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Interview with Samuel L. Finn

Samuel L. Finn

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WRIGHT BROTHERS - CHARLES F. KETTERING

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON

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SAMUEL L. FINN

Interviewed by

Susan Bennet

on

February 21, 1967

SB We're recording now I believe, Mr. Finn. This is Mr. Finn, Sam Finn.

(break in tape)

SB And this is February 21, 1967. Where am I getting this whistle. Oh, I see.

There we are. And Mr. Finn would you tell me now how you met the Wrights?

SF Well, I knew Orville Wright from attending civic meetings with him. And he was, of course, an outstanding person. He had very little to say, but he was a good listener, and was a fine person.

SB Now, when you say civic meetings, what particular type of meetings do you mean?

SF Well, almost any, any kind that dealt with public works.

SB You mean like the Conservancy District, or...

SF Yes. Yes, that would be one of them. But I can see him in my mind just now, he would attend them regularly and seemed to be very interested, but, as I said before, he had very little to say.

SB He was that involved.

SF Yes.

SB Did he, did he, he was interested merely as a spectator. Did he offer suggestions or anything like that?

SF Mostly as a spectator.

SB Is that so...

SF Yes.

SB (unintelligible)

SF Yes.

SB Now would these, these meetings were they down...held downtown?

SF Yes, downtown at hotels or at other appropriate public halls.

SB Yes. Did he ever have any of them in his home?

SF I...yes, he did. The home that was near the National Cash Register, and which the National Cash Register now owns.

SB You mean Hawthorn Hill.

SF Hawthorn Hill, yes.

SB Was he a genial host?

SF I really don't remember, I don't remember that.

SB But there were mainly men at the, at the meetings.

SF I think entirely men.

SB Yes.

SF Yes.

SB Now, you also had Miss Wright as a teacher.

SF I did. Miss Katharine Wright, the Wright Brothers' sister was my teacher in Latin at Steele High School. About the year 1905 I would say.

SB Yes, was she a strict teacher?

SF Moderately so. She was a very good teacher. But tremendously interested in the work of her brother.

SB Oh, is that so?

SF Brothers.

SB Brothers, yes. In fact...Ginny told me a little story about you and Mr. Estabrook that you hadn't study the lesson...

SF Yes.

SB I thought that was cute.

SF You may find this hard to believe, but there were times that some of us were not prepared to recite.

SB Oh, I didn't think that ever happened.

(laughter)

SF And on those occasions, we had a deal sort of rigged up that when we got into her class, one of us would raise his hand and ask her whether she thought that powered flight was practical. And she became so enthused that she would talk the rest of the period and consequently we did not have to recite.

(laughter)

SF And then we would meet outside the hall and give our opinion of anybody that

thought that there was such a practical thing as powered flight.

SB Oh, is that so. Everybody thought they were crazy, I suppose. Did, did this seem a great deal more exotic than, than the automobile at this time? The fact that you could fly? Do you remember?

SF My recollections would be that it did not seem as exotic as the airplane because we all thought that it would never succeed, where the automobile by that time we knew was an established method of conveyance.

SB Yes.

SF Yes.

SB Did you ever go over to their bicycle shop. Do you remember?

SF Oh, I went by it. I don't believe I ever went inside to talk to the Wright Brothers. But I knew where it was. Out the, let's see, West side, wasn't it?

SB Yes. It was, I've never been able to identify it. I'm going to have to drive by one time. It was on Hawthorn Street.

SF I...that's my recollection too. It was on Hawthorn Street.

SB On the, on the West Side. It's a shame we still don't have it here. Maybe we'll get it back some day.

SF I hope so.

SB Yes. Is, about this time, when you all were in high school, how did the people in Dayton feel towards the Wrights? It seems kind of odd they were, they were the preacher's sons doing this wild thing. Did they think they were a bunch of nuts or did they respect them or not?

SF I think (laughter) it depends on your definitions of what a nut is. But I think that people took them half-heartedly and thought they were foolish experimentors, that would never amount to anything. The run of mill people that I encountered had that attitude.

SB Oh is that so?

SF Yes.

SB Well, when, when did this feeling begin to change?

- SF Well, let's see. I guess the first fairly successful flight was around nineteen five wasn't it?
- SB Well 19...yes, well actually 1903. But nobody paid any attention to that.
- SF No.
- SB It was 1905 before they even, before they even paid any attention to them, out there on the prairie.
- SF Now, about 1905 I would say people began taking them seriously.
- SB Is that right?
- SF And wondering whether this gadget really would be able to fly and whether it would ever be practical.
- SB Yes. Did you ever go out and watch them?
- SF Yes. Yes.
- SB When you went out to watch them, would it be a bunch of boys go out together? Or was it...
- SF Yes. It was sort of a lark and looking upon a curiosity that you felt never going to amount to anything. But it was fun watching it.
- SB Yes. Did you go out on your bike or out on the tram, or...
- SF Bikes mostly.
- SB Now, gee that was a long way.
- SF Yes. That was a long ride.
- SB Yes. Almost...they must have had a pretty good show. (laughter)
- SF Yes. (laughter)
- SB To go out all that way.
- SF Yes, it was so unusual that it would draw kids.
- SB That would take the...Miss, did Miss Wright at this time, was there anything that made her different from any of the other teachers that would...
- SF Only that there was a unique way of getting (laughter) enough to have to recite. (laughter)
- SB Yes, I don't imagine that worked with very many teachers.
- SF No.

SB How would she explain this? Did, did she know enough of the aerodynamics of it. Or how would she go into her little dissertation?

SF Well, so far as I was concerned and I believe so far as the other boys were concerned, we didn't pay too much attention to that.

(laughter)

SB That was a means to an end.

SF That right, that's right. (laughter)

SB Oh, I can't help but feel a little sorry for her. All you took her in that way. (laughter)

SF (laughter)

SB Did you see her after, after, do you remember seeing her on the street or anything after they had flown?

SF No, I don't. No I don't.

SB They seemed to have, well they did stay in Dayton though, didn't they?

SF Yes. They stayed in Dayton for quite some time, and Miss Katharine Wright married later in life. And then I, I lost complete track of, of them.

SB There was, or there has been some comment that, that he was very much distressed when she married.

SF I know nothing about that.

SB Yes, because they had been sort of alone for such a long time. Oh, you were going to tell me about the patents.

SF Yes, I'd like to tell you about that because that was fascinating to me.

There was a patent law firm in Dayton known as Toulmin and Toulmin. T-O-U-L-M-I-N. And composed of a father and son. The father apparently got out the original patent for the Wright Brothers and had it patented in the United States patent office. However, I don't believe that was universally known but after the son Harry A. Toulmin Jr. passed away, his widow called me one day, and told me that in going through the effects of both her husband and her father-in-law, that they came across the original patent that was issued to the Wright Brothers.

And they wondered whether I would be interested in it in view of the fact that I was president of the Carillon.

SB Oh, yes.

SF And I told her I would be very much interested in it. And thereupon through Henry Stout, our former Mayor, they delivered this original patent to me and we now have it hanging out at Carillon Park in the Wright building and it's worthwhile seeing.

SB I imagine so.

SF Yes.

SB I've seen a copy of it. I haven't seen the original. Then they probably took care of all the legal matters for the Wrights?

SF Yes, Toulmin and Toulmin apparently took care of all the legal matters for the Wright Brothers.

SB Isn't that interesting.

SF Yes.

SB Were they their financial advisors or did they, they...

SF That I don't know.

SB Yes, they seemed to have used a great deal of, oh business, I guess, in their dealings...

SF Although I had heard that they were taken advantage of and that they did not get anywhere near what they should have gotten out of this wonderful invention.

SB Is that so?

SF Yes, I heard that many times.

SB Well, yes I guess so because. Of course they sold out. But they were supposed to have royalties from the patents and I think that, that the matter was that they won the fight but that collecting the royalties was something else again.

SF Yes.

SB The, I wonder as an attorney, if you had any knowledge of the various suits over the patent?

SF No, I, know nothing about that.

SB Yes.

SF I am not a patent attorney.

SB Oh. (laughter)

SF ...just a general attorney. (laughter)

SB I hadn't realized. I should have known better. That there would be a distinction there. (laughter)

SF Yes.

SB Well, that's very interesting. Let me...

(break in tape)

(end of tape)

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