

Present at Creation

From five witnesses came a family tradition to honor the moment the airplane was born

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Among the locals helping the Wrights were Tom Beacham (second from right) with young son John and his dog Bounce. (Library of Congress)

At 10:35 a.m. every December 17, a small group of men, women, and children, usually bundled up against the winter winds of the Outer Banks, leave the warmth of the visitor center at the Wright Brothers National Memorial in Kill Devil Hills, North Carolina, to walk a short distance to the foot of a granite boulder. There they lay wreaths to mark the spot where Orville Wright left the ground on the first powered, controlled, heavier-than-air flight. They are a select group, the descendants of the four men and a boy who witnessed that historic event at this moment on this day so many years ago.

The annual wreath laying began on December 17, 1928, the 25th anniversary of the first flights. That year, 3,000 people traveled by boat, automobile, pony cart, and on foot to reach the birthplace of the airplane. The first commemoration was the work of the Kill Devil Hills Memorial Association, a group of locals who donated the land where the federal government would soon begin work on a great monument to the Wrights. The group also fought for a bridge that would link this remote section of the Outer Banks to the mainland, and a paved road to carry sightseers to the place where the air age began.

Over the years, the association evolved into today's First Flight Society, which still organizes the annual commemoration. The current president, Bill Harris, served as superintendent of the Cape Hatteras National Seashore, which includes the Wright Brothers National Memorial, before retiring from the National Park Service. Harris has his own personal connection to the Wright story. On September 13, 1900, when Wilbur Wright first came ashore at Kitty Hawk after a harrowing voyage across Albemarle Sound in an open boat, the first person he met was 13-year-old Elijah Baum, who was out crabbing along the shore. The young man was kind enough to escort the visitor to the home of William Tate, where the newcomer would be staying. Bill Harris, the grandson of that young Good Samaritan, maintains a quiet pride in Baum's small role in the Wright story. "My granddad's warm welcome and offer of assistance," he notes, "was only the first example of the friendship and hospitality which the residents of Kitty Hawk would extend to these visitors from faraway Dayton."

A good many of the other descendants who lay wreaths on the spot each year are also active in the First Flight Society (anyone wishing to help continue the tradition can join at www.firstflight.org). Lois Smith is the granddaughter of witness John T. Daniels, who took what may be the most famous photograph of all time: the image of the Wright Flyer just lifting off the launch rail with Orville Wright at the controls and Wilbur running alongside. After the fourth flight of the morning, the brothers asked Daniels to remain outside minding the airplane while the others went into the shed to warm their hands. A gust of wind sent the world's first airplane tumbling backward with the faithful Daniels hanging on. In later years he would remind listeners that he had not only witnessed the first flight of an airplane, and taken the first picture of that event, but had also been the first victim of an airplane accident—all in one morning.

Daniels accompanied granddaughter Lois when she laid her first wreath here as a young girl in 1945. "He was," she remembers, "the sweetest man you can imagine." Lois cherishes photos of herself with her grandfather and aviation luminaries like Jimmy Doolittle and Igor Sikorsky, who made the pilgrimage to the Kill Devil Hills over the years and were delighted to meet the witness who photographed that historic moment. Lois says that her memories of her grandfather make her determined to continue the family tradition.

Johnny Moore, the youngest of the witnesses, took his granddaughter, Karen Brickhouse, to her first commemoration in 1947. In 1903, Moore was living with his mother, a local "wise woman" who earned her living supplying natural remedies and telling fortunes. Having watched the brothers fly that morning, the young man went tearing down the beach toward Kitty Hawk, four miles to the north, shouting the news as he went. For Karen, attending the annual ceremony is a way of honoring her grandfather. "I promised my mother I would always represent us," she explains, "and my kids have promised me that they will carry it on."

Terry Beacham usually attends the December 17 ceremony dressed in the uniform of a turn-of-the-century member of the U.S. Lifesaving Service. A retired Coast Guard aviator, Beacham is not one of the wreath layers. At the time of the first flight, his grandfather, William

Thomas "Tom" Beacham, was on duty at the Kill Devil Hills Lifesaving Station less than a mile away. He was there, however, when Wilbur Wright made an attempt at a powered flight on December 14.

Terry adds a new detail to our knowledge of events leading to that failed first try. He shows me a familiar photo taken by Orville Wright on the morning of December 14 and points to a man, a boy, and a dog standing just behind the world's first airplane as it rests on the sand. Those individuals, he explains, are his grandfather Tom, his father John, then age five, and John's dog Bounce. For me, as a Wright biographer, learning the dog's name breathes new life into that morning's events.

John Beacham always remembered the candy that Orville kept in his pockets for the boys who hung around the camp, Terry recounts. When the Wrights fired up the engine on December 14, John and Bounce scampered off to escape the clatter and the flying sand. That day, the Wrights had laid the launch rail down the lower slope of the big dune. The weight of the machine headed downhill prevented Wilbur from releasing the line that restrained it. When the Lifesavers assisting that morning pushed the airplane up the track a bit to relieve the pressure, Wilbur and the craft shot into the air, the airplane nosing up so sharply that it stalled. Wilbur made a hard landing only 60 feet from the takeoff point, damaging the front elevator support. Young John Beacham never forgot that aborted flight. Decades later, when Terry Beacham told his father that he wanted to become a Coast Guard aviator, the old man commented: "I didn't know we had any insanity in the family."

I'll be on hand for the ceremony again this year. Last time I was invited to join in, by laying a wreath sent by the city of Dayton, the hometown I share with the Wright brothers. It will be good to see my old friends again, the descendants of the original witnesses. I look forward to watching one of them urge a child or grandchild forward to take up the tradition and lay the family wreath for the first time.