

MS-302

Levitt Luzern Custer Papers

**Special Collections and Archives
Wright State University**

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Introduction

Levitt Luzern Custer was a Dayton-area aviator and inventor, and an associate of Orville Wright. During his lifetime he engaged in pioneering balloon experiments, served as an official timer for flight trials, collaborated with Orville Wright on various projects, and invented a wide range of mechanical machines from the statoscope to amusement park rides.

The Levitt Luzern Custer Papers document many of his achievements as well as those of other early aviators, such as the Wright Brothers. Information on early aviators such as the Early Birds who flew before 1916 are also preserved. Patents, blueprints, photographs, and correspondence are also a rich source of research.

The collection spans from 1886 through 1998. It was donated by his son James Custer in August 2000. The collection occupies 10 boxes and 4.5 linear feet. There are no restrictions on this collection.

The collection is arranged into the following series:

- Series I Biographical
- Series II Patents
- Series III Aviation Materials
- Series IV Publications
- Series V Photographs
- Series VI Wright Brothers Materials
- Series VII Scrapbooks
- Series VIII Films

Biographical Sketch

Levitt Luzern Custer was born on July 27, 1888 in Dayton, Ohio. As a young boy, he frequented the Wright Brothers' Bicycle Shop, where he met the acquaintance of Wilbur and Orville Wright. Katherine Wright was his Latin teacher at Steele High School. This began a long friendship with the Wrights, particularly Orville.

Custer attended Central District School and Steele High School, both in Dayton. He then attended Otterbein University in Westerville, Ohio, and the Massachusetts Institute of technology in Cambridge, Mass.

After briefly working for the National cash register Company, he founded the Custer Specialty Company in 1916. There he developed mechanical devises such as the statoscope, cars, motorized invalid chairs, power scooters, and various amusement park rides.

Custer was also a figure in aviation. He was a pioneer in flying and racing hot air balloons. His father Levitt Elsworth Custer had done the same. Custer also became an official timer for the national Aeronautic Association and the Federation Aeronautique Internationale. Custer officiated with Orville Wright at world record flight trials at McCook Field and Patterson Field, both near Dayton.

Custer was a member of the Dayton Engineers' Club; Early Birds; National Association of Amusement Parks, Pools, and Beaches; Kiwanis; and Free Masons. Custer was also a member of the Westminster Presbyterian Church.

Custer had three sons, James, Randall, and Donald from his first marriage. In his second marriage to Gladys Mills he had one son, Don.

Scope and Content

Series I (Box 1) Biographical

The contents of this series include biographies written by and about Levitt Luzern Custer. Correspondences are also included within this series, and include letters from R.W. Schroeder, Walter R. Brookins, and J.H. Doolittle, all early aviators. Of particular interest are the files of his inventions.

Series II (Box 2) Patents

This series includes original patents, most of which belong to Custer. Some other patents belong to his father, Levitt Elsworth Custer and another inventor John H. Hammond. Of major importance is the invention of the statoscope, a devise used to measure ascension and descension of airplanes, found in file 2 of this series.

Series III (Box 3) Aviation Materials

This series contains materials related to aviation, excluding documents relating to the Wright Brothers, which are found in Series VI. Included in Series III are log books and information on the Early Birds. There are also some newspaper clippings found in this series.

Series IV (Box 4) Publications

This series contains magazine and news publications. Of major interest is a souvenir copy of *The Dayton Journal* printed in the air from the balloon "Hoosier" on June 29, 1909. The original of this is found in the scrapbook found in Box 9, Series VII. Aviation journals such as the Aero Club of America's journal are also within this series.

Series V (Box 5) Photographs

This series contains photographs of ballooning, aviation, famous early aviators, and inventors such as Henry Ford. The photos encompass the years 1910-1960.

Series VI (Box 6) Wright Brothers Material

This series contains some very extraordinary materials. A photograph of the first flight with a signature by Orville Wright is preserved here. There are other photographs as well. Dedication documents, booklets, and other memorabilia are also found in this series.

Series VII (Box 7-8) Scrapbooks

Within this series are two scrapbooks belonging to the Custer family. In these, are clippings, documents, and photographs of major events, such as clipping of the work of the Wright Brothers, photographs of the 1913 Dayton flood, and certificates awarded to Custer.

Series VIII (Box 9-10) Films

Within this series are 16-mm reels of aviation races, C.F. Kettering's 75th birthday party, and Dayton sporting events. In the final box are VHS copies of the 16-mm originals.

Box and File Listing

Series I: Biographical

<u>Box</u>	<u>File</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>Date</u>
1	1	Biographical Documents	1944, 1962, n.d.
	2	Correspondence	1910-1968
	3	Miscellaneous Files	1937-1962
	4	Inventions	1935-1958
	5	Blueprints and Drawings	1949-1959

Series II: Patents

<u>Box</u>	<u>File</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>Date</u>
2	1	Patents	1909-1910
	2	Patents	1910-1915
	3	Patents	1919
	4	Patents	1922
	5	Patents	1927
	6	Patents	1930
	7	Patents	1931
	8	Patents	1933
	9	Patents	1935
	10	Patents	1936
	11	Patents	1942
	12	Miscellaneous Patent Documents	n.d.

Series III: Aviation Materials

<u>Box</u>	<u>File</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>Date</u>
3	1	Articles	1960-1962
	2	Log Books	1915-1939
	3	Log Books	1939-1946
	4	Log Books	1944-1945
	5	Log Book on Barograph Tape	1924
	6	Early Birds' <i>CHIRP</i> Magazine	1953
	7	Early Birds' Correspondence	1960
	8	Early Birds' Photographs	1948-1959
	9	Early Birds' Memorabilia	1939-1959

Series IV: Publications

<u>Box</u>	<u>File</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>Date</u>
4	1	Brochures	1908-1954
	2	<i>Dayton Journal</i> article	1909
	3	Aviation Journals	1910-1919
	4	<i>Aero Club of America</i> book	1911
	5	Aircraft Product Catalogues	1919
	6	Rule Book	1922
	7	<i>International Air Races</i> Monthly	1924
	8	Prague Conference Report	1925
	9	Flier of the Song "The Aviator"	1927
	10	Bookmarks	1935
	11	Aeronautics Annual Report	1938
	12	Page from <i>Who's Who in Aviation</i>	1943
	13	Newspaper Articles	1953
	14	Air Show, Dayton Directory and Log	1954
	15	Congressional Record	1958
	16	Army Air Service Report	n.d.
Oversized Loc 31 Folder 2		<i>National Aeronautics Association Review</i>	1924

Series V: Photographs

<u>Box</u>	<u>File</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>Date</u>
5	1	(1) L.L. Custer and Balloon "Luzern"	1910
		(2) W.R. Brookins at Simms Station	1910
	2	National Balloon Race, Kansas City	1912
	3	(1) Lincoln Beachey, photo with inscription	1914
		(2) Descriptor from the back of frame signed by L.L. Custer	n.d.
		(3) Photograph of frame descriptor	n.d.
	4	(1-3) Original and composite photos of flight off Reibold Building Dayton, Ohio	1923
		(4) Copy of negative of Lt. John Macready's World Altitude Record	n.d.
		(5) Descriptor from back of frame of photo of L.L. Custer	n.d.
	5	(1-4) Photos and descriptors of World Altitude Record By Lt. John Macready	1924
	6	Steam Heat Head with L.L. Custer, Dayton Power And Light	1955

<u>Box</u>	<u>File</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>Date</u>
5	7	General E.W. Rawlinger, signed	1957
	8	Brig. General Frank P. Lahm, signed with note from L.L. Custer	n.d.
	9	Photo and copy of notable businessmen including Orville Wright, Col. Edward Deeds, Frederick Rike, and Henry Ford	n.d.
	10	Portrait of L. L. Custer	n.d.
	11	Photographs taken at Custer Specialty Co.	1939
	12	Photos of Amusement Park Ride	1959-1960
	13	Military Equipment	n.d.
	14	Portrait of Randall Custer, L. L. Custer's son	n.d.

Series VI: Wright Brothers Material

<u>Box</u>	<u>File</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>Date</u>
6	1	First Flight Photo, signed by Orville Wright	1903
	2	Wright Flyer booklet	1910
	3	Dedication of Wright Home and Shop	1938
	4	Wright Brothers Hill dedication	1940
	5	Presentation of Wright 1903 Flyer to Smithsonian	1948
	6	Drawing of Wright Motor Crank Case	1950
	7	50 th Anniversary of powered Flight	1953
	8	Orville Wright portrait signed	n.d.
	9	Photographs, including Orville Wright, Henry Ford, Charles F. Kettering	n.d.
	10	Manuscript by Custer <i>My Intimate Association with the Wrights</i>	n.d.
	11	Christmas Card from Orville	n.d.
	12	Other Memorabilia	n.d.

Series VII: Scrapbooks

<u>Box</u>	<u>File</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>Date</u>
7	1	Volume 1 of Scrapbooks	1886-1913
8	1	Volume 4 of Scrapbooks	1946-1956

Series VIII: Films

<u>Box</u>	<u>File</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>Date</u>
9	1	(1) 16mm reel: Air Race Cleveland	Sept. 4-6, 1948
		(2) 16mm reel: University of Dayton vs. St. Louis Football Game	1948
		(3) 16mm reel: Wright Field; Universal Church- North Chicago; Air Show/Horse Race	1948-1949
		(4) 16mm reel: Marseilles, France Oil Tanker; Shuey's 50 th Anniversary	1949
		(5) 16mm reel: Gene Core Don Airplanes	1950
		(6) 16mm reel: Detroit Air Races; C.F. Kettering 75 th Birthday	Aug. 17-18, 1951
		(7) 16mm reel: National Air Races- Dayton	Sept. 4-6, 1954
		(8) 16mm reel: National Air Races- Dayton	Sept. 4-6, 1954
		(9) 16mm reel: "TY" and the Ducks	n.d.
10	1	(1-9) Copies of 16mm reels onto VHS	