2-18-1967

Interview with Henry Stout

Henry Stout

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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

HENRY STOUT
Interviewed by
Susan Bennet
on
February 18, 1967
...the tape of Mr. Henry Stout who knew the Wright Brothers. Today is February...

Eighteenth.

Eighteenth, 1967. Okay, do you want to sit down, Mr. Stout?

Yes, but I, shut it off for just a minute, because I want to talk...

(SB) (break in tape)

Okay, now we're recording.

Just for the record, I want to say that I'm Henry S. Stout.

Oh, pardon me, sir.

There are four Henry Stouts in the line here in this community. Not very important, but, nevertheless, let's make the record clear.

Well, yes, well let's also add that you're a former mayor of Dayton...

Well,,,

And that you have lived in this community for a number of years.

My family has been here for a hundred and fifty years.

Hundred and fifty years.

Yes.

Well, that's a long time.

We found a comfortable rut and settled down; there was no pioneer blood in the Stout family.

(SB) (laughter)

On the Wright Brothers, my source of material is a, started primarily with Fred Kelly's biography, which was published in 1943. I took that a, book shortly after it was published and reviewed it with Orville and he gave me a lot of sidelights and comments about various people which normally would not have been published in the book. And I've had contact with the Wright's secretary, Mabel Beck, who was with them for years and years and years. And
a most interesting series of visits with Carrie Grumbach. Spell it?

SB Yes, that might be easier.

HS G-R-U-M-B-A-C-H.

SB Oh.

HS She died very recently, but she was their housekeeper for thirty-eight years. And I have had several very interesting visits with Harold and Ivonette Wright Miller. Mrs. Miller is the niece of Orville and Wilbur, and the daughter of Lorin Wright, and Harold Miller was the executor of Orville Wright's estate. Also, a contemporary of mine, a classmate in high school, was Milton Wright who's a nephew also of the Wright Brothers. And, a, I have had several visits with him and I have had recordings of talks he had made various places. Then, of course, we've always been rather interested in the fact that...Mr.

(break in tape)

HS ...father, who was a buyer of yard goods for Rike's, sold them the fabric which they used to cover the wings on that first airplane.

SB I wonder how much a yard it was. (laughter)

HS I haven't the foggiest idea. I have a piece of that fabric, which Mr. Miller gave me. My first recollection of the Wrights was a rather vague memory in early childhood of local talk and people wondering what those crazy Wrights were doing now.

SB (laughter)

HS Now that's that's almost literal. And then the name of Wright was very much impressed upon me in 1907, where I was still in high school. Katharine Wright who was the sister of the two Wrights we're talking about, gave me a flunking grade in freshman Latin.

SB (laughter)

HS Of course that impressed me considerably.

SB (laughter) Your father too, I bet. (laughter)
HS Yes. (laughter) Yes, my father also impressed me.

SB (laughter)

HS Then in, oh, my seventh and eighth grade days, and high school, with some of my friends, we used to ride our bicycles out to what was then called Huffman Prairie, which later became Wright Field, and hoped that we'd be fortunate enough to see the Wrights make a flight. We sometimes did.

SB Did they ever chase you away?

HS Oh, no, no, no, no.

SB They...

HS Now we were not hanging around their old hangar, we were at the fence that surrounded that field. Just looking over the fence. There was one of the things which I've always remembered but I've never seen any picture of, was their method of casting their motor and their propeller. They had fashioned two that looked like hot water tanks together with gas pipe and mounted their motor on that and to that they had attached their propeller. And they would zip up and down the Miami River here between the Third Street and the Main Street bridges. And of course, that was one of the things that caused the people in Dayton to wondering what those Wrights were doing now. The first evidence that we have of interest in aviation on the part of the Wright Brothers was in 1896 when they had heard something about the gliding done by Otto Lilienthal of Germany and they read up on all the information they could get on him and became actively interested in solving the problem of powered flight. Rather surprisingly, it was only seven years before they had solved that problem, and most cases are solved, unsolvable problems take a lot more time to it than that. Their first flight, of course, was December the seventeenth, nineteen three, at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. They made four flights that day. And on the fourth flight the plane was wrecked, nobody hurt, but the plane was wrecked.

(break in tape)
Alright, now we're recording.

To illustrate how little Dayton people thought of this aviation activity, I quote verbatim, a telegram which Orville sent to the Dayton Journal following those flights. And here's the quotation: "Success, four flights Thursday morning all against twenty-one mile wind. Started from level with engine power alone, average speed through air, thirty-one miles. Longest, fifty-nine seconds. Inform press. Home Christmas." Unquote. Martin Beard, who was at that time the city editor of the Journal, was called from, I think a card game, to receive that wire, and he came back to the table, picked up his cards, and said to the boys who were there at the table, "Those Wright boys are coming home for Christmas. Isn't that nice?"

(laughter)

And the Dayton papers carried no notice of that first flight.

Oh dear.

It was my priceless privilege in 1953 to go to Kitty Hawk to visit with Captain Billy Tate. He was the gentleman who wrote to the Wright Brothers in response to their query in 1900, and recommended that Kitty Hawk would be a very good place for their box kite glider and airplane experiment. It was because of his enthusiastic letter that they went down there and the first year they were there, they stayed at his home. He helped them with some of their work on the box kite and as they were about to leave, he asked them what they were going to do with that contraption. And they told him they were going to dismantle it. He asked if he might have it, and Billy Tate told me that the Wrights weren't the kind of people who just answered questions offhand, they told him they would let him know in the morning. So the next morning they said, "Billy, you can have it, on these conditions. First, you must not let anyone make any measurements or photographs of this. We don't want you to disclose any of the data that we have, that you have helped us prepare, and lastly, we ask you to dismantle this yourself." And he
said, Mr. Orville said something to me that I'm proud to say I have always remembered. He said, "Billy, there's no way for us to tie you to this, for there's no law, except the law of honor to bind you." He said, "I, I listened to the law of honor and I obeyed it. I took that contraption home. I took it apart; my wife made dresses for our little girl out of the wing fabric and I put the wing spars, the hickory spars up in my barn and a hurricane took it away." I was, I think, the last person to visit with Billy Tate prior to his death in 1953. I took the last picture of him that was ever taken.

SB Now, as I recall, he didn't actually get to see that first flight after all that help, did he?

HS That's questionable.

SB Oh.

HS It's questionable.

SB How did he react towards the people down there trying to fly? Did he think they were crazy too?

HS I don't think he did. No. He seemed to be a man far more intelligent and with more ability to look into the future than many people. And speaking of looking into the future, nineteen two, in nineteen two, Thomas Edison, who was quoted in the *Scientific American* to the effect that there was no possible future, commercial future, for the airplane. So Mr. Edison was very wrong on that one.

SB Now, Mr. Tate, did he have something to do with the weather bureau. Wasn't that...

HS That's right...

SB He was the...

HS He worked with the weather bureau there and he also worked with the coast guard.

SB Yes.
HS Yes. But I don't intend in this little talk to aim to cover the technical
phrases of their work, but rather, I want to talk about the Wrights as
very, very human people which is something about them that not many people
realize. They were people that I would classify as fun loving, very
compassionate people and very persistent people. And I think Orville, as I
observed him, was at times being a little bit lazy.

SB Where did you first meet him, do you remember that?

HS No, I don't remember.

SB Did you come into contact with business or in leisure or...

HS Well, my first real contact with him was a visit to him out there at Hawthorn
Hill. And I reviewed that Fred Kelly's biography with him.

SB Yes.

HS I had seen him on the street, I've seen him at the Club, I had been speaking
to him for a long time. But this was the first visit of any consequence
that I had with him. But the thing which caused me to say to you that I
thought he was a little bit lazy was that he had an armchair there which
I'm sure had not been re-upholstered, or recovered since the house was
built, but it was a very comfortable chair, he built a little bookshelf
fastened to the frame under the seat of the chair, but extending out to the
side. And in that little shelf, he had a pair of scissors and a letter opener.
He also had a world almanac and a dictionary and a writing pad so that he
didn't have to get up for most of the things that he was doing. And he
had built what I call a gooseneck light and he put a brass bushing in the
right hand, arm of the chair, and he could set that light down in that right
hand arm, but he would also put one on the left side so he could move
the light from side to side. His footstool, he didn't quite like the way
the manufacturers made it for he had blocked up the legs nearest to the chair
so that there was proper support for his knees there too.

SB (chuckle)

HS I came home and did the same thing to this chair that I'm sitting in right now.

SB (laughter) Did he act, did he act like his injury hurt? Do you think he had a chair, you know.

HS No, no.

SB He didn't...

HS I, after his death, I went out and visited with the housekeeper, Mrs. Grumbach. And I was very much astonished to go into the kitchen and find the old-fashioned icebox. So I said to her, "Well, here in the home of Frigidaire, is it possible that you don't have a mechanical refrigerator?"

She said, "Mr. Stout, there's going to be quite a few things that you will fail to find here. Things of a mechanical nature, or things of that type which came into the house, Mr. Orville would take apart to find out how they worked. And he'd never bother to put them together."

SB Oh, dear?

HS Well, the same thing happened with the first I.B.M. electric typewriter. He had one of them sent out. Took it apart, solved all the mysteries that existed as far as he was concerned, put the parts in a bushel basket, and he was through with it and told them to come and get it. (laughter)

SB Oh, wow.

HS Then upstairs, they had a shower-bath, the bathroom was, I'd say, probably twelve feet square. They had a shower there which was probably six feet square. There was a very beautiful shower curtain that hung at the entrance of that shower, but I noticed the back of it was an old stained tarpaulin. So I asked Miss Grumbach why the tarpaulin? She said, "Well, Mr. Stout, that is the tarpaulin that they used to use out at Wright Field in their hangar to cover their plane with. But the reason it's there is because Mr. Orville
didn't want to get that shower curtain wet."

SB (laughter)

HS He didn't want to get it stained, so he just kept it to protect it that way, and I noticed that their wash basin, there were drawers there. And he had built little compartments in the drawer there; one for his shaving brush, one for his shaving creams, shaving mug, one for his razor, one for a toothbrush, one for tooth powder, and so forth. Everything had its place. He mentioned to me that shortly after their first flight, a gentleman whose name was Zahm, Z-A-H-M, came to them and wanted to be employed as a consulting aeronautical engineer. He said we didn't employ because we thought we knew as much about it as he did. And he never quite forgave us. And he was the one who, primarily, as an employee of Smithsonian, kept the first plane out of the Smithsonian because he influenced the people there that they would not label that as the first powered flight. A successful airflight. But, later on, of course, it was returned here from Kensington in London. And I remember that as they went through the index of Fred Kelly's biography, Orville came to that name Zahm, of course, towards the end of the index and his eyes twinkled. And he said, "That rascal."

SB (laughter) Why, why were you going over this Kelly book with him?

HS Because I wanted to. (?)

SB Oh, you wanted to be sure that it was true.

HS Well, I know. Well, I have been interested in the life all my life, and I watched them, of course, and so forth. And one of the highlights of my life was the big show they put on here in Dayton for them. I got one of the model airplanes they had at that time. Which I, I'd say, liberated as they say now, "Swiped", as we said it then. But I'll mention that a little later. Nineteen nine, they're making tests for the army, to meet army specifications, I meant they were successful in those tests and the army had agreed to buy their plane from them. Other countries had shown interest,
but, apparently Uncle Sam was little bit hard to sell. They were conducting those tests right near Washington. And it was rather surprising that at the same time, they were coming back and forth to Dayton in connection with the project, the city of Dayton put on to honor them. And I want to read you a letter that Wilbur wrote to Octave Chanute from Fort Myers, Virginia, about the situation at that time. And here's an actual quote. "About a week of our time will be consumed in traveling back and forth between Dayton and Washington to receive medals. The Dayton presentation has been made the excuse for an elaborate carnival, an advertisement of the city under the guise of being an honor to us. And it was done in spite of our known wishes. We are not as appreciative as we might be." And that is the end of that quote. I like that for it was further of the fact that the Wrights were not at all impressed by honors and so forth and so on. Right along that line in 1928, when the cornerstone was being laid on Kill Devil Hill at Kitty Hawk, the cornerstone for the Wright Memorial, which is a very beautiful structure. The spectators who were there, with one exception, showed much enthusiasm. The one man who failed to catch the happy spirit of the occasion turned with a wry smile to Lindsay Warren, L-I-N-D-S-A-Y Warren, who was then the representative in Congress from that district and said, now this is a quote, "I wonder if this whole thing isn't a mistake. Fifty years from now might be soon enough to determine if this memorial should be built. To do it now seems like an imposition on the taxpayers." And that is the end of that quote. I liked his feelings towards us taxpayers.

SB Now who, you didn't say who said that.

HS This a, Orville.

SB Oh, that was Orville.

HS Yes. Rather surprisingly these young men finished high school, but they didn't bother to go get a diploma. They were not the kind of people who
took much stock in that kind of folderol as they would have called it. Their second airplane, as you undoubtably know, is at Carillon Park, where Colonel Deeds has had it restored beautifully. The first, of course, is at Smithsonian. All their medals and honors are on display at the Dayton Art Institute. Ford, Henry Ford moved the bicycle shop away, which I think was where we Daytonians made a mistake. That southward located at 1127 West Third Street and I hope that before that spot disappears, into just the pages of history, there'll be some sort of a fitting memorial there. Orville, as you know, died in 1948, and his executor as I have said, was Harold Miller. He was a keen investor; surprisingly I have learned that he owned the most stock of any kind in airplanes. Airplanes. After they had solved the problem, they apparently lost interest. They continued their interest in gliders up till 1911. But after they had sold their airplane, to the government and after World War I where they were, where Wilbur, no when Orville was involved as a consultant to the Dayton Ohio Airplane Company. They had very little aviation activity. They had numerous inventions of various kinds, even they invented some toy.

SB Did he get patents on these inventions?

HS No, a, his, the wing warping was I think their biggest problem, and that was patented, that patent was handled, handled by Mr. H. A. Toulmin, Sr. of this city. They copied, they printed that patent hangs in the Deeds Carillon and the building where the plan is on display.

SB They seemed to be quite capable financial men. Did they, was this, did they have an advisor or...

HS Financially?

SB Yes.

HS Well, I've been told by investment men in Dayton that they would go around and ask a lot of questions. Of course, this is primarily always Orville we're talking about because Wilbur died before they had started to accumulate.
But they would ask a lot of questions and then make up their own minds. They were not the kind of people, Orville was not the kind of person to whom you could sell anything. Paul Price, who was recently chief of police in Dayton, but who at the time was a traffic sergeant, told me that one day, Orville called him up, greatly concerned because their automobile had been in an accident. Orville never drove, but their chauffeur had been involved in an accident. He was very much worried about that they might be sued, and Mr. Price tells me that he said, "Well, Mr. Wright, you shouldn't be worried about that. Your insurance will take care of that. Mr. Wright says, "Well, I carry no insurance of any kind."

Yes.

And, I, of course, know that my father who is in the insurance business, tried to sell Orville annuity, but he had no interest in it. And I have since found out that apparently they didn't even carry fire insurance on their home. He just didn't believe in insurance.

Well, he thought he would invest his money and it would accumulate to cover any possible loss, do you think. Or that he just figured he'd be lucky?

Well, I, I don't know, I don't know that much about that investment.

I would like to shut off the thing.

Okay, now we're doing all right. Okay.

About this celebration which they had in Dayton to honor the Wrights, I have only vague recollections. It was a carnival type of thing. There's no question about that. But on Main Street, I believe, from First to Fourth, they built what you called a court of honor there. About every half block they'd build pillar platforms, probably fifteen feet high, and between the pillars of each one of these, they had small wooden models of the
original airplane. Well, of course, all the young folks in Dayton, immediately were after those small models, they were, it was probably three feet in wing spread. Well, I got one. And for many years, it hung in my bedroom, and what's become of it now, I don't reason.

SB What this...

HS Do you have any questions you want to ask?

SB Well, was this put on by the Chamber of Commerce?

HS Oh, sure the Chamber of Commerce.

SB Yes.

HS And I, if you want dope on that, go to the newspapers.

SB Okay.

HS Could you, you can get those from 1909 copies?

SB Yes. I just, you know, was wondering was it by that time had they, the Dayton public attitude towards, them change? When did, when did people finally believe that they, they really had something here?

HS Well, obviously not until 1909.

SB Not till 1909.

HS Because they didn't do anything about it.

SB Yes, but did, was there much...

HS And they, they let the, the shop get away here.

SB Yes, well, was there, was there much interest besides the kids to go out and see them fly?

HS No, not a great deal, not a great deal, no. You could have gone out there on what then we called the traction, the inter-urban street car. You'd go right past the place. You'd get off there and wait a while and if they flew you'd see it. If they didn't fly, you didn't see it.

SB Yes.

HS But the...
SB Did they make a conscious effort to keep the people away?

HS Not that I'm aware of. But for one thing about it, that area out there was used as a cow pasture and it belonged to Mr. Torrence Huffman, whose son, William P. Huffman, is the president of the State Fidelity Federal Savings Association, and he had a herd of cattle out there, and the Wrights approached him, asking for permission to use that. He said it was all right for you to use it but don't harm my cattle.

SB Yes.

HS But the place had the reputation of being infested with rattlesnakes. So people didn't do too much walking around there.

SB (laughter)

HS Whether or not there were, I don't know for sure.

SB It was effective in keeping a crowd away.

HS Yes, that's for sure.

SB Yes.

(end of side one)

(start of side two)

SB Did, did they seem to have any other interest or were they active in anything else around the city? Did they go to church?

HS I don't know, I really don't.

SB Yes.

HS I expect they did, for their father was the bishop of the United Brethren Church. Now I can't imagine growing up in that home without being thoroughly inducted in the religious beliefs. They were the kind of people who would have carried those with them. Incidentally, I never heard Orville use any profanity of any kind. Not even the mildest kind. But, of course, the only time you ever heard Orville talk was when you're talking to him personally. Because, in spite of all the events which were put on in his honor and all the honors were given to him, he'd never been known to make a speech other
than to rise and say thank you.

SB Yes.

HS When the Conservancy job came along here, Colonel Deeds, who was a friend of the Wrights, of course, who was then the president of the National Cash Register Company, no, correction, who was then general manager of the National Cash Register Company, was the key man in the Conservancy operation and he suggested that they, the speakers' bureau be headed by Orville Wright. He said then we can keep his speaking down to a minimum.

SB (laughter) The perfect after dinner speaker. (laughter)

HS Perfect.

SB Oh dear, that's interesting.

HS He was, Orville spent a good bit of time over at the Engineers Club, of which he was one of the charter members.

SB Yes, did he hold any office in the Engineers Club? Or did he just...

HS Not to my knowledge.

HS Just enjoyed the library.

HS I don't think he did, I don't think he did.

SB Yes.

HS Their, their first four cylinder motor is over there right now on display, has been there for a long time. It was never used in an airplane. I'll tell you one thing that I think is interesting. They both liked to play a joke in their rather quiet way and when Harold Miller married Ivonette Wright, he was invited there for Christmas dinner with the rest of the family. He learned at that time that there had always been this Christmas dinner and every person had a ten dollar bill at their plate. Well, he didn't expect anything there; he was a stranger. And there wasn't any there at his plate, but there was a nice box of candy. And he was very delighted with that. But Orville kept needling him to inspect that candy closely and look
at the box, how nice it was, finally kept working on him and he took the box
apart. He took the fine coat of paper off the cardboard which covered the
box, and underneath was the ten dollar bill.

SB Oh, this was Mr. Miller.

HS Yes.

SB Oh.

Unintroduced voice Can I talk?

SB Nope, I am.

Same unintroduced voice Is that all?

SB I think so. Maybe you go on and finish that maybe I can think of a few
questions here.

HS Well, with your permission, I'd like to close this particular discussion with
a tribute to Bishop Wright, their father. A very wonderful man. He kept
a diary in considerable detail. Now get this, from 1854 to 1917. Now Mr.
Miller has all those diaries. And on the day of Wilbur's death, this was
written in that diary, I think it's a wonderful tribute from a father to a
son, and it certainly applies to both Wilbur and Orville and I quote from
that diary. "This morning at three fifteen, Wilbur passed away. Age forty-
five years, one month, and fourteen days. A short life, full of consequences
and unfailing intellect, incurable temper, great self-reliance, and has great
modesty. Seeking the light clearly, pursuing it steadily, he lived and died."
That's the end of the quote.

SB That's a nice thing for a father to say, isn't it.

HS And it's very well said.

SB I should say.

HS Very well said.

SB Yes. Did you know, did Orville write very much on his own? Did he? Letters?
Did he ever write memoirs?

HS No, not to my knowledge. No, I never heard of it, at all, I'm sure I would
have.
The Wrights, both of them, were the kind of people who never threw away anything. And that Miracle at Kitty Hawk book by Fred Kelly is a collection or a selection rather of much of their correspondence. Their correspondence now is all in the Library of Congress. But they kept copies of all the letters they ever wrote to anybody. They kept the letters they received from anybody. They kept the sheets on which they had done their calculations, and everything there, is, I'd say all their accomplishments in life are well-documented.

That's interesting. The old, their housekeeper, she was with them for a number of years, gee.

Thirty-eight years.

Thirty-eight years.

Carrie, Carrie Grumbach. She died I guess about last November.

Yes, I understand it was quite recent. A who...

Wilbur gave her an annuity.

Who did he see in everyday contact, who were his close friends?

I don't know.

Or did he have any close friends?

I couldn't answer that question.

Well, thank you very much. I appreciate your help.

You're more than welcome.
INDEX

Airplanes, Wright, 1904 model, 10 (Carillon Park)
Beard, Martin, 4
Beck, Mabel, 1
Bicycle shop, 10, 12
Carillon Park, 10
Chanute, Octave, 9
Commercial use of airplane, 5
Dayton Art Institute, 10
Dayton Chamber of Commerce, 12
Dayton Journal, 4
Dayton, Ohio celebrations, 8, 9, 11-12
Dayton Ohio Airplane Company, 10
Deeds, Edward A., 10, 14
Deeds Carillon, 10
Edison, Thomas Alva, 5
Engineers Club, (Dayton), 14
Flights, Wright 1903 (Kill Devil Hills), 3-4
Ford, Henry, 10
Foreign interests, 8-9
Fort Myer, Virginia, 9
Frigidaire, 7
Gliders and gliding, 10
Grumbach, Carrie, 2, 7, 16
Hawthorn Hill, 6, 7-8
Huffman, Torrence, 13
Huffman, William, 13
Huffman Prairie, 3, 13
I.B.M electric typewriter, 7
Kelly, Frank, 1, 6, 8, 16
Kites, 4-5
Kitty Hawk, N.C., 4
Lilienthal, Otto, 3
Material used; cloth in gliders, 2
Miller, Harold, 2, 10, 14, 15
Miller, Ivonette Wright, 2, 14
Motors, Wright Wright 4 cylinder, 14
National Cash Register, 14
Patents, Wright, 10
Price, Paul, 11
Public's interest in Wrights, 2, 4, 12
Scientific American, 5
Smithsonian Institution, 8
South Kensington Science Museum, London, 8
State Fidelity Federal Savings Association, 13
Tate, Capt. William J., 4-5
Telegram reporting Kitty Hawk flight, 4
Toulmin, H.A., Jr., 10
United Brethren Church, 13
U.S. Army, 8-9
Warren, Lindsay, 9
Wing warping, 10
Wright, Katharine, 2
Wright, Lorin, 2
Wright, Rev. Milton, 15
Wright, Milton, nephew of Wright Brothers, 2
Wright, Orville character, 6, 11, 13-14 finances, 10
inventions, 6-7
on the Wright Brothers Memorial (Dayton), 9
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wright, Orville</td>
<td>(cont.) Wright Brothers,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reviewing book by Fred</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kelly, 1, 6, 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>mentioned, 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wright, Wilbur</td>
<td>on Dayton celebration, 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rev. Wright on, 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>mentioned, 6, 9, 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wright Field</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wright family</td>
<td>6, 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wright Memorial</td>
<td>(Kitty Hawk), 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zahm, Dr. A.F.</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>