

Auglaize County's Wright Connection (Orville, that is...)

The following is a reprint of an article by Katy Gilbert that appeared in the January-February 2001 issue of the Auglaize County Historical Society newsletter. Katy was a longtime ACHS trustee, and a great historian and writer. Thanks to Genevieve Conradi for making us aware of this fascinating story.

According to information I received this past year, Auglaize County has a Wright connection. That connection was Hulda Kuenning Diedrich of New Bremen.

Hulda Kuenning was born July 13, 1899, to Frank D. and Augusta Lehmkuhl Kuenning of New Bremen. She was born at a time when canal boats still journeyed up and down the Miami-Erie Canal. Just four years before the Wright Brothers would take their first flight in 1903. As others born during the latter part of the 19th or the early part of the 20th century, she saw and experienced the many changes in transportation, from horse and buggy to airplane. But Kuenning was also fortunate to have met one of the early pioneers of flight.

Kuenning was living on her father's farm about one mile north of New Bremen. It was 1919 when the 48-year-old Orville Wright came to the farm house and asked to use the telephone, another new invention. Wright's plane had developed some problems and he had landed in Kuenning's pasture.

Kuenning had been instructed by her mother not to call any numbers that were in the book, because the phone company would charge more for those calls. So when Wright requested the use of the telephone, Kuenning politely asked if the number was in the book.

Negotiations were made and Wright used the telephone to call Dayton and ask his crew to come to the Kuenning farm to bring Wright and the plane back to Dayton.

Kuenning expressed surprise at how lightweight the plane was and how effortlessly the crew lifted it over the fence and onto the flatbed truck.

After that first flight, Wright's plane often came to the Kuenning's pasture. Kuenning explained Wright's visits were frequent and "we all got acquainted." When she was asked about her impression of seeing Orville Wright's plane in the sky, she said it didn't seem all that strange. She noted her father was in the livestock business,

and they were used to seeing strangers pass through the area.

Kuenning got an unexpected chance to fly in Wright's plane during the summer of 1920. The annual Farmers Picnic at Kuenning's Grove was August 15 of that year. It was a large event that drew a crowd of some 1,500 area farmers.

As Kuenning's father was preparing the grove for the event, Wright flew over the site and landed.

Kuenning's father invited Wright to fly his now much improved plane over the fields during the picnic and give rides to anyone wanting to fly. "You'll be first," Wright told Kuenning's father. But her father declined, saying he liked to keep his feet on the ground. However he did agree that his daughter be first to fly that day.

Kuenning said she wasn't nervous about going up because the motor had been vastly improved from the days the plane sputtered out in the pasture. The flight was not higher than the treetops and Wright pointed out the various homes in the neighborhood, "It was wonderful," Kuenning was reported to have said. But as wonderful as the light had been, Kuenning said she'd rather ride horses. She never flew again.

*Looking way ahead: Thursday, May 12, 7 p.m.,
at the Lockkeepers House, New Bremen*

Buckeye Boys and Girls

"Buckeye Boys and Girls" will be a novel presentation of Ohio history derived from speaker Susan Talbot-Stanaway's experience curating museum art and history exhibitions in the state. In this talk, images of masterwork paintings, vintage photographs, historic clothing, antique toys, books, quilts and sports equipment will be used to recount the stories of Ohio children, 1840s to our town time. From America's first toy electric train to the iconic Etch-A-Sketch, all of the objects were invented, created, or made in Ohio. Plan now to attend!