

In Her Own Wright
Part 2: Katie and “The Boys”

[HARRY HASKELL:] The Wright Brothers are as close as it comes to American folk heroes, and the famous photograph of their first successful powered flight at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, on December 17, 1903, is one of the most iconic images of the twentieth century. Yet we often forget that Wilbur and Orville weren't the *only* Wrights. The family also included their resilient, infinitely resourceful mother, Susan Koerner Wright; their pious, strong-willed father, Milton Wright, known as “the Bishop”; the two oldest Wright brothers, Reuchlin and Lorin; and, last but not least, their kid sister Katharine, nicknamed Katie.

I'm Harry Haskell, Katharine's step-grandson, and in this three-part podcast we're shining the spotlight on the little-known Wright Sister who played a key role in the saga of the Wright Brothers, although her contribution is all too often overlooked. Part 2: Katie and “The Boys.”

[ACTOR:] The flying machine is in process of making now. Will spins the sewing machine around by the hour while Orv squats around marking the places to sew. There is no place in the house to live but I'll be lonesome enough by this time next week and wish that I could have some of their racket around. They really ought to get away for a while. Will is thin and nervous and so is Orv. They will be all right when they get down in the sand--where the salt breezes blow etc. They think that life at Kitty-Hawk cures all ills. [Katharine Wright (KW) to Milton Wright, 8.20.1902]

[HH:] The four short hops over the North Carolina dunes that immortalized the Wright Brothers were still sixteen months in the future when their twenty-six-year-old sister penned that note to their widowed father. Katharine had always felt a special bond with “the boys,” as she called Will and Orv. They formed a tightly knit unit within a tightly knit family. Katharine and Wilbur prided themselves on holding things together while the Bishop, an itinerant preacher, was away on church business and Orville was working in the brothers' print shop or fixing bicycles. Over the years, Katharine did everything in her power to make her brothers' lives easier and advance their careers, starting long before the world had heard about the two enterprising bicycle mechanics from Dayton, Ohio.

[RICHARD MAURER:] You can ask, well, if Katharine had gotten married and gone off and lived somewhere else, would the airplane ever have been invented? Maybe not. Maybe the brothers would have gotten stuck in some way, or maybe when they needed encouragement, they wouldn't have got it. [HH:] Richard Maurer is Katharine's biographer. [RM:] She did many little things for them which don't seem all that significant. Like she acted as their correspondence secretary when they were out of town, significantly when they went to Europe. They went several times in the late 19-aughts, and that's where they made their big commercial breakthrough and began to sell machines, sign contracts. And that attracted the attention of the United States Army, who decided that if the European military was interested in this flying machine, they better get on board as well. So it all took off from there. Katharine played an important role while they were in Europe, because she was so personable. She spoke French, which was the universal language in Europe, much like English is today. So she could talk to the French, she could talk to the Italians, she could talk to the Spanish. She hobnobbed with kings

and other kinds of royalty in a very natural sort of charming, American way that was still very respectful, and in a way that the brothers couldn't really do because they were very uncomfortable in social groups unless they were with their family or friends.

[HH:] The three Wrights made a well-balanced team. Wilbur, the eldest, was the captain. A brilliant mathematician and theorist, he possessed a forensic skill that made him a formidable opponent in legal and scientific debates. Orville, four years younger and considerably shyer than his brother, excelled as a practical engineer. He was more at ease dealing with machines in his laboratory than with people outside the family. Katharine, smart, vivacious, confident, and down-to-earth, was her brothers' ambassador to the world. As Richard Maurer explains, her outgoing personality made her an indispensable asset to Will and Orv.

[RICHARD MAURER:] After they become famous--and particularly after they've gone to Europe to introduce their flying machine over there, where it got much more attention than it had up to that point in the United States--they become known as not just the Wright Brothers, but the Wright Brothers and the Wright Sister. So the three of them were thought of as a team. In France, there was speculation in the press that Katharine may have done the calculations for the machine or done other kinds of technical work. All throughout her life, Katharine did everything she could to scotch this rumor. [She said] that there was no truth at all in it, so we have to take her word for it, I think. Even in the United States, after they became lionized in the press and lionized in Dayton with the parades, and after the brothers were put on advisory boards, are asked to testify to Congress, or have lunch with the president of the United States, there was still the impression that Katharine did play some significant role in the airplane.

I was trying to think of an analogy of some great figure who was almost working as a team with a woman who really didn't get all the credit she deserved for his achievements, because up until a generation or two ago, it was always the man, and the woman would be in the background. I've been reading the Robert Caro multivolume biography of Lyndon Johnson. Johnson was a very impressive politician, a master politician. We probably haven't seen his like since his death. But if you subtract Lady Bird from Lyndon, I don't think he's nearly as successful. He would probably have burned himself out or gone crazy or gotten involved in some scandal that would have scotched his political career. Lady Bird Johnson understood Lyndon. She understood his moods. She knew when to pump him up when he needed encouraging. She knew when to turn him off when he was being self-destructive. She knew how to build bridges to other politicians in her very charming social way that would help his career, like with Sam Rayburn, the Speaker of the House for so many years.

[HH:] Katharine was a dyed-in-the-wool Republican who revered Teddy Roosevelt, so I'm not sure how she'd feel about being compared to Lady Bird Johnson. Classicist Judith Peller Hallett offers a less controversial analogy: she likens Katharine to a Roman matron and thinks the Wright Sister would have felt perfectly at home in the ancient Mediterranean society she studied at Oberlin College.

[JUDITH PELLER HALLETT:] Her situation has a lot in common with these women from powerful Roman families, where the men had the public responsibility and the public offices.

But because the finances were such that women were included--women held property, they owned slaves--fathers did not want to send their daughters off into the control of other families. They wanted to keep them in the family sphere. She's very much a Roman aristocratic daughter in her own way. One of the ways in which Roman women exerted their power was to help their brothers. It was their blood relatives, particularly their brothers, that they shared a name with, and they often shared political and socioeconomic causes. So I think of [Katharine] as very much in the tradition of some of these famous Roman women who [were] much smarter and more socially adept than [their brothers]. If she could time-travel back to second- or first-century BC Republican Rome, she would've fit in perfectly.

[LOIS WALKER:] How would this whole story have looked different if Katharine hadn't been there? You know, if she'd been married, if she had a family, if she hadn't been available, how would things be different? [HH:] Lois Walker is a retired US Air Force historian with a special interest in the Wrights. She too considers Katharine an integral part of the Wright family team, especially after she gave up her career as a high-school teacher to accompany Wilbur and Orville to Europe. [LW:] She was engaged for almost two years to a man named [Arthur] Cunningham at Oberlin. He went on to medical school and practiced medicine in Washington State. What if Katharine had married [Arthur]? What if she was out on the West Coast and wasn't anywhere available for all this? Imagine all those photographs of the Wrights. Erase Katharine out of that picture and the story would have been very, very different. I think that the boys would have continued to be famous, but there would have been a different air about it altogether. People were so impressed by Katharine. Anybody that met her, they were just charmed by her. They were surprised by the boys--you know, who thought that two bumpkins from Dayton would do something like this?--but Katharine really charmed them. So it became a family thing. Katharine made a big difference.

[HH:] If Katharine and Orville both looked up to Wilbur, they depended on each other for other kinds of sympathy and support. They were born on the same day three years apart, played together as kids, and hung out with the same group of friends while they were growing up. When Orv contracted a life-threatening case of typhoid in 1896, Katharine stayed home from college to see him through the worst. And twelve years later, she rushed to Orv's bedside in Washington, D.C., after he was critically injured in a plane crash that took the life of his passenger—the first fatal airplane accident in history. The memory of that traumatic event was still fresh when she recounted it years later in a letter to my grandfather:

[Actor:] Tomorrow is the seventeenth anniversary of Orv's accident at Fort Myer. That was the last day I taught school. After getting word of the accident, I went to Washington that night, staid seven weeks, was home four or five weeks and then went with Orv to Europe. Dear Little Brother! He was so badly hurt. I never did anything much harder than walking in to his room at the Hospital and smiling as if nothing much was the matter. He said afterward he thought it couldn't be so bad or I wouldn't have acted as I did. The doctors had dreaded my coming and were so relieved when I wasn't hysterical. They were sure glad to have me take charge at night. It was a military hospital and not another woman around the place. Orv is like a little boy with me. When we came home from Washington, after his accident, his leg was so sensitive and so easily hurt. He said "Sterchens, *you* watch and don't let them hurt my leg!" When he is delirious, and he always is if he has a bit of fever, I am the only one who can assure him everything is

being done for him. He always says he knows (even in his delirium) that I will see to everything for him and that *he* doesn't need to worry. [KW to Harry Haskell (HJJH), 9.16.25 and 12.17.25]

[HH:] Orville's brush with death in 1908 brought Katharine's life to a turning point. A few months later, Wilbur made his sister an offer she couldn't refuse: he and Orville would match her teacher's salary if she would help them market the Wright flyer in Europe. Katharine leaped at the opportunity to join her brothers overseas. After spending a decade drumming Latin grammar and Roman history into the thick heads of Dayton teenagers, she was eager to see the Old World with her own eyes. And she was a smash hit in her new role as the Wright Brothers' social secretary. Crowned heads of Europe and captains of science and industry soon succumbed to her unaffected midwestern ways. Although Katharine had often observed Will and Orv's test flights back home, she had yet to go up in a flying machine herself. Her maiden flight took place on February 15, 1909, near the southern French village of Pau. A photographer captured the Wright Sister perched in the open cockpit beside Wilbur, her long woolen skirt and overcoat bound near the ankles. Laurie Notaro is the author of *Crossing the Horizon*, a marvelously evocative novel about early women aviators. I asked her to help me imagine Katharine's feelings as the single-engine Wright biplane soared above the French farm fields.

[LAURIE NOTARO:] I will say that in 1909, 1908, she had to be one heck of a brave woman. The women that I profiled in my book *Crossing the Horizon* were not making their flights until 1927, 1928, 1929. I have seen those planes. I have seen similar planes to the one that they flew. And they are cramped. They are tiny. So I can't even imagine--we're talking 20 years prior to when the women that I knew of took flight. She was flying in an open cockpit, which posed all kinds of dangers. There have been reports [of] people being tossed out of open cockpits when their seatbelts broke and they were sucked out. It was a very, very dangerous proposition to do something like that. When you've got an open cockpit, you're not only dealing with the temperance of the plane, you're dealing with weather and wind and gravity, like you would never have in a closed-cockpit airplane. [It was] really difficult, really dangerous, to fly in. So she must've had a streak of courage, a lot of bravery. Even though she had an experienced pilot at the helm, it was still a terrifying ordeal. I think [Katharine] was just as brilliant as her brothers. There was no stepping down for her. This probably gave her a channel to defy her father as well and assert her independence and say, I can handle this. Watch me be brave. Watch me take this on and watch me do it beautifully.

The women that I followed and researched on their first flights up, they were not piloting a plane. They were simply passengers, much like Katharine. And what all three of them reported was the incredible sense of freedom, that anything was possible. It was beautiful, it was revelatory, and it was liberating. Elsie Mackay said, up there anything is possible. My aviatrixes were flying in pants, so they didn't have to tie their skirts, but that's what I'm talking about. You're dealing with elements, so women are even bound up in an airplane as passengers. Women simply did not have that kind of freedom on the ground. So I think to have it up in the air was something that was truly striking and really inspirational. The freedom that they found up there made so many of these female pilots take the risk. In many cases it cost them their lives, but they found a freedom up in the air that they did not have access to on the ground.

[HH:] We've heard about Orville's accident in 1908, which put him out of commission for months and left him afflicted with chronic pain. That mishap, on top of a series of fatal crashes involving daredevil stunt pilots—some of whom were employed as airborne promoters by the Wright Company's own Exhibition Department--had made all three Wrights determined to avoid unnecessary risks. In Katharine's case, the lesson may have been reinforced by the myth of Icarus, a key figure in the genealogy of human flight. (There's even an image of Icarus on the base of the Wright Brothers Memorial in North Carolina.) According to classicist Judith Peller Hallett, Katharine would have known the classic cautionary tale from Virgil's retelling of it in the *Aeneid*, a work she had read at Oberlin in the original Latin.

[JUDITH HALLETT:] One of the reasons that this interested me is that this particular myth features very prominently in tributes to the Wright Brothers. Kitty Hawk--Icarus is there. The Library of Congress had a commemoration for the centennial of the first flight--[it] begins with the story of Daedalus and Icarus. Daedalus was a famous inventor. He had invented this labyrinth in the famous palace of Crete, and he and his young son Icarus wanted to escape. He invented wings that humans could put on to fly, and he was very successful in adapting these wings and escaping. But Icarus did not follow the directions that his father gave about avoiding going too high and too low. He flew too high. The wax that put the wings together melted and he tragically fell into the sea.

[Daedalus and Icarus] figure prominently in representations of the history of flight. There are some beautiful representations in classical art of this myth, and my favorite is actually in Baltimore at the Walters [Art Museum]. It takes the form of an amulet that young boys would wear until they had come of age in ancient Roman culture. It has Icarus falling into the sea. It was actually worn by a young man. This was a warning to him about not exercising control, not listening to your elders. I'm sure that [Katharine] got this message too, that it was dangerous to fly. It wasn't comfortable. It didn't offer the same comforts as [traveling by] train. [The Wrights] took a lot of ships, they were always on boats back and forth. That must have been why they were happy to see Charles Lindbergh get all the glory for taking the risks entailed with the long flight. They did not want to. It's a danger [and] they didn't want the risk.

[HH:] Despite her risk-averse attitude where her brothers' flying machines were concerned, Katharine regularly threw caution to the winds in other areas of her life, not least as a trail-blazing feminist. While she was breaking down gender barriers as Wilbur and Orville's semi-official business partner and an influential trustee of her alma mater, a cadre of pioneering women pilots were poised to storm another male bastion, one that the Wright Brothers helped erect: the aviation profession.

[LAURIE NOTARO:] This was an act of women who were truly courageous, who were tired of being held down simply because they were women. [HH:] That's Laurie Notaro. [LN:] They had the skills, they had the momentum, they had the drive to do it, and they just went ahead and did. And believe me, there was a lot of negative feedback coming from all over the place. When Ruth Elder made her flight, Eleanor Roosevelt, who was a staunch supporter of women's rights, said that it was ridiculous for her to go up into the air and [that] she was serving her country much better and serving her family much better if she was behind the desk as a secretary than [if] she

was trying to break a world record as the first woman to cross the Atlantic. That was 20 years past when Katharine made this flight, so she was facing criticism from a lot of people, not just family. I'm sure a lot of people thought she was being really foolish and that women simply had no place anywhere near an airplane. And she proved them wrong, which I think is terrific. If she had not been connected in that way and it was later in years, I think she most definitely would have been a really amazing aviatrix.

Women had just gotten the right to vote in England and in the United States around 1917, 1918, 1919. So when these women were flying, they were really breaking all the rules. Aviation, as dangerous as it was, was one of the forefront industries that women were breaking into before anything else. There were more women pilots at that time than there probably were women doctors. Everyone wanted in on this. After Lindbergh made his flight in 1927, aviation was the place where women were starting to break out and prove that they could do things that men could do. It was wonderful. It was this liberating force. In 1929, Amelia Earhart and Ruth Elder formed the Flying Ninety-nines, which was at that point 99 women who had pilot's licenses from all around the country. That organization lives until this day. However, statistically speaking, the percentage of women pilots to men pilots has not changed since 1929. The numbers of course have gone up because there's more men flying as well. But the percentage of women versus men flying is still the same as it was in the 1930s. It has not changed a bit.

[HH:] Aviation wasn't the only field in which Katharine lived to see the march toward gender equality slow to a snail's pace. As the impetus behind the women's movement faltered during the Roaring Twenties, the upward path it had charted since the turn of the century flattened out. Katharine declared that winning the vote had forced men to take women more seriously, but that may have been wishful thinking.

[CINDY WILKEY:] I can certainly understand why it probably felt that way in the 1920s, but as a women's historian, the evidence isn't really there to support that woman's suffrage changed much of anything. [HH:] Historian Cindy Wilkey has researched Katharine's role in the suffrage movement. [CW:] I would argue that her views were pretty typical for a well-educated suffragist, because almost all of them had an understanding that the vote was but a first step. Indeed, Elizabeth Cady Stanton near the end of her life decided that the vote would be almost just a band-aid, that we weren't really getting at the fundamental issues here. She actually has kind of a falling out with the movement she helped found, because her interests become more radical and she starts looking really at the roots of patriarchy. The suffrage movement itself embraced other issues for women--equal pay, equal access, equal education. They did get a little more focused simply on suffrage, especially as the movement went national, because talk of things like the right of women to divorce was very unseemly for the time period. So Katharine's views on these larger issues would have been in keeping with the other well-educated suffragists of her time.

[HH:] Just before the First World War, Katharine received a tempting offer to tell her side of the Wright Brothers' story for a national magazine. If she had accepted, we might not need to rediscover her in the twenty-first century. But the Wright Sister chose to shun the limelight and slip back into her familiar domestic role. She helped her brothers plan a new house for the family in a leafy suburb of Dayton, a grand, double-porticoed mansion they called Hawthorn Hill

befitting the Wright Brothers' eminence as the fathers of flight. But Wilbur never saw it: he died of typhoid in 1912, age 45, at the height of his fame. His untimely demise shattered Orville, Katharine, and their father. And it had an equally devastating impact on the family airplane business, which was bogged down in numerous patent-infringement lawsuits and faced stiff competition at home and abroad. Katharine was instrumental in helping her surviving brother wind down and ultimately sell the Wright Company. In the process, she steered Orville into his emeritus role as the elder statesman of American aviation. Edward Roach is a historian with the National Park Service and the author of a definitive study of the Wright Company. In his view, the Wright Brothers were both out of their element and out of their depth in the cut-throat world of big business.

[EDWARD ROACH:] One of the issues they have as businessmen is that they've run a small printing shop in Dayton that did job printing. They tried to print a few newspapers over time. It wasn't that successful. They sold their printing gear in 1899. They'd already started their bicycle business during the bicycle craze of the 1890s, and again, it's not unsuccessful. They're perfectly comfortable. They support themselves just fine. But we wouldn't be having this conversation had they stuck with bicycles. When it comes to business, the brothers don't have the experience of the people in New York, the people in Germany, the people in France who invest in their companies, and they are very hesitant to look to them for advice, for business practices. While I wouldn't say that they looked to Katharine for business practices, they certainly did look to her for advice. It goes to that sounding board role again, of who do we talk to? Do we talk to Alpheus Barnes in New York, who was the operating secretary of the Wright Company? Not really. They didn't like him, because he was from New York and was into business and had his own ideas of how the front office should run. The board of directors, which has quite a few big names--Cornelius Vanderbilt's on it, Andrew Freedman—these aren't names that people necessarily recognize today, but in their time these are big men of industry. Freedman was involved with creating the New York subway system. He owned the New York Giants at one point. So these are men with money. These are men with very decided ideas of how a capitalist operation operates. Wilbur and Orville aren't from that milieu. They're from a more petty bourgeoisie, [where] the business owner is the one who does the work and builds the bicycles and balances the books. It's a whole different world, and I think the brothers really look to Katharine as that person to whom they can talk who's on their age level. Milton is of course still around for much of this time, but he's elderly and he's a professional religious person. He has even less dedicated business experience than the brothers do. Katharine has been to Oberlin, she's been to college. She actually has more formal education than either Wilbur or Orville do. And I think they can use that. I think they did use that, in an informal sense, to their advantage.

Orville, when he sells the Wright Company, he sells it for about \$500,000, which in today's money--and, you know, you can argue these statistics a bit, but it's roughly \$13 million. So Orville's not filthy rich in a Rockefeller sense, in a Vanderbilt sense. He's not a tycoon of some sort, but he's very comfortably set. He doesn't have to work for the rest of his life. Katharine and Orville didn't grow up poor at all, but they grew up middle-class. They grew up in a small house. They grew up the sons and daughter of a minister. For a minister, the ultimate reward is spiritual, [not] financial. So they're not rich in a monetary sense until they start getting those patents sold. You look at Hawthorn Hill, the house they built in Oakwood, which we sometimes think of as their "success mansion": for the part of Oakwood where Hawthorn Hill is, it's actually not that

big. You look at some of the other houses in that section of Oakwood, goodness, they really show money off. [Orville] was just pleasantly rich, not filthy rich.

[The Wright Brothers] certainly wanted to make money. They're not the Gordon Gekko, greed-is-good type, but they regained their investment pretty quickly. They didn't put that much of their own money into their invention. They didn't need to. They recycled a lot of their bicycle parts. They lived with their dad. They didn't have families to keep. Their expenses were pretty minimal. But once they get to a point where they can make some money, sure, they want to. They do try to corner the market. But I don't think they try to corner the market for financial reasons. I think they're going for reasons of primacy, for reasons of getting the Wright name out there and for recognition. When they're furnishing Hawthorn Hill, they go up to Grand Rapids in Michigan, which at that point in time was a big furniture center. They go and they buy, what, \$3,000 worth of furniture from Berkey and Gay and from some other Grand Rapids producers. They're quite interested in having nice things. They're interested in having nice china. They go to Tiffany's in New York and buy things. But at the same time, they're restrained as well. The Wrights aren't going, like J. P. Morgan, to Europe and buying artwork.

[HH:] Wilbur left Katharine a \$50,000 legacy, a tidy fortune that could easily have allowed her to move out of Hawthorn Hill and set up house on her own. Instead, she chose to continue living quietly with Orville and their octogenarian father. A confirmed bachelor, Orv in retirement grew increasingly dependent on his sister. Katharine said she considered him "more like a husband than a brother." She even wore a diamond ring he'd given her when she graduated from Oberlin in 1898. As Orv's live-in companion, Katharine not only gave her publicity-shy sibling a sense of psychological security but also made herself useful in more practical ways. Ever since Orv's plane crash, she had taken on the burden of writing much of his correspondence and editing the pieces he wrote for publication. She took charge of his social calendar and attempted to manage his volatile relations with the press. And she escorted him to dinners, award ceremonies, and other official functions that he disliked more and more intensely. Then there was what Katharine called "the book." For years she and other allies of the Wright Brothers badgered Orville to write a detailed description of their scientific work. An authoritative account by the co-inventor of the airplane would surely vindicate the lawsuits the Wright Company had pending against unscrupulous competitors. It would also refute, once and for all, the Smithsonian Institution's bogus claim that one of its former secretaries had beaten the Wright Brothers in the race to be first in flight. But Orville refused to play ball. He responded to Katharine's pestering by mounting a campaign of passive resistance that drove her to distraction.

[ACTOR:] I feel like screaming when you all keep urging Orv to get together what he wants to say about the state of the art when he and Will took up work on it and to whom they were indebted for certain things and what was their original contribution. I have tried so hard for years to get something done on that. He must write the book and I have been looking forward to it each fall, with hope. But he always has some plausible excuse. When I get too insistent he reports that he is "looking up things" and getting everything ready to use—"indexing" etc. etc. He looks and acts exactly like a small boy—trying to dodge a disagreeable chore. I can't do much for him but suggest and advise and revise. If I try to write anything it is just funny the way he riddles it. I miss the point just enough to exasperate him. Orv thinks he oughtn't to have to call attention to the points in which he and Will excelled the rest. The work is all on record. Did [Alexander

Graham] Bell have to write a book or [Thomas] Edison or any one else for that matter, to prove that they had done something? It is ridiculous that a man should have to stand and howl and howl to call attention to what he has done. Orv can't do it, that's all, and wouldn't, if he could and I respect him for it. I despise the whole superficial spirit in what is called the scientific world! "Scientific fiddle sticks"!! [KW to HJH, 5.14.25, 6.1.25, 6.5.25]

[HH:] Katharine let off that head of steam in a letter to my grandfather, one of the Wright Brothers' staunchest journalistic supporters. Her sisterly pride in Orville's scientific prowess and unimpeachable integrity was gradually giving way to frustration. As months stretched into years, with nothing to show for her efforts to prod Orv into action, she grew increasingly dissatisfied with her cloistered life as her brother's keeper, coping with his recurring bouts of crippling sciatica and supervising their long-time housekeeper, Carrie Kayler Grumbach. Casting an envious eye on her married friends, she pondered what she might be missing out on as a middle-aged spinster. Katharine had always placed special value on her friendships with women, but these days, it seemed, they had less and less to offer her. Yet as much as she begrudged what she called women's "everlasting concern about personal trifles," she could be just as unsparingly critical of herself.

[ACTOR:] I pretend to be a lot "touchier" on the subject of women than I really am! I exaggerate it because so few people ever stop to think of the subject from both sides. I don't think women, in general, have had a fair deal and I think it has been as it has mostly because men have never imagined how a lot of women feel about it. I have always had more than a fair deal so I have no personal grievance But I am not so prejudiced that I can't see all too plainly how silly my "sect" can be and often is. There is no excuse for a lot of it. Of course, as a matter of fact, there is no excuse for my doing nothing but fritter away my time. If a man did that I'd have my own opinion of him! But just as soon as I could get really started on something, Orv would come down with sciatica or some visitors would come and Carrie would be sick, as she now is, and I would have the house to look after. Nobody would expect Orv to stay at home and take care of me if I were ill but nobody would excuse me if I did not take care of him. Everything is greased to prevent a woman from doing any serious work. And her own disposition is, perhaps, the most serious thing in her way. [KW to HJH, 12.31.24]

[HH:] Few people have thought longer and harder about Katharine's disposition than Dawne Dewey, the former head of special collections and archives at Wright State University in Dayton. I asked her about Katharine's struggle to reconcile the selflessness that was bred into her with her growing need for self-fulfillment.

[DAWNE DEWEY:] I worked at Wright State University for 31 years, and I had the opportunity to work with the Wright Brothers Collection pretty closely during that time and got to know a lot about their history and the different family members and so forth. People came to me with lots of different opinions about who these people were, but I had my own opinion too, just from reading letters. And Katharine was one who always fascinated me. Yes, the Wright Brothers were interesting. It was always Wilbur and Orville--and the Bishop, their father, was interesting too. But when people asked me, which one would you want to sit down with and talk to, it was Katharine. I felt an affinity or a connection with her because when I was researching her in the most detail, I was about the same age as [she was when] these things were happening to her. She

has been described in letters by her family members as being fun and gregarious and talkative and always wanting to learn. But she was tough too. And she had deep feelings about her life. She was an intellectual. She loved to read. She loved to learn. She loved to talk about what she had learned. Loyal--don't remember if I said that or not. I think her disposition was a lot of different things. She was a strong woman, but she could also be very vulnerable.

I often think about what would she have been like if there was no “the Wright Brothers,” if they had just been Wilbur and Orville, her older brothers. What would her life have been like if she hadn't been thrown into this world that she would never have been exposed to if that had not happened, if the invention of the airplane and the Wright Brothers' story hadn't enveloped her? I was just struck by the conflict that she lived in. She was torn between the expectations of women at that time and what she really would love to have done, that drive in her to want to get out there and work for women's rights and all those other things she was interested in. I think I identified with that, and I think women identify with her because those kinds of conflicts or push-and-pull between what we're expected to do and what we would like to do, that still goes on today. For me, working full-time, trying to manage a family and still have that intellectual stimulation--I could see Katharine struggling with these same things. I think women can identify with her story because she's caught in this perfect storm of expectation of what she was supposed to do for her family under the circumstances. And yet she was given so many opportunities to go beyond what an average woman of her time period could have expected to experience.

I was rereading some of her letters to your grandfather last night. And there was one letter that really struck me where she is talking about women's roles and men's roles and how women are silly and they've always been prevented from doing good, fulfilling work. She talks about women not having a fair deal. And then she says: But I have no complaints. I have no personal grievance. I have had a fair deal. And I'm thinking, no you didn't! It struck me that maybe she was trying to convince your grandfather that I'm really not complaining about this. I've had a fair deal. But I kinda think underneath her claim that she'd had all these opportunities to meet people and to travel and to do things she never would have gotten to do if Wilbur and Orville hadn't done what they did, [that] she didn't think she had had a fair deal. I really think that was deep inside her. And that caused her some heartache.

[HH:] For the next few years, Katharine's life continued to revolve around Hawthorn Hill and her immediate family. Then, in 1917, the fortuitous coincidence of two events brought her to another turning point: her father, Bishop Wright, passed away at age 88, and her old college chum Harry Haskell, my namesake, came to Oberlin to receive an honorary degree. My grandfather's wife was ill and unable to travel, so Katharine filled her place and took Harry--her future husband--out to a college baseball game, chaperoned by her married brother Lorin. Slowly and subconsciously, Katharine was warming to the idea of sharing her life with someone other than her brother Orville. That wisp of a dream wouldn't become reality for another nine years, but the seed had been planted while she and Harry were still undergraduates together at Oberlin in the 1890s. One of the most talked-about novels of that decade was Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. It centers around another independent-minded woman struggling to escape the clutches of Victorian conventionality. The Wright Sister was ripe for her own awakening, one that would tear her away from family and home and lead to a tragedy that neither she nor “the boys” could have foreseen.

I'm Harry Haskell. Thanks for listening to *In Her Own Wright*. In Part 3, we'll explore the dramatic final chapter of Katharine's life.