

Wilbur Wright – The best and brightest of us all

By Jane Olt Healy

One hundred years ago, Wilbur Wright passed away on May 29, 1913. At the time of his death over 1,000 telegrams, from all over the world arrived at the Dayton family home expressing sympathy at the loss of a great man. Cornelius Vanderbilt himself penned a letter as a member of the committee of The Wright Company: "He exemplified the highest, the best and the brightest of us all. Wilbur was kind, considerate, always cheerful and an ideal brother. We have lost our guiding Spirit." He accomplished in 45 years what all of mankind through the centuries could not do - invent flight - a goal thought to be unobtainable.

As bicycle maker from a small town in America he had an unusual life to say the least. As a boy he was known to be one of the best skaters in Dayton and also extremely agile; one of the most skillful performers on the horizontal bars. This ability he would later put to use in handling the gliders and early "motorized gliders." As a man, he was well known for his ability as a mechanical engineer, and his facility with tools.

At age 41, he traveled to France to unveil the Flyer and he stayed in Europe nearly one year demonstrating and teaching would-be pilots about the new discovery, the aeroplane.

Wilbur Wright was often prophetic. After inventing the air-



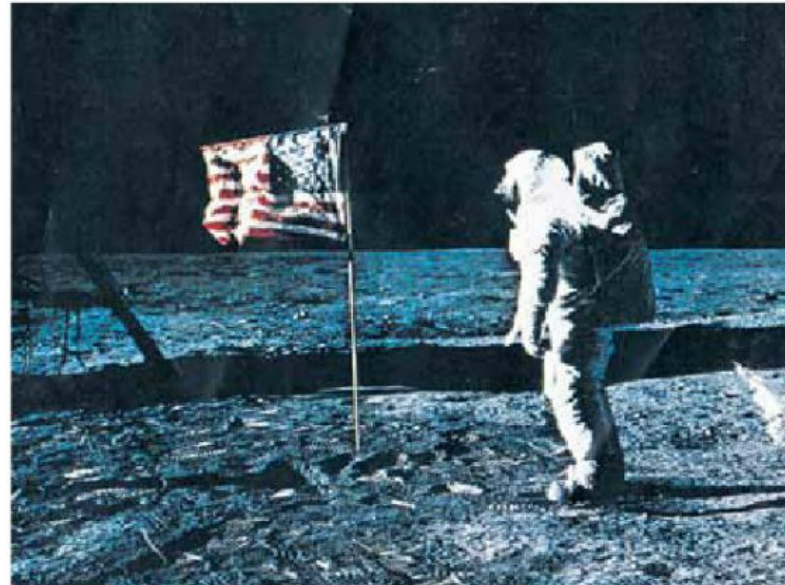
Official times Wright Flyer with stopwatch at Le Mans, France with Wilbur Wright piloting the aeroplane for over two hours, a new world record, winning the Michelin Prize.

plane, the question arose of how to provide suitable starting and stopping places - "aerogarages" which the new travel would require. It seemed a foregone conclusion that the aeroplane would eventually carry passengers. Many argued against the aeroplane since there were no designated landing fields. Wilbur, intent on establishing a network of airfields, defended the idea with the statement: "If boats, trains and automobiles have their own ports there ought to be ports on the planet designated for aeroplanes," a novel idea at the time.

Many have written about Wilbur but had little knowledge of his character. He was known to be an extremely modest man who exemplified admirable virtues

inherited from his father, Milton Wright, a Bishop in the United Brethren Church. Other views on his character come from Fred Kelly, the only authorized biographer (by his brother, Orville) and the 1978 interviews with men who worked with him in the Dayton Wright factory.

According to one interview, when Wilbur was in the factory, he was quiet, "his mind was in higher things; Orville was on top of things and always working on a new airplane design." According to another, "Orville was always very quiet and very unassuming. Wilbur was a business man and Orville was more the inventor."



Apollo 11 astronaut Neil Armstrong saluting American flag on the moon.

Fred Kelly, the biographer asserted, "It is unlikely that either Wilbur or Orville Wright working alone could have or would have flown. The job seemed to require this glorified team, each giving advice and support to the other. Though they complemented each other in a way, certain characteristics were strong in both: Intense curiosity, infinite patience, insistence on being sure of facts - these traits seem to have been about as marked in one brother as in the other."

Wilbur Wright was the first to feel acceleration in flight - the feeling of being off in your own world. Those first flights of the Wrights were a new delight in human experience. The brothers felt a sense of power, exhilaration and also well-being. Perhaps they even experienced the freedom of the birds as they soared over that landscape at Huffman Field in 1904.

A special thank you to former Oakwood resident Jane Olt Healy for contributing this story and these photos. Healy is the author of Wrights' European Odyssey: The Untold Story of Orville and Wilbur in Europe 1908-1909 and The Original Wrights: Orville and Wilbur's Overwhelming Legacy. She is currently working on the third book in her Wright Brothers trilogy.