

HANDOUT A

Toys and Inventions

The Wright brothers became interested in flying when their father brought home a simple rotor toy.

In 1878, when Orville was about 7 and Wilbur was near 11 years old, their father, Bishop Milton Wright, took a trip to France. On Bishop Wright's trips he often bought gifts for his children and on this trip he brought home a special toy for his sons. Wilbur and Orville's parents had always encouraged their sons to explore and learn as much as they could. Their father made sure there were always plenty of books in the house for his children to read. Susan Wright, their mother, knew all about physics and was mechanically inclined. She was always fixing things around the house and showing her boys how to do mechanical repairs, too. Orville once said that he and his brother had "special advantages...we were lucky enough to grow up in a home environment where there was always much encouragement to children to pursue intellectual interests; to investigate whatever aroused their curiosity." The special toy that Bishop Wright brought his sons was a small helicopter of the type designed by the French aeronautical experimenter Alphonse Pénaud.



A sketch by Orville of his rotor toy

When their father brought the helicopter toy home, Orville and Wilbur loved it and became fascinated with discovering how it worked. It was about a foot long and made of paper, bamboo and cork with a rubber band to twirl its rotor. It wasn't long before they were trying to copy the toy by making one of their own using whatever materials they could find. Based on the toy their father gave them, Wilbur and Orville invented their own model flyers. They were always trying new features, which they thought would make their toys fly even better and stay in the air longer. When he should have been studying, Orville's teacher caught him working on one of their inventions in class. Orville explained to his teacher that he and Wilbur planned someday to build a flying craft large enough to carry both of them. It was twenty-five years from the time Orville and Wilbur received this toy to their invention of the airplane, yet the Wright brothers were convinced their father's gift had a major influence on their desire to invent machines that would carry people into the sky.