



Flightlines

The Centennial of Powered Flight (1903-2003) The Wright Family Album & Oregon's Little-Known Connection

This article is 2nd in a series of historical focus stories to commemorate the Centennial of Powered Flight, offered in FLIGHTlines during 2003. Keep reading, as we offer little-known information about the Wright family's connection to our own beautiful state of Oregon.

More than 100 years ago, a Bishop of the United Brethren Church commented with disgust on the idea that human beings would ever fly. "Blasphemy! Utter blasphemy!" he shouted. "God intends only his angels to fly." What was the Bishop's name? Reverend Milton Wright - none other than the father of Wilbur and Orville Wright themselves.

The son of a pioneer, Milton Wright was a United Brethren minister and theology professor, who ultimately became a Bishop in that denomination. His wife, Susan Wright, was the daughter of a carriage maker. The year was 1853 when she and Milton met at Hartville College in Indiana, where he was working and she was a student of literature.

After a long courtship, Milton asked Susan to marry him and accompany him to the Oregon Territory, where the United Brethren church had assigned him as Bishop of the territory and a missionary among the mining camps. While Susan declined to accompany him to the Oregon wilderness, she agreed to marry him upon his return. They married in 1859 - fairly late in life for "those days." He was almost 31; she was 28. In spite of their late

start, they had seven children together. Reuchlin was their first, born in 1860. Katharine was the youngest girl born to Bishop Wright and his wife (1874) and the only daughter to survive infancy.

Bishop Wright's three years in the Oregon territory were hard ones indeed. After a year as a circuit riding missionary in Oregon's mining camps, he was assigned new responsibilities. The Pacific Congress for United Brethren Church divided the Oregon Territory into two large districts. The Northern District



in 1857 established a preparatory school at Sublimity and appointed Reverend Wright as its first president. Despite his efforts, Sublimity College closed its doors two years later due to lack of student enrollment in a largely Catholic and Methodist region. Wright wearily returned to Illinois and married Susan, discouraged at "his failure out West."

Concurrent with the establishment of Sublimity College in the Northern

District, the Southern District of Oregon had established Philomath College near Corvallis. Bishop Wright remained affiliated with that institution, albeit largely from a distance. Philomath College became very prominent in the life of the newly formed State of Oregon. In fact, it remained open until 1929, when it was forced to close due to the growth of Oregon's public college network.

It is interesting to consider that had Sublimity College not failed, causing Reverend Wright to return to Illinois more quickly than he had originally planned, and marry - or had he been appointed with primary responsibility at Philomath College rather than Sublimity - the Wright Brothers may never have been born.

Instead, Wilbur Wright was born in 1867. He was an excellent student and athlete. He had ambitions of going to Yale, but never managed to attend college because of a life-changing injury he suffered in the winter of 1885-86. During a skating game called "shinney" a bat flew out of another player's hands and struck Wilbur in the mouth. The blow knocked out his teeth and turned his face to a bloody pulp. As his mouth, teeth and jaw healed, complications set in. Medicine prescribed by the family physician weakened his heart and an undisclosed but severe intestinal disorder followed. Wilbur abandoned all plans for college

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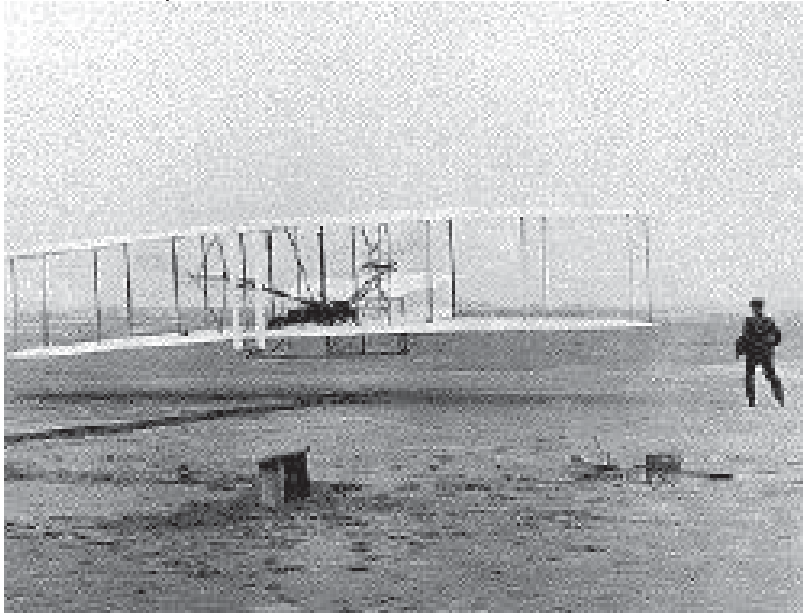
and fell into a deep depression, living for years in seclusion.

It was a toy purchased by Bishop Wright for his sons that sparked this fascination with flight. In 1878, Rev. Wright bought them a flying toy made of paper, bamboo and cork and powered by tightly wound rubber bands. (Today we would call the contraption a helicopter.) The brothers built a number of successful flying replicas of the toy. When they undertook to build the toy on a much larger scale, it failed to work so well. They were 11 and 7 at the time. This is when the Bishop uttered his now famous words about God only wanting angels to fly.

They performed their first aeronautical experiments with kites in 1899, then built a series of gliders through 1902 - developing an aerodynamic control system for airplanes while teaching themselves to fly. They added an engine to their aircraft in 1903 and made the first controlled, sustained powered flights on December 17th of that year.

The Bishop's boys made their first public demonstrations of their flying machine to a group of Dayton, Ohio, residents on October 4, 1905. In 1908, they sold airplanes to the U.S. Army and to a French syndicate and demonstrated them to the public at large. In 1909, Wilbur flew before a million spectators at the Hudson-Fulton Celebration in New York City. The flying machine became such a hit

that the Wright brothers organized a company to manufacture airplanes in 1909 and began filing law suits against all other airplane manufacturers that were using their patented methods of aerodynamic control. Wilbur became the designated "expert witness" in these cases and traveled frequently to give testimony. Worn out, he



contracted typhoid on one of his many journeys and died in Dayton on May 30, 1912 - exactly 13 years after he began his formal aviation experiments.

Orville reluctantly took over their company when Wilbur died, but sold it in 1915 to follow his own interests. He was a consulting engineer on the first guided missile (the "buzz bomb") during World War I and was co-inventor of "split flaps" used on dive bombers in World War II.

Orville was a lifelong board member of the National Advisory Council on Aeronautics (NACA), which later became NASA - the National Aeronautics And Space Administration. Most of the latter years of his life were spent preserving and protecting the

honor that he and his brother Wilbur had earned in developing the first true airplanes.

Bishop Wright lived with Wilbur from his retirement in 1905 through his death in 1917. His own handwritten diaries cover a sixty-year span from 1857 to 1917. In those diaries, he recounts the story of the day he finally flew in a plane. The year was 1910, and Orville piloted the craft in which his family's aging patriarch consented to serve as passenger. Orville feared the experience might unnerve the elderly Reverend Wright. But instead, the bishop shouted above the combined roar of engine, propellers and slipstream: "Higher, Orville, higher!"

Despite his earlier discouraging commentaries on the prospects of aviation, Bishop Wright and his wife Susan instilled in their children a sense of curiosity. They encouraged them to pursue their own interests. At the dinner table, the Bishop minister would have the children debate the topic of the day - which he always chose. As adults, they used this model of debate to hash out their disagreements about aerodynamic problems - which sometimes became quite heated.

From their father, Orv and Will learned perseverance, dedication, hard work, and the "stick-to-itiveness" that would typify their approach to problem solving. ■