

Saga of the Spirit of St. Louis Nose Cone

by Robert C. Mikesch



Gazing up at the "Spirit of St. Louis" that hangs in the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C., few visitors would take note that the metal finish on the propeller spinner does not match that of the engine cowling. A quick check of the classic pictures of the "Lone Eagle," Lindbergh, standing by the nose of this airplane at San Diego or St. Louis before the Paris flight will show that all the metal on the nose, spinner included, has that swirled effect that is so noticeable and symbolic of this historic airplane. The present spinner has a smooth, unetched finish.

Once this difference has been noted, it becomes obvious that the spinner on this airplane is not the original that left the Ryan factory in 1927 with this airplane.

The replacement of this spinner before the Atlantic crossing has been a recorded fact, but some of the details about this last-minute change and the whereabouts of the original nose cone have been of concern for many historians. Speculation has been allowed to fill some of the gaps in information and if not corrected could become accepted as fact. Now that the original nose cone of the spinner has been recently identified, pieces of this puzzle fit together more clearly, which nearly completes the story surrounding the absence of this meaningful piece of metal that once graced the nose of the "Spirit of St. Louis."

The concern about the missing original nose cone first became apparent, but not seriously recognized, when younger relatives of several men who worked at the Ryan factory and built the "Spirit of St. Louis" sent inquiries to the National Air and Space Museum, asking if their family member's name could be verified as being written inside the spinner. As the story was told, many of those who built the airplane inscribed their names inside the nose cone with their wishes to Lindbergh for a safe and successful flight to Paris.

This classic picture of Charles Lindbergh standing in front of the "Spirit of St. Louis" shows very clearly the original spinner. It can be readily identified by the wire brush swirls that matched the engine cowling.

These inquiries occurred around the time this famous airplane was removed from the Smithsonian's Arts and Industries Building where it had hung since 1928, and was moved to the new building of the National Air and Space Museum in 1975. In the interim, the airplane was taken to the museum's Paul E. Garber Preservation, Restoration and Storage Facility at Silver Hill, Maryland, where the plane was given a general cleaning and inspection.

The story about the nose cone begins shortly after Lindbergh arrived at Roosevelt Field, Long Island, on May 12, 1927, in preparation for his flight to Paris. The next day, a crack was discovered in the spinner that streamlines the propeller hub to that of the engine cowling. It was agreed that this assembly should be replaced before the long flight was attempted. This situation is told in Lindbergh's own book, *The Spirit of St. Louis*, published by Charles Scribner's Sons, beginning on page 159. It reads as follows:

When we arrived at the hangar on Curtiss Field, I found a crowd already assembled to see the Spirit of St. Louis. Mulligan comes up to me with a piece of cowling in his hands.

"Where's the propeller?" I inquire.

"Over at the Curtiss Company," he tells me. "We found a crack in the spinner. They're fixing up a new one for you."

"They said they wouldn't send a bill for the work," Boedecker adds, "so we didn't wait to ask you if it was all right. . . ."

It's extraordinary. Here's the Curtiss Company, one of the Wright Corporation's chief competitors, repairing my spinner for nothing. Everywhere I turn it's the same way. . . .

The key person at Curtiss for the repair of the spinner was

the late Stanley I. Vaughn, assistant factory manager at that time for the Curtiss Aeroplane and Motor Co. In an interview with Mr. Vaughn on September 12, 1962, made by George Hardie, Jr., a respected aviation historian and now Experimental Aircraft Association Historian, the following transcript was made of their conversation:

Hardie: Mr. Vaughn, did you work on Lindbergh's ship by any chance?

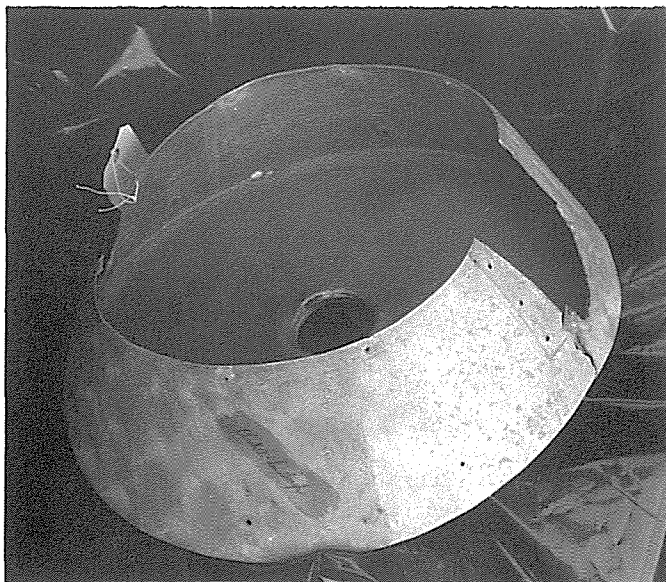
Vaughn: No. You see, Roosevelt Field then belonged to the Curtiss Company. He landed there and used a hangar there. I saw a bunch of people in our propeller department and I wondered what all the commotion was about. I was told that was Lindbergh needing a spinner for his propeller. I remember that we had a spinner that would just about fit, so I went down to see what I could do. I see this long lanky fellow so I asked, "Are you Mr. Lindbergh?" He said, "Yeah." I said, "Could I look at your spinner?" This gang was talking and wasn't getting anywhere.

So that's where I got the spinner. (It was later learned after examining the object mentioned here as "spinner," that only the collar portion, also known as a propeller ring, was in Vaughn's possession. The collar and nose cone combine to make up the spinner.) When we took the old one off, I just had a hunch. I told the fellow working on it when they took the old one off not to throw it away—bring it to my office. Well, then he (Lindbergh) flew. I decided to go home. When I drove into my yard—I think it was on a Saturday—a neighbor hollered over that Lindbergh had landed in Paris. So I said to myself, "Back up!" So I returned to my office and got the spinner and brought it home before someone else got ahold of it. Then I thought, "I wonder if I can get him to autograph it."

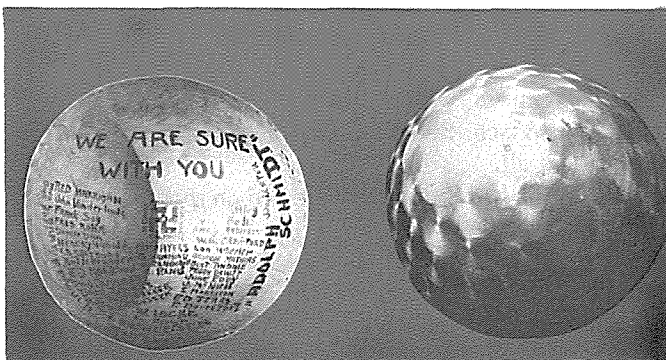
Of course, I couldn't get near him when he got back because of the crowds. Casey Jones said he'd get it autographed for me so he put it in his car. But he didn't have a chance either and brought it back, saying, "I'm sorry, but I just couldn't make it." So I put it back in my office.

It was there about a year. So one day at the plant who was walking down the stairs all by himself but Lindbergh. When I got up to him, he was looking at a Challenger motor that

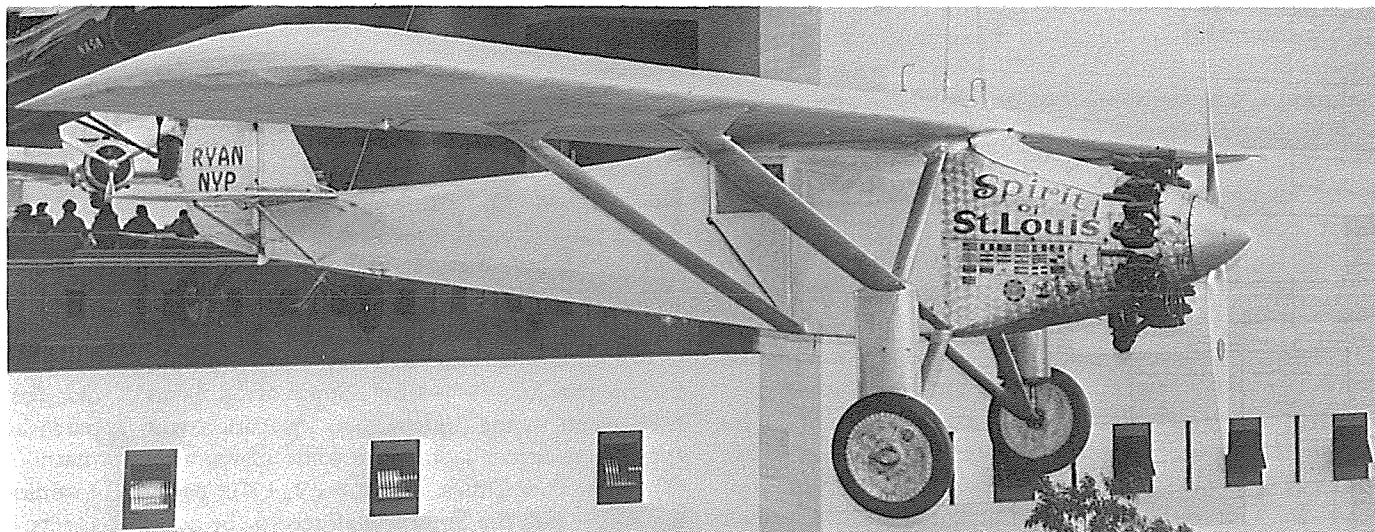
The pointed spinner cap on the "Spirit of St. Louis" as it now hangs in the National Air and Space Museum is a sharp contrast to the more rounded contour on the original spinner.



Stanley Vaughn donated this portion of the original spinner to the National Air and Space Museum in 1970. At the opening for each propeller blade in this spinner collar is a sizable crack. The autograph, "Charles Lindbergh," has been intensified and is coated with varnish.



This is the inside and outside view of the original nose cone of the "Spirit of St. Louis." Following the emotional caption as inscribed, "WE ARE SURE WITH YOU," many, but not all who worked on the airplane, printed their names inside the aluminum spinner: Mrs. L. Bray, F. Magula, W. Locke, L. Boyd, L. Muehlerson, B. Jones, John Lester, Doug Kelley, Wm. Bodie, Andy Anderson, W.B. Crawford, Len Wheeler, Georgie Mathias, Henry Hybold, J. McNiell, S. Morrison, Ed Terry, P. Davenport, Fred Ayers, G. Hammond, C. Randolph, C. Rand, Red Harrigan, John Van der Linde, Frank Soy, Fred Rohr, Burt Tindale, Peggy DeWitt, Ed Morrow, Doug Corrigan, Dale Powers, Bill Van der Akker, Ed Krawzeyk, Adolph Schmidt, E.D. Sherburn, June Eddy, Ruth Kenough, Daniel B. Burnett, Jr. ("Dapper Dan"). Names of four supervisors are shown in center of the spinner in small letters: Franklin Mahoney, Pres., Ryan Airlines; Don Hall, Engineer; A.T. Edwards, Sales Mgr.; Hawley Bowlus, Factory Mgr.





The "Spirit of St. Louis" stands completed at the Ryan factory in San Diego in the picture at left. Compare this photograph and spinner with the picture at right having the new spinner just before the Atlantic flight from Roosevelt Field, Long Island.

happened to be sitting there. I went up to him and said, "Mr. Lindbergh, before you made your flight across the Atlantic, do you remember stopping here and having a spinner put on your propeller?" He said, "I remember you. You're the one who took me over and showed it to me." I said, "I had a hunch you were going to get across so I saved that old one. Would you autograph it for me?" He said, "I'd be tickled to death to do it for you."

Hardie: How did he autograph it?

Vaughn: Charles A. Lindbergh.

Hardie: I mean, with a pen or what?

Vaughn: A pen. But it's fading. You can make it out but that's about all.

Hardie: Too bad it can't be engraved on there. That's a real prize.

Vaughn: I haven't done a thing with it. It's dirty as the devil. It's still laying down in the basement. I talked with Paul Garber at the Smithsonian and he said they knew that wasn't the original spinner on theirs, because it didn't have the swirls. We did the best we could in a hurry, but it wasn't exactly like the rest of it. I said I had the back part of it, but I'm afraid the front piece was lost between St. Louis and New York and they'll never know where that is. (Not true, as will be revealed later.) I'll have to ship it down to him (Garber). I should have done it long ago.

On November 26, 1970, Stanley Vaughn did donate the spinner collar to the National Air and Space Museum. According to the record made by Paul Garber who received it, the signature of Lindbergh had been varnished over to preserve it, although by then it was noted as "indistinct." Since that time someone has intensified the signature, lest it be lost forever.

Accompanying the spinner collar was a handwritten statement by Stanley Vaughn of his account surrounding the circumstances, which varies slightly from his interview with George Hardie, but historical aspects remain unchanged. In part it reads as follows:

A few days later (after learning of Lindbergh's planned ocean crossing) a young man came to the plant with a propeller and the rear section of the propeller spinner. He identified himself as Charles Lindbergh, and asked if we could furnish him with a new spinner. I told him we had some spinners in the cowl department that I was sure would fit his propeller and cowl. *He did not tell me what became of the nose cone or the attaching parts for the spinner to the propeller.* We went to the cowl department and found a spinner

that would fit quite well. Lindbergh then asked me when we would have it attached on his propeller. I told him with the assistance of the engineering department we would have it completed at noon the following day, but to be sure, let's say tomorrow night. He said, "O.K., that's fine." We delivered the propeller with new spinner the following day at noon and on May 20, 1927, Lindbergh was on his way across the Atlantic to Paris.

In talking with Lindbergh, I had a feeling that this young man would accomplish the flight of which many had failed, so I told the workmen who installed the spinner not to scrap the old one, but to put it in my office.

When I heard Lindbergh had landed in Paris, France, I picked up the spinner (collar) and took it home for safekeeping as there was a demand for it for display purposes. But, I refused to part with it. When Lindbergh returned to this country, I tried in vain to get him to autograph this spinner.

Nearly two years later, Lindbergh again visited the plant in Garden City, L.I., N.Y., and this time I found him alone and asked if he remembered when we installed a spinner on his propeller. He said, "I sure do and it was an excellent job. I not only flew the Atlantic, but many thousands of miles since and have had no trouble with it." I then told him I had a feeling when we installed the spinner that he would accomplish the flight and had saved the old spinner and would be pleased if he would autograph it. He said he would be glad to, and did.

The spinner has been in my possession for 43 years and on November 26, 1970, I donated it to the Smithsonian Institution.

Comments in letters that pertain to the transfer of the spinner-collar to the museum tell of newspaper accounts relating to the history surrounding this item from the "Spirit of St. Louis." It was such a news story that prompted Charles Lindbergh to write to S. Dillon Ripley, Secretary of the Smithsonian, to ask that the record about the spinner be correctly documented. In his letter from Switzerland, dated March 12, 1971, it reads in part, and of which nothing has been altered or added to the way Lindbergh had it typed:

The third note relates to a New York Times article about "a broken part of ———(the) 'Spirit of St. Louis,'" that has been given to the Smithsonian Institution with apparently the best of intent along with some inaccurate information. (The New York Times, December 9, 1970, page 46.) I would like to get into the Smithsonian record the actual facts relat-

ing to this "broken part." (To do so, I am enclosing a carbon copy of this letter to you—for Smithsonian files.)

The Times article is about "a rear section of the ——— propeller spinner———the cone-shaped device that fits over the center of a propeller for streamlining purposes and to protect the gears that activate the propeller pitch. Somewhere along the 'Spirit of St. Louis's' preliminary flight from San Diego to Roosevelt Field, L.I., by way of St. Louis," the article states, "the front section of the spinner separated from the rest and, in falling off, damaged the rear section." (Not true, as explained.) The donor is quoted as saying that when he was assigned factory manager of the Curtiss Aeroplane and Motor Company, Garden City, L.I., in May, 1927, "a young man entered the plant with a propeller and the rear section of the propeller spinner. He identified himself as Charles Lindbergh, and asked if we could furnish him with a new spinner."

The facts are as follows:

The "Spirit of St. Louis" did not have a controllable-pitch propeller. Therefore, there were no gears behind the spinner.

Nothing fell off the "Spirit of St. Louis" during its flight between San Diego and New York.

After I landed at Curtiss Field, on Long Island, and inspection of the plane brought out the fact that a crack was developing in the spinner cap that was installed at San Diego.* The Curtiss Company most considerately offered to construct and install a new spinner cap for me. I gladly accepted the offer. I am under the impression that the "broken part" referred to in the Times article is probably a part that was replaced when the new spinner was installed.

(*A photograph of the original nose-cone or "cap" portion of the spinner does not show a crack as described here; however, one is apparent in the collar, which may have led to the replacement of the entire assembly. Throughout this entire study, the descriptive words for these propeller spinner parts may have changed over the years, or that they were carelessly applied in describing these accounts.)

For many years, the subject about the spinner remained closed, and the concern about the disappearance of the nose cone remained. In March 1982, however, new light on the subject came to the attention of the National Air and Space Museum in the form of a letter from (Mr. Glenn H. Bowlus), a brother of the late William Hawley Bowlus. The letter discussed the possibility of donating the "original nose cone of the Spirit of St. Louis" to the museum. Soon thereafter members of the Bowlus family supplied a photograph of a nose cone that meets all the appearance that this must be the missing part.

It is understandable why Hawley Bowlus had the nose cone, and that Lindbergh should have sent it to him. At the time of the building of the "Spirit of St. Louis," Bowlus was factory manager for Ryan Airlines, and therefore was influential in the building of the airplane for Lindbergh. Hawley and wife Inez often invited him to their home for dinner and a discussion of the coming flight, so it is probable that the return of the nose cone was arranged at that time. Following his efforts in the building of the "Spirit of St. Louis," Bowlus became a legendary figure in sailplane design and record-breaking flights. This interested Lindbergh soon after his trip to Paris. Lindbergh worked closely with Hawley Bowlus, since

the two were already the best of friends, and he frequently flew the new sailplane designs of Bowlus' in California. (Two of these Bowlus sailplanes are in the aircraft collection of the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C.) Therefore, it is understandable why the souvenir from the "Spirit of St. Louis" would be in Hawley Bowlus' possession. It is safe speculation that when Lindbergh saw the removed nose cone from his airplane at Roosevelt Field, he would not have discarded it indiscriminately. He was aware of the sentiment that many had expressed by placing their names inside the nose cone.

It is apparent now, as it would be then, that the shape of the new nose cone is different from that of the original, and therefore the original nose cone could not be reused. Lindbergh may well have set the nose cone aside in the care of a friend, or for that matter, the care of his mother, who left the scene not too long thereafter. It is interesting to note that nothing is mentioned about the nose cone in any stories about Lindbergh, including his own books about the airplane and his life. Family members of Hawley Bowlus were satisfied that Lindbergh sent the nose cone to Hawley after the historic flight, because they were not otherwise informed. In their words, "Lindbergh sent the cone, with his thanks, to the dedicated Ryan employees who wrote and signed the message shown inside the cone, before the airplane left San Diego." After viewing a picture of the cracked spinner-collar, and noting the difference in the contour between the original and the replacement nose cone, they are now convinced that the two-part assembly that left San Diego did arrive in New York, but did not continue on to Paris.

Perhaps one day, this original part of the "Spirit of St. Louis" will be placed in the National Air and Space Museum, not only rejoining its other half (the cracked spinner collar) but also to commemorate the men whose names appear in the inside of this nose cone and to recognize them for the part they played in aviation history. The names of the persons who placed their initials inside the nose cone are listed herewith. As the Bowlus family points out with regard to the sentiment attached with the nose cone and the people involved with it, "No other airplane was readied for so important a flight in so short a time."



The original nose cone of the spinner is temporarily placed onto the collar by Jack Bowlus on August 19, 1983, at the National Air and Space Museum. The match-fit confirmed their authenticity. Watching the event is Robert Mikesch, author and Senior Curator for the museum.