

Bird Biplane

Lindbergh's pick for Anne

BY H.G. FRAUTSCHY PHOTOS BY H.G. FRAUTSCHY

In 1929, Brunner-Winkle had a hit with their Bird model A biplane, but by the end of the 1920s, even the seemingly inexhaustible supply of surplus Curtiss OX-5 engines had begun to dry up. Airframe manufacturers were scrambling to find new engines, and at the same time, engine manufacturers had seen the writing on the wall, and were building a series of new moderately small radial engines like the 100hp Kinner K5 and Warner Scarab series. Michael Gregor, chief engineer of the B-W firm, got busy redesigning the Bird for the soon-to-be-popular radials, with the Kinner-powered version designated the BK.

Andrew King flies the "Lindbergh Bird" over the southern Wisconsin farm fields west of Brodhead.





Charles A. Lindbergh was known as a very particular pilot, one who wanted everything "just so." When he chose an airplane in which to teach his new bride Anne how to fly, he decided the Brunner-Winkle Bird was a solid, well-manufactured airplane with excellent manners. In fact, he picked this very Bird BK, s/n 2037-16, NC727Y, which he purchased for \$3,500 on August 1930, registering it in Anne's name.

Starting that fall, and well into the spring of 1931, Anne and Charles were seen in the skies of Long Island, New York, with Anne struggling to learn the intricacies of landing. Finally, late in the spring, she mastered landings well enough for her husband to turn her loose for her solo flight. With feelings that any pilot can understand, she was elated when she was awarded her pilot's certificate on May 29, 1931.

After learning to fly with the Bird, it was sold back to the factory at the end of October, and it soon bounced around different owners in New Hampshire, Connecticut, and Massachusetts. Eventually it found a home with Joe Fischera, recently mustered out of the military. He purchased the biplane in April of 1946. He really wanted an airplane — it took all the money he had, plus some he had to borrow, a total of \$600. Sadly, he never got to fly it, as it was wrecked in a wind storm just a month later. But he didn't give up on the "Lindbergh Bird."

Recalled to active duty, and stationed at Andrews AFB outside Washington, D.C., his first job back in the military was to set up a mechanic's school for the Air Force. With the help of the students, he rebuilt the Bird, and flew it just a short while before another mishap put the airplane on its back following an engine-out. After that accident in 1950, it would be over



While owned by Anne Lindbergh, the registration card was stolen, and a new one had to be issued by the CAA.

six decades before the Bird would fly again.

Fichera moved on to a career in the Air Force, followed by a stint restoring aircraft for the Smithsonian Air & Space Museum's Paul Garber restoration shop. Retiring in 1984, Joe was still a busy man, and the Bird project sat on the back shelf for another 17 years. As he came up on the age of 80, he figured he'd better get on it if he wanted to be the man to complete the project.

Complete it he did, with the help of friends, both experienced and inexperienced, whom he taught the craftsman's ways of hand-built aircraft restoration. While the majority of the significant restoration was confined

to the wings (the upper is all new), Joe and his volunteers carefully went over the entire airframe, as well as seeing that the prop was straightened and the Kinner overhauled.

When he completed the airplane in 2012, the plan was for Joe and another experienced pilot to take the airplane to fly-ins and airshows. The Bird proved to be Joe Fichera's swan song, as he passed away January 23, 2013. Thanks to the dedication of Joe's wife, Anne, friend of the family Bob Newhouse flew the airplane on a tour of the Midwest, stopping at events such as the annual members fly-in for the Antique Airplane Association. ✈



Tina Thomas of the Poplar Grove Wings and Wheels Museum and Andrew King, who flew the Bird back home to Maryland from the Midwest, pose with the biplane in a manner reminiscent of the most famous couple of aviation, Anne and Charles Lindbergh.



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Above: There are 70 Bird biplanes still on the registration rolls.

Left: The Bird BK is powered by the 100hp 5-cylinder Kinner K5, which features these unique exhaust pipes, commonly called a "bayonet exhaust."

Below: Andrew King flew the airplane back home to Maryland in September of 2014.

