

Nurses, Wives and Vixens

Santa Feans' book chronicles evolving roles of flight attendants

By Craig Smith
The New Mexican

Ever since I decided to ignore my conviction that a megaton metal object has no business soaring through the air, I've loved to fly. There's a primal thrill knowing you've "slipped the surly bonds of earth," as John Gillespie Magee Jr. wrote in *High Flight*. But while we trust pilots, plane and air traffic controllers to get us from here to there, what happens between takeoff and landing is vital, too—in terms of both comfort and safety. That's where flight attendants come into their own.

Santa Feans Johanna Omelia and Michael Waldoch pay tribute to the craft with *Come Fly With Us! A Global History of the Airline Hostess*, now available from Collectors Press. The authors sign copies of the book this weekend at Borders Books & Music.

Pasatiempo: Did either of you ever want to be a flight attendant?

Michael Waldoch: Not me!

Johanna Omelia: Actually, no. I wanted to be a writer. We have good reasons we wrote the book.

Waldoch: I used to travel a lot, to about 140 countries. I landed the first time here, in this country [Waldoch is a native of England], in Los Angeles and took an internal flight to San Francisco on PSA. When you got on the plane, they kissed you! The English are so repressed; I just sat through the flight with my mouth open.

Pasa: The book is more than profusely illustrated. Where did you get the material?

Omelia: Michael, over the years, has collected pamphlets, in-flight brochures, newspaper clippings,



photographs, airline press releases from the 1940s, '50s and '60s. You get a real feeling for the decade and time.

Waldoch: We decided to use the contemporary voice wherever we could, rather than having people recall the past. Present the materials themselves. Some additional things came from the airlines.

Pasa: There have been huge role changes for flight attendants.

Omelia: The first flight attendants in the '30s were registered nurses. They would guide you through the really bumpy flights. It was pretty much the same in the '40s.

Waldoch: In 1937 there were five crashes in five weeks, and the stewardesses were getting passengers out of the burning planes. Right from the start, they got a reputation for being professionals.

In 1950 they became wives in training. It was part of the GI return [from World War II]. These guys came home; they had education and a job, they wanted a wife and kids. The wife in training fitted the social mores on the ground.

Omelia: The ads shifted from women as nurses to

a woman mixing a baby's bottle with one hand and a martini with the other! Then, by the '60s, flight attendants were perceived as vixens of the sky.

Waldoch: What happened on the ground tended to happen in the air a little later. The '60s sexual revolution went up in the air.

Pasa: I know that flight attendant was and is a popular profession.

Waldoch: In pre-ERA days, jobs for women were either teaching or secretarial. This profession was created by a woman. It was glamorous.

Omelia: In the '50s and '60s, if you talked to high school and college women, the three most desired glamour professions were actress, model and flight attendant. Not necessarily in that order.

Waldoch: No doubt, airlines have styles, and I think people joined particular airlines because they liked the style. PSA was racy; the attendants wore buttons that said, "Pure, Sober and Available." National had the "Fly Me" campaign.

Omelia: While Delta was always very conservative, considerate of their flight staff.

Pasa: The pictures of the food in your book—they're amazing: full-course gourmet dinners, national cuisine from the home country.

Waldoch: It was part of the enjoyment of flying, for many years a defining characteristic of airlines. Deregulation killed all of that. I think three or five major providers now do all the food for the airlines. It's all the same.

Omelia: The planes were restaurants aloft. They served seven-course meals upstairs. You booked your table, went upstairs and had dinner on china plates. In the '40s and '50s, most planes featured theme cocktail lounges. There was Fujiyama on Northwest, and Pan Am had Maxims of Paris. In 1970 American Airlines had a piano bar in coach—on the 747s, the big ones.

Waldoch: Braniff invited people to roam the lounges. They had seven lounges in economy class on some planes.

Pasa: Flying was different then—more of an occasion.

Waldoch: It was happier then. The atmosphere was conducive to enjoying flight. The attendants of those times were encouraged to chat with you, to play cards.

Omelia: It was a social event, wasn't it? People dressed up to go on a flight.

Pasa: Then there are the different styles of attendant clothing. I couldn't quite believe it; it's a seven-decade dress parade.

Omelia: The fashions tell a story of their own. The original eight attendants hired by United in 1930 wore a cape with deep pockets. The first attendants changed into their nurse uniforms during flight.

Waldoch: They carried a wrench in one pocket to tighten the bolts holding the seats to the floor. They also carried train schedules, because planes were forced down so much in those days due to weather. It was part of their job to get the passengers to a train station.

Omelia: In the '40s, stewardess uniforms reflected high fashion. By the '60s, they were setting the fashion. Most major airlines used designers: Halston,

Lauren, Dior, Valentino, Blass.

Waldoch: Braniff was using Pucci to design its uniforms. It [the fashion] went ahead of what was on the ground.

Pasa: Tell me about getting the book published.

Omelia: We did a proposal to Collectors Press. They accepted it right away. Normally you have a year to work on a book on contract, but we were stalled by 9/11. So we revisited it.

Waldoch: This was serendipitous because Miramax had stalled its Gwyneth Paltrow movie [View From the Top], which is now out. There's a flurry of flight attendant films. *Catch Me if You Can* has Pan Am attendants. Paltrow flies on a mythical airline.

Pasa: So what's the future hold?

Waldoch: There are so many more of them now, the passengers. In the early days, there would be 20, 30 passengers on the plane. Now there are hundreds. New planes will hold almost 600 passengers. Training for this next round of flight attendants is going to include crowd control.

Pasa: What about bringing fun back to flying?

Waldoch: Airlines that promote the sense of flying, not just getting somewhere, will thrive. JetBlue and Southwest make flying an enjoyable experience for customers. The flight attendants are part of that. We tend to fly now with low expectations. If the flight attendant smiles at you, you smile back.

Omelia: Flight attendants are still the basis of the airlines. They're crucial. ◀



DETAILS

- ▼ *Come Fly With Us!*, book signing
- ▼ 1 p.m., Saturday, April 19, Borders Books & Music, 500 Montezuma Ave., 954-4707
- ▼ 1 p.m., Sunday, April 20, Borders Books & Music, 3513 Zafarano Drive, 474-9450
- ▼ www.comeflywithus.com