

## Frontier: Memories of 'The Boomer Airline'

Bob Schulman

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Photo courtesy of Jake Lamkins, FAL-1.tripod.com

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Coach passengers enjoy first-class legroom and fold-down center seat (if not occupied) for added elbow room.

No, there's no mistake. The jet – a Boeing 737-200 – carried as many as 124 passengers on other airlines. But this carrier has just 98 seats in the same kind of plane, and all in coach. Their ads call this “First-class comfort at coach prices.”

Later in the flight, the passengers ooh and ahh as the flight attendants set up their trays for the meal service. There's real silverware, fine crystal glasses and crisp linen napkins.

Next comes the big eye-popper: when the flight attendants lift the foil off the meals. There – on chinaware, no less – is a mouth-watering double entree of char-broiled steak and lobster. And topping it all off is a bottle of imported Mateus wine.

(On this airline's other flights the entree might have been veal and lasagna... or Eggs Benedict... or Beef Wellington... or Monte Cristo sandwiches... or ice cream sundaes... or Apple Pie in the Sky.)

And it was all free. And in coach!

The airline was the original Frontier Airlines (no relation to the modern-day Frontier). Based in Denver, it was born in 1946 along with the first wave of baby boomers at the end of World War II.

Frontier, at first named Monarch Airlines, was one of two dozen “local service” airlines created by Uncle Sam to handle a huge upswing in regional air travel in the roaring post-war economy.

Monarch changed its name to Frontier a few years later when it absorbed two of the other new kids on the block. Their combined routes – mostly short hops flown with war surplus DC-3 “gooneybirds” -- stretched out to 40 cities in seven states.

Like the early boomers, Frontier grew up over the next 25 years. It painted its colors on yet another airline, enlarged its route network to 94 cities and swapped its small propeller planes for jets.

In 1971, under a new management team, the airline debuted what turned out to be a winning marketing philosophy: “Run on time, tell passengers the truth and give them better service than they expect from an airline.” From this came the 10-year-long “golden era” of Frontier, when its customers enjoyed comfy legroom and all the other perks they never expected from an airline.

The good times (they were good for Frontier, too) came to an end in the shockwaves of airline deregulation, when in Congress' zest to free the skies for competition it also unleashed the multi-billion-clout of the big airlines against the little guys. Guess who won?

A last look back: All told, Frontier carried 87 million passengers 49 billion miles with but one passenger fatality, a safety record hailed as the best in the industry during that 40-year span. At its peak, Frontier's routes stretched out from Denver to just about every major city in the U.S. and across the borders to popular destinations in Canada and Mexico.

And its inflight service – from its extra legroom to its steak and lobster entrees -- has become an enduring legend among veteran travelers.

Disclosure: The writer was a public relations executive for the former Frontier and a vice president and co-founder of the “new” Frontier. Unless otherwise noted the photographs are from his personal archives.