

*In Her Own Wright*

**Part 3: The Hazards of Love**

[HARRY HASKELL:] If the love lives of celebrities are the meat and potatoes of tabloid journalism, the reporters who covered the Wright Brothers had precious little to sink their teeth into. The inventors of the airplane insisted on shielding their private lives from the glare of publicity that hounded them wherever they went. Wilbur and Orville were lifelong bachelors with no discernible love interests, and biographers long took it for granted that their younger sister was equally immune to affairs of the heart. Only lately has Katharine Wright come to be seen for who she was--a passionate, sensitive, and exceptionally articulate woman who followed her heart and suffered the unhappy consequences.

I'm Harry Haskell, Katharine's step-grandson. In this three-part podcast we're looking at the public and private lives of the unsung Wright Sister, who left her adoring but highly possessive brother Orville to marry my grandfather almost 100 years ago. Part 3: The Hazards of Love.

[ACTOR:] If we could only be together and not have to go off to bed separately. But if I could just be with you tonight as we were at Christmas time! Only you know what happened to me after three nights of not much sleep. I want to be close to you right now, my darling, darling lover, and feel your hand against me. It was so sweet to have you so close to me and to give something of myself to you. I wanted to feel your hand against me, dear, and I thought you would like it. And I knew you would be gentle and delicate with me. I am never afraid of you. I know you will never be anything but delicate no matter how completely we let the bars down. It would be *too* sad to ever get "common" with each other. Let's always keep our sensitive feelings about each other. . . . we *mustn't* ever get so used to intimate relations with each other that we don't have the most delicate feelings about it. It would be enough tonight if we could just be together in that blue room and you would hold me up close to you and let me feel your hand against me. I can't tell you, dear. It seemed to stop a sort of aching. [Katharine Wright (KW) to Harry Haskell (HJH), 4.12.26]

[HH:] When Katharine Wright wrote that steamy love letter to Harry Haskell in 1926, they'd been secretly engaged for ten months. My grandfather and namesake was an old college friend of Katharine's from Kansas City, one of the few newspapermen whom she and Orville admitted to their inner circle. Over the years, and especially after Wilbur's death in 1912, he'd become a trusted ally in the fight to defend the Wright Brothers' scientific patents and their reputation as the fathers of human flight. When my grandmother succumbed to cancer, Katharine instinctively offered Harry consolation and understanding, and before either of them realized what was happening, their budding intimacy had blossomed into romance. So it was that two not-so-proper Victorians, both in their early fifties and both the products of strict religious upbringings, found themselves conducting a torrid love affair under Orville's unsuspecting nose—indeed, under the very roof of Hawthorn Hill, the Wright family home in Dayton, Ohio. We know the site of their clandestine trysts—the “blue room” that Katharine alludes to in her letter—thanks to some painstaking detective work by Sarah Heald of the National Park Service, who prepared a historical furnishings report on Hawthorn Hill several years ago.

[SARAH HEALD:] When you're doing historic-building research, the names of rooms and the locations of rooms is something that comes up almost every time in a project, because the names have meaning. A nickname tells you something about how the room is used. Like the "trophy room" at Hawthorn Hill, or this is Orville's bedroom, or it's the "rose room," or it's the "blue room." In the case of Hawthorn Hill, they had not done any wallpaper exploration or paint analysis at that point, so they didn't know what the rose room was or the blue room was. When you're doing this kind of research, you're looking for those things because it just comes up in letters and newspaper articles, in checkbooks, in diaries: I bought the rugs for the blue room. So which room was the blue room? There were five Wright family bedrooms on the second floor at Hawthorn Hill. On the original plans they're just numbered 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and I don't know if I ever saw a plan that said, this is Orville's room, this is Katharine's room, this is Wilbur's room. But it was very clear from what they looked like in the early 21st century, yeah, that's Orville's room, that's Katharine's room. One had more feminine furnishings. Orville's room was the one that had that needle bath for his back, so he was closest to the bathroom that was going to suit his needs in the shower. Wilbur had only said in his plans [that] he just wanted to have a bathroom. That's all he cared about. All of the bedrooms on the second floor other than Milton Wright, their father, the Bishop's, which did not have its own bathroom--all the bedrooms have bathrooms, so that didn't really help you with which one was Wilbur's. Now you might think, by a process of elimination, they expected that Wilbur would be alive and live in this house, so all the siblings got the best bedrooms on the front of the house. And that was the case. So it would have been Wilbur's room, Katharine's in the center, and Orville's at the opposite end of the house from Wilbur's.

Fortunately, Katharine wrote lots of letters, often late at night in her room, the largest and nicest bedroom in the house, directly over the front entrance. Also fortunately, the Wrights had lots of house guests. That was one reason Katharine had pushed her brothers so hard to have this grand new house to begin with, because their small home in Dayton didn't have room for guests and Orville had to pay for them to stay in hotels when they came to visit. Griffith Brewer was there often, a good friend, so at times the main guestroom, which was also the rose room, was sometimes also called Griffith Brewer's room. It was also the room where Harry Haskell slept. I knew that that was not on the front of the house. I knew that the one on the front of the house next to Katharine's was the blue room because she wrote about one of her college friends staying in the blue room. So by a process of elimination, the blue room had to be what had been initially thought to be Wilbur's room.

There's every reason to believe that an armchair that was pictured in the blue room in 1948 had probably been there for quite a while. It wasn't in the room when I first went there in 2007 or 2008, but when I was able to look at the servants' dining room downstairs, and there was a chair there, I realized, this is the same chair that's in that picture in 1948 in the blue room. So that was just my supposition, that this chair had probably come from the blue room and perhaps that was the chair that Katharine and Harry enjoyed each other's company in. I don't think they were worried about Orville walking in on them. My impression from what I recall of her letters is that they were never in bed together and that probably premarital sex was not part of what was going on.

[HH:] Sex or no sex, the traditional image of the Wright Sister as a celibate spinster is hard to square with the erotic charge of her letter to Harry. [ACTOR:] “I want to be close to you right now, my darling, darling lover, and feel your hand against me”: [HH:] I don’t know about you, but to me those are the words of a profoundly sensual woman who has suddenly and unexpectedly been seized in ripe middle age by an overpowering passion. Mind you, Katharine wasn’t exactly a babe in the woods. Male admirers had been flirting with her and showering her with tokens of their esteem ever since she came of age. As a student at Oberlin College in the 1890s, she even got engaged to an upperclassman--then broke it off before anyone in her family was the wiser. A few years later, her habit of unwittingly leading men on landed her in hot water: a visiting friend of her clergyman father’s, a famous temperance preacher some twenty years older than Katharine, got the wrong end of the stick and made a pass at her. She described her narrow escape in a letter to a woman friend:

[ACTOR:] I had the weirdest experience you ever heard of my having. . . . Would you ever imagine that I could let myself get wound up with a *married* man? Well, I did—and an Oberlin man, too, and a very well known man—old enough to be my father. Well, I wasn’t altogether innocent, I fear, though I had sense enough to hold things down pretty well. It was like sitting on top of a volcano! The man isn’t a bad man, in any way—only weak, because he has been away from home too much and was sick. I was so absolutely innocent about being friendly and he was fascinating—terribly bright and interesting. The first thing I knew he was altogether *too* interested in me. I should have kept him from coming out but I let things drift on until I finally came to my senses fully and sent him home—to the hotel. I won’t be bad again. You’ll forgive Katy, won’t you? [KW to Agnes Beck, 8.5.09]

[HH:] The Katie Wright who penned that contrite confession was thirty-five years old and ensconced in her career as a high-school Latin and history teacher in Dayton. That job helped satisfy Katharine’s hunger for intellectual stimulation and companionship. At the same time, it made it easier for here to put her love life on hold after graduating from Oberlin in 1898. As her biographer Richard Maurer sees it, that decision also reflected Katharine’s disillusionment with her college beau.

[RICHARD MAURER:] She kind of tested him by asking, well, should we really go through with this? And maybe she was hoping he would say, yes, of course we should go through with it. I love you madly. But he didn’t say that. He said, well, maybe you’re right. And that just completely deflated her. I think from that point on, she decided that marriage was not in the cards for her. He went off and got married to someone else and had some kids, and that was that. So she just closed the book on that chapter of her life. Very sad. [HH:] And as for the skirt-chasing temperance preacher: [RM:] That’s an interesting episode because I’m sure it was not uncommon for preachers to have dalliances with members of the congregation, and Katharine surely knew about their reputation. So I don’t think Katharine was surprised by that. And who knows? She may have been subject to indiscreet passes from other men along the way, but she had this self-image and she didn’t think of herself as--she wasn’t tempted, let’s put it that way. Some women might have been tempted by the attentions of the famous temperance preacher to open a new chapter in their lives, but Katharine was not tempted in the least. She must have had very tight control over her emotional life, I feel.

[HH:] Katharine's unguarded behavior toward men was deeply unconventional by contemporary standards, but it wasn't until she reached her mid-forties that its consequences really struck home. In 1919, a celebrated Arctic explorer named Vilhjalmur Stefansson—Stef for short--visited Hawthorn Hill to meet Orville. Stef was an intrepid adventurer, a gifted storyteller, a popular writer and lecturer--and a compulsive womanizer. Katharine fell for him hook, line, and sinker. She appears to have convinced herself that she wasn't the kind of woman who turned men's heads. Truth be told, she was precisely the kind of smart, articulate, independent-minded woman whom certain men of the world found irresistible. It didn't take Katharine long to realize that she had mistaken Stef's casual flirtation for a sign of deeper feelings.

[ACTOR:] I did not realize that you could seem so close when, it seems to me now, it was just a superficial closeness or rather a closeness which existed mostly in my mind and not in reality. But having once started on the wrong track, I had to have a lot of collisions and smashups before I could get it into my head what was the matter. It isn't, in the least, a criticism of you if you haven't, in your scheme of things, any need of the kind of friendship I want to give you. But, on my side, I mustn't keep giving what isn't asked for. I have been ridiculously sensitive and full of absurd whims and AWFULLY hard to get along with. I never dared to trust to my feelings and I wobbled around, being ashamed of thinking so much of you, one minute, and ashamed of being ashamed, the next minute! I have sometimes thought that I was being ashamed of the best part of me, with not a blush for the worse parts. All this has made me even more foolish than I commonly am. It is time now for me to have more sense. So I've tried awfully hard to give up the ideas and feelings that have made so much trouble all around. But feelings aren't very amenable to summons to come or go, are they? Just as I get them well settled, in a Punch and Judy box, so to speak, something touches a spring and up they jump, out of the box. [KW to Vilhjalmur Stefansson, 1.15.25 and 1.24.25]

[HH:] Katharine's efforts to keep a lid on her emotions were clearly unavailing in Stef's case. And the same volatile compound of impulsiveness, self-doubt, vacillation, and remorse would eventually come into play in her relationship with my grandfather. Meanwhile, she rebounded from Stef into Orville's waiting arms. The two youngest Wright siblings had been living alone together at Hawthorn Hill since their father died in 1917, and casual visitors often mistook them for a contentedly married couple. Orv definitely considered their easygoing intimacy a kind of marriage. As for Katharine, she had long grown accustomed to serving as her retired brother's consort. She told herself that she was lucky to have avoided the pitfalls of a romantic attachment while still enjoying what she called "the virtual position of a married woman." Life with Orville was comfortable, predictable, and emotionally undemanding. The arrangement suited them both--at least for a while.

[RICHARD MAURER:] She became Orville's wife essentially. [HH:] This is Richard Maurer. [RM:] She began to fill that emotional role in his life because Wilbur was gone, and Orville wound down his role in the airplane business. It just sort of took all the wind out of his sails. He sold the airplane business sometime after that and stopped flying. I don't think he ever flew after that. He would serve on boards and he would give advice. I don't know if they ever took his advice, but he was the famous co-inventor of the airplane, so if you were a congressman holding hearings on the needs of aviation in Washington, DC, you would want Orville to testify because everyone had heard of him and he had invented this whole thing. Even if you had no intention at

all of following his advice, you wanted to have a consulted him. And he was happy to go to Washington, DC, and Katharine would go with him, just as, had he been married, his wife would've gone with him. They might have a shopping trip in Manhattan on the way, they would visit friends, and then they would be eager to get back to their mansion in Dayton, where they had their local lives to live, much to do. So it was exactly like Orville was married to her. I think Katharine was probably beginning to feel like a middle-aged woman who's married to a rich man, and she has her friends and she has her social life and she has this big mansion to run, but really there's not much focus to her life. She's sort of at loose ends. If she had been a drinking woman, she might have started to take to the bottle, but fortunately they were teetotalers.

[AMANDA WRIGHT LANE:] I believe she probably came to the same crossroads that many of us come to, men and women, at a certain point in your life when you say, is this everything I was meant to do? Is there something more?

[HH:] Amanda Wright Lane, Katharine's great-grandniece, picks up the story at the point where the Wrights' cozy domestic routine was disrupted by Katharine's growing intimacy with Harry Haskell. She and my grandfather had formed a warm friendship at Oberlin and stayed in touch over the years. The fact that Harry had a wife and son in Kansas City, Missouri, made him, in Katharine's eyes, a "safe" male friend—someone in whom she could confide without setting off too many alarm bells, either among her family and friends or in her own heart. It was only after my grandmother Isabel died in 1923 that Katharine realized she and Harry had moved beyond friendship and now had to confront what she called "the hazards of love."

[AMANDA LANE:] I do think you have to feel after a certain time in their lives, when Aunt Katharine is at the beginning of her fifties and Uncle Orv is at the end of his fifties, that they just assumed they would both rock their lives into the sunset at Hawthorn Hill. But of course that changed when Aunt Katharine became reconnected with Harry and began to entertain the idea of a life outside of Hawthorn Hill. Once she met your grandfather, I believe she began to really understand what the romantic love could be. I think she found, oh my gosh, just a world of interests that they shared and passions that they shared. And I believe it made her think, hmm, this is something that sounds so wonderful, and she thought she wanted to be part of it. But I do think she struggled with it sometimes. I think she struggled not so much about leaving Uncle Orv, although she struggled with that as well, but about do I change my life completely at 50, at 51? Do I go off and try something that I have never done in my life? It wasn't necessarily about your grandfather, Harry. It was more about it is a huge change at that time in your life during those times to say: I'll leave my home, I'll leave my friends, and I'm going to do it for love. There were so many things I think she was weighing. And I know it rested heavily on her, because if a friend had come to her in the same situation, Aunt Katharine would have given it so much thought and tried to help her friend with advice. And now she has to advise herself and she can't really ask one of the people that she talked to so much in her life, which was Orville. When you realize how many things in her life she had done pretty independently--going off to college, coming back, taking care of a household, being thrust into an international spotlight--and when that spotlight was turned on the brothers, it was also turned on her--I believe she held her own. If they were a rock band, they all three would have been in the spotlight at the same time. And then to transition their lives to Hawthorn Hill, where their lives were filled even more with visitors

from around the world and interesting dinner conversations and no censorship of her thoughts or her in terms of her womanliness--I think [what] she's thinking is, am I willing to give that up?

[HH:] This prolonged attack of indecision and soul-searching took a heavy toll on Katharine, both emotionally and physically. She complained to Harry about suffering from chronic fatigue—a doctor of the day might have diagnosed it as nervous exhaustion, or neurasthenia.

[ACTOR:] I find myself with the same old weariness every afternoon . . . it has always been my besetting weakness, this getting so tired. My opinion is that I would be less tired if I had some good, hard work to do! [KW to HJH, 9.20.24] [HH:] Dawne Dewey, the longtime custodian of the Wright family papers at Wright State University, believes Katharine was in the throes of a midlife crisis that had been brewing for years.

[DAWNE DEWEY:] I think Katharine must've gone through a really deep struggle during that period when Wilbur is gone and they're in the background. All of the excitement and all of the stimulation that she had suddenly went away, tapered off. Yes, she was still meeting important people. When I think about the books in their library that we have at Wright State, where she's received all these first-edition copies from famous authors--she was meeting all these very interesting people in fulfilling this new role for Orville, but it still wasn't enough. It must've been a shock to her system, her psyche maybe, to be thrown into that world of theirs, to go to Europe, to do all those things. And then Wilbur's death, and that all changes. Suddenly she's got time now. She was busy, no doubt about that, but she has maybe more time to think about what has she missed or, or what could her life have been like if she wasn't in this role with Orville, if she wasn't his consort, if she wasn't his right-hand woman, whatever you want to call it. When you look at when she was born and the time period that she lived in and all of the changes that were happening and the expectations of her role, and then [look at] what she was allowed to do, encouraged to do, and then she ends up being with Orville in that house for how many years before she breaks away from it. I just think she's living this perfect storm of all the experiences that could be thrown at a young woman at that time and having to deal with those. It must've really weighed her down. I don't know if she was in a deep depression or if it was some physical illness, but it was certainly really wearing on her.

[HH:] My widowed grandfather Harry pressed his suit in a barrage of letters, interrupted by occasional trips to Ohio, when he and Katharine could steal a few precious moments to be by themselves. Their epistolary romance reached an explosive climax during Oberlin's commencement in 1925. We don't know exactly what transpired while they were on campus together, but after Harry went home to Kansas City, he laid his tender feelings for Katharine on the line in an impassioned letter that sent the habitually self-possessed Wright Sister into a tailspin.

[ACTOR:] When I have sense enough to think anything—I wonder who it is walking around here in Oberlin. I'll never forget this Commencement, that's sure.

But, Harry, you break my heart. I feel as if everything I had tried to be and do was tumbling down around me. I can't understand what has happened, and I feel to blame because I can't change my feeling but it would be even worse if I could. I am sure no one can imagine how inseparable the relation is now between Orv and me. It would have almost killed me if he had, in these latter years, wanted someone else more than me. I can't desert him now even if I could

adjust myself to a change of feeling between us. I have taken care of him so much. I have lived in his life so long—I have felt so responsible about steering things here and there to smooth this way and that for him—I love him so, Harry, and we are so happy together. Since Will and Father have been gone we have been everything to each other. And he is so good to me. You would be good, I know that. I wouldn't be afraid for myself. That isn't it. But I haven't changed my feeling about you. It is all a dream to me that you have such feelings about me. I can't realize it. . .

I don't know how to tell you what a shock it has been to me this last week. I didn't understand at all at first what you were hinting at. I guess you've got it through my head at last and I'm as nearly "stricken dumb" as I'll ever be. I can't tell you anything of what is inside me but I try to because I feel it is so awful of me to let you think anything different from what I really feel. Please forgive me, Harry dear. I ought not to be so affectionate with you, maybe, but for a long time I have wanted to give you all I could. I knew you needed the comfort that affection and sympathy give. It has been natural for me to trust you with affection. Now I wonder if I should not have been more restrained. . . .

It is all so confusing now that I can't write a decent letter. Back of everything is the feeling that I can't fail you now, though I can't see very far ahead, and I can't go back on Orv. There must be some way for me to make a way out. I can't see it and I can't say that I would dare the "great adventure" anyway! It scares me so. [KW to HJH, 6.13.25]

[DAWNE DEWEY:] This letter, it's almost funny, and yet it's heartbreaking because she's [saying], oh, you break my heart; no, this can't be. And then by the end of the letter, she's so in love that she wants this too, and she can't quite get the two to jibe because there's such a struggle going on in her. [HH:] This is Dawne Dewey. [DD:] When I first read that letter--she's talking about Orville and how she cannot tell him, [because] she's been there for him for so long--I misread [it], and this is quite telling, I think. I read, "I have lived his life for so long." I went back and read it again this morning, and it says, "I have lived in his life for so long." But I thought, she really had--and my whole thinking over the past couple of days has been, she was living his life. She was a part of it. She was so entwined in what Orville wanted. She tried to get him to write a book about his accomplishments. That's something she might've done, but that wasn't her life. That wasn't her story. She was in Orville's story, in her family story, and she wasn't necessarily directing her own story. "I was living his life" versus "I was living in his life." Two things were going on there, and I think she was struggling so in those letters to Harry. She was like a volcano ready to explode after all that she'd been through.

[RICHARD MAURER:] She was so shocked when Harry made this sudden overture. And it wasn't as it had been with the preacher, where he made a pass. He did it exclusively in his letters and telegrams. She was a very verbal person, so that was something she could respect. A letter of course gives you a chance--it's not like having someone face-to-face--it gives you a chance to think about it, or try to think about it, and frame a response. But it was totally out of the blue to her, even though there must have been all of these clues leading up to it for several years. They would talk about Orv and the problems with the Smithsonian and other issues of mutual concern. They enjoyed each other's company and this was an acceptable topic of conversation for them. So they had strong feelings of friendship, and they wanted their friendship to continue. They wanted to cultivate it, but they didn't want to cross the line. Now your grandfather must have been a much more worldly person than Katharine was. The fact that he eventually popped the

question is partly proof of that. But if he had been as emotionally reticent as Katharine, you can just see this kind of relationship continuing until their deaths, where they're just very close friends.

[HH:] What I like to think of as Katharine's maiden flight into the uncharted realm of romantic love occasionally detoured into a comedy of errors. Let's listen to her breathless account of the immediate aftermath of Harry's declaration of love. In a telegram from Kansas City, he proposed meeting on neutral territory, at a hotel in Chicago, to talk things through. But Katharine's dander flew up at the thought of such an unseemly assignation. So she invited him to Dayton instead, conveniently timing his visit to coincide with Orv's forthcoming business trip to Washington. Amid a flurry of crisscrossing letters and telegrams, Harry frantically tried to read Katharine's mind, though she scarcely knew it herself.

[ACTOR:] First I told Orv you were coming because Carrie came into the dining room when we were at breakfast and said the Western Union had a telegram for me. So I went in and got it. When I got back to the table I said "Harry's coming tomorrow night." Orv said "He is? How does that happen?" So I said "Going East." That struck him as opening a chance that he might see you in Washington, so he says, "Going to Washington?" "No," says I, "New York." (Stupid lie.) Of course I might as well have said I didn't know but I was playing a new role of "creative artist." So that passed with Orv expressing regret he could not stay home to see you. That was the end of it until the telephone rang while Anne [McCormick] was here and she answered. "Western Union for you" she called out. That was the message which said something (I was too excited to hear straight) about some other message being reported "undelivered" and saying you would come Wednesday night. Then when we opened the door on coming home tonight the bell was ringing wildly and I made haste to answer it. This time the Western Union again with the message saying you wouldn't come now. So as casually as I could I told Orv you weren't coming after all. I felt as if he could see I had been deceiving him all day. Harry, dear, the lies I have told today for you ought to be on your conscience. I regret to say they are not on mine!  
[KW to HJH, 6.16.25]

[HH:] On some level Katharine was clearly enjoying these romantic escapades, but behind the comic deceptions and mixed messages lurked an impending tragedy that she wanted to avert at all costs: the break with Orville that her marriage to my grandfather would bring about. Katharine dithered for months after accepting Harry's proposal, hoping against hope that Orville wouldn't react as badly as she feared when she finally got up the nerve to tell him. In the meantime, the furtive fiancés tiptoed around the subject, confining their lovemaking to daily letters and late-night trysts in the blue room on Harry's visits to Hawthorn Hill.

[SARAH HEALD:] To me, what she and Harry experienced was just this perfectly understandable, normal romance--that, probably not unlike a teenage girl of a generation later, something is doing in their parents' house. They knew that this wasn't something that Orville would approve of, but they were in love. [HH:] That's historian Sarah Heald. [SARAH HEALD:] So how do we characterize Katharine? Was her behavior flirtatious? She's unmarried, so she probably has emotional needs that have not been met. And she's living in this world that thinks that people who end up in situations like she was in are flirtatious hussies. In the case of Harry Haskell, these guys have been close friends in college. He was her math tutor, I believe.



And she was friends with his wife. They were all friends. Her initiation of more correspondence with him was when his wife Isabel was so ill with cancer. So she wasn't flirting with him. She was trying to be a supportive friend. And then of course Isabel dies, and what had been a friendship 30 years, 40 years earlier at Oberlin and Harry had married somebody else because he was in love with her—well, suddenly they might find that they have these feelings for each other also. So as much as we might think about them as sneaking around in Hawthorn Hill--which they very much were doing--there was as much sneaking around going on when she's writing him two or three letters a day and sneaking them out to the post. So there's a lot of sneaking around going on in that relationship and in that house. It wasn't just sexual, and I think that's important to recognize. Everybody likes a fun sex story or sneaking around doing something a little mischievous, but I think it's important to look at Katharine in this broader framework. To me, the way she writes about the blue room at Hawthorn Hill and references the transfer of that to Kansas City speak simply to [the fact that] she must not have had that type of intimate relationship when she was in her twenties in college some 30 or 40 years earlier, and that it meant a lot to her, what happened in the blue room and Hawthorn Hill, and the space was their safe space to do that, and she was looking forward to that when she was married.

[HH:] Katharine's worst fears came true when Orville belatedly learned about her wedding plans—not from her, as it turned out, but from Harry himself. Far from sharing his sister's happiness, Orville viewed her engagement as a betrayal. In his eyes, Katharine had violated an unspoken pact that she and her brothers would never marry. Not only did Orville refuse to host the wedding at Hawthorn Hill, he made it clear that if Katharine left the family home, his door would be closed to her forever. In the end, she decided she had no choice. And so one day in late November 1926, the Wright Sister walked out of Hawthorn Hill for the last time, carrying only what she could fit in a suitcase. The next day she and Harry were married in a small private ceremony at a friend's house in Oberlin. Even after moving to Kansas City, Katharine studiously kept a low profile, explaining that she didn't want Orville to get annoyed by reading about her in the papers. She poured out her heartache and endless self-recriminations in letter after letter to mutual friends:

[ACTOR:] It was all so undignified, going away as I did. I shall never forget that. I hated it so. No one can ever realize how heart-broken I was to do what I did but it came finally to the place where I thought it was the only right thing to do. I have been very happy this winter in spite of many dark hours over Orv's feeling about me. I did not mean to cut myself off from him as it has turned out. I always intended to spend a good deal of time with him. I *never* thought of walking off and leaving him. Harry doesn't know, I hope, how much I worry over Orv. It does no good but I can't forget him and I don't want to forget him. In my imagination I walk through that house, looking for Little Brother, and at all the dear familiar things that made my home. But I never find Little Brother and I have lost my old home forever, I fear. [KW to Agnes Beck, 3.11.27]

[HH:] In February of 1929, as she and Harry were preparing for their long-delayed honeymoon in Europe, Katharine fell ill with pneumonia. The Wright Sister was 54 years old. Orville ultimately relented and arrived in Kansas City to find her heavily sedated; she died a few hours later. According to younger members of the Wright family, Orville never spoke about his sister again. But my grandfather cherished her memory. Every year on the anniversary of her death he

sent money for flowers to be placed on her grave in Dayton, and every year he took her love letters out and reread them. Did Orville's intransigence wear Katharine down and hasten her death? That's the opinion of several of the commentators we've heard from in this podcast. But Lois Walker, the retired US Air Force historian, has a different view.

[LOIS WALKER:] I put an awful lot on Harry. You know, if he hadn't pushed her and cajoled her--and he was persistent, just persistent and insistent. My opinion is that he couldn't bear being alone, unmarried, [as] witnessed by the fact that he did marry yet again, not long after Katharine died. Katharine, of course, was perfect from so many perspectives. She was just a perfect partner, and he did have feelings for her from the days of Oberlin, when he tutored her. And she may have had feelings for him, who knows. Katharine had watched him go through Isabel's long illness and her death. She knew how torn up he was about it. So over the next few years, Henry managed to convince Katharine that he just absolutely needed her. And for her it became another project--saving Henry, I'm going to save Henry. Once he'd convinced her that he loved her deeply and wanted to be with her, then he knew exactly how to appeal to her, I think. He was pushing all the right buttons. But it just put her in such a horrible, horrible situation, and you see it from the letters. It just tore her up. Now there wasn't that much going on in Hawthorn Hill. Orville was turning into sort of an old fuddy-duddy. They had their own separate lives. He'd go to the Engineers' Club, he had his lab; she had her life. But especially after the nieces and nephews were grown and gone, I think she said to herself, well, why not? You know, she was nothing if not adventuresome. Don't get me wrong. I'm so glad that they got married, that she found love and affection in her--I don't want to call it her senior years, but in her golden years. Heaven knows she deserved it. But in my opinion, both of those men were pretty selfish. Harry was selfish about not being alone, and Orville was selfish because his warm, cozy life was being upset.

[CINDY WILKEY:] I've often wondered, had opportunity presented itself sooner, if Katharine would have been willing to leave Orville at some other moment. [HH:] This is historian Cindy Wilkey. [CW:] Because sometimes it feels like they're painting Katharine as this person who somehow didn't have those typical female interests in romance and all those types of things. And that's just not true. She clearly hungered for that, as is true of most individuals, but just didn't feel it strongly enough until Henry's very active courtship of her. But I mean the decision to leave Orville, the anguish it caused her, it was--I can't imagine. I actually felt guilty reading those letters, where she was just pouring her heart out as she attempted to come to terms with what she wanted to do. That idea that women were allowed to have lives of their own was still in its infancy. When I'm teaching the time period to my students, I emphasize that the so-called New Woman got to have fun for a few years, but then she was still expected to marry and have children and take her primary meaning from those roles. In a way the New Woman wasn't really very new at all. So while we think about Katharine choosing to leave Orville as--and it clearly was--a gut-wrenching decision that caused her much anguish, what she was doing was utterly traditional. She was doing what women are supposed to do, which is marrying and identifying as a wife. She just did so much later than others. On the other hand, ultimately Katharine does decide, I'm allowed to have a life. I'm allowed to do what's important to me here. And everyone she spoke to encouraged her: yes, this is okay. So that does speak to some larger social changes--that women are allowed to actually do something for themselves. Women still struggle with where they're allowed to do something for themselves versus the need to be caretaker for

everyone else. Katharine just really had a larger-than-life example of that dilemma. It's interesting that it occurred when it did, because I'm not sure that a younger Katharine would have had the sense of self to say, it's okay for me to want this for myself.

[HH:] That larger-than-life image of Katharine, as a woman who transcended her time and place in history and speaks to modern women directly, lies at the heart of a new opera about her called *Finding Wright*. Librettist Andrea Fellows Fineberg and composer Laura Kaminsky tell her story through the eyes of a recently widowed woman named Charlie living in the present day. In exploring Katharine's life, Charlie finds her own path toward understanding, connection, and healing.

[ANDREA FELLOWS FINEBERG:] Opera is a very different art form. It's not a play. It's not a biopic. The story needs to be bigger than life. And I believe Katharine lived in such a way that demands that her story be told in this spectacular fashion. She asked questions. She steered, she guided, she loved, she loved. That's one of the things that really resonated for me, that she really loved her friends, she really loved her family, she loved Harry. And I think that's a message for all time. She loved and she loved well. I think that's really important. I like the other aspects of her that I've discovered, but that she loved and loved well was really what I would want to stay with people.

[LAURA KAMINSKY] It's quite sad, tragic when somebody dies young, especially just as they've achieved this joyful part of their life. But it was kind of like, okay, I'm accepting. This is the end. I'm really tired. I'm done. This was all good. I'm glad. It's not a heartbreak tragedy, it's a matter-of-fact tragedy. Her life to me was one of conviction, despite all of the hard things that she had to endure. Part of them were the specifics of the family relationships and her role, and some were because of the times that she lived in and what was or was not an option for women. We didn't think of her as a spinster--she was too vibrant. It was a sad ending, but not a tragedy. We framed it in our storytelling against the story of a contemporary woman who discovers Katharine, and Katharine becomes sort of a muse for her as she's grappling with her own frustrations and her own losses in life about how do you own the good and the bad in your life to have a purposeful, meaningful life. So the ending, despite it being Katharine's death, gives our secondary lead, whom we call Charlotte—Charlie--a sense of hope that I can go forward.

[HH:] The Katharine Wright we've encountered in this three-part podcast was many things—a trail-blazing feminist and a traditional homemaker, a self-sacrificing sister and a self-fulfilled New Woman, the mainstay of her family and a dedicated professional in the classroom, an influential trustee of her college and a citizen of the world. Our commentators have used many adjectives to describe her: strong, gregarious, fun-loving, opinionated, loyal, adventurous, smart, analytical, supportive, curious, level-headed, engaged. The Wright Sister lived her entire life surrounded by men, in a world dominated by men. But—and I say this as the grandson of the man who precipitated the greatest emotional crisis of her life--she never allowed herself to be defined by her relationships with men. So let's wrap things up by revisiting the question we asked in Part 1: who was Katharine Wright?

[AMANDA WRIGHT LANE:] I think Aunt Katharine was a woman's woman. [HH:] Here's Amanda Wright Lane. [AL:] I feel like she embraced other women. I rarely, if ever--I'm trying to

think of an example--heard of her [expressing] any sort of jealousies about other women. I think she was a good friend. I think she understood all of the things a woman could potentially be. And I feel like she was probably the friend that always urged her friends into taking that step, daring to try something. I love that about her, especially in today's world when we can sometimes hold back and not encourage those around us. I think she was one of those people that was very encouraging and very happy for the success of others.

[HH:] For Dawne Dewey, it's the irreducible complexity of Katharine's identity, with all its conflicts and contradictions, its agonies and ecstasies, that makes her story relevant and inspiring today.

[DAWNE DEWEY:] I just don't think that you can put her into a little box and say, this is, this was Katharine. I think she's so many things, and [there are] so many parts of her life [that] all of us can identify with and find lessons in.

I'm Harry Haskell. Thanks for listening to *In Her Own Wright*.