just quiet conversation?

JJ I think that Orville Wright never held back saying what he thought, to someone he felt reasonably close with. I think. I don't recall any arguments, I'm sure that there were many just plain open discussions of one thing or another. I think that he wasn't one to pussy foot around a conversation. If he had, if he was going to talk about it, he would talk about it openly and if he didn't want to talk about it, he didn't he wouldn't say anything if he didn't have any point to make he would keep quiet. So he wasn't one to discuss in generalities, I think he was always one to come right to the point, and say what he wanted to say. I don't recall...

SB You don't remember any...

JJ ...any conversations about...

SB ...oh, about the events of the day.

JJ ...politics of anything.

SB Were you ever in his home?

JJ I have been in his home. I don't recall being in his home during his lifetime. I've been to Hawthorn Hill since then. When Arthur Godfrey came to Dayton to be the master of ceremonies for the Hall of Fame, 1963, we stayed at Hawthorn Hill and Arthur stayed at Hawthorn Hill and we had a nice evening together there. And visiting the home and looking through the things still in the home that go back to the time when Orville lived there. If you looked at the furniture in the home, which is still left over from the days, you come to the conclusion that Orville was not a spendthrift, furniture
was drab and in all instances he wasn't one to spend money for it to be for himself or for his surroundings. I don't really understand why they ever built Hawthorne Hill. Except I think that when his brother Wilbur was living and Katharine was living that they might have influenced, Katharine might have influenced them to build this house. But with the death of Wilbur I think the house is really just a place to be that's about all for.

SB How many bedrooms were in that house, it looks like it's big.

JJ Oh, it's a large house, there must be upstairs, four to five bedrooms, least I can remember them. It's a beautiful home inside. I have heard stories about when they built the house, now this is typical of Orville Wright, that they put thirteen coats of white enamel on the wood works and there wasn't a coat of paint put on since that time, until his death, and the paint in the house is marvelous, it's like ivory. When he did something he wanted to do it, did it right. He didn't, he didn't wasn't, wasn't skimpy in doing things right. But he just wasn't a person that would adorn himself with many fancy surroundings or to use his wealth, what he may have had, towards personal outward enjoyment. He was very, I would say not quite miserly, but he was very close with his money.

SB Did he wear any rings, jewelry or anything like that do you remember?

JJ I don't recall. I remember just a memory of a diamond stick pin. But I, it's just a memory. Maybe I've seen a picture of it somewhere and I recall it, I don't know.

SB There was one comment that he resented when his sister got married and that he didn't...

JJ Yes.

SB ...would not attend the funeral.

JJ I've read this and I don't know if this is true. Again when he made up his mind about something it was made, and there was no dissuading him back off of
that. I think that I've read this story and I've wondered about it. I can believe it, knowing how long he fought for a position with the Smithsonian and held his position and finally won, I believe once he made his mind to something he was very difficult to dissuade away from that position. So I'm sure that he was unhappy with his sister, marrying and moving away. That left him alone, then, in his big house.

SB Did he have Lorin's children out, do you remember? Or did he come and enjoy Lorin's children?

JJ Oh, if you read the papers of the Wright brothers, tells about when they were flying at Kitty Hawk, Lorin Wright and his boys at least Buzz Wright or Horace Wright visit Kitty Hawk, and this must have been in 1903 or '04 there maybe '05, and Orville Wright went out fishing it was. Orville Wright was one who I'd say, liked boys in a sense. He didn't, he was, he liked children in a sense, and I think particularly boys, but he never, he wasn't real outward in his expression, but you had, you knew that you were in good terms just being with him. But he would, he took Buzz Wright out fishing and when you talk to Buzz Wright you'll see pictures of this, which I've never seen published anywhere else. But he liked his enjoyment, with, he was not a one to be outward. Any show I think was, he didn't want to show it.

SB He wouldn't come up and pat you on the back or tossle a kid's hair, like that?

JJ No, no, no, no, no, he would ask you to sit down and talk with him. Let you know that he was interested in you. His eyes probably said more than anything else, the twinkle in his eyes.

SB Is that so? I'll remember that. It must have made quite an impression.

JJ Well, when he was in my house, I never felt, you never had the feeling that you were in the presence of a great man, in the sense that he never, very
humble, he never made you feel that you were way beneath him. I never put
him in the sense that he was a great man. As I look backwards now I recognize
him as a great man. Not for, not so much as a person, but you recognize
him for what the contributions he and his brothers made, and it was for the
contributions that he stands out in history. But as an individual he was not,
he was very humble.

SB  Well.....

(break in tape)

(end of tape)
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