



The Society

The year is 1900, and you are employed by the Cincinnati Scientific Society, a group of about 100 progress-minded people who are interested in learning about the latest advances in science and technology. Some of the members are very wealthy and regularly sponsor lectures, studies, and expeditions. At the Society meeting last month, Mr. Pierpont reported that his cousin from Dayton had written him about her neighbors, two bicycle salesmen named Wilbur and Orville Wright. People were saying that they were making a large glider in the back of their bicycle shop. In talking with the Wrights, Mr. Pierpont's cousin had learned that they were attempting to invent a flying machine.

This is just the kind of thing the Society is interested in. Society members had avidly read reports about the gliding experiments of the German Otto Lilienthal, who was killed when his glider went out of control and crashed in Germany in 1896; about the Englishman Percy Pilcher, who died the same way in 1899; and about the Americans Octave Chanute and Samuel Langley. Mr. Sidney Krause makes a motion that the Society send an investigator to report on the efforts of the Wright Brothers. The motion passes unanimously; you are selected to be the investigator. The Society gives you strict instructions to report only the facts and not to mention the name of the Society in your investigations. (Society members want to avoid the appearance of being out to steal anyone's ideas. They are just interested in science.) Mr. Pierpont gives you the address of the Wrights and their shop, and you set off for Dayton the next morning.



Chanute showing off the multiplane soaring machine "Katydid."

Courtesy of the National Air and Space Museum,
Smithsonian Institute. Negative 1A-20406 A494771
(<http://www.smithsonian.org/>).



Langley's "Great Aerodrome" perched aboard a houseboat on the Potomac, just before a disastrous launch that tumbled the aircraft down into the river.

*Lilienthal's flight station near his home in Steglitz
(today part of Berlin).*

Courtesy of Archive Otto-Lilienthal-Museum
(www.lilienthal-museum.de. Inquiries are directed to
LilienthalMusuem@t-online.de).



Activity 1—Early Aviation

Before you go to Dayton to investigate the Wright Brothers, it is important to do some research and get some background information. You need to go to the library and/or the Internet and find out about the progress of attempts to build a flying machine up to the year 1900 (try searching under terms like “early aviators” on the Internet). Write a short paragraph about each of the following and their accomplishments up to 1900:

1. Otto Lilienthal



2. Octave Chanute



3. Samuel Langley



See whether you can answer the following questions:

1. Why do you think some of these early pioneers were using gliders instead of powered aircraft? Why didn't their craft have engines?
2. What was the record for distance and time aloft by a manned glider in 1900?
 - a) 20 feet and 2 to 3 seconds
 - b) 100 feet and 5 to 6 seconds
 - c) 500 feet and 8 to 10 seconds
 - d) Over 1300 feet and 12 to 15 seconds
3. Why was gliding so dangerous at the time?
4. Why do you think Chanute chose to test his gliders at the Indiana Dunes on the southern shore of Lake Michigan?
5. How far is it from Cincinnati to Dayton? How do you think you might have travelled from Cincinnati to Dayton in 1900?



Activity 2—Your First Interview



Now that you know something about the state of flying machines in 1900, pretend that you are a reporter for the Dayton Daily News. You are being sent to interview the Wright Brothers. What questions do you think you would want to ask them about what they are attempting to do?

A. 1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

B. If you are working in a class, team up with a classmate and see how your questions compare.

C. Discuss how you think the Wright Brothers might answer your questions.



News reporters waiting for the Wright Brothers to fly.

