

Several Flew Over the Goose's Nest

(The Heretofore Unpublished Memoirs of an Ex-Ticket Agent).

By Liz Wilson - May 1979

Put two former Antilles Air Boats employees together - any two - and its memory time right away. But more than that, once you have worked for the Air Boats, you automatically become a member of the family and those ties are binding no matter where you may be presently.

Take Bunny Olsen, for example. Her claim to fame is that she holds the first ticket ever issued by the company back in February 1964 and of course she was on board the Mallard at this year's birthday celebration when that first flight was re-enacted. A blonde blue-eyed dazzler, Bunny first met Capt. Charles F. Blair when he flew Pan Am props into Bermuda many years ago. After moving to St. Croix, it was only natural she would want to climb aboard that inaugural flight to St. Thomas.

The first office for the new airline (which consisted of exactly one plane -N95467) was in Wendy Hilty's Kings Alley Hotel office and the passengers were loaded by rowboat into the aircraft which was anchored in the harbor. Bunny also recalls landing in St. Thomas in front of the old Carousel Bar and being met by boatman Fred Romney who today is the veteran employee of the company.

Each year to commemorate that occasion, no matter where she happens to be (and she lives part time in the Azores), Bunny sends flowers and other appropriate tributes to the airline which she calls the finest and most fun anywhere in the world. It was Bunny, too, who designed the handsome gold Goose charm worn by so many loyal Air Boats ladies today.

For ticket agents in the early days there were almost no limits on what we were called upon to do since all of us had to handle the four "p's" -- passengers, pilots, planes and packages -- at one time or another. You might add another "p" to the list too, since "people" of all kinds have always been a part of the rich Air Boats spectrum.

St. Croix's Maggie Hart ran the old ticket office in St. Thomas back in 1965 when it was nothing but a red and white wooden shanty near the old lumber yard on Veteran's Drive. She remembers one colorful character who was overly fond of indulging in alcoholic spirits. Each morning he would take up his station next to the office wearing battered top hat and full dress formal "tails," greeting startled passersby and loudly exclaiming passages from Shakespeare. Maggie, in those days, lived a hazardous life, since at times when Romney was busy with the aircraft she had to stagger across the highway dodging traffic as she lugged cargo and suitcases for some passengers who were used to big time amenities such as Red Caps when they traveled.

She recalls too, that many lady tourists in those days dressed most properly for travel in white gloves, hats and patent leather shoes. They presented an odd sight, she says, as they bobbed out to the Goose in the rowboats, straddling their luggage which was then loaded by the pilot into the nose of the plane.

Maggie says it wasn't at all uncommon for passengers of prestige to pitch in and help when she was tied up on the teletype. She remembers several occasions when then-First Lady Bert Paiewonsky would pick up the jangling phone, saying in her most official voice "Antilles Air Boats. May I help you?"

The St. Croix ramp too attracted its share of interesting personages, both local and from afar' ON one occasion I was engaged in conversation with an elderly gentleman who was watching the arriving and departing planes with some curiosity. He told me he was from Frederiksted and it was his first visit to Christiansted in 20 years. I expressed surprise and asked him why he visited so infrequently. His response was a shrug of the as he said "Why should I? There was no need to leave Frederiksted."

In 1966 a new ramp had been built at the end of the recently completed Pan Am Pavilion and a modern ticket office replaced the small wood building which then became our first full-fledged cargo office. Prior to that time the area had been a lumber yard. Across the access road which was unpaved there was an ice house where the Caravelle Arcade is now and each morning the construction trucks lined the road to fill up with ice for the many crews engaged in the building boom of the sixties.

Right next door to our office an island institution popular to this day soon opened. Sir Aubrey's Pig's Ear quickly became known as the Air Boats Annex and billed itself as "The World's Largest Airport Terminal Restaurant - Serving a Thousand People (10 at a time)." "Maily colorful personalities frequented the plg's Ear, among them a man from the states who had recently taken up residence on the island, evidently on the advice of his hometown doctor. Most of the time he kept to himself puttering around with carpenter's tools and doing odd jobs for Sir Aubrey. One day, for some reason, the loud roar of the airplane engines seemed

to provoke him unduly, and after watching one Goose lumber up out of the water he could stand no more. Grabbing a spray can of red paint, he ran out shouting "Get out of here" and commenced to attack the aircraft by spraying red paint on the fuselage until he was persuaded the plane meant him no harm.

Sales Supervisor Helen Mattice, better known as "Helen of Croix," remembers another visitor who told her his name was "Jesus Christ." He was so insistent that there was nothing she could do but write the name on his ticket. Later when she called the flight, he mounted the plane steps, threw wide his arms and gave a benediction, blessing everyone in sight.

In those early days of AAB the operation was definitely informal. It wasn't at all unusual to discover at flight time, particularly in late afternoon, that all of the passengers were enjoying themselves in Sir Aubrey's emporium. This meant that we often had to walk into the restaurant to announce the flight as loudly as possible and then personally cajole the passengers., usually

our sister St. Thomians, to board their aircraft for the flight home. If we didn't the telephone wires would have been sizzling that night and we didn't feel up to explaining to families 45 miles away where their errant relatives were.

The informality extended to animals as well as people and in the initial days of the airline residents were allowed to board the plane accompanied by their dogs -- if they promised to behave. However, since some passengers preferred animals at a distance, we soon devised a chain gate to fit across the aft cargo area thus allowing dogs and owners to see each other during the flight.

Prior to that time however, I would have given anything to have had a camera when I was on duty one Sunday morning. A dog show was being held in St Thomas that afternoon and one plane was booked by dog fanciers from St. Croix who had all been instructed to keep their pets on tight rein. The passenger list had an unusual flavor with such names as Rob of Trelawney and Tolkien's Lord Strider. I never found out if it was by design or mere happenstance but after I had gone aboard to see that everyone was safely buckled in and under control I stood to one side of the tarmac to watch as the Goose trundled down the ramp for take-off.

I did a double take, not believing my eyes. Each window on the starboard side clearly showed its occupant inside -- one a collie, another a shepherd and the third a large poodle. The say that dogs often resemble their owners and I concur. That day those dogs looked as natural as any human about to fly to St. Thomas. Of course, that was 13 years ago but I'll never forget those doggies in the windows and the fact that the pilot later reported they were among the best behaved passengers he ever had!

Speaking of dogs, one illustrious wife of a local VIP often traveled with her tiny poodle in a basket which she placed on the ticket counter as she checked in. I usually gave the dog a pat as I went about my business and one day I absentmindedly reached my hand inside the basket but quickly withdrew it in some embarrassment. I was patting a wig, not a cute little poodle. Hopefully, she did not notice my error since we chatted on as if nothing unusual had occurred.

Senior pilot Capt. Bill Mable reminisced recently about one unusual cargo load he carried when he was flying to St. Croix without passengers on board. Several large gunny sacks containing what he was told were "barbecue pigs" had been placed in the rear of the plane and "Iggle," as he is known to everyone, says he was just flying along minding his own business, when there was a sudden commotion behind him. The gunny sacks were rolling around the aisle with legs and small snouts poking out as several young pigs attempted to extricate themselves from confinement. The ramp agents had neglected to inform him that his "barbecue pigs" had not yet been barbecued!

Another time, a former St. Thomas pilot reported he felt very foolish one day after giving orders that two young caged baboons should be loaded into the nose hold of the plane. It seems he later say them walking around the cargo office on their hands, their long arms stuck through the bars and carrying their cages on their backs. As he reflected, he might have had a real start if they had reached up into the cockpit and tickled his toes while he was flying.

It wasn't at all unusual for poultry to fly the Goose, particularly on weekends when cock fighting aficionados came through from Vieques or Fajardo on the way to the big bout. One time a man insisted on showing me his prize rooster, removing it from a burlap bag on the counter as he checked in. The handsome creature seemed a bit confused at first and then, perhaps thinking the enemy was nearby, he started flapping his wings, jumping, scuffling and pecking away at all the tickets and manifests until the place was in an uproar with papers flying and everyone scurrying for cover. I never heard if he won his fight, but he should have.

Another occasion which should have been dignified but turned out quite the opposite was the inaugural flight to San Juan. There were large ground swells in the harbor that day and aircraft 901 was perched on the ramp ready for the historic take-off when several large waves churned up onto the ramp. When they receded, they also took the chocks blocking the wheels right out to sea. You guessed it. The plane, with no one aboard, started to slide down the incline into the water. Capt. Mable grabbed the plane to retard its departure but just then another wave flowed in and down the ramp went Mable, still desperately tugging at the seat born plane. Meanwhile, dignitaries and special guests were engaged elsewhere and did not notice the sudden pilotless departure of their aircraft or the fact that Mable by this time was swimming to keep up with it! Somehow he managed to climb aboard, start the engines and bring the errant aircraft back onto the apron. Later after the inaugural flight proceeded without further mishap, Capt. Blair remarked that he simply could not understand why the pilot's seat was filled with water.

Mary Simpson, our boss lady and to this day a member of AAB's board of directors, was always quick to react to any sudden "outside duty." One late afternoon, again during heavy seas, the planes were being switched around on the tiny Pan Am Pavilion air drome and Mary was in the Boston whaler with a line tied to the rear of good old 40 Romeo helping to keep the aircraft to one side of the approach while other planes maneuvered up the ramp.

Unfortunately, when it came time to take 40 Romeo ashore to park it for the night, Mary neglected to tell the pilot she was still tied onto the aircraft. Up the ramp he roared and right behind him was Mary zooming across the concrete in the Boston whaler.

Antilles Air Boats passengers often seemed to prefer calling the seaplane anything, but a Goose and former public relations head Fran Smith remembers one New Yorker asking, "When does the next duck leave?" Another island visitor asked Helen of Croix "When does the frog take off from?" And when she gently reminded her inquirer that the Goose departed from the nearby ramp, the tourist was heard to mutter "Oh well, I knew it was some kind of amphibian."

Those were indeed the good old days for many for us – those years in the mid-sixties when something of a frontier charted by visionary Charles F. Blair lay before us - and we were very much a part of it all.

And I could regale you with stories on into the night, but maybe it's best to stop right here. Let the new and younger employees at AAB start recording their memories to add to the now published memoirs of a former AAB ticket agent.



Mary Simpson, (left) and Fran Smith chat with Capt. Blair. Ms. Simpson, a member of the AAB board of directors, once took an unexpected ride in a Boston Whaler. Both she and Ms. Smith were employed in top positions in the airlines early days.



Capt. Bill "Iggie" Mable



St. Thomas Ramp agent Fred Romney in the Boston Whaler he used to ferry people to and from the Goose. Mr. Romney is one of AAB's first employees.



"Bunny" Olsen, Maureen & Patti Armstrong

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