

Secrets of the Lone Eagle

By: [Mercerspace](#)
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It's a fine autumn day, as crisp as an apple. Dry leaves scuttle across the road as I drive out of Princeton. A half-hour later I am in the hills of the Sourland Mountains. A mist hangs over the fields; suddenly a rainstorm erupts. Then I see, in the middle of the road, a young woman standing in a pink bikini top and running shorts, her face turned up into the falling rain. I jerk the wheel just in time to avoid her.

I want to turn left at the end of this wooded road, but there is a sign sternly stating: State Property: Entry Forbidden To Unauthorized Persons. I take a deep breath and turn into the road, anyway. Moments later I pass a pickup truck parked sideways against a huge boulder. It's been there for a while, judging by its rust. Just as I wonder whether I am really at the right place, I see my destination.

It is Highfields, the house where Charles A. Lindbergh Jr. was kidnapped in 1932. At the time, his father, Charles Lindbergh, was the most famous man in the world. In 1927, in his flimsy single-engine monoplane, the Spirit of St. Louis, he made the first trans-Atlantic solo flight, flying by dead reckoning from Long Island to Le Bourget airfield in Paris.

It was the 1927 equivalent of landing on the moon by himself. The handsome young man with the boyish grin and modest manner became an immediate hero, was showered with honors, wrote a bestseller and traveled all over the world. In many ways, he became the first media celebrity in the modern world.

The French-style mansion looks exactly like the pictures from the time of the case. On one side I see the second-floor window where the kidnapper climbed up a rickety ladder to take the 22-month-old baby from his crib. The event held America in its grip for many months. "The biggest story since the resurrection of Jesus," it was called. The whole country went into mourning when the body of the little boy was found a few miles away, near the Mount Rose intersection on Carter Road.

A German-born carpenter named Bruno Richard Hauptmann was arrested as the murderer. After the sensational "Trial of the Century" in Flemington, Hauptmann was found guilty. He was executed in Trenton in 1936.

But there was always something that gnawed at people afterwards about the case. Conspiracy theories abounded. Why did Lindbergh move shortly before the kidnapping to this totally remote spot? Why did he orchestrate the investigation in meticulous detail and yet forbid the press or the police to speak about it? The circumstantial evidence pointed to Hauptmann — the wood from his attic was used to make the ladder, ransom money was found in his house — but it is also clear that he could not have acted alone. Hauptmann went to the electric chair maintaining his innocence.

After Hauptmann died, we found out that the Lone Eagle had many secrets. Seven illegitimate children surfaced by three mistresses in Germany and Switzerland, in addition to the six he had with his wife, Anne Morrow Lindbergh. He was a staunch supporter of Nazi ideology, especially eugenics. There were rumors that his first child was mentally deficient, and Lindbergh had plotted the kidnapping himself to get rid of the boy.

I am daydreaming about these questions, when suddenly a muscular man in a uniform appears at my window. His cap reads: U.S. Army Vet, Operation Desert Storm. He scowls at me and taps on the window.

"Can't you read?" he asks gruffly. "This is state property."

"Sorry, sir," I say. "I thought this was the Lindbergh museum."

"This is a prison," he replies. "It's a reformatory for girls."

At that moment the girl I had seen jogging on the road appears out of the mist, still soaking wet from the rain. Is she one of the prisoners? Is she a guard? Before I leave, I look again up to the famous baby room, apparently now part of a prison. This time without a rickety ladder. The secrets of Lindbergh remain well guarded.

The exhibition, "Charles and Anne Morrow Lindbergh: Couple of an Age," opens at Morven Museum & Garden on Nov. 13 and runs through October 2016. This will be the first large-scale exhibition to explore the complex and nuanced partnership between Lindbergh and his wife, an adventurer and celebrated author in her own right.

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