

a breakfast serials story

Up in the Air: The Story of the Wright Brothers

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Chapter 1 First Flight 1878

With a jolt, Orville looked up. How long had Ida Palmer been calling his name? "*Orville Wright*," she said. "What are you *doing*, Orville?"

Orville looked down at the bits of wood and paper in his hand. He knew *what* he was doing. He'd just forgotten *where* he was doing it. "I'm building a flying machine," he said. He saw the confusion on Miss Palmer's face. He looked around the schoolhouse and saw it on the faces of his fellow second-graders, too. "It's not finished," he said.

"I hope not," said Miss Palmer. She held out her hand, and Orville put the wood and paper on her palm. She pointed with them to the cast-iron stove in a corner of the schoolroom. "This ought to go right into the fire, Orville," she said.

"It's only a toy, Miss Palmer," Orville said. He couldn't help adding, "But I do want to build a larger one." The idea caused him to brighten. "Large enough to carry me. And my brother, too."

Ida Palmer shook her head. "Just not in class, Orville," she said. She put the wood and paper back on his desk. "Not in class."

Later that afternoon Orville sat on the edge of the family porch, back at work on his machine. At home, too, he had trouble building his machine. He had unwanted attention, from his brother Wilbur, and his sister, Katharine.

Wilbur was eleven, four years older than Orville. Katharine was four years old, three years younger (to the day) than Orville. She kept asking, "What *is* that?"

Orville finally answered. "It's not *anything*, yet," he said. "It's supposed to be like this." He held up a small toy that their father, Bishop Milton Wright, had given them. It was simply a small stick with paper screws, or propellers, at either end. A band of India rubber ran up and down the stick. "The design is by a Frenchman named Alphonse Pénau," their father had told them. "It's called an *hélicoptère*."

Orville called it a bat. He took it now, held the propellers still, and twisted the little contraption until the rubber band coiled tightly around the stick. He stepped onto the lawn and tossed the bat out of his hands. The rubber untwisted rapidly, and the propellers spun,

whirled softly, and carried the little contraption into the air. The toy bat flew.

Orville smiled. He had been having so much trouble building his own bat that he'd almost forgotten how much he enjoyed the original. When the band of rubber unwound and the propellers stopped spinning, the bat dropped. Orville ran underneath to catch it, but the low sun was in his eyes, and the next thing he knew—

“You’ll break that if you keep trying to catch it with your head, Orv,” said Wilbur.

“I’m showing it to Swes,” Orville said sharply, using the family’s nickname for Katharine.

Wilbur stepped down from the porch and took the toy from Orville. “I can’t get the screws at the right angle on mine,” Orville said. “Or something. I don’t know. It’s not working.”

Wilbur looked carefully at Orville’s work. He was impressed, but not surprised. Orv had inherited his mechanical skill from their mother, Susan Wright. As a child she had spent much of her time in her father’s carriage workshop, and as an adult she made simple tools for herself and toys for her children. “This isn’t so bad, Bubs,” Wilbur allowed.

“I didn’t say it was *bad*,” Orville said.

“Hand me the bat Dad gave us, Swes, will you?” said Wilbur. Orv watched his brother compare the two bats. An awkward silence settled over them, and Orville sensed what Wilbur was thinking. Wilbur was intrigued by the bat, but didn’t want to get caught playing with his younger brother’s toy. After all, Will spent more of his time with his older brothers, Reuchlin and Lorin, than with Orville. (Their father had thought Wright too plain a name, and so had done his best to give his sons interesting first names.)

After a moment of fiddling with the small propeller, though, Wilbur looked over at Orville, then back at the bat. Finally he said, “I could, if you want, I could give you a hand with this, Orv.”

“All right,” Orville said. “Just this once.” He tried not to seem *too* happy about it, but his grin gave him away.

As the boys grew older, Wilbur and Orville continued to spend time together. When Orville reached the sixth grade he grew interested in printing. With Wilbur’s help, he began to build his own presses, out of old buggy parts, scrap lumber, and bits and pieces from junkyards. Once Orville used an old tombstone for a press bed. Then he and a friend set up a small shop in the back of the Wrights’ house and began to pick up jobs. Orville’s hobby was becoming a career.

Wilbur’s interests began to take him elsewhere. He was a strong student, and as he neared the end of high school he began to think about college.

“Maybe Yale,” he told Orville. That would take Wilbur far from his home in Dayton, Ohio, and far from Orville. The brothers were moving apart.

It would take an accident to keep them together.

Next Week: From Printing to Pedaling, 1886-1896

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