

In July 1910 Oberlin awarded honorary doctorate degrees to Charles Martin Hall and to Wilbur and Orville Wright. Oberlin was the first university to award a degree to the Wrights. Why the Wright Brothers, you might ask.

Well, there's a story. If you took Physics at Oberlin in the late '60s, you would likely have taken it with Mr. Palmieri in the Wright Physics Building. So now that you've been told that they received a doctorate from Oberlin, you might wonder which came first, the doctorate or the building. You might be inclined to speculate that the Wright Brothers were physicists and perhaps graduated from Oberlin. The Wrights were from Dayton, airplanes are made from aluminum, and Charles Martin Hall founded Alcoa ... a reasonable speculation.

Orville and Wilbur were geniuses for sure. Over the course of about five years they did the research, invented aerodynamic experiments, and created the basic theory of aerodynamics that is still taught today. Oh, and they invented the first powered controllable airplane too, but you knew that. However, they never attended any college, much less Oberlin. In fact, they didn't even attend their high school graduations. Wilbur, the brains of the two, was accepted at Yale divinity school but suffered a horrible facial injury while playing hockey and became so depressed that he never went to college.

Their smarter, younger sister, [Katherine](#), did graduate from Oberlin in 1898, which was quite an accomplishment. Orville, the younger brother, adored his sister, and she provided much support to the brothers during their aviation career. Their mother had died when Orville was about 12 and Katherine became the woman of the household. While at Oberlin, however, Kathrine met Henry Haskell (yes, grandfather of Tamme Haskell '69), and she decided to marry him much later in 1926. By then, the brothers were world-famous. Wilbur had died (1912) and Orville was quite attached to Katherine, perhaps too much. After she married Henry, Orville refused to speak with Katherine until he went to her on her deathbed.

In 1948 when Orville died, his will specified that \$300,000 be given to Oberlin College. No reason was given. The college had just completed building its new physics laboratory building, so they decided to name it the Wilbur and Orville Wright Physics Laboratory. My guess is that we have Katherine to thank for that.

John Barrer '68