

[By Matthew Keegan](#)

The following article serves as a tribute to eight women who were the forerunners of the modern day flight attendant now numbering nearly 250,000 women and men worldwide.

In 1930, it was the dream of many a young man to marry a Boeing Skygirl. These “original eight” women were single nurses enticed from their homes with the idea of marriage to a rich-lonesome business passenger. Ultimately, however, they played a pivotal role in revolutionizing air travel by ensuring passenger comfort and through promoting the safety of air travel.

During that time America was in the beginning of an economic depression that would eventually deepen and spread to effect the entire world. Nevertheless, new advances in aircraft development continued to be promoted which helped strengthen the accessibility of air travel to the general public.

BOEING’S FIRSTS

The Boeing Company was, at that time, in the enviable position of being both the manufacturer of the first airliner and the first airline passenger transportation company providing cabin services. In 1928 Boeing introduced an airliner designed specifically for passenger comfort and convenience. The Model 80 touted a separate and enclosed flightdeck for the pilots and a spacious cabin for the passengers. The original model held twelve passengers and was followed one year later by the larger, 18-passenger, Model 80-A.

THE ORIGINAL EIGHT

Originally, young boys were hired to serve food, beverages, and comfort the passengers when they became airsick. Soon, however, it was suggested by Ellen Church, a registered nurse, that women -- specifically nurses -- could work as stewards. She felt that nurses would be best suited to care for passenger comfort (and illnesses), promote a female presence to demonstrate the safety of air travel, and to free up pilots for more important flight duties.

Boeing managers accepted her proposal and on May 15, 1930, eight women were hired for a three month trial. Thus began the position of “stewardess” the forerunner of the modern day flight attendant.

WIDE AND VARIED DUTIES

The duties of the original stewardesses went far beyond providing cabin services. She served as a tour director by pointing out places of interest including, cities, towns, rivers, mountains, passes, etc. She took tickets, loaded luggage, fueled the plane, and helped the pilots push the aircraft into the hangar!

Because of low ceilings and narrow aisles, Boeing mandated that stewardesses be small in stature with a height limit not to exceed 5'4” and a weight of no more than 115 lbs.

UNITED REPLACES BOEING

In 1931 Boeing Air Transportation, Inc., merged with three other transportation companies to form the newly named United Airlines. About that time most of the “original eight” returned to more conventional lives.

MARGARET ARNOTT INTERVIEWED

In 1996, Clipped Wings historian Vicy Morris Young wrote a tribute to the original eight which made mention of an earlier interview with Margaret Arnott, the last surviving member of the heralded group. Just before her death in 1995, Margaret shared how as she was awaiting hip surgery her doctor brought in a framed photo from his wife -- who was then flying for American Airlines -- that she wanted to have Margaret autograph. The doctor's wife found it in an antique store and it was the only one taken that had all eight women together in uniform. Laughing aloud, Margaret said, “I never thought I would end up in an antique store! I notice you asked for the signature before you did my surgery!”

Margaret loved to meet with latter day flight attendants who always asked about early flying experiences. Known for her sense of humor, she was telling a young woman onboard a trip about an emergency landing in a muddy corn field. Her listener asked seriously, “And did they jet you back to Chicago?” A solemn reply, backed by a mischievous grin was, “Not that day.”

THE ENSUING YEARS

Soon after the introduction of the “original eight” other airlines began to hire “stewardesses” too. Government regulation of steward(esses) began in 1952 when the Civil Aeronautics Administration, now known as the Federal Aviation Administration, passed a resolution requiring all air carrier aircraft with a capacity of ten or more passengers to provide at least one steward(ess) for safety reasons. In 1974 the FAA rewrote the Federal Aviation Regulations (FARs) to read, “flight attendant crewmember.” This step was significant in professionalizing the role of the flight attendant.

No formal government standards exist in the United States to regulate the Corporate or Business Flight Attendant. Most large corporations and air carriers employ flight attendants as they recognize the importance of providing exceptional service from both comfort and safety aspects.

Today’s crop of flight attendants consists of men and women of a multitude of nationalities working for a variety of commercial, business, and private companies. Unlike the “original eight” they no longer have to push planes into hangars, load luggage, or fuel the aircraft. However, thanks to jet travel, they can be expected to travel longer, higher, and further than their counterparts, interact cross-culturally, and be equipped to handle any conceivable emergency situation that may arise. Nearly 75 years after Ellen Church’s idea became a reality, the benefits of utilizing flight attendants has been enormous. We salute the “original eight” and all that have followed in their footsteps.

“Original Eight” Tidbits

The “Original Eight” stewardesses were: Ellen Church, Margaret Arnott, Jessie Carter, Ellis Crawford, Harriet Fry, Alva Johnson, Inez Keller and Cornelia Peterman.

Ellen Church’s first flight was on May 15, 1930. She flew from San Francisco to Cheyenne, Wyoming. (Source: www.kwtv.com)

Church was from Cresco, Iowa. In 1959 that city built a new airfield and named it “Ellen Church Field” (CJJ) in her honor. Source: Iowa State University extension website: ww.exnet.iastate.edu)

Can you guess how much the first flight attendants were paid in 1930? They received a salary

for the princely sum of \$125. per month!

Sources:

First Stewardess From Cresco, Iowa State University Extension, WWW.EXNET.IASTATE.EDU.

Model 80, Boeing Company, WWW.BOEING.COM.

A Special Tribute – The Original Eight Stewardesses, Vicy Morris Young, Clipped Wings, WWW.CLIPPEDWINGS.COM.

Matt manages the Corporate Flight Attendant Community at <http://www.corporateflyer.net> and writes extensively about business, travel, and human interest topics.

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