

Ms Johnson was  
Superintendent of the N J State  
Home for Girls  
from 1930 to 1948

Submitted by Lindbergh Case researcher, Susan Campbell

THE LINDBERGH CASE

Last July, the newspapers announced the death of former Governor Harold G. Hoffman, of New Jersey. Two of the most significant things in Gov. Hoffman's career were that he embezzled large sums of public money over a period of years before death and the law caught up with him and that he granted a reprieve to Bruno Richard Hauptmann awaiting execution in the New Jersey State Prison for the kidnapping of Charles A. Lindbergh, Jr. Gov. Hoffman gave as his reason for granting this reprieve his belief that Hauptmann had accomplices, and that with his death all hope of finding them and getting the whole story of the kidnapping would be gone. But the hue and cry against Gov. Hoffman for granting this reprieve were so great (the police, the press, and the public as a whole demanded a victim) that the reprieve was short, and Hauptmann went to his execution with whatever secrets he may have had buried in his heart. But I have often wondered if Gov. Hoffman may not have been as right in this reprieve as

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he was wrong in his embezzlement. Some others felt the same; among them, Hon. W.J. Ellis, Commissioner of Institutions and Agencies for the State of New Jersey, who told me that after reading a transcription of all the evidence in the case, he approved of Gov. Hoffman's action.

"The Spirit of St. Louis" by Colonel - now General - Lindbergh, a best-seller which brought the author the Pulitzer Prize for autobiography and which is on our club list, has again brought General Lindbergh to public attention. This, and the fact that while living in New Jersey, I had several unusual experiences in connection with this celebrated case, lead me to indulge in some personal reminiscences about it. ✈

Through the kindness of the Attorney General of New Jersey, I was able to attend the trial, though only for one day. But I was there while Hauptmann was testifying and stood within a few feet of him. The papers spoke of his struggling with language difficulties, but to me he seemed the typical meticulous German, thinking carefully before answering questions. I was one of the

few people to attend the trial other than those connected with the case, representatives of the press, and the like, since attendance was limited because the court room in the 200-years-old courthouse at Flemington, New Jersey, accommodated so few.

The Negro man, William Allen, who, with a truck driver named Orville Wilson, found the remains of the baby, afterwards worked for several years for the institution of which I was Superintendent. Before a small group of people in my home, several years after the case was all over and done with, the Director of Parole for New Jersey, Mr. John Colt, made some rather startling statements regarding certain aspects of the Lindbergh case. There was no suggestion that they be considered confidential. These were my unusual experiences in connection with the case to which I referred.

Not long before the kidnaping of Charles A. Lindbergh, Jr., his parents had built a home in the Sourland Mountains of New Jersey about four miles

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from the little town of Hopewell. It would be hard to imagine a more desolate and isolated spot in which to establish a home and bring up a family. After you left the main highway leading out of Hopewell, the only approach for about three miles was over a narrow dirt road - really a lane - which in bad weather (and for months this section is covered with snow) was practically impassable. The nearest neighbors were an old couple living in a shack about half a mile away. It had been said that the reason Gen. Lindbergh chose the location he did for his home was because he wished to have a private landing-field. But there was no landing-field or any preparation for one. When Gen. and Mrs. Lindbergh left New Jersey after the trial was over, they gave the place to the State to be used as some kind of charitable institution, and though the State did much to improve the roads and the surrounding territory, no use had been made of the place when I left New Jersey in 1949 - on account of its inaccessibility, I understand. It was from this house that the 20-months old baby boy was

kidnapped on the evening of March 1, 1931, some time between seven and ten o'clock.

Occupants of the Lindbergh home at the time, in addition to General and Mrs. Lindbergh, were the English butler and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Oliver Wheatley, and Betty Gow, the child's Scottish nurse. Soon after the end of the trial the Wheatleys went back to England, where Mr. Wheatley died suddenly. What became of his wife, I don't know. Betty Gow went back to her native Scotland, and according to newspaper reports, disappeared. Violet Sharpe, a maid in the home of Senator and Mrs. Morrow, the parents of Mrs. Lindbergh, committed suicide after having been questioned by the police. If these people carried secrets, as Hauptmann may have done, they, too, are buried.

I don't intend to discuss the details of this dastardly crime which shocked the civilized world, but to talk about some of the puzzling aspects of the case, as they came to my personal attention.

The State proved that the child was taken out of the nursery window, which was directly above one in the library before which Gen. Lindbergh sat at his desk a large part of the evening. The State based its case on the fact that earth found on the nursery floor was of the same sort as that directly under the window. In the nearby woods a ladder was found which experts in the composition of wood proved to be made from lumber which was the same as that in Hauptmann's attic, where some planks were missing. Hauptmann was an expert carpenter.

On the other hand, the nursery window through which the child was thought to have been taken was found closed, with several toys arranged on the window-sill. There were no finger-prints on the window, although there were footprints on the ground underneath it. Several times I stood before that nursery window and wondered how it could have happened. How did Hauptmann - and there was no doubt about his guilt - climb a ladder directly in front of a window at which General Lindbergh sat at his desk, a ladder that was about a yard

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short of reaching the nursery window ledge, open the window, pick up a sleeping child, climb out of the window with the child in his arms, arrange toys on the sill, pull the window down from the outside, and get away, without attracting attention? True, it was a windy March night, but it still seems impossible.

As you may remember, the child was found dead, buried in a shallow grave about fifty feet off the main highway between Hopewell and Princeton. From this spot, in winter, when the trees are bare, the Lindbergh home may be clearly seen, standing white and stark against the mountainside. Any unusual excitement there, such as would be indicated by all the lights being turned on, could have been seen from this spot where the child evidently was hastily buried, and it would have been known to his kidnapper or kidnappers that the family had discovered the empty crib and that the police would have been notified and all cars stopped and searched. The autopsy showed that the child died from a blow on the head. But whether he was killed when he was taken from the nursery, or when the kidnapper realized that the crime had been discovered, will never be known. But if the murder was not intended

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and if the kidnapper planned to return the child unhurt, he must have had a woman accomplice to care for a 20-months old infant.

A few months after the trial was over, William Allen, who had discovered the body when he entered the woods to answer a call of nature, came to work for us at the State Home. Some exploiters had gotten hold of him and were taking him around the country, exhibiting him in a tent, and charging admission to have him tell the story of finding the baby. Governor Moore, who succeeded Governor Hoffman, wishing to put a stop to this, asked us to give him a job. We found him competent and reliable during the two years he worked for us.

One day I said to him, "Allen, how could you go around the country telling that gruesome tale about that poor little baby?"

"Mrs. Johnson," he said, "after I found that baby, the police took

me up to Col. Lindbergh's house. For three days they put me through the third degree. I couldn't eat and I couldn't sleep. And not a single member of the Lindbergh family spoke to me; and, after all, it was better for them to know the truth about the baby, to know that he was dead. Then, after I went home, it was worse. There were newspaper people and I don't know what-all at my house day and night. And all of 'em asking, 'Allen, what you going to get? What you going to do with your money?' (Allen was to receive - and finally did receive - part of the reward for finding the child. But this was several years later, as there was some <sup>legal</sup> technicality involved.) I told everybody all I wanted was a job. I had a wife and four children. One of them had TB. It was during the depression, and I would have tried anything that would have helped me to take care of them."

Well, I doubt that Allen was to be censured as much as those women

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from New York, Brooklyn, Newark, etc., who poured into Hopewell during the trial and paraded the streets wearing little ladders pinned on the lapels of their coats - many of them mink - tiny replicas of the ladder down which the kidnapper was supposed to have climbed with the baby. These souvenir ladders were hawked on the streets of Flemington and sold by the score to sight-seers who flocked into the town.

Soon after the kidnapping, the President of Princeton University offered to close the University and organize the students to search the territory surrounding the Lindbergh home. Had this been done, the body of the infant might have been found promptly and the Lindberghs saved a great deal both in anxiety and money, though the latter, of course, was of small moment to them in their extremity. Moreover, the opportunity for the cranks and exploiters who entered the case - the famous "Jafsie", the ship-builder, and the Episcopal

minister from Norfolk, and North Carolina's Gaston Means - would have been eliminated. The offer was declined by the authorities, due, the gossip was, to the squabbling and jealousy of the local and State police, each group being anxious for the credit of "breaking the case".

Several years after the crime and the execution of Hauptmann, Mr. John Colt, Director of Parole in New Jersey, was having lunch at my home with several other people. Mr. Colt had been a professor of economics at Princeton, and then an officer in one of the Princeton banks. When the bank closed during the depression, he accepted the parole position with the State. I was closely associated with him for several years and regarded him highly. Without any reservations as to secrecy, he told of the following incidents at this luncheon.

He said that the FBI man working with the local police on the case told him that General Lindbergh refused to let him have a private interview

Betty Gow, the baby's nurse. The FBI man told Gen. Lindbergh that if he could take Betty out to dinner, get her in a relaxed atmosphere and mood, if she knew anything, she would probably talk. He gave the General his solemn promise that he would not browbeat her or mistreat her in any way. But Gen. Lindbergh refused his permission. Why it had to be asked, I couldn't understand. Not long after that, Mr. Colt said, a representative of J.P.Morgan and Co., the firm in which Senator Morrow, Mrs. Lindbergh's father, had been a partner, appeared in the Princeton bank and told the officials that if the FBI man was not taken off the case, their loan from J.P.Morgan and Co. would be recalled. How, or if, the bank brought this about, I can't say; but the FBI did withdraw from the case, and there was much speculation about it at the time.

Nothing, of course, can restore the child to his parents or mitigate the crime of his kidnapping; nevertheless, certain questions seem reasonable:

Was it not possible that Hauptmann's wife, or some other woman, was

prepared to care for the baby? Hauptmann could not involve anyone else without admitting his own guilt, and he stubbornly refused to make this admission, in spite of overwhelming evidence against him. You will recall that thousands of dollars of the ransom money were found carefully concealed in Hauptmann's garage and in a box on a shelf in his closet. Incidentally, he was in this country illegally after quite a career of crime beginning in early youth in his native Germany.

Why was the Lindbergh family apparently interested in protecting Betty Gow? With one exception, she was the only person who knew the Lindberghs would be at home in Hopewell that evening. They had planned to go back to the Morrow home in Englewood, but when the baby developed a cold, Mrs. Lindbergh phoned Betty, who was in Englewood, that they would not go there as planned, and for her to return to Hopewell. Betty admitted phoning "Red" Johnson, a Norwegian sailor who had jumped his ship and with whom she was on friendly terms, that

the Lindbergh family would be in Hopewell that evening. Johnson, too, disappeared after the police could pin nothing on him.

Violet Sharpe, who committed suicide and was the other person who knew of the Lindberghs' change of plans, admitted phoning her "boy friend".

How did the kidnapper know where the child slept and that the window through which he was supposed to have been taken was the only window in the house which wouldn't lock? Was all this mere chance? Who knows?

And wasn't Heywood Broun a prophet when he wrote of the Lindbergh baby with sure prescience soon after his birth:

"His background is that of wealth and fame, of courage and high reputation. But I am already filled with compassion. He cannot possibly realize yet the price he must pay for being a front page baby. He will."