

**WHAT would it be like to be one of the other brothers of the Wright brothers? HOW did they go from being high school dropouts in this family of high aspirations to becoming world famous inventors of the airplane?**

## The Wright Brothers A Genogram Life Story

By Monica McGoldrick



The Wright brothers, Wilbur and Orville, were described by their father as "inseparable as twins." Wilbur once wrote:

From the time we were little children, my brother Orville and myself lived together, played together, worked together, and in fact, thought together. We usually owned all of our toys in common, talked over our thoughts and aspirations so that nearly everything that was done in our lives has been the result of conversations, suggestions, and discussions between us (cited in Crouch, 1989, pp. 49-50).

I fell in love with the Wright brothers when I read the Landmark Book about them as a child. I was fascinated by these two brothers who were so much like twins they could complete each other's sentences and so full of imagination they invented the airplane. When I began researching seeking families with more than one famous sibling for my genogram research, I was amazed to discover that I could find out almost nothing about family, especially about the other brothers. The

story seemed to be that these two “twin” brothers, sons of two highly intelligent and talented parents who had both gone to college, which was extremely rare, especially for women in that era, were both expected to be high achievers. Yet both Wilbur and Orville dropped out of high school shortly before graduating. They hung around working at a bicycle shop, and then invented the airplane! It was the strangest story. The parents had high aspirations for the achievement of all their children. The highest aspirations of all, were apparently for Wilbur, who was expected to go, not just to college but to Divinity School, since the father was a minister and then a bishop. And not just any Divinity School, but Yale Divinity School was the expectation for him. So how did it happen that he just dropped out of school and hung around, even leading to rumors within the family that he was malingering.

I kept asking myself what happened to these two brothers that they never even finished high school and never dated or left home. And what happened to their other brothers, Reuchlin and Lorin, about whom we’ve never heard even a word? Interestingly, the landmark book, along with many other biographies, completely ignores these two older brothers, who were, in fact more like twins in age, being only a year apart, while Wilbur and Orville were a full 4 years apart. What would it be like to have been one of the *other* brothers of the Wright brothers? And how did they go from being high school dropouts in this family of high aspirations to becoming world famous inventors of the airplane? I did find it interesting to learn that Orville and Katherine, the youngest of the 5 siblings shared a birth date, August 19, so those two might have been thought to be somewhat like twins by sharing a birthday.

And, of course, these two amazing brothers did not just happen to invent the airplane. They worked in a highly collaborative way together for years. As their work on inventing the airplane developed, the charge in their already close relationship was particularly intense. For six or seven weeks they worked together day and night, and argued all the way. They could even reverse positions and continue their intense arguing. An assistant recalled that whenever the brothers were in the same room the shouting would start, resounding through the house:

One morning following the worst argument I ever heard, Orv came in and said he guessed he'd been wrong and they ought to do it Will's way. A few minutes later Will came in and said he'd been thinking it over and perhaps Orv was right. The first thing I knew they were arguing it all over again, only this time they had switched ideas ([cited in Walsh, 1975, p. 115](#))

Probably switching sides was an attempt to stop the escalation of their fighting, when it had then gone too far. Agreement would have brought them too close, so they quickly moved back to polarized positions. The brothers' collaboration on the development of the airplane was one of the most productive partnerships in history, a relationship more binding than most marriages, even to the point where neither could use their joint bank account without consulting the other. The brothers often began whistling the same tune while at work in their bicycle shop, as if there was a psychic bond between them. And their voices were so alike a listener could not tell them apart except by seeing them. They attributed this phenomenon to an association of ideas stored in a common memory ([Howard, 1987](#)). Though both were mechanically minded and intelligent, it was their combined abilities and efforts that allowed them to succeed at man-made flight. Only together did they experience genius.

The collaboration of these extraordinary brothers created one of the miracles of our time. On the surface this extraordinary "twinship" is somewhat mystifying. As mentioned earlier, other sibling pairings in the family might have seemed more natural. While Wilbur and Orville were 4 years apart in age, their two older brothers, Reuchlin and Lorin were only a year apart in age. Orville and their sister Katherine were linked with each other by having a shared birthday. Unlike every other member of their family, including their mother, neither Wilbur nor Orville went to college.

I believe their "twinship" was influenced by the hidden connection brought on by the birth and early death of twin siblings, Otis and Ida, born between Orville and Wilbur. The twins' birthday was commemorated by their father for the rest of his life- more than a quarter of a century later ([Crouch, 1989](#)). Though we know that twins tend to run in families, we know

nothing of earlier instances of twins in the Wright family. But I can't help wondering if the intensity of the Wright's need for twins doesn't also reflect some earlier traumas involving other twins in previous generations of the family.

As we know, families that lose children often form a special attachment to the surviving children, who become emotional replacements and have difficulty leaving home. Bishop Wright, the father, actually boasted that neither Orville nor Wilbur ever married or left the parental roof, while their two older brothers and their younger sister all left home for college. The reasons for this remain obscure, leaving one to wonder if there was not some covert message for them not to leave, given both parents high educational aspirations for all their children and the fact that all three of their siblings did attend college.

Wilbur sustained a sports injury around the time of finishing high school and withdrew to his home, nursing his mother, who was slowly dying of tuberculosis. The father lost his position as bishop the same year, due to political hassles, which put him in difficult circumstances financially and in his community. However, Wilbur's inability to mobilize himself lasted long after his mother's death and left several family members wondering if he was malingering or depressed. The parental message not to leave may have been intensified not only by the loss of the twins, but by the mother's illness and early death and the father's political problems within the ministry. Orville and Katharine did indeed have a kind of twin relationship, which intensified after Wilbur died at the early age of 45. Orville and Katherine lived together in the family home as a pair for many years. One might almost hypothesize that this family "needed" twins. Could it be that for the family the lost twins were replaced by the "book-ends" Wilbur and Orville, born on each side of the twins. Then, when Wilbur died, Orville and Katherine became the replacement twins.

When Katherine finally decided to marry at the age of 52, having hesitated for over a year to tell Orville of her engagement, he refused to speak to her ever again. As one of the Wright biographers put it:

Katherine violated a sacred pact. In admitting another man into her life, she had rejected her brother. Katherine of all people, had shaken his faith in the inviolability of the family ties that provided his emotional security (Crouch, 1989, p. 483).

From a family systems perspective this example reflects a common family pattern: fusion leads to cut-off, and cut-off leads to fusion. In other words, if you cut off feelings about one relationship (say, the twins in the Wright family), you may intensify feelings in another (Wilbur and Orville), which got transferred to yet another fusion (Orville and Katherine) and led eventually to another cut-off, when Orville demanded fusion with Katherine and could not tolerate her having another intimate relationship. The Wright family demonstrates the power of twins' creativity, but also the deadening effect of the lack of flexibility brought on by traumatic loss that is unresolved. Intervention in such families may help them take a more proactive role in redefining constricting roles that have been set in place by the system failing to adequately acknowledge their traumatic experiences. Once families shut down in response to experiences they feel too overwhelmed to handle, something needs to release the pressure to set the system free again. The act of cutoff is in this sense the equivalent of death, and that becomes the final act of rigidity in a system that is in trouble. It was only on her deathbed that Lorin convinced Orville to speak to his sister after years of refusing even talk to her for "betraying" him by marrying her friend from college, Henry Haskell. Katharine was the most successful of all the Wright children academically, having attended Oberlin and developing a circle of friends. She later taught, but gave it up to care for her brothers. Henry Haskell, whom she had known in college, had loved her from that time on though he had married another college colleague. Now his wife had died and he was alone. Unfortunately Katherine and Henry had only a few years together, as she died only 3 years after they married at the age of 55.

So what happened to the other two Wright brothers. It is actually hard to find out. Both sons attended college, though possibly neither one completed it. Both married and had children. Reuchlin eventually moved to Kansas, where he raised 3 sons and a daughter, a 4<sup>th</sup> son having died. His surviving son, Wilbur Wright died in 1991 at the age of 61. It is said that

Reuchlin returned some of the inheritance from his brother Wilbur's estate, feeling it was not owed to him. What went on for him at a deeper level I wish I knew. He seems to have remained estranged from his family of origin but managed to go from bookkeeping to raising cattle on a farm in Kansas.

The other brother, Lorin, also spent some time in Kansas, but eventually returned, married his childhood sweetheart Ivonette (Netta) Stokes, and raised 2 sons and 2 daughters in Dayton, where the family had resided, and where he eventually became city manager, before his death in 1939. Orville and Katharine had some relationship with Lorin's children and with him. One daughter Ivonette Miller and her daughter, Marianne Miller Hudec have contributed substantially to the family papers available, some of which were given to the Library of Congress, while the rest went to Wright State University.

#### **WRIGHT FAMILY**

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