

The Investigation of the Lindbergh Kidnapping Case

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ABSTRACT: A review of the investigation of the Lindbergh kidnapping case is presented.

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When reviewing the facts of the investigation of the Lindbergh kidnapping one is struck by how little the techniques for the investigation of crime and human nature have changed in the last 50 years. We think of this as the age of great technological change but criminal investigation still involves painstaking checking of suspects and leads. The investigator is still dependent on shoe leather and a few good breaks to solve most crimes.

The Lindbergh case began on Tuesday, 1 March 1932 at about 9:30 in the evening, when the 20-month-old son of Charles Lindbergh was abducted from his crib in the nursery of the family estate near Hopewell, NJ. Hopewell is a small village in central New Jersey near Princeton. Baby Charles Jr. was put to bed about 7:30 by his nurse, Betty Gow. When the nurse went to the nursery about 10 o'clock, she found the crib empty and the window open. She went to the parents room thinking the child was with them. When the child was not there the search began. In the nursery a note was found asking for a \$50 000 ransom and signed with interlocking circles. When the child was not found the police were notified [1].

The local and state police arrived within the hour and the house and grounds were soon crowded with police and press. Other than the nursery there seems to have been little effort to safeguard the crime scene. At about midnight Trooper Frank Kelly, state police fingerprint expert, arrived and processed the nursery, the ransom note, and a homemade ladder found under the nursery window for fingerprints. He developed no prints of value. Photographs were taken of the scene and a footprint found below the nursery window.

At about dawn Colonel Norman Schwarzkopf, head of the New Jersey State Police and Captain John Lamb, Chief of Detectives for New Jersey State Police arrived and took charge of the investigation. They set up a temporary headquarters in the garage of the estate. By this time word of the kidnapping had spread around the world. President Hoover offered the assistance of federal law enforcement agencies.

On 4 March a second letter, postmarked the day before in Brooklyn NY, arrived with the same interlocking circles traced in blue, with the solid red oval in the center and the three square holes that appeared on the ransom note found in the nursery. The handwriting was the same. This note raised the amount of the ransom demand to \$70 000. Another letter ar-

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rived at the New York office of Colonel Breckinridge, Lindbergh's friend and attorney; it restated the demands of the 4 March letter. Lindbergh attempted to get the child back by newspaper appeals and even dealing with underworld figures. In the meantime the state police quietly investigated the household staff and people in the area. Letters were arriving by the thousands giving suggestions and possible suspects. They were also receiving reports from all over the country from people who thought they saw the missing child.

While this was going on an elderly educator from the Bronx, Dr. John Condon, wrote a letter to his local newspaper, *The Bronx Home News*. In it he offered to go anywhere at his own expense and to add \$1000 to the ransom in order to return the child to his loving mother. The newspaper published his letter in the 8 March edition. On 9 March, Dr. Condon returned home in the evening to find a letter addressed to him. The letter said that if he wanted to act as the go-between give the enclosed note to Mr. Lindbergh. After talking to some friends Condon called the Lindbergh estate and explained about the letter. He was asked to read the letter over the phone; as soon as he mentioned the interlocking circles at the bottom Lindbergh wanted to come to the Bronx to meet Condon. But Condon offered to go to Hopewell. He did and this began weeks of negotiations. Condon using the name "Jafsie" negotiated with the kidnapper who was using the name "John," who proved he had the baby by sending its sleeping suit to Condon. This negotiation involved two meetings and a series of letters.

It was agreed that the ransom would be paid. At the urging of Treasury Agents the serial numbers of the bills were recorded and 35 000 of the 50 000 dollar package were gold certificates. A second package of \$20 000 contained 400 \$50 gold certificates. Samples of the paper and string used to tie the money were held for possible future comparison.

On the night of 2 April 1932 Condon met "John" at St. Raymonds Cemetery in the Bronx with Colonel Lindbergh waiting in a nearby car. Condon convinced "John" to accept only \$50 000 instead of the \$70 000. For the ransom money he received a note that said that the baby would be found on a boat the "Nelly" near Elizabeth Island. For the next few days Condon and Lindbergh searched for the boat with no results. Jafsie put a note in the paper asking "John" what went wrong. He never answered.

One month later, the body of the baby was found beside the road from Hopewell to Princeton, not far from the Lindbergh home. It was identified by Colonel Lindbergh as his son.

For the remainder of 1932 the investigation of the Lindbergh case was conducted on two fronts. The New Jersey State Police concentrated on the household staff, other suspects, and the physical evidence including the ladder and notes. They, however, refused to share their information with other law enforcement agencies. The Division of Investigation of the Department of Justice and the New York City Police were forced to concentrate their efforts on the ransom money and suspects reported to them in letters. The ransom money was turning up in various locations especially in New York City. Both the Division of Investigation and New York City Police published and distributed booklets listing all the ransom money.

On 5 April 1933 shortly after taking office Franklin D. Roosevelt under the power granted him under the Banking Reform Act directed that all gold and gold certificates be exchanged for other forms of currency by 1 May. Lieutenant James Finn in charge of the New York City Police unit and special agents of the Division of Investigation hoped that this might trap "John," since about two thirds of the ransom money were gold certificates. They alerted the banks. On 2 May, they were notified that \$2980 in ransom money was turned in at the Federal Reserve Bank in New York. The teller did not remember the transaction and the exchange slip bore the name "J. J. Faulkner 537 W. 149th Street, New York." There was no one with that name at that address and after checking out this lead it appeared to go nowhere.

In the meantime, the New Jersey State Police working with Arthur Koehler of the Forest Service of the United States Department of Agriculture, were trying to trace the wood from

the ladder. Ultimately their search led to the National Lumber and Millwork Company on White Plains Rd. in the Bronx.

Finally in the fall of 1933 after seeing that all indications were that the kidnapper lived in the borough of the Bronx in New York City, Colonel Schwarzkopf and the New Jersey State Police joined forces with the Division of Investigation and the New York City Police and began to exchange information.

The pattern of the occasional report of ransom money continued through most of 1934. Each time the person receiving the money remembered the passer, the description was similar to that given by Condon of "John."

On 18 Sept. 1934, the Corn Exchange Bank notified the police that they had received another \$20.00 ransom gold certificate. The next day Lt. Finn, Special Agent Seery, and Corporal Horn went to the bank. On the side of the bill was written "4U 1341 NY." Lt. Finn was sure that it was an auto license number and started checking garages that had made deposits. At a garage at 127th St. and Lexington Ave. in upper Manhattan, the manager Walter Lyle remembered putting the numbers on the bill the previous Saturday. He described the passer. It fit the description of "John." Lt. Finn checked for the owner of the car. It was registered to "Richard Hauptmann, 1279 E. 222nd Street, Bronx."

Members of all three law enforcement agencies staked out the East 222nd St. house that night. They waited until the next morning when a man left the house and took a 1930 Dodge from the garage. It had license number "4U1341 NY." They followed and a few blocks away pulled the car over. They searched the driver and found another ransom bill. They arrested him. He was Richard Hauptmann. He was taken back to his house and questioned. The house was searched and after some time he was taken to the Greenwich Street Police Station in lower Manhattan. Hauptmann denied any knowledge of the kidnapping or the ransom money. He provided the police with samples of his handwriting.

Hauptmann's 1930 Dodge was examined by members of the New York City Police Laboratory. They found buttons, hair pins, paint stained wood, and oil stained paper. Stains in the car were identified as oil, grease, rust, and fruit stains. The report ended "No blood, substances or matter was found which would have any relative connection with the crime."

The next day police searching his garage discovered \$13 760 in \$10 and \$20 gold certificates from the ransom money and a small gun hidden behind some boards in the wall of the garage. Hauptmann then changed his story and said that it was left in his keeping by a friend Isidor Fisch who had gone to Germany and died.

After being identified by Dr. Condon, Hauptmann was arrested for extortion. He was indicted by the Bronx Grand Jury and extradited to New Jersey on 15 Oct. 1934.

The investigation of the Lindbergh case was to continue for the next few years as Hauptmann's story was checked out and other people confessed to the crime.

Hauptmann was tried and convicted in New Jersey for the murder of the Lindbergh baby and was executed 3 April 1936.

How much have investigative techniques changed in the last 50 years? What would we do different today if we were faced with another Lindbergh case?

In comparing the Lindbergh case with present techniques I found myself comparing it with the Son of Sam case. The two cases have many points of similarity especially in the amount of media coverage.

With the exception of getting the necessary search warrants and a speedier arraignment, there are very few areas where cases are handled differently today. We may use ninhydrin or lasers to process for fingerprints. We may use computers to keep track of suspects or leads. But by and large the investigation would be handled the same way. We still do not always safeguard the crime scene properly. Law enforcement agencies still do not want to share information and cooperate with one another. Investigation is still the time-consuming process of interviewing people and checking out thousands of leads. In famous cases the police will

get thousands of letters and telephone calls from people who think they know the name of the suspect. These must be checked out.

When the case is solved there will be the journalist or author with his conspiracy theory. You have it today in the Son of Sam case with the devil cult theory. You had it in the Lindbergh case. One of the most recent was in Anthony Scaduto's book, *Scapegoat* [2]. He claims that Hauptmann was not guilty and that all involved in the case conspired to frame him. He states that he came to this conclusion by his review of the New York City Police and Bronx District Attorney's Office files. I reviewed many of the same files in preparing this paper and found that Scaduto was selective in the files he referred to. For example he stated that Hauptmann when interviewed by the Police and District Attorney (D.A.) said that the reason he did not tell them about the money in the garage was because they were gold certificates. In the Bronx D.A. files [3] the question and answer taken 20 Sept. Hauptmann said the reason he did not tell the police was because there was a gun hidden with the money in the garage.

Mr. Scaduto makes much of a handwriting report in the Bronx D.A. files dated 1933 by Albert Hamilton, a chemical and microscopical investigator from Auburn, NY. He says that this report by a "recognized handwriting expert" identified "Manning Strawl" on 15 Oct. 1933 and this shows that the handwriting testimony of Albert S. Osborn and the other document examiners is wrong. Scaduto goes on to state that he checked out the name "Manning Strawl" in police and newspaper files and there was no record of anyone by that name. Mr. Scaduto would have done better if he checked out the name "Albert Hamilton." He would have found that Hamilton was famous as a patent medicine salesman, phony doctor, and ballistics expert in the Stielow case. In this case Hamilton identified Stielow's gun as the murder weapon because of microscopic abnormal scratches on the bullet and the gun. He did this without firing the gun. After Stielow's conviction Charles Waite and Captain Jones of New York City Police proved that it could not have been the gun. Stielow was pardoned [4]. This case is cited by many as the beginning of forensic firearms identification in the United States.

In summary, investigation has not changed that much; it still requires patience, determination, and a lot of leg work checking out suspects and leads. It also does not hurt to have a little luck, be it a parking ticket or a license number written on a bill by a gas station attendant.

References

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- [3] Bronx District Attorney Office Files, Hauptmann/Lindbergh Case, New York City Archives.
- [4] Thorwald, J., *The Century of the Detective*, Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., New York, 1964., pp. 421-428.

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