Inside the Capture of the Lindbergh Baby Kidnapper

A look back at the big break in the search for the Lindbergh baby's kidnapper that led to the arrest of Bruno Hauptmann.

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Shortly before 10 a.m. on September 15, 1934, a dark blue Dodge sedan pulled up to the gasoline pumps at a Warner-Quinlan service station on Lexington Avenue in upper Manhattan. Manager Walter Lyle walked over to the car and filled it with five gallons of ethyl as the man behind the wheel requested. "That's 98 cents," the attendant told the driver, who reached into his inside coat pocket and pulled a $10 bill from a white envelope.

Lyle grasped the bill with his greasy hands as his eyes noticed something unusual. "You don't see many of these any more," he told the driver. The motorist had given Lyle a gold certificate, which had been removed from circulation more than a year before when President Franklin D. Roosevelt took the country off the gold standard in response to the hoarding of precious metal during the depths of the Great Depression. "No, I have only about one hundred left," the driver told Lyle. The suspicious attendant recalled his company's warning that counterfeiters might attempt to reproduce gold certificates, so as the 1930 Dodge pulled away from the station, Lyle scribbled the vehicle's New York license plate number—4U13-41—on the bill's margin.

The CRIME of the CENTURY

by
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With the Eyes of the World Focussed upon the Trial of Bruno Richard Hauptmann, Indicted for the Kidnaping and Murder of Baby Charles Lindbergh, the Case Is Reviewed Here in Fullest Detail

Before 10 p. m., March 1st, 1932, Hopewell, New Jersey was a fly speck on the map. It had a total official population of 250. The police chief was a plumber who had had five official cases in his entire term of office. Its hotel had a normal business of approximately twelve transients a week, traveling salesmen and others whose appointments made it impossible for them to get on to Princeton or some other town where there were better accommodations. One train a day stopped at Hopewell. The only way to get to the place was by automobile or bus.

The inhabitants of the district were trappers, small time farmers, makers of illicit apple jack and a sprinkling of petty gangsters from Brooklyn, and the band of cities along the New Jersey border, who furnished an outlet for the product of these illicit stills.

At 10:06 p. m., the night of March 1st, 1932, a message flashed out over the five state police teletype alarms in Trenton, that turned Hopewell into the human interest capital of the world.

That message told of the kidnaping of Charles Augustus Lindbergh, Jr.

As this story is being read, Bruno Richard Hauptmann is facing trial at Flemington, New Jersey for the murder of that baby. In the two years and ten months from the time the world knew of the kidnaping of the Lindbergh baby, to the taking of the first word of testimony at Hauptmann's trial, there has been a man hunt and a coordination of detective efforts unequaled in the criminal records of any country in the civilized world. There is no adequate estimate of the amount of money spent by official and private sources in running down the literal hundreds of thousands of clews that have been checked.

These facts give some indication as to the extent of just what has been done. The Department of Justice at Washington has checked and compiled all reports that have been made to date on the case. This includes records of all suspects questioned, reports, in many cases summarized, in the words of agents who have checked and eliminated other and longer reports from various sources. This Department of Justice record is kept on thin onion skin paper, single spaced, and bound whe ever a volume reaches a given thickness. That comple record today makes a pile of bound volumes 13 ft., 6 high, the height of two tall men, one standing on t shoulders of the other.

Sketched into the complete records are stories of s cides, criminal arrests and convictions—all growi out of the Lindbergh investigation, but found in fi analysis to be in no way concerned with either the k naping of the baby, death of that baby, or the payme of the ransom for the baby's return. Such facts as ha been found to be germane are taken from that thirte foot pile and whipped into shape for Hauptmann's tr

These specific facts stand out from laborious perus of the mass of pre-trial material gathered from sources:

1. The prosecution is proceeding on the theory th the kidnaping and murder of the child, Charles Aug tus Lindbergh Jr., was a one man job, and that the p petrator of the kidnaping, murder, and the ransom coll tion was Bruno Richard Hauptmann.

2. The prosecution believes it has traced all b $80.00 of the $50,000.00 ransom fund directly in Hauptmann's hands. Of that amount $5,400.00 w spent from within two days of the time the ransom w paid, to the date of Hauptmann's arrest. Approximate $14,000.00 more was found in Hauptmann's garage aft his arrest. The remaining $28,000.00 coincides with t amount of money used by Hauptmann in his sto market operations, though the actual gold certificat lost in those operations have not as yet been found

Three days later, after the service station made its deposit, the unusual bill caught the eye of an attentive teller at the Harlem branch of the Corn Exchange Bank who checked its serial number and made a startling discovery. The bill was connected to the "crime of the century," part of a $70,000 ransom paid to the kidnapper of Charles Lindbergh Jr., the 20-month-old son of the American icon who completed the first solo, nonstop flight across the Atlantic Ocean in 1927. The bank immediately notified federal investigators, who traced the license plate number written on the bill to a German immigrant carpenter named Bruno Richard Hauptmann who lived in a quiet, leafy residential neighborhood in the Bronx.

The Investigation of Bruno Hauptmann

The next morning, police and federal detectives peered through their binoculars as Hauptmann left his apartment in a two-story house and backed his Dodge sedan out of the garage. Seeing that the license plate number was a match, the police pulled Hauptmann over and found a $20 gold certificate from the ransom money inside his billfold. Finally, after tens of thousands of man-hours and countless false leads, an arrest was made in the Lindbergh baby case.


Bruno Richard Hauptmann

The next day, authorities searched Hauptmann's garage and found $13,750 of the ransom money hidden inside a dirty oil can, stuffed in a package inside a wall and buried beneath the garage floor in an earthenware pickling jar. Hauptmann insisted he had no connection to the crime that had consumed America since the night of March 1, 1932, when the Lindbergh baby's nurse discovered that the boy had vanished from his crib in the second-floor bedroom of the aviator's estate in Hopewell, New Jersey.

The only clues left behind were the muddy footprints leading to an unlocked window, a homemade folding ladder left near the house and a ransom note on the windowsill. A month later at a late-night meeting inside a Bronx cemetery, an intermediary delivered the ransom—a wooden box filled with crisp gold certificates. The man who took the ransom passed along a note that the toddler could be found on a boat called Nelly off the Massachusetts coast. A frantic search, however, turned up no sign of the boy.

What Happened to the Lindbergh Baby?

Six weeks later, a truck driver discovered the toddler's decomposed body in a wooded area alongside a road less than five miles from the Lindberghs' house. An autopsy revealed a fractured skull, and authorities theorized that the kidnapper had accidentally and fatally dropped the boy while climbing down the ladder.

Hauptmann denied he was the perpetrator. He explained that he had been given the money by a deceased business partner and had been hoarding gold certificates based on his experience living in Germany after World War I. "I'm afraid of inflation," he told police. "I know what inflation was in Germany and I wasn't taking any chances." Neighbors had noticed that Hauptmann had suddenly stopped working in 1932. He told them he was "making money in Wall Street," although few were during the Great Depression.

Charles Lindbergh at the grand jury investigation of Bruno Hauptmann on October 2, 1934. (Credit: Planet News Archives/SSPL/Getty Images)

News of Hauptmann's arrest remained a secret for more than 24 hours before the news leaked out. Curious throngs descended upon Hauptmann's house. Hot dog vendors did a brisk sidewalk business as schoolboys picked through the detritus outside Hauptmann's garage for souvenirs and newsreel planes circled above to gather footage.

At a press conference announcing the arrest, a reporter asked New York City police commissioner John O'Ryan, "In your opinion, does this solve the Lindbergh kidnapping?" The commissioner paused and conferred with Division of Investigation director J. Edgar Hoover and New Jersey State Police head H. Norman Schwarzkopf Sr., father of the general who would lead American forces in Operation Desert Storm nearly six decades later, before responding, "Yes, it will."

Bruno Hauptmann's Conviction

Although Hauptmann was convicted in 1935 of the kidnapping and murder in a sensational trial and executed the following year, even eight decades later numerous people don't believe that the arrest was the final word on who was responsible for the crime. Prosecutors argued that Hauptmann, who had a criminal record in Germany and was on parole when he arrived in the United States as a stowaway, used his carpentry skills to build the ladder and showed the jury that the grain of the yellow pine on a ladder rail matched that of a board in his attic. Handwriting experts said the ransom note matched Hauptmann's scrawl.

Until his execution, Hauptmann maintained his innocence. Some believe him. Others believe he couldn't have acted alone and that he was part of a conspiracy that could have involved the underworld or, according to some, even Lindbergh himself.

Source: History.com