

# Radio Aspects of the Lindbergh Kidnapping

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*NOTE: This topic was presented orally on October 24, 2008 at the Friends of Old Time*

*Radio convention in Newark, NJ, but this is the first time it has appeared in print.*

OTR researcher Derek Tague has often, and correctly, declared that the three most newsworthy events in the 1930s all happened in New Jersey: the Hindenburg disaster at Lakehurst, the Martians landing at Grovers Mills, and the Lindbergh Kidnapping in Hopewell. Since the first two events have been discussed several times at OTR conventions, but never the Lindbergh Kidnapping, I felt compelled to correct that omission.

The kidnapping of Lindbergh's baby in 1932 has been accurately termed "The Crime of the Century" based upon its impact on the national and international scene. This startling crime, which involved not only the kidnapping but the murder of a small boy, generated more shock among the citizens of North American and Europe than a presidential assassination. And this crime, and subsequent trial, certainly resulted in more news stories, radio summaries, and magazine articles over a five year period than any other criminal event, before or since.

The story actually begins in May 1927 when Charles A. Lindbergh, an obscure mail pilot, became the first person to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean, landing in France. The feat electrified the world and brought him immediate honors, riches, and fame. He was accorded the Congressional Medal of Honor and President Coolidge dispatched a Navy ship to return him and his plane back to the U.S. The National Archives has released, under their audio file entitled "Sounds of History" the audio exchange of Coolidge and Lindbergh as it aired over the major networks in 1927.

Lindbergh's face was on the cover of every U.S. and European magazine, there was a dance named for him, and he was truly the best-known personality on either side of the Atlantic. In May 1929 he married Anne Morrow, the daughter of a multi-millionaire banker and ambassador to Mexico. In June 1930 their first son was born at the Morrow estate in Englewood, NJ, but they had already purchased 390 acres near Hopewell, NJ, to build their own mansion. It was completed in late 1931 and the Lindberghs alternated between the two residences. They were in their Hopewell residence on March 1, 1932 when a kidnapper placed a ladder under the second story nursery about 9 PM, took the child without a sound, left a ransom note in the bedroom, and escaped to a nearby car without being heard by the family or staff. In addition to abandoning the home-made, collapsible ladder, the kidnapper also left a chisel at the scene.

The baby's nurse discovered him missing about 10 PM and alerted the Lindberghs who found the ransom note. Local and state police were notified

and the most extensive law enforcement investigation began; it would go non-stop for two and a half years until the perpetrator was arrested in September 1934.

At that time, kidnapping was not a federal offense so the FBI and Dept. of Treasury had no jurisdiction. However the public outcry forced the White House to direct all federal agencies to render any possible assistance to local authorities. The Coast Guard searched the shores for the missing baby and the Commerce Dept. did the same at airports and train stations. Immigration authorities examined every vehicle coming to or from Mexico and Canada, trying to find the baby.

The New Jersey State Police were officially in charge of the investigation which made their agency head, Col. H. Norman Schwarzkopf the lead man on the case. His fame in this case would later catapult him into radio's *Gang Busters* as the narrator and he was also the father of General Stormin' Norman Schwarzkopf, the hero of the first Gulf War.

The first ransom note demanded \$ 50,000 for the safe return of the child. It contained a unique symbol as a signature (two interlocking circles with three holes punched through the design) which turned out to be very valuable in separating the real notes from the kidnapper (there would be 13 more) from the hundreds of fake ones that poured into the case, claiming to be from the kidnappers.

The media, particularly the newspapers and radio stations, had their reporters surrounding the Lindbergh and Morrow estates as well as NJ police stations, waiting for news, and sometimes creating news if there was none. Everybody wanted to get into the act, even Al Capone. At that time, Capone was serving time for tax evasion in Chicago but promised if he was released he could find the kidnappers in a few weeks and would return the unharmed baby to his parents. Capone seemed insulted when his offer was declined by authorities.

A week after the kidnapping, a 72 year old retired school principal in the Bronx, Dr. John F. Condon, unknown to Lindbergh, injected himself into the case by sending a letter to a local newspaper, offering to act as intermediary in the ransom payoff. Astonishingly, the kidnapper responded to Condon and sent him a series of ransom notes with instructions for the payoff. (The amount had now risen to \$ 70,000.)

Lindbergh and his advisors met with Condon several times and approved him making the ransom payoff. The kidnapper had specified a wooden box of certain dimensions be made and the money placed inside. All bills were to be unmarked and their serial numbers not recorded. Lindbergh, fearful of his son's life, insisted the police follow the kidnapper's demands, despite the police protests it would make the solution even more difficult. Not only was Lindbergh overruled by the police (they recorded every serial number) but also at the demand of Treasury investigator Elmer Irey, the majority of the bills were gold certificates. Irey had surmised accurately, that the U.S. would be going off the

gold standard shortly and thus gold certificates would be easier to identify, locate and trace. While no one knew it at the time, his plan would eventually result in the arrest of the kidnapper. The actual payoff was made on April 2, 1932 in the Bronx by Condon to the kidnapper, who called himself John.

Since only \$50,000 would fit in the wooden box, Condon left the other \$20,000 in the car when he made the payoff, telling the kidnapper that was all Lindbergh could raise. The lesser amount was accepted and Condon was given instructions to find the baby on a boat near Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts. It was a cruel hoax; neither the boat nor the baby was found after days of searching. The ransom money began appearing in business deposits in the New York City area that very week. One at a time, they trickled in but no one could be located who remembered the customer who had spent the bill in their establishment. None of the merchants had the numbers of the ransom bills so it was up to bank tellers to find them in the incoming cash deposits, a daunting task. Meanwhile Condon and Lindbergh's aids tried to recontact the kidnapper to obtain better information on where to locate the baby.

On May 12, 1932 a truck driver parked his vehicle on a muddy road near Hopewell and walked into the woods to relieve himself. About 75 feet from the road, he found the body of a child, partially decomposed, under the branch of a tree. He immediately alerted the police who determined it was the body of the Lindbergh baby. It had been found two miles from the Lindbergh estate. The baby had been killed by a blow to the skull and apparently had been dead since the night of the kidnapping.

The case, which was being covered widely by all the news media, increased greatly with the tragedy of the dead victim. A reporter and cameraman actually slipped into the office at night where the body was being examined and took photos of the partially decomposed corpse and then sold copies of the photo for five dollars on the street.

(Note: Regrettably, these photos are still being sold today on EBay by a Canadian dealer.)

Law enforcement authorities, no longer fearful of putting the child at risk redoubled their efforts throughout the Eastern U.S., where the ransom bills continued to find their way back to banks, primarily in the New York City boroughs. They even were the recipient of one of the first, effective examples of criminal profiling. While this technique is relatively common nowadays, in the mid 1930s it was virtually unknown. A 39 year old psychiatrist in NYC, Dr. Dudley Shoenfeld, was permitted to examine all the physical evidence, including all 14 ransom notes.

Although most law officials thought the kidnapping was the work of a gang (as many kidnappings were in those days) Shoenfeld declared in November 1932 that the kidnapper was a lone amateur. He also concluded the kidnapper was a German alien with little formal education, recently settled in the Bronx, had been institutionalized, worked with wood, had low income, was

approximately Lindbergh's age, if married, was tyrannical at home, was methodical and very cautious, had supreme confidence in himself, and when arrested would not cooperate nor confess. While the profile was not specific enough to uncover the kidnapper, it was accurate in all respects, which the police would confirm after the arrest of the kidnapper in 1934.

The ransom bills continued to be turned in after the U.S. went off the Gold Standard on April 5, 1933 but now any that were gold certificates became more rare every day so they were more likely to arouse the suspicions of merchants and banks who accepted them. In addition, the kidnapper had used up most of the five dollar bills and was using the tens and twenties. Eventually a few of the recipients actually remembered the description of who had given them the bill. A pattern description emerged of a Caucasian male, mid-30s, medium build, felt hat, German accent . . . it was the same description Dr. Condon had provided of the man to whom he paid the ransom in a Bronx cemetery. But it brought the police no nearer to his capture.

Finally on September 15, 1934, the big break in the case occurred. Walter Lyle, a manager at a gas station at Lexington and 127th Street, got a ten dollar gold certificate from a man who was paying for 98 cents worth of gas. Lyons was afraid it might be counterfeit so before the man drove off in his 1930 Dodge, Lyon wrote down his license number on the ten dollar bill. Three days later the teller processing the gas station's deposit found the ransom bill and phoned the authorities. Their interviews at the gas station confirmed that what had happened and a quick check of motor vehicle records determined that license plate was registered to Bruno Richard Hauptmann, 1279 E. 222nd Street in the Bronx.

A decision was made to arrest Hauptmann away from his residence so they could catch him with another ransom bill in his possession. They set up surveillance, including three cars, and when he left the next day, September 19, 1934, they followed him from his home to White Plains Avenue where they arrested him in his car. Among the twenty-nine dollars in his wallet, Hauptmann had a 20 dollar gold certificate which was part of the ransom package.

He was taken into custody and a search of his residence and garage discovered about \$15,000 in the missing ransom money (carefully hidden), a tool set in which a chisel was missing (which matched the one found the night of the kidnapping), and Condon's address and phone number written in a closet. Hauptmann was grilled for several days and never confessed to any wrong doing. He insisted the money found had been left to him by an associate, Isador Fisch, who had died in Germany a few months ago. Despite all the overwhelming evidence, he continued to protest his innocence and the October 5, 1934, *The March of Time* program summarized his interrogation for CBS radio, citing all the damning evidence against the kidnapper. (The program is in general circulation.)

While there are no credits on this program, Hauptmann was probably voiced by Dwight Weiss, who did most of the roles on *The March of Time* which required a German accent.

After a grand jury indictment and extradition to New Jersey, the trial was to begin in the courthouse in Flemington, NJ, a town of less than 3,000 people, located an hour from New York City. Due to various motions, the trial was postponed a few times and finally began on January 2, 1935. The prosecution team was led by David Wilentz, the state's AG, while the defense team was headed by Edward J. Reilly, a prominent Brooklyn defense attorney. The trial had attracted over 100 reporters from America and Europe, 25 radio and telegraph operators, and even a newsreel camera were used in the gallery. Walter Winchell and other well-known columnists were there, joined by prominent novelists also pressed into service: Edna Ferber, Alexander Woolcott, Fannie Hurst, and Damon Runyon. Sports stars, Broadway luminaries, and other show-biz personalities flocked to courtroom as spectators including Jack Benny.

Samuel Leibowitz, a prominent Brooklyn defense attorney, was hired by WHN Radio to broadcast regular trial updates on the air. They were done on transcription disks for subsequent airings and are apparently the only radio programs that survived, of the thousands of radio shows and bulletins that came out of the lengthy trial.

Nearly five hours total of Leibowitz's trial observations remain with us, but unfortunately they are all in the custody of the Museum of Television and Radio in Manhattan. That means that anyone can go there in person and listen to them, but no one can dub any copies of them.

Here is an excerpt from one of Leibowitz's programs: "What difference does it make whether there was an accomplice, or two accomplices, or a whole army of accomplices? If (Hauptmann) had a hand in this kidnapping, whether he actually committed the kidnapping or not, he is just as much of a fiend, and is just as guilty as if he actually killed that innocent child."

The trial would last for six weeks with nearly 400 witnesses, dozens of evidence items introduced, and a variety of experts on handwriting, wood, and medicine testified. All of Hauptmann's past history was revealed including his robberies in Germany, his escape from jail there, and entering the U.S. as an illegal alien. It was shown he had not worked a day after the ransom was paid and yet spent money lavishly for the next two years during the Great Depression. Jack Benny summed up the pitiful defense in a statement to the press: "Bruno needs a second act." Near the end of the trial, Hauptmann's attorney went on national radio and appealed for witnesses with any knowledge of the case to come forward. Only a few kooks responded. The jury convicted Hauptmann of murder on February 13, 1935, with no recommendation for mercy, thus requiring the death penalty.

The wall to wall radio coverage of the trial elevated several announcers and commentators to a higher level of fame that they previously had. But the radio personality that benefited most from the trial was a new announcer at WNEW who had just started at \$20 a week. Hearing that WNEW would be broadcasting periodic reports from the Flemington court house and wanted

something to fill the gaps between, Martin Block convinced station management that him playing musical records would be the best solution. He called his show *Make Believe Ballroom*, a title he borrowed from former associate, Al Jarvis, who used that same name for his west coast DJ show. Block's show became very popular during the six weeks trial and when it was over, WNEW made it a permanent fixture in their programming, eventually making Block a millionaire.

Mutual Radio had a tradition in those years to air a year end summary each December of what they termed "The Top News Stories of the Year." In 1935 the program was narrated by announcer Seymour Birkson. Although the Hauptmann trial was clearly the top story that year, Birkson bumped it down to number 2, right behind the Italian war in Ethiopia. Birkson summarizes the trial in a half dozen sentences. Copies of this program are in general circulation.

But it would be over a year before the execution, due to a series of long and complicated appeals, one of which went all the way to the Supreme Court. Hauptmann's widow raised thousands of dollars, mostly from German audiences in the East and the Midwest, pleading "Help me get a new trial for the father of my poor baby." Meanwhile the kidnapper was held at the state prison in Trenton, declining to confess in order to escape the death penalty, even after a personal visit by the governor. On the scheduled day of his execution in April 1936, he was asked what he wanted for his last meal. He declined, saying he was not hungry, but he did have a special request. When asked what it was, Hauptmann said he wanted to address the American people on the radio so he could convince them he was innocent. The request was denied.

After all appeals were exhausted, the execution was scheduled for April 3, 1936. Hundreds of press and radio reporters gathered outside the prison, not counting the 30 members of the media who were among the 55 official witnesses watching the room containing the electric chair.

All had been frisked for cameras and microphones since the warden was aware that five years earlier a reporter with a camera hidden on his leg, photographed murderess Ruth Snyder when she was electrocuted.

Everyone had been told the execution would take place at 8 PM so Gabriel Heatter, who gained some publicity with his bulletins on the trial in Flemington, took his place outside the prison with about five minutes of material in case the execution was a few minutes late. However, the few minutes stretched to 45 minutes and Heatter ad-libbed without a break for the entire time, a feat that would push him to the top of radio commentators and insure his successful career on the air. Hauptmann was executed at 8:45 and the news was flashed around the world.

The grieving widow was given no peace from the media. She was staying in a room at the Stacy-Trent Hotel in Trenton with a few friends and defense attorneys.

About five minutes after the execution, about a dozen camera men, newspaper and radio reporters burst into her room, taking photos and shouting questions at her. After about 15 minutes, her associates were able to push the

media out of the room, leaving the widow sobbing on her bed. But the case did not die with Bruno Hauptmann.

Doubts about his guilt were expressed by Eleanor Roosevelt, NJ Governor Harold Hoffman, and other wellknown figures who were apparently unfamiliar with the mountain of evidence of his guilt. Hauptmann's widow embarked on a crusade to prove his innocence, a quest that she followed until the day she died in 1994 at the age of 96. To further complicate the case, about a dozen men sought the spotlight by claiming to be the Lindbergh baby, now grown up. While they may have been seeking an inheritance from the Lindbergh millions, at least three of them actually sued NJ for the records to prove their preposterous claims and one of them made a living on the lecture circuit with his claim.

A wise philosopher once pointed out "Nothing is as strong in human beings as the craving to believe in something that is obviously wrong." So it was natural that Anna Hauptmann's pleas would find sympathetic ears.

The mutterings about Hauptmann's innocence, which simmered for years, became more prominent in 1976 with the book "Scapegoat" by Anthony Scaduto which claimed the baby was not even killed but was still alive in the person of Harold Olsen (one of the dozen impostors.)

Anna Hauptmann filed a series of multi-million dollar civil suits against NJ in the 1980s, and while she lost every case, the publicity encouraged the publication of more pro-Hauptmann books, including Noel Behn's 1994 book, a TV documentary, and an HBO movie, all claiming that Hauptmann was not the kidnapper, he was an innocent victim of a law enforcement plot.

All these phony theories of Hauptmann's innocence were crushed in the 1999 book, "The Ghosts of Hopewell" by Jim Fisher, a Lindbergh historian. I do not have time to summarize his compelling evidence but I urge you to read his book if you have slightest doubts about the case and the verdict.

Now over 75 years after the kidnapping, the case continues to fascinate many people. When the Union Hotel in Flemington, which had housed the jurors, several reporters, and many prominent spectators, was offered for sale three months ago, it made the front page of several Eastern papers. Today, across the street from the hotel, in the original court house, a live drama of the Trial of the Century is being performed every weekend in October. Actors portraying all the main characters of this drama are featured in this two and a half hour summary of the trial.

Harry Kazman wrote and directs this play and you can find details at [www.famoustrials.com](http://www.famoustrials.com). The pertinent sites of the ransom negotiation, the payoff, and the arrest of Hauptmann are all covered in a bus tour of the Bronx every year in May, usually the third Saturday. Richard Sloan, who created and manages this interesting tour, has been researching the case for years. You can email him for details at <[emma1231@optonline.net](mailto:emma1231@optonline.net)>