

A History of

INFLIGHT ENTERTAINMENT by John Norman White

THE PRE-BEGINNING ... MEDIA EVENTS

Controversy still exists today about the exact date when inflight entertainment was first introduced on an airplane. The fact is ... inflight "entertainment" for passenger enjoyment was not the prime motivation of the earliest air-borne presentations. As a matter of record, the term "inflight media event" is a much more accurate label to describe the purpose of the first onboard entertainment efforts. In an era when air travel was highly romanticized, the general public eagerly grasped every detail about the fledgling aviation industry. Clever ways of directing attention to this new industry abounded. Enterprising airlines, press agents, and public relations firms devised a number of events to take advantage of the public's unquenchable hunger for news concerning this exciting and glamorous new form of transportation.

The earliest validated instance of inflight movies took place in 1921 when Aeromarine Airways showed a movie promoting Chicago (HOWDY CHICAGO) to its passengers on a number of flights during the city's "Pageant of Progress." The flights departed from Chicago's Navy Pier and the 11-passenger Curtis F5L amphibian or hydroplane *Santa Maria* flew passengers around the area at low altitudes and 90 miles per hour. A screen was hung in the fore cabin, an electric light socket supplied power, and a DeVry suitcase projector was secured to a table in the aisle. As sightseeing passengers flew above Chicago, the city's highlights appeared on the movie screen. There were no concerns related to sound ... "talkies" were years in the future.

Another validated instance involved a Handley Page WWI bomber converted to commercial passenger use. The 12-passenger Imperial Airlines aircraft was fitted with a movie screen and the black and white silent film, *THE LOST WORLD*, was shown during a 30-minute flight that took off from an airfield near London. That took place in 1925. *Note: Segments of that classic old film can still be viewed on youtube.*

Early inflight entertainment included live singers, musicians, fashion shows, etc. All performances were designed to become media events within themselves, not specifically to entertain passengers. The press was invited, flash bulbs popped, and newspapers and magazines throughout the world held their readers in rapt fascination with news of these events in the sky. The presence of the steady drone of noisy aircraft engines did not affect the media's raving reviews of these early innovative forms of air-borne entertainment. In another instance, archival photographs from May 21, 1932, show an early television set receiving pictures aloft on a Western Air Express flight. The airplane was a Fokker F-10 and the presentation involved the young Hollywood starlet Loretta Young. One of the key engineers behind this dated event was none other than Mr. Herbert Hoover, Jr., the son of the then-US President.

Film showings were soon added as another onboard media event to attract attention to the growing industry. Records of the earliest films shown on aircraft are validated in airline archives around the world and date from the early 1930's. Early photos show a film projector set up in the aisle of the airplane, and the film projected on a home movie screen erected in the forward section of the cabin. One memorable BOAC (British Overseas Airways Corporation) photo from 1933 even shows a non-commercial type projector sitting on an antique wooden coffee table. Multiplex or hard-wired sound distribution systems were unheard of at that time, so the sound was blasted from strategically placed loudspeakers that matched the roaring propeller driving engines decibel for decibel.

In 1941 an early flight seeking to again capitalize on media coverage featured the premier of a now long forgotten movie epic and the "live" appearance of Veronica Lake, a Hollywood star known for her sultry aura and "peek-a-boo" hairstyle. This entertainment event was held during a special flight of a Navy cargo plane that circled New York City for three hours while the press was entertained, wined, and dined. News of this unique and exciting event added to the public's growing obsession with the developing airline industry.

In 1948, Pan American World Airways advertised "Movies 7,000 feet above the Atlantic". A special gimmick was devised to attract media coverage of the inflight presentation of the movie "Stagecoach". A team of horses pulling a stagecoach galloped up to the aircraft while it was waiting on the tarmac at Idlewild Airport (now JFK) and delivered a 16mm print of the movie. The press loved it! During the flight that followed, a projector was set up in the aisle, and the stewardesses ran the film and served refreshments during the changing of the reels. All the while, the piston engines were drowning out much of the movie's soundtrack (headphones were not yet being used behind the cockpit). Nevertheless, it was quite an event.

THE REAL BEGINNING

[Scene One] Along came a man whose name was David Flexer. He had a long time "movie-house" theatrical background, enjoyed movies, and understood the mechanics of projectors. He had a brilliant idea while he was making a transcontinental flight. Flexer thought that movies, presented professionally on an airplane, would be a wonderful way for passengers to enjoy a flight even more and reduce tedium in the process.

[Scene Two] At this time also, in classrooms and businesses across America, thousands of projectionists in the proverbial audio-visual clubs and departments rolled either Bell & Howell self-threading 16 mm projectors or Kodak Pageant projectors into classrooms and boardrooms. Bell & Howell had the edge because their projector grabbed a piece of film and drove it through an elaborate self-threading process. But sometimes, the front end of that film was "chewed up", and film libraries throughout the country were forever replacing the long leaders at the head of those films to compensate for the "chew-up" factor. The more adept projectionists in schools and company A/V departments were using the Kodak Pageant projectors. They were more complicated, had to be threaded manually, and a proper film tensioning loop had to be formed. However, those projectors were as "good as gold", and they worked very well.

[Return to Scene One] Flexer contracted with an engineering firm that studied the systems and decided that the basic works of the Kodak Pageant projector system were the best available. Flexer formed a company called Inflight Motion Pictures, Inc. and an aircraft projection system that adapted that Kodak projection mechanism and fit it into a shallow ceiling area of an aircraft interior was designed. To avoid the dilemma of changing three or four 16mm film reels during a movie presentation, all the film was spliced together and spooled onto a giant 26" diameter reels. Films were normally run in a vertical reel fashion, but the new system opted for a ceiling mounted horizontal feed and take-up reel system. The technique was ingenious, and it worked relatively well.

TWA was the first airline in the world to commit to Flexer's innovation. His (Flexer's) enthusiasm and salesmanship made it happen - even though it is rumored that his initial presentation to a group of TWA senior executives consisted solely of describing the concept as he stood next to a "soon to be revealed inflight projector" that consisted solely of a black-draped carton with a projector lens protruding from the empty box. Nevertheless, TWA truly walked away with the title of being the first airline in the world to show movies on regularly scheduled service. The jet era was then beginning. The Boeing 707 was flying with a number of carriers, the Douglas DC-8 and the speed champion Convair 880 were introduced by Delta and later adopted by many carriers - although General Dynamic's 880 was never a successful product and its main claim to fame relates to one of them later becoming Elvis Presley's private "Lisa Marie." These were heady times. Today, trivia and movie buffs alike confirm that in 1961 TWA was the first real exhibitor of inflight movies. That first movie was the relatively risqué (for that day) "By Love Possessed" starring Lana Turner and Efram Zimbalist, Jr. The official title to the first non-US carrier showing a regularly scheduled film onboard goes to Pakistan International. They began that service in May 1962.

Despite film breaks and mechanical problems, the Inflight Motion Pictures systems were working. Stories are told about unsuspecting mechanics who, while carrying the large, heavy, and cumbersome 30" diameter movie reels on and off the aircraft, were blown off the boarding stairs when high winds suddenly caught the oversized surfaces of the reel cases.

Nothing stirs the pot in the airline industry like competition. By this time black and white television was well established. American and Pan Am opted to install a video system by placing black and white TV monitors on their airplanes. Twenty or more monitors per aircraft were installed, and passengers viewed movies on this unique closed circuit system. This was an era far before the days of solid state circuit boards and light weight systems. Aviation fuel was cheap, and the commercial airline world hadn't really given a thought to such aviation buzz-words as "fuel-burn" and "weight-penalty". Because these systems were heavy, difficult to maintain, and because color television was becoming popular, it was a short-lived period.

One of the novel developments of the time was an American Airlines system that Bell & Howell was commissioned to produce. "Astrocolor" was a most unique system. This system involved a 30" reel of 16mm film that was stored in a forward cabinet and was threaded through a series of film monitors located throughout the airplane. There were twenty or more monitors on the airplane, and passengers saw the film image (and heard the sound) as it was projected through their nearest monitor. The film started out from the forward, starboard section of the airplane and followed a 260' path that involved six 90-degree turns. On some aircraft, the film trail approached three hundred feet. What this meant was that a first class passenger sitting in a seat on the port side would see scenes and hear sound 7 1/2 minutes after the passenger on the starboard side of the airplane had experienced it. It was marvelously innovative ... but it was also impractical and short-lived.

A NEWLY ESTABLISHED INDUSTRY

As the 1960's came to a close, inflight movies were becoming a way of commercial aviation life. In the United States, there were movies on American, TWA, Pan Am, United, Continental, National, Western, and Braniff. Eastern and Delta were much later entrants into the inflight movie arena. Internationally, movies were being shown on Pakistan International, Air France, China Air, Aerolineas Argentinas, Philippine, SAS, Swissair, and UTA.

The inflight movie business was growing, and airline passengers were enjoying this relatively new medium. It was becoming obvious to a few that money could be made in manufacturing and selling the systems and also in distributing the movies to the airlines while collecting a fee for each presentation. A multiplex sound (MUX) distribution system that permitted a single pair of wires to carry many channels of programming to a seat was developed, and a Passenger Control Unit (PCU) was becoming a common sight on the seats and armrests on larger aircraft. It is quickly read and quickly said but the importance of the "MUX" system and the development of the "PCU's" are major stories within themselves and were most critical to those early years of development. The pneumatic, stethoscope type headphone, consisting of flexible, vinyl tubing was commonplace, and, in addition to the movies, passengers were enjoying stereo music channels. The corporate name of AVID was very primary in those early years. It was all beginning to represent a possibly profitable new industry (although the profit potential for airlines remains questionable to this day). In Hollywood, there were more than a few studios that were becoming aware of this potentially new and remunerative market.

At this time, long before the acronym of IFE (Inflight Entertainment) was common, the acronym IMP (Inflight Motion Pictures) was frequently used. Their primary competition was the Avicom Division of Bell and Howell in Chicago. One of the young engineers at that company, Dick Bertagna, directed by his super salesman supervisor Bob Kitson, had been behind many of those innovative first moves into the new industry.

Pan Am and TWA were operating across the Atlantic, and both were showing movies. It was creating great concern among their competitors who were not showing movies. IATA. (International Air Transport Association) considered the growing complaints and eventually decided that movies could not be shown across the Atlantic. That ruling, however, was in conflict with restraint of trade legislation in the United States so the I.A.T.A. ruling was then amended to forbid the inclusion of movie costs in a passenger's fare ... thus was born the first movie charge for passengers who chose to watch the movie.

A TECHNOLOGICAL BREAKTHROUGH

The inflight entertainment industry was about to be "scooped". Several entrepreneurs in California decided not to be intimidated by Flexer in New York. His firm (IMP) had done an admirable job of introducing inflight movies onboard airplanes, but the cumbersome, large reels of 16mm film were a constant problem. Enter the much smaller format of Super 8mm film. A system of loading more compact 8mm film into a cassette was developed. Using it was easy and not too far removed from the ease of placing a video cassette into a slot and having a VCR play it. It was no longer necessary for aircraft mechanics or film technicians to come onboard an airplane at the conclusion of every flight and change those large film reels. The new California company worked out a much smaller projection system, and the simple, self-feeding, endless loop type cartridge revolutionized the industry. That company... known as Trans Com ... expanded greatly as a result of their innovative 8mm system introduced in 1971. With their 8mm system and, later, video systems, Trans Com became the largest suppliers of inflight entertainment hardware and programming to the world's airlines. In the early days of this company, Sundstrand Corporation had a major investment in Trans Com and, to protect that investment, they assigned one of their young bright corporate stars to lead that new enterprise. Enter onto the scene, a man who soon to become an icon in the young industry ... John Landstrom. One of the earliest and most astute things that Landstrom did was to lure Bob Kitson from Bell & Howell to Trans Com. The Landstrom/Kitson team soon created a major change in the business.

AUDIO ENTERTAINMENT

Prior to the introduction of regularly scheduled audio entertainment for airline passengers, there were many instances of the cockpit crew in a propeller driven aircraft tuning into a ground-based am radio station and piping that transmission into the passenger cabin. Major sporting events were the primary focus of that practice, but maintaining a local radio station's radio frequency was a short-lived thing as the airplane was soon to fly out of range. For a time, American Airlines' transcontinental passengers were treated to listening to a "Music In The Air" network broadcast as cockpit crews tuned into radio frequencies noted on a company supplied list. The music was transmitted to the passenger cabin as the airplane hopscotched its way across the country from one radio station's range into another's.

With the development of the "Mux" systems and the various IFE systems, the development of custom-programming and audio entertainment systems should also be mentioned. Airplane passengers enjoyed listening to music programs, and a host of new, relatively small music programming companies got into the IFE business. At the same time, the licensing companies of ASCAP, BMI, SESAC, and the Harry Fox Agency became involved. Around the world, other licensing

entities followed their lead. The pioneer audio entertainment company was John Doremus in Chicago (his name and personality were inseparable from his company name) and his mellifluous voice and entrepreneurial skills launched a new base of companies. Billboard/Music In The Air followed as did a grouping of other companies: Inflight Radio in London (later Inflight Productions), AEI in California, Horizon Audio Creations in Canada, HI Inflight in Australia, Trans Com in California, and a few others, some of which have since faded and been replaced by many others. Inflight audio programming became and remains an extremely creative and active IFE format.

A VIDEO REVOLUTION

Just as David Flexer was a pioneer, the individuals at Trans Com were innovators. Similarly, the entrepreneurs at Bell & Howell were anxious to expand into this new inflight entertainment area. They had already been working on those early systems in competition with Inflight Motion Pictures.

As time moved on, the aggressive personality of innovator Dick Bertagna was becoming stronger and stronger at Bell & Howell. The company worked out an arrangement with Panasonic (Matsushita) in Japan that resulted in the introduction of video players and projectors into the aircraft interior. The installation of new technology video systems represented as major a breakthrough for Inflight Entertainment as did the introduction of the jet aircraft into passenger travel. Incidentally, at this time in history, the acronym for inflight entertainment... "IFE"... was beginning to be established.

Film can be a very fragile thing. In those early days of IFE, stable, mylar based film didn't exist, and the problem of transporting a large reel of acetate film through a projector's transport mechanism and sound system was a major challenge. The technical challenges of making that 8mm self-fed cartridge system work were awesome. When video was introduced, the percentage of successful movie showings on the world's airline jumped from 70 and 80%, to 98 and 99%. Video projection systems could not compete with the color and brilliance of a light shown through 16mm or even 8mm film stock, but that was small price to pay for the flexibility presented by the video cassette. That flexibility ushered in the option of "Welcome Aboard" and "Safety" videos, "Duty Free" presentations, "customized Video Magazines", "Boarding" videos, and even ... for a few industrious carriers ... "Daily News." It laid the foundations for a wide range of creative and innovative programming. By the late 1970's, it was obvious to all that video was the wave of the future.

Bell & Howell in Chicago was a most conservative company and had less and less faith in the profitability of this new enterprise of inflight entertainment. Accordingly, entrepreneur Dick Bertagna obtained financial backing and bought Bell & Howell's Avicom division. The new "Avicom" was born, later to be purchased by Lockheed and later to be purchased by Hughes ... although it was almost purchased by Matsushita (but that's another story. An additional informational aside is that Rockwell Collins, a major contractor in the aviation and aerospace industry became entranced with the IFE industry in 1997 and, by the end of the year, purchased Avicom and discarded the name). Trans Com developed a competitive video system, and Inflight Motion Pictures, Inc. eventually went out of business. Video was taking over the industry (except for a number of cash-strapped airlines who continued to use their 8mm film systems until 8mm film was no longer available in the marketplace). In mid-2000, Rockwell Collins continued its growth spurt and purchased Trans Com (then Sony Trans Com) and that name also disappeared.

A VERY SMALL IDEA

In the early eighties, a creative businessman (Arn Steventon) with an engineering background, a pilot's license, and a partial ownership in a Los Angeles-based firm that specialized in aviation components was returning from the Boeing 757 rollout in Seattle. As he sat in his home-bound commercial flight and the movie played, his mind wandered, and he thought about the new, miniature liquid crystal diode (LCD)TV screen that was just being introduced into the consumer electronics market. He had recently been exposed to it at the annual Las Vegas Consumer Electronics show and he pondered the possibilities of putting that small screen into the aircraft seatback that he faced. At the time, it was a very small screen ... just 2.7 inches in diagonal measurement ... but Steventon was doggedly determined and pursued his concept. He eventually parlayed his idea into a small company that was later bought by much larger and richer firms. His company Airvision was purchased by Warner, then half sold to Philips, then all sold to Philips, then all sold to BE. His idea on that flight from Seattle generated the next major revolution in inflight entertainment ... the personal video screen. His "small" idea set the stage for the next major stepping stone in the inflight entertainment arena.

PERSONAL VIDEO

Most major commercial airlines throughout the world are now flying with fold-up, swing-out, or seatback mounted LCD video screens. Initially, there were two basic types of small screen systems. The difference between the two is that one small screen system involved a personal playback unit that permitted the passenger to insert a miniature video cassette of choice (of hi Band 8 format or, later, a DVD) and play it, stop it, reverse it, etc. at his or her discretion. The other system is a "distributed" system. A passenger has a personal screen and a tuning mechanism that affords dialing between a multitude of scheduled programs being broadcast from central playback systems. Movies can be viewed, instructional

tapes can be watched, and the passenger can select other programming options. Both systems involved advantages, but the distributed system's advantages of lesser weight and mechanical problems proved to be more popular. A major disadvantage to the distributed system was that passengers had to wait for the timing of a program's presentation.

Battery-powered Sony "Walkmans™", featuring a small LCD screen and playing hi Band 8 format tapes, was the "stop-gap" response competitive pressures used by some airlines while they bided time and delayed the decisions of installing the promised, soon-to-be-perfected, expensive hard-wired systems. It can also be said ... while they waited for engineering to catch up with marketing. Handheld hi Band 8 tape players, usually replaced later by portable DVD players, represented a stop gap measure used by many carriers. These personal players have proved to be popular with some airlines because they allowed the carrier to provide a wide variety of programming to their premium class passengers without investing in the much more expensive AVOD systems.

Those problems were addressed by "video on demand" (VOD). Video on demand is a digitally based system that involves a playback of programming in digital bit format (rather than the normal analog style) and, when the inflight passenger presses a button, a small "black box" beneath the seat begins to gather digital bits of the desired program. Within a very short time, those digital bits gather into the program and the passenger enjoys the program of choice. That includes starting, pausing, etc. VOD, long in development but eventually successful operation, is now commonplace in the IFE industry. VOD addressed the disadvantages of the distributed video systems and added the advantages of the personally controlled systems ... without the weight and mechanical problems of those systems. Although most industry experts would agree that the AVOD (Audio, Video on Demand) systems were introduced to the industry prematurely, the reliability of those digital systems became established. IFE hardware suppliers expended millions of research and development finances into the development and refinement of AVOD but it now stands as one of the very few and, probably, the single most outstanding example of an IFE development that led, rather than followed, the consumer electronics industry. It has become standard fare in homes, hotels, hospitals, and much more. In this instance, IFE was followed rather than led. It's virtually impossible to fully describe the revolution that emerging digital technology brought to the aviation and IFE industry.

Digital systems are now commonplace throughout the industry. Digital content has replaced analog tapes and, in doing so, caused more than a few tape duplication firms (and film duplicators to close their doors. Content duplication represented a substantial revenue stream for many years but it has now been replaced by digital bits transferred to the airplane from a hard drive or by satellite feed

More recently, personal digital IFE players utilizing an internal server with a capacity for numerous movies, audio and custom short-subject programming became available to passengers. First flown on Alaska Airlines in 2003, the handheld "digEplayers™" represented an innovative solution for carriers not committed to hardwired IFE systems. Developed by Alaska Airlines' employee and consummate entrepreneur Bill Boyer, the digEplayers introduced by Boyer's firm APS (Airline Protective Systems) was soon duplicated by other firms and spread throughout the industry. The units can be reasonably ranked as forerunners of the more contemporary Apple iPads™ and similar, ubiquitous digital tablets of today.

A VARIETY OF NEW OPTIONS

An abundance of innovative options now exist for passenger use on modern aircraft. Very sophisticated software programs have been developed that are linked to the inertial guidance systems in the aircraft cockpit. On the main cabin screen or on a personal screen, passengers can observe their airplane's relative location on the globe and can receive reference information about their relative flight speed, outside temperatures, elapsed time since take-off, etc. Exterior mounted cameras can also provide live, inflight images. As time has progressed, the sophistication and quality of those ground map images has been progressively enhanced.

USA Today Sky Radio pioneered broadcasting live news and sports from a studio in Arlington, Virginia. This specialized programming was uplinked to a ku-band satellite that broadcasted a wide "footprint". Equipped Delta, Northwest, and United aircraft picked up those satellite signals, and passengers received "live" audio programming. USA Today discontinued that operation but the concept has now returned in the form of live audio and video broadcasting and is now a reality and available from several suppliers. Watch the Olympics, the World Cup, or the SuperBowl live? It's already happened and it is commonplace. Satellite-beamed live programming has become popular in North America but satellite footprints and quagmire of licensing entanglements still restrict global broadcasting.

Commercial "spot" emplacements were long ago developed for integration into video programs presented by airlines. The revenue that this commercial time generates offsets the costs that airlines are incurring for many of their new amenities. Most airlines in the world utilize some form of commercial sponsorship.

Noise cancellation technology came into military aircraft cockpits in the late 1980's and has now become standard equipment in commercial and private jet cockpits around the world. Now, that technology is entered passenger cabins and passengers on a number of airlines have the luxury of using that premium amenity to listen to movies, audio programming, or just to "listen" to silence on noise reduction headsets while they read, work, or sleep. Currently, research is being done on using noise cancellation technology to establish "zones of silence" in areas of the cabin ... or throughout the entire airplane.

The inflight phone systems, first provided across the United States in 1984 by Airfone (later evolving into Verizon), were expanded with the addition of AT&T Wireless and Inflight Phone Corp. - which has since bowed out. Satellite technology is thrusting those firms, as well as British Telecom's Sky Phone, into the forefront. Worldwide telephony, in digital format, is no longer imminent, it's here but the profitability of those ventures is in question. Early inflight telephony and inflight faxes did not prove to be popular with many passengers because of expense and technical difficulties. Today's passengers, however, are able to use their personal cellular phones inflight and that has significantly changed the market. The airplane no longer remains an area of solitude - because incoming phone calls are also becoming commonplace. An incoming phone call ... at the passenger's discretion ... can even be linked to a conference call. Inflight access to e-mail, an aircraft-contained "intranet", and the internet has also been common and WiFi equipped aircraft are now taken for granted by many passengers. They can use their smart phones to send short messages (SMS) and their laptop computers to stay linked to their businesses, send e-mails to friends, or surf the web and download items of their choice.

WHERE IS IT ALL HEADING?

Much of what's happening in the areas of inflight entertainment is being driven by very sophisticated ...and very expensive ... technology. In today's leading-edge systems, a passenger can sit in a seat, watch one of dozens or over a hundred movies on demand, select audion programming of choice from hundreds of availabilities, and scan the menu or beverage listing. He can view the duty-free merchandise selections, look at the duty-paid merchandise listings, etc., and be able to press several buttons, "swipe" a credit card through a built-in unit, and order whatever he or she desires. Hotel or rental car reservations made in advance from the aircraft seat? No problem. Have a desire to call up a diagram of the airport where the flight will be landing? No problem. Up front, there will be a CD ROM or Digital Video Disc (DVD) unit or/and a large capacity server that will connect a passenger with any airport on the system. Many envisioned the time when major entertainment or informational media would no longer be manually carried onboard. Rather, the media could be downloaded from a satellite directly into a file server. No longer a vision, it's already common practice. The recent introduction of hand held, personal players and servers have provided a new option to some carriers and the units are finding their way into premium and main cabins, powered by their battery-paks, or by inseat power ... power intended originally only as a convenience for laptop computer users. Originally introduced in low voltage dc format, 110 ac inseat power is the newer standard. To some, all this technology is mind-boggling. Digital compression, video on demand, live broadcasting, worldwide telephony ... it's either here or just around the corner. Most of it is already here.

Along the way, a big question has been, "Just who is going to pay for all of this?" Are passengers going to be willing to pay for this sophisticated hardware and technology? Cost figures for equipping an A380, a 747 or a 787 with an IFE system and all the "bells & whistles" involve many millions - an expense that senior airline executives of years ago could not even begin to imagine. IFE has become, following the airframe itself and the engines, the third greatest cost of a modern commercial jet. Are the airlines going to be able to pay for it all? In years past, there were some vendors that promoted "inflight gaming" (a euphemism for gambling) as a way to cover all expenses. Several companies tested their gaming systems on major carriers, but returns dictated that gaming was not the "Holy Grail" first portended. The gaming firms departed for more fertile grounds. Broadband satellite time is relatively expensive. Will passengers be willing to pay for that? Many have been reluctant to pay for the convenience of inflight telephony. Many of the business models based on highly optimistic suppositions have proven to be wrong. Throughout the history of IFE, it has been a constant truth that airline passengers expect virtually as easy an access to IFE as they have to those options in their home - and at about the same or no cost.

The commercial airline industry has always been cyclical. The airline economy pendulum swings to cycles of booming economy and under capacity and then, through periods of over capacity and horrendous financial problems. Few industries are as instantly reactive to the economy. The industry's most recent cycle began in 2000 and was exacerbated by "9/11". Billions have been lost since then and a slow recovery predicted. Some of the world's largest carriers have hemorrhaged and questioned survival. Some are no more. Quite naturally, it has had a major impact on IFE. Research and development has been severely curtailed at many companies. The period has, however, permitted some suppliers to "catch-up" with their proposed product line and many hardware items are becoming more robust. There are also carriers that have opted to look toward global passenger growth. They have made major commitments to new aircraft and new IFE systems.

The long ago "first" of IFE ... that 1921 silent film showing above Chicago ... was introduced almost a century ago. The first validated IFE presentation on TWA in 1961 ... half a century ago. That first video projection system ... about a quarter-century ago ... same thing with inflight telephony . The pace of change continues and it accelerates. In the near future, in this age of oncoming "virtual reality", will it be possible for a "cramped" coach passenger to be able to put on a headset and visualize him or herself in a 42" wide aircraft seat with 6 feet of legroom? Will it be possible for passengers to feel they are seated in the center of a symphony orchestra listening to those sounds ... or perhaps, standing in the center of a soccer or football field, ready to run the ball? Will noise cancellation technology create that "zone of silence" throughout the entire passenger cabin?

The IFE industry has come a long way since Mr. Flexer's first showing of "By Love Possessed." It is a certainty that the chronicle of IFE history will continue.

THE WAEA EMERGES

As an appropriate footnote, it should also be mentioned, as a valid part of IFE history, that in 1979, a number of vendors and airlines felt that the emerging industry could be well served by a formal association. The goal of the association would be to serve as an open forum and to enhance communication between all members. Cindy Tarver of Billboard/Music In The Air, marshaled a group of supporting vendors and airlines. They planned a conference that was held in Palm Springs, California, and it was most successful. It laid the framework for an international association of airlines and vendors and became known as the Airline Entertainment Association. At that first grouping, an informal assemblage designated Claus Jensen of Thai International to be their first Chairman and Topper Van Avery of Western Airlines to be the first President.

Months later, John Doremus in Chicago hosted an all day meeting to hash out the Bylaws for the newly formed group. Unofficially, months before at that first Palm Springs meeting, the grouping got together and planned an organization. Officially, on that day in Chicago, the Airline Entertainment Association, the AEA, was born.

Several years later, in 1985, in an attempt to recognize the international nature of the organization, the AEA, the Airline Entertainment Association voted to change its name to the WAEA, the World Airline Entertainment Association. The association's name was radically revised in 2010 and became the Airline Passenger Experience Association (APEX) in recognition of the increasingly expanded scope and prominence of the industry. Since its founding, the association has remained a singular and unique proscenium for the airlines of the world and the suppliers to this industry that provide passengers with service, communication, and entertainment.

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The foregoing treatment of the history of inflight entertainment represents only a very broad and general look at its development. Many individuals and firms have not been included because of the brevity of the article. The history of IFE is the history of many dedicated and far-visioned people. Many individuals have contributed to this article and, with apologies to my exclusions, a few of the contributors include: Dick Bertagna, Dinny Clark, Don Clark, Katherine Danielson, Ken Li Donnici, Everett Hall, Steve Harvey, Mario Irizarry, Bob Kitson, John Landstrom, Daniel Kusrow, Tony Latessa, John McMahon, R. R. Norris, Michael Pierry, Andres Sierra, Arn Steventon, Cindy Tarver, Ron Van Camp, and Lonnie Weber. We solicit any corrections to statements made in error.

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