Back In The Days When Lindy Was A "Barnstomer" In Plane

The wire braces screamed so that they could be heard a mile away as the plane shot downward 1,000 feet and the pilot struggled to bring his ship out of the left spin. On the ground, in front of the hangar at the St. Louis air field, a friend, who now tells the story, watched with his heart in his mouth, unable to do anything. It was a flight to test a new plane that had developed into this perilous situation. Three thousand feet up, we read in The Popular Science Monthly, the brave aviator had tried, for test purposes, to go into a right spin so that the torque, or twisting force of the motor, would bring him out of it. Three-times he tried, but the machine would not respond. Hence the left spin that now seemed so likely to end in death. While the flyer was still 2,000 up, we are told by Randy Enslow, the friend who was watching, former air "barnstormer" and now one of the country's leading pilots "he crawled out on the fuselage back of his seat, hanging on like a leech, ready to jump with his parachute. But he didn't jump. He pulled himself back into the cockpit again and came down 1,700 feet more trying to save the ship. He was only 300 feet above the ground when he jumped, but he wasn't hurt a bit."

That, Mr. Enslow tells us, was the closest his friend, Col. Charles A. Lindbergh, ever came to being killed—and to us it seems more than close enough. Mr. Enslow has contributed to The Popular Science Monthly an entertaining account of a little-known phase of the New York-Paris flyer's career, when the two of them "barnstormed" over the Middle West. It came about by accident, the writer tells us, continuing.

It was this way. We were both living in St. Louis in 1924. He had sold an old war-time "Jenny" to a boy living up at Oelwein, Iowa. The kid gave him a deposit of twenty-five dollars, or something like that, and flew off home. He was supposed to send some more money each month until the plane was paid for When nothing came from Oelwein for three months, "Slim" asked me to fly him up to see what was the matter.

I had built a J-1 Standard, the type of ship the army used to train pilots on before the war. It was built with home-made spars, a second-hand engine and dusty fittings that I painted over. But it flew like a bird. When we climbed aboard, we didn't have much money in our pockets. We never did in those days.

At Oelwein, we found that the boy had gone off as a traveling violinist with a carnival. His mother had sold the "Jenny" for five dollars. She said she was afraid somebody would get hurt by the propeller. The buyer had come down in a perfect one-point landing—right on the nose—the first time he tried to fly the ship, and it was a total wreck. So we started to pay for our trip.

Our stock in trade was carrying passengers. But we would do stunts and wing-walking, and put on little one-plane air circuses of our own We did everything that would bring in dimes. Sometimes we would race automobiles at country fairs. We got seventy-five dollars for each race. Above those little half-mile dirt tracks we would have to bank the plane almost straight up and down and buzz around like a fly in a bottle. As I remember it, we always won. But we used to throttle down the motor until the last lap to give the spectators a run for their money. On that last lap, we would show the boys what the ship could do.

Once we flew into a town with "Slim" on the wing. When we landed, an old lady came up and asked: "Which one of you young men was that out on the fender?" "Slim's,' favorite joke in those days used to be the one about the farmer who saw a pilot crack up in his cornfield and wipe off the landing gear and break the propeller. The farmer's wife asked her husband what happened. 'Oh not much,' he said; 'he just broke the truck and paddle.'

From Iowa, we barnstormed down into Missouri, and then over into Illinois, spending most of the year at it. After I'd been out on the road for a week with "Slim" I always investigated a bed before I jumped into it. If I didn't, I usually sat down on a cocklebur or had June bugs crawling up my back. I got so I kept an eye on him during the day. If I saw him stoop over and pick up anything as we walked across a field, I knew it was another cocklebur or bug, and governed myself accordingly.

On one of their barnstorming trips during this part of Lindy's career, the adventurers left St. Louis with seventy-five cents between them, we learn, reading on:

"Slim" flew the ship down to Greenfield, Missouri. The school children heard us buzzing around overhead just before recess. When we landed, it broke up the school. All the kids came out and a bunch went up for rides. After a while the teachers and the townsfolks came along and went up too. We would take turns at the stick. By night, we had a hundred and seventy-five dollars. I'll never forget how "Slim" dumped it all out on the bed in the hotel. The pile looked as big as a strawstack.

At night, we would stake the ship down, or tie its tail to a stump and leave it backed into the wind like a Missouri mule. One time, when we left it tied down like that in a field in Illinois a tornado came through the country and headed rght that way. But just before the twister reached the spot, it gave a jump and came down several miles beyond. The ship wasn't even scratched.

Here Mr. Enslow tells part of the inside story of how he helped his pal to enjoy his honeymoon in quiet—well comparative quiet, at least. Thus:

Knowing the way he loves a practical joke, I can imagine how he enjoyed giving the reporters the slip on his honeymoon. He let me in on some of the fun. I was one of the handful who knew he was out in his motor-boat when the papers were reporting him in a dozen places at once. I flew his Falcon plane from Curtiss field as though to meet him, to throw reporters off the scent.

As soon as I climbed into the cockpit to warm up the motor, a fast Fairchild-Wasp was wheeled out of a hanger behind me. When I took off, the Fairchild was right on my trail, carrying the newspaper men, I headed north over Long Island, gaining a couple of miles an hour on the Fairchild. I kept climbing for altitude, watching a fog bank that was rolling in below. About thirty minutes out from the field, I did a wing-over, dove into the fog and headed back toward New York, flying blind. When I thought I was nearing the big buildings, I zoomed up out of the fog and looked around. Nobody in sight. So I scooted for Schenectady and started the papers off on another wrong lead.

I have seen Lindbergh half a dozen times since he flew to Paris. Each time he has been the same old "Slim." If he has changed at all, isn't in the direction of forgetting his old friends. That I know.

The incident of the spin was not Lindy's only close call. Mr. Enslow remembers this occurrence, at a small town in Missouri.

"Slim" was doing his stuff out on the wings. We usually circled around a place two or three times to get everybody out, and then came down in a careful landing to impress the people with the safety of flying.

This time, we kept on circling. "Slim" looked over to see why we didn't go down. I made motions, pointing to the throttle. He crawled in to see what was the matter. I shouted in his ear:

"The throttle's stuck. Can't shut the motor off."

So "Slim" crept to the front of the wing and poked his hand in back of the engine. He found a can of motor oil we carried for emergencies had jarred under the throttlearm and wedged. He tugged and pulled, but he couldn't get it out. He told me to cut the switch, and down we came in a dead-stick landing.

But that was nothing new. We were always making dead-stick landings. The only instruments in the old Standard were a tachometer, an altimeter, and an oil-pressure gauge. And sometimes they didn't work. Water would get into the gas tank, or maybe dirt— we couldn't take any too good care of the ship oftentimes—and down we would come with a dead engine.

Nobody's Business

By Gee McGee

(Continued from page four.)

worn with propriety now are skin-colored, and were it not for the seam that runs north from the heel, it would be a job to tell whether she had or had not. Hats are out of style if they are not worn entirely out within 2 days after they leave New York, and men know that a little 15-cent rag that flops down over the ears like a fly-swatter costs from $9.96 to $38.98, and while they are all practically alike and of the same value, our wives want the highest priced ones.

Powder puffs changed yesterday from a cream white to a pink buff. Wrist watches now must be held on with a silver bracelet, and not with ribbons that were the go last Saturday. Why, we even have to change the mountings in our wives' engagement rings at least 3 times a year. It's a flop between platinum and gold and silver and pig-iron. Just anything for a change, and the jeweler usually gets all of it. Window curtains are disgraceful from one prayer-meeting to another, and rugs ain't fit for nothing unless they are less than 5 installments old. Oh, well, we're all ruint anyhow, so why worry?