

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, January 9, 2017

Charles A. Lindbergh (1902-1974): Lindbergh was a true American hero. When I was three years old, he flew alone in a tiny single-engine airplane of his design non-stop from New York to Paris. The flight took 33½ hours on May 20-21, 1927. Many had tried it before, and several had lost their lives. He was the first to accomplish it and claim the Raymond Orteig Prize of \$25,000. This was headline news all over the world. When the first moving pictures of his Paris arrival reached Washington, two rival film companies rushed the movies to New York for a spectacular first showing in their respective theatres. One hired a plane and the other a special train on the Pennsylvania Railroad to run non-stop (except for an unplanned water stop), which beat the flight by several minutes. The 4-4-2 Atlantic-type steam locomotive that pulled this train, now known as the "Lindbergh" engine, is on display at the Pennsylvania Railroad Museum in Strasburg. It made the trip from Washington to Manhattan Transfer, outside New York City, in less than three hours at an average speed of over 82 m.p.h. I saw and photographed this locomotive during its last days of regular service in 1955, when it handled short shuttle trains from Ocean City to Tuckahoe Junction, New Jersey.

Because Lindbergh's plane was named the "Spirit of St. Louis," most thought that was his hometown. On the contrary, he was born in Detroit to parents who lived in Little Falls, Minnesota, a small town on the Mississippi River 100 miles north of Minneapolis. His mother was from Detroit and was back home with her family when young Charles was born. Her first job as a schoolteacher had been in Little Falls, where she met and married widower Charles Lindbergh. Most of young Charles's childhood was spent at Little Falls, where he often slept (by choice) on an open porch in bitter cold weather. As his parents' marriage deteriorated over the years, she spent more time in Detroit than in Minnesota. Her husband was a member of the U.S. Congress for 10 years and was running for governor at the time of his death in 1924.

Young Charles liked the idea of flying, rather than the study of engineering. He left college to do stunt flying at country fairs, a popular attraction in the years after World War I. Then he got a contract from a St. Louis firm to fly air mail. Achieving a stellar reputation as a competent flyer in all kinds of weather, he convinced St. Louis investors to build him a plane of his design, in which he would try to fly the Atlantic and claim the Orteig prize. His epic flight was epitomized many years later in a Hollywood film "The Spirit of St. Louis" starring Jimmy Stewart, a noted pilot in his own right, as the title character. After Lindbergh returned home from Paris and received the Congressional Medal of Honor from President Coolidge, he flew the "Spirit" to 47 U.S. States promoting aviation. In 1929, he married Anne Morrow, a recent graduate of Smith College, who was the daughter of U.S. Senator Dwight Morrow of New Jersey.

Anne Lindbergh was a journalist and author in her own right, who was enthralled with aviation, and her new husband soon taught her to fly. She wrote a best-selling book, "North to the Orient," describing their flight over Alaska and Siberia to Japan and China. Together they charted unknown over-water routes along both coasts of North and South America and across the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans for the fledgling Pan American Airways. The Lindberghs had six children and a long life together, ending with his death in 1974. Their happiness was marred, however, by the kidnapping of their first child, Charles A. Lindbergh Jr., from their home in Hunterdon County, near Flemington, New Jersey, in 1932. After being held for ransom, his body was found four months later. In 1935, Bruno Richard Hauptmann was convicted of the crime and executed the following year, but it was widely believed that others were involved as well. Kidnapping of the "Lindbergh baby" made international news through the early 1930s.

Prior to the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December, 1941, Lindbergh had been an outspoken "America Firster," speaking all over the country against America's involvement in the widening European conflict. When the U.S. entered the war, however, he was a sought-after advisor in many aspects of the aircraft industry, but many still held his earlier isolationist views against him. Following the war, he sought privacy and wanted to be "left alone." He and Anne bought a property on a beautiful but isolated part of Maui in Hawaii and spent most of their time in retirement there.

In 1971, a historic site known as the “Lindbergh Childhood Home” was dedicated in Little Falls, Minnesota. The hero was driving a well-used Volkswagen “bug” at that time, and he drove it from the East Coast to Little Falls for the dedication. After a short speech at the festivities, he said “good-by” and left, leaving the VW behind. It is still on display at the childhood home.

Anne Lindbergh maintained their home on Maui until her death in 2001. She owned a second home in Vermont, however, where she died at the age of 95. My father, who was never in an airplane, would often be told in his later years that he should fly somewhere for the experience not available elsewhere. His answer would always be: “If Lindbergh asked me to go up with him, I might do it.”