



BRUCE L. LARSON

***Barnstorming
with Lindbergh***

Charles A. Lindbergh established a milestone in aviation history when, on May 20–21, 1927, he flew the “Spirit of St. Louis” non-stop from New York to Paris, the first one-man crossing of the Atlantic. The flight was followed by an unprecedented popular response that made Lindbergh a public figure and Americans aware of the potential of commercial aviation. But only four years earlier Lindbergh had been a 21-year-old barnstorming pilot, and aviation was still considered a novelty rather than serious transportation.

In the summer of 1923 the young aviator made a barnstorming swing in southern and central Minnesota. During this trip he took both his father and mother aloft, worked with a new friend and barnstorming companion, Heston Benson, whom he taught how to fly, and suffered two minor crack-ups with his airplane at Savage and Glencoe. This article will examine representative stops on this Minnesota itinerary, the characteristics of “gypsy” flying, and the impact of both on Lindbergh and aviation.

Lindbergh had actually begun his aviation career about a year earlier, when he took his first flying lessons at Nebraska Aircraft Corporation in Lincoln and gained experience as expert mechanic, parachute jumper, and barnstorming participant as he joined plane owners Erol G. Bahl, H. J. “Shorty” Lynch, and Harlan A. “Bud” Gurney on flying jaunts over the Midwest and Great Plains. His 1923 venture began in April when he purchased a Curtiss JN4-D biplane, as the “Jenny” was formally known, for \$500 at Americus,

Georgia, and barnstormed west to Texas and then north to Nebraska and Minnesota. “I rolled my equipment and a few spare parts up in a blanket, lashed them in the front cockpit and took off for Minnesota.”¹

Lindbergh’s plane was among the most typical aircraft used by barnstorming pilots of the 1920s, who made a living by flying town to town and taking people up for rides. Usually powered, including Lindbergh’s plane, by the 90-horsepower OX-5 engine, the Jenny was not always praised for its flying capabilities. Gurney, Lindbergh’s close friend and later an experienced World War II and United Airlines pilot, opined in 1977 that next to the B-24, “the Jenny is the worst airplane ever put in the air,” and local barnstormer Cyril Stodolka of Royalton agreed. Despite problems of limited power and sensitive stability, the Jenny nonetheless was a mainstay of early barnstorming. It was cheaply priced (over 6,000 JN4-Ds were produced during World War I and nearly 4,000 JN4-Hs in the immediate post-war years as trainers), and its slowness aided the stunt flying of the period.²

As Lindbergh flew north he planned to join his father, Swedish-born former Congressman Charles A. Lindbergh, Sr., during his Farmer-Labor primary campaign for a U.S. Senate seat as part of the special election following the death of Knute Nelson. In mid-May the senior Lindbergh wrote his son that he should come as soon as his plane was “just as you want it” and noted that “I think you can make some spondulix at the same time.” Clearly, the plan was to combine barnstorming and campaigning.³

The first of two mishaps occurred as Lindbergh flew his Jenny from Lincoln, Nebraska, with a fuel stop at Forest City, Iowa, to Minnesota in early June. Intending to meet his father at Shakopee, the pilot was forced by bad weather to remain in the air waiting for a rainstorm to subside. However, while flying near Savage, a heavy shower forced Lindbergh to land quickly after three cylinders on his engine “cut out.” He ended up in a swamp east of town, and after rolling about 20 feet, the Jenny “nosed over” with the top wing and radiator touching the ground and Lindbergh hanging upside down by his safety belt. Although later accounts stated that local Savage youths got him out of the plane, Lindbergh wrote that he had released the safety belt.⁴

According to Lindbergh it was a minor accident, as the propeller was badly cracked and the spreader bar weakened, but otherwise the plane, cushioned by the soft mud, was fine. It did draw some attention,

¹Charles A. Lindbergh, “We” (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1927), 43. See also Charles A. Lindbergh, *Boyhood on the Upper Mississippi: A Reminiscent Letter* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society [MHS], 1972), 46. Research for this article, revised from a paper given at the Northern Great Plains History Conference in 1990, was funded in part by a grant from MHS.

²Harlan A. Gurney to Bruce L. Larson, Feb. 5, 1977; interview with Cyril Stodolka, July 15, 1983; unless otherwise noted, notes or transcripts of all interviews cited in this article are either in the possession of MHS or the author. See also *The Curtiss Standard JN4-D Military Tractor Handbook* (Buffalo: Curtiss Aeroplane and Motor Corporation, 1918); Bruce L. Larson, “History Professor/Author Provides Lindbergh Overview,” *Charles A. Lindbergh Fund Newsletter* (Fall, 1989), 2; Paul O’Neil, *Barnstormers & Speed Kings* (Alexandria, Va.: Time-Life Books, 1981), 26–27; “Curtiss JN4-D (Jenny)” pamphlet, National Air and Space Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 1967.

³Charles A. Lindbergh, Sr., to Charles A. Lindbergh, Jr., [May 17, 1923], Charles A. Lindbergh, Sr., and Family Papers, MHS; Bruce L. Larson, *Lindbergh of Minnesota: A Political Biography* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), 271–273.

⁴Lindbergh, “We,” 71–76; *Savage Review*, Aug., 1989; *Shakopee Argus-Tribune*, Sept. 1, 1927, p. 1.

Bruce L. Larson, professor of history at Mankato State University, has written and spoken widely about Lindbergh and his father. He is the author of Lindbergh of Minnesota: A Political Biography (1973).



Pilot Lindbergh (back to camera), examining the damage to the Jenny near Glencoe, 1923

however, and there was even a rumor that the pilot was dead. In any case, local residents arriving at the site helped pull the plane to hard sod, Lindbergh wired for a new propeller, and two days later he was flying again.⁵

At this point he made contact with his father's political campaign, and his flight logs reveal an itinerary from the swamp at Savage—to Marshall, Redwood Falls, Olivia, Buffalo Lake, and Glencoe. While there is some uncertainty about the exact location, the senior Lindbergh's first flight with his son likely occurred at Glencoe. Indeed, wrote Lindbergh in 1967: "When I took my father up at Glencoe on his first flight in an airplane, we planned on throwing some campaign literature out over town." C. A. was in the front cockpit, carrying a bundle of "hundreds of sheets" of handbills, and was to throw them out when Charles signalled by "rocking" the plane. When he did, however, his father tossed the whole bundle at once, and it struck the stabilizer with a sharp thud. As Lindbergh later observed, the distribution of literature "wasn't very broad," and "my father's face was quite serious when he looked back at me after the thud."⁶

But the airplane campaign strategy ended on June 8, when, in an attempted take-off on the G. E. Miley farm southwest of Glencoe, the plane "swerved into a

ditch," and both the propeller and landing gear were broken. Local coverage of the incident varied as to whether it occurred during landing or take-off. Moreover, the *Glencoe Enterprise* noted that Congressman Lindbergh was "somewhat shaken up," but that neither he nor his pilot son was injured. There was also some evidence that someone may have tampered with the plane's rudder, causing the accident. Congressman Lindbergh's daughter Eva worried about this report, but the elder Lindbergh assured her that the plane was

⁵Lindbergh, "We," 73. The cracked propeller is currently in the possession of the MHS and on display in Little Falls. Lindbergh later recognized the community help at Savage when he flew over the town during his nationwide tour in 1927 after the Paris flight. See Bruce L. Larson, "Lindbergh's Return to Minnesota, 1927," *Minnesota History* 42 (Winter, 1970): 145.

⁶Charles A. Lindbergh flight logs, Charles A. Lindbergh Collection, Missouri Historical Society (MoHS), St. Louis; interview with Lindbergh and Eva Lindbergh Christie, Red Lake Falls, April 16, 1966, and with Lindbergh, Little Falls, April 17, 1966, Lindbergh Papers, MHS; Lindbergh to Bruce L. Larson, April 7, 1967 (a 32-page commentary on the 1966 interview with Lindbergh). See also Lindbergh, "We," 76; Larson, *Lindbergh of Minnesota*, 273; and Charles A. Lindbergh, *The Spirit of St. Louis* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), 448.

in no shape to fly; it had been “munkied with . . . I figure it was not a plot, but just some boys.” Meanwhile C. A. left for Litchfield by automobile to resume his campaign, while Charles stayed with the plane. After this second mishap repairs took three weeks, and the young flyer traveled by railroad from Glencoe to Minneapolis and back for parts.⁷

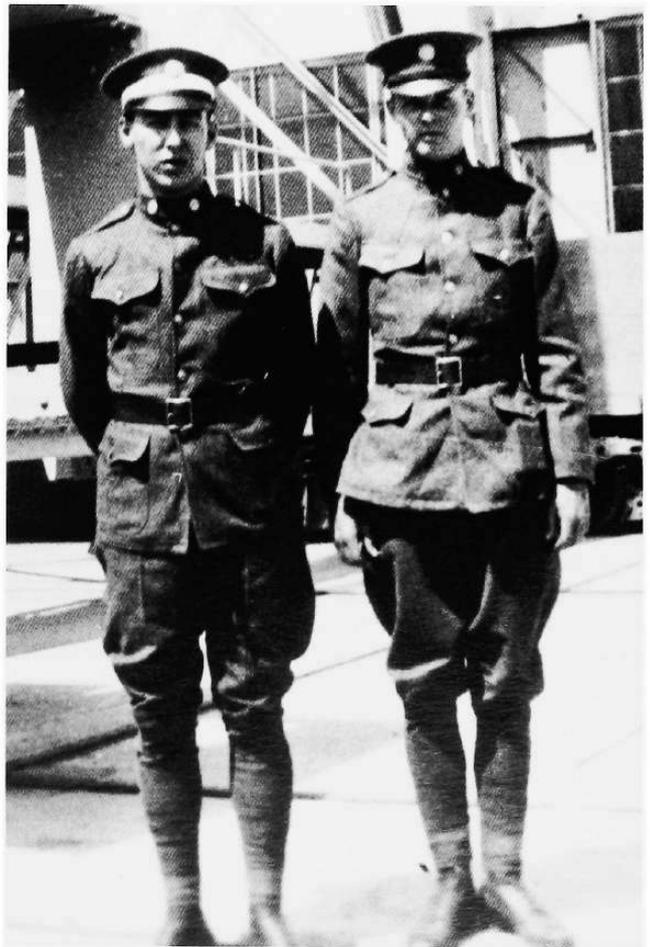
IT WAS during this delay at Glencoe that Lindbergh met a local young man, Heston Benson, and offered him a job on the barnstorming tour. They became acquainted when Lindbergh took some parts from his plane to the garage which Benson’s father operated, and soon Benson was spending most of his time with Lindbergh at the aircraft. After the landing gear was fixed, according to Benson, “Lindbergh propositioned me to go with him and help him barnstorming. In return for that he’d teach me to fly.” Although his father was opposed to the idea—he had already been absent from the garage too often—Benson thought it was an excellent suggestion, and as he put it: “I took a set of underwear and an extra shirt and I told Lindbergh that I had my dad’s blessing and I could go although that was not the truth. We took off.” Thus, although Lindbergh normally barnstormed alone in his Jenny, Benson joined him for four to six weeks in 1923 as they made numerous stops (probably 86 for Benson, according to Lindbergh’s flight logs) in such towns as Hutchinson, Arlington, Shakopee, Zimmerman, Little Falls, Glenwood, Willmar, Robbinsdale, Madison Lake, Faribault, and Ellsworth, Wisconsin.⁸

In an informative 1984 interview, Benson described the 1923 trip with Lindbergh and provided insight into such areas as flying conditions, equipment and tools, day-to-day operations, and Lindbergh’s characteristics. Aviation and flying conditions were “primitive” at the time, he said. There were few instruments in the cockpit—an altimeter, a compass, and a tachometer. Therefore the best “guidelines” to know your direction, according to Benson and another Lindbergh barnstorming buddy, Leon A. Klink, were railroads and rivers. Average speed of the Jenny did not vary

much between landing speed (60 mph) and air speed (70 mph), with the engine running at about 1,475 rpm. Moreover, the Jenny had no brakes, although it was equipped with a drag, a spring connected to the back of the fuselage that dragged on the ground.⁹

One particular problem with the plane’s OX-5 engine, equipped with a radiator in the days before air-cooled engines and ethylene glycol antifreeze, was its tendency to overheat. Flyers like Lindbergh used “just water,” which had to be replenished quite often. Most pilots, including Lindbergh, stripped away the leather straps on top of the engine for more air, but even then the water often boiled over in the air, and spray came back over the windshield. According to Benson, one had about a half hour or less to land after overheating, “unless we’d lost too much water, or got it cooking too much, and then we’d have to get down.” In addition, the short exhaust pipes could also be a problem, as fumes and oil spat back at the pilot’s face and wind-

Charles Lindbergh (right) and fellow barnstormer Leon Klink in their Army Air Service uniforms



⁷Lindbergh and Christie interview, 1966; Lindbergh to Larson, April 7, 1967; *Litchfield Saturday Review*, June 16, 1923, p. 1; *McLeod County Republic* (Glencoe), June 15, 1923, p. 1; *Glencoe Enterprise*, June 14, 1923, p. 1; Charles A. Lindbergh, Sr., to Eva Lindbergh, July 3, 1923, Lindbergh Papers, MHS; Lindbergh flight logs, Lindbergh Collection, MoHS.

⁸Interview with Heston Benson, Glencoe, July 12, 1984; Lindbergh, “We,” 77; Lindbergh flight logs, MoHS.

⁹Benson interview; interview with Leon Klink, Le May, Missouri, Aug., 1976; *JN4-D Handbook*, 9. The *Handbook* lists maximum and minimum horizontal flight speeds at 75 mph and 45 mph.



Heston Benson, posed with the Jenny, 1923

shield, and occasionally ignited the dope in the cloth covering of the Jenny.¹⁰

Special equipment, clothing, and tools used by Lindbergh and Benson were limited. The only flying gear they wore were puttees, helmets, and goggles. Tools carried in the plane were “meager,” said Benson, a few special wrenches for the propeller (spanner type) and the engine, and always a can of dope and some linen or cotton for wing repair. The OX-5 used Troparctic #30 weight oil and regular gasoline, but no extra cans were carried in the plane, so at most stops it was necessary to take on 10 to 15 gallons of gas by truck or can. The OX-5, with a 21-gallon tank, burned about nine gallons per hour, therefore giving Lindbergh a little over two hours flying time.¹¹

On a day-to-day basis, barnstormers were early risers, with morning flights to the next town where passenger rides were scheduled for afternoons and evenings. “I’d fly between places,” stated Benson, as Lindbergh kept his promise about flying lessons. But Benson’s main duties on the 1923 stint were to help advertise the rides by wing-walking, to see that “no persons got in the line of flight” on the ground, and generally to help on fueling and maintaining the air-

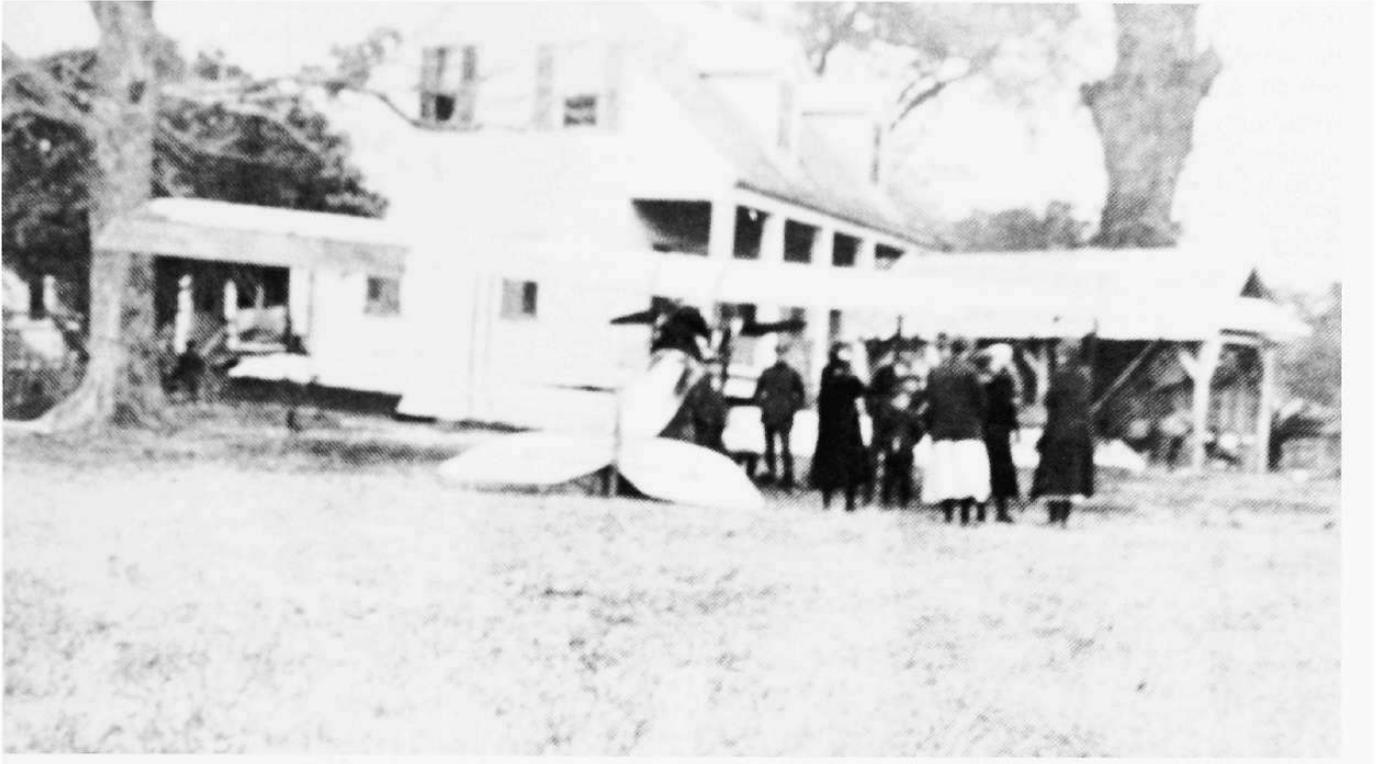
craft. On a typical day he would wing-walk or sit on the wing (at about 70 mph) and talk to anyone on the ground. People below could easily hear him, and it was his job to “try to induce them to take a ride.” Lindbergh was firm on the price—“fifteen minutes for five dollars,” and he handled the money. On wing-walking, “the difficult part is not after you get on the wing, but to get out of the cockpit because you are in the slipstream of the prop. . . . You would not wear shoes or stockings, you do it in your bare feet because you had better control.”¹²

Like other barnstormers, Lindbergh usually tried to meet expenses, in part, by trading plane rides for room and board. This was a common practice both for commercial lodging and in private homes, and Benson remembered that many times they stayed at hotels. There were other nights, however, that “we slept right out under the wing of the plane,” and often with no more bedroll than the cushion from the cockpit. Overall, Lindbergh later wrote, “Some weeks I barely made

¹⁰Benson interview; O’Neil, *Barnstormers*, 26.

¹¹Benson interview; *JN4-D Handbook*, 9.

¹²Benson interview.



The Jenny, parked near a Minnesota farmhouse where Lindbergh probably spent the night

expenses, and on others I carried passengers all week long at five dollars each.”¹³

In Benson’s judgment, Lindbergh was a “cautious” pilot who always flew straight and level. He was “not one to show off or be an exhibitionist,” and he was a “fair weather” pilot who would not take unnecessary chances, but rather tie down in fog or bad weather. Lindbergh was a good mechanic, too, he stressed, observing that he and Lindbergh would “everlastingly be repairing the wings.” On the personal side, Benson saw Lindbergh as straitlaced, for he “neither smoked, chewed, or drank,” but he did enjoy practical jokes.¹⁴

¹³Benson interview; *Lake Region Times* (Madison Lake), Jan. 7, 1982, p. 8; Lindbergh, “We,” 77.

¹⁴Benson interview. See also Charles A. Lindbergh to Heston Benson, Oct. 12, 1924, MHS. It was a rarity that Lindbergh signed his letter “Carl,” as Benson apparently called him, rather than Charles or “Slim.”

¹⁵Lindbergh flight logs, MoHS; Lindbergh interview, 1966; Benson interview; Lindbergh, Sr., to Eva, July 19, 1923, MHS; *Little Falls Daily Transcript*, July 16, 1923, p. 3. See also Lindbergh, *Boyhood*, 46; Lindbergh, *Spirit of St. Louis*, 448; Bruce L. Larson, “Historic Houses: Charles Lindbergh An American Childhood at Little Falls,” *Architectural Digest*, June, 1989, p. 52; Lindbergh flight logs, MoHS; Lindbergh, “We,” 77.

THE 1923 Minnesota itinerary included Lindbergh’s flights with his father and mother, barnstorming at Biscay, Plato, and Hamburg, and a week to ten days of activity and repairs in the Madison Lake area. One flight with his father probably occurred in July near the home farm at Little Falls, where Lindbergh landed the Jenny in a meadow across Pike Creek. Benson recalled that he and Lindbergh slept “outside the house itself,” likely on Lindbergh’s favorite porch facing the Mississippi River. C. A., Sr., who had earlier expressed some doubts about the life-span of pilots, was elated with this flight. He wrote his daughter Eva: “I wanted to see the town and the farm from the sky, and it was wonderful.” In August, Lindbergh took his mother, Evangeline Land Lindbergh, on her first flight at Janesville, and thereafter barnstormed with her for ten days in southern Minnesota and northern Iowa. She “enjoyed flying from the first,” Lindbergh later wrote, and Benson recalled meeting her at Janesville.¹⁵

Grace Rogers Underwood, a paying passenger in 1923, provides further detail about barnstorming with Lindbergh at Biscay, a tiny town near Glencoe. The young pilot landed in an alfalfa field across from her home, and she ran to get five dollars and rode with him

that evening. Many others did not go up because they thought the plane was unsafe, but "I went because I was not scared one bit." The enthusiastic Underwood tried to promote rides by word of mouth, but she was unable even to convince her two daughters to go up. "The ride was beautiful," she said of her flight, with fields "marked off" and automobiles and railroad tracks that looked "so tiny." Her hair blew in the wind, Underwood remembered, and her hand "got numb" as she held it back. The next morning Lindbergh flew low over Biscay, and Benson was out on the wing. "They went right over the barn," and her husband could practically touch them. Lindbergh and Benson flew on to Glencoe, where she noted that Lindbergh generally parked the plane.¹⁶

Although not a passenger, another observer, Dora Graupmann, recalled seeing Lindbergh and the plane at Plato. There was a lot of excitement and she remembered that "some of the girls were after him" and drove to Hamburg to see him again. In any case, Lindbergh's flight logs note that there were two stops at Hamburg, and that he took a trip by Overland car from Hamburg to Glencoe and back.¹⁷

The somewhat extended stay at Madison Lake in August was prompted by mechanical problems and Lindbergh's awareness that a good mechanic, Glen Allyn, had a shop there. According to Benson, they had had three forced landings, and ultimately "we found the primary cause to be rubber particles in the bottom of the gas tank." Allyn, who was also the Durant and Star automobile dealer in town during the 1920s, later wrote that he "rebuilt" the engine for Lindbergh. Thus Lindbergh and Benson stayed for several days at the old City Hotel run by the Robert Madigans. One false rumor, which surfaced later regarding the hotel, claimed that Lindbergh's greasy hand print on a doorknob was never removed. Bonnie Allyn Kincaid, daughter of Glen Allyn, remembered with pleasure this special time at Madison Lake; she was one of those who received a ride in the Jenny, as she and a friend squeezed into the front cockpit. She, too, said that her father overhauled the plane's engine, and, that as a 12-year-old girl she was excited when Lindbergh and his pal joined her family at dinner, where Lindbergh rarely looked up from his plate. Interestingly, Kincaid also claimed that her father advised Lindbergh to get further flight training with the U.S. Army, and "cut out this damn nonsense [barnstorming]." Indeed Lindbergh formally inquired about Army flight training about the same time.¹⁸

Lindbergh's landing site at Madison Lake was the Lewis Fitcher wheat field on the northwestern edge of town. The plane drew practically everyone in town, and today in a small park near the open field a plaque commemorates the flyer's presence there in 1923. An-



Evangeline Lindbergh at Janesville

other person who remembers the events there is Agnes Borneke, who paid five dollars for a 15-minute ride. There were no seat belts, she said, and she got down on the floor of the cockpit as Lindbergh banked the plane for a better view of the town and the lake. It turned out to be the only airplane ride of her life. The Bornekes still have the ten-dollar check made out to "C. A. Lindbergh" and endorsed for two rides on August 18, 1923. The *Madison Lake Times* simply reported: "A couple of aviators arrived in a large plane Monday and have been taking up passengers at \$5 per." But the editor apparently was not impressed, for he was not one of those who had gone up for a "birdseye look" at the town. He

¹⁶Interview with Grace Rogers Underwood, Hutchinson, July 13, 1984; *Hutchinson Leader*, Sept. 12, 1969, p. 1, 12; Lindbergh flight logs, MoHS.

¹⁷Interview with Dora Von Berge Graupmann, Plato, July 16, 1989; Lindbergh flight logs, MoHS.

¹⁸Benson interview; Bonnie Allyn Kincaid to Bruce L. Larson, Dec. 7, 1982; statement by Glen Allyn in the files of the Madison Lake Historical Society, Madison Lake (the Lindbergh entry is incorrectly dated 1924); *Free Press* (Mankato), May 20, 1977, p. 1; May 26, 1987, p. 4; *Lake Region Times*, Jan. 7, 1982, p. 8; Charles A. Lindbergh, *Autobiography of Values* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), 9-10.

felt “safer with his feet on the ground” and thought that “five bucks is a lot of money.”¹⁹

Lindbergh continued to barnstorm with his Jenny in southeastern Minnesota and western Wisconsin, interrupted by a car and train trip home to Little Falls and Melrose. In late September he headed from Minnesota through Wisconsin and Illinois to reach the national air races at St. Louis in early October, thus ending the barnstorming tour in Minnesota. He is listed in the 1924 *Aircraft Yearbook* as a civilian pilot who flew to the St. Louis races in a “JN4,” traveling some 1,200 miles from his starting point at Minneapolis and carrying one passenger (probably Bud Gurney). After the races, in which Gurney broke his arm in a parachute jump from the Jenny, Lindbergh instructed students in Illinois. In the late fall of 1923 he flew to Oelwein, Iowa, and there Lindbergh sold the Jenny to one of Gurney’s friends.²⁰

WHAT IMPACT did barnstorming have on Lindbergh and on aviation history? In the short run, he managed to make a marginal living, and he enormously enjoyed the freedom of movement that barnstorming allowed. He later spoke fondly about the “old flying days”; indeed, the individualism and freedom of this earlier period suited his temperament, even in later life. More significant, perhaps, the Minnesota tour coincided with a crucial turning point in Lindbergh’s early aviation career: the decision to pursue further formal instruction with the U.S. Army Air Service. He gained valuable flying experience in the unpredictable Jenny. “Its OX-5 engine was underpowered for the average farm pasture I landed on,” he later revealed, “but that fact developed in me piloting skills I could not have otherwise achieved.” The Jenny’s lack of power triggered his choice of Army training. He was attracted by the JN4-Hs (with Hispano-Suiza engines and twice as much power) and the 400-horsepower Liberty engines.

Glen Allyn may have influenced his decision, but Lindbergh also noted that “On a barnstorming expedition in southern Minnesota, I learned that the Army was accepting flying cadets.” A carload of young men, one of whom was a graduate of the Army Air Service, drove up and explained how to write the War Department for information and enrollment forms. That same night Lindbergh sent a letter that launched his career in more formal aviation training.²¹

Lindbergh’s Minnesota tour exemplifies a transitional period in American aviation history, a time of almost unstructured activity before the beginnings of regulations and the dawn of commercial aviation in the last half of the 1920s. As Heston Benson clarified, there were no laws or licenses in 1923: “You were required no qualifications to carry passengers or to fly an airplane.” Minnesota aviation was in its infancy. Only two “fixed operators”—Marvin Northrup and the Aero Club of Minneapolis—are listed in *Aircraft Yearbook* statistics for 1923. The Aeronautical Chamber of Commerce of America, which published the *Yearbook*, worried about American aviation safety. Statistics showed that 470 accidents had occurred between 1921 and 1923, with 221 deaths. Most accidents were caused by “gypsy” flyers; although the chamber recognized these flyers as “pioneers” in aviation, it argued that the high accident rates were due to “lack of federal control.”²²

Lindbergh’s tour was also an early example of the use of an airplane in a Minnesota political campaign. This was a novel and bold idea in 1923, regardless of the setbacks in the anticipated use of the Jenny in his father’s senatorial race and the fact that Nonpartisan League politician Arthur Townley, for one, had earlier used an airplane.

¹⁹Interview with Ted Roemer, Madison Lake, May 20, 1989; *Lake Region Times*, Jan. 7, 1982, p. 8, Aug. 19, 1987, p. 5; interview with Agnes Borneke, Madison Lake, June 14, 1983; *Free Press*, Dec. 3, 1982, p. 15; *Madison Lake Times*, Aug. 9, 1923, p. 5. The original Lindbergh check, made out on the Madison Lake People’s Bank, is in the possession of Donald Borneke, Eagle Lake.

²⁰Lindbergh flight logs; Lindbergh, “We,” 78–83; *Aircraft Yearbook*, 1924 (New York: Aeronautical Chamber of Commerce of America, Inc., 1924), 10, 165.

²¹Interview with Land Lindbergh, Greenough, Montana, Aug. 14, 1981; interview with Charles A. Lindbergh, St. Paul, Oct. 1, 1973; Lindbergh, *Autobiography of Values*, 9–10; Lindbergh, “We,” 78–79.

²²Here and below, see Benson interview; *Aircraft Yearbook*, 1924, 10, 18–19, 26–27, 103–104; Larson, *Lindbergh of Minnesota*, 274.

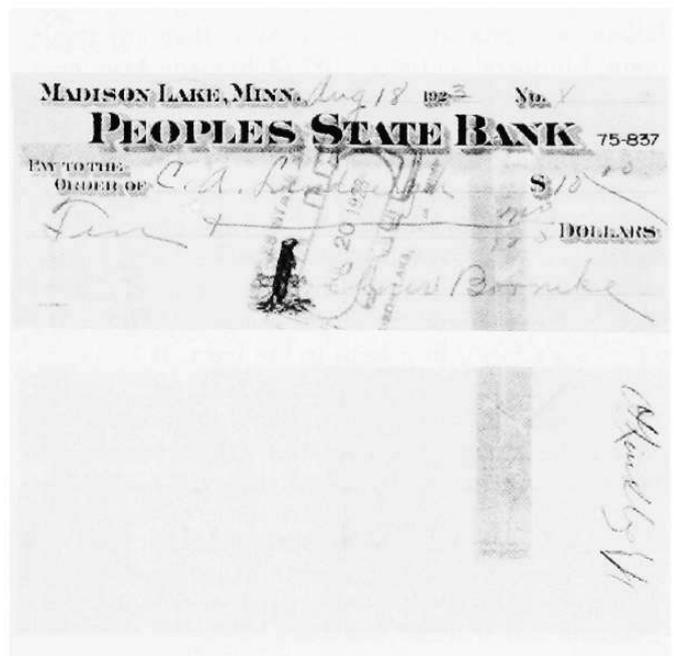




Exhibit at the Northwestern National bank, Minneapolis, 1982

In the “Jazz Age,” with its sensational journalism and economic prosperity, barnstormers helped to publicize aviation and bring about regulation and control. As writer Paul O’Neil noted, “before their show had run its course, they had introduced a hesitant public to the thrill of flight.” Using war-surplus planes and engines, they were a key part in the evolution of American aviation. By the mid-1920s the Kelly bill let air mail contracts, and the 1926 Air Commerce Act promoted civil aviation, as it set up the aeronautics branch in the U.S. Department of Commerce; its duties included the licensing of planes and pilots, establishing safety regulations, and general promotion. More than any single event, Lindbergh’s historic 1927 flight made Americans aware of the potential of commercial aviation, and there followed a boom in aviation activity during 1928 and 1929.²³

The story of Lindbergh’s 1923 barnstorming activity survives in part because his Jenny has been restored and is on display at the Cradle of Aviation Museum in Long Island, New York. Thanks to the efforts of George Dade and Frank Strnad, the plane was located in 1973 on an Iowa farm, in a heap in the barn. It had been purchased for parts after a crash in 1927. In the fall of 1973 Lindbergh visited Long Island, where he confirmed that it was his biplane, corroborated by the initials CAL carved on the rib of the right wing. The

Long Island Early Flyers group successfully completed the restoration job by 1976. A Twin Cities promotional effort, involving, among others, the Charles A. Lindbergh Fund, the Northwestern National Bank of Minneapolis, and the Minnesota Historical Society, brought the restored Jenny to Minnesota in 1982. It survived a fire in the Northwestern bank, where it was on display, and was later placed at the Minneapolis-St. Paul airport main terminal (renamed the Charles A. Lindbergh terminal during 1985 ceremonies). In 1983 the Jenny was returned to Long Island, where it remains on view.²⁴

²³O’Neil, *Barnstormers*, 6; Roger E. Bilstein, *Flight in America, 1900-1983: From the Wrights to the Astronauts* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 37, 51; Gerald N. Sandvick, “Enterprise in the Skies: The Early Years of Air Commerce in Minnesota,” *Minnesota History* 50 (Fall, 1986): 86-98. Larson, “Lindbergh’s Return,” 152.

²⁴George Vecsey and George Dade, *Getting Off the Ground: The Pioneers of Aviation Speak for Themselves* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1979), 282-288; author’s conversation with Charles A. Lindbergh en route from St. Paul to Little Falls and Brainerd, Sept. 29, 1973; Roger Skophammer, “Lindbergh’s Jenny,” *Minneapolis Tribune*, Nov. 14, 1982, Picture sec., p. 12-14, 17-18.

The photograph on p. 235 is from the Lindbergh Interpretive Center, Little Falls; the illustration on p. 237 is courtesy of the author; all others are in the MHS collections.



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).