

## **AirSpace Transcript Season 9 Episode 8: Limited Edition**

**Emily:** I'm sorry, I don't think I've grown out of getting a pair of fake captain's wings.

**Matt:** No? Okay.

*AirSpace theme in the under*

**Matt:** Welcome to AirSpace from the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum. I'm Matt.

**Emily:** And I'm Emily. Back in the day, airlines gave you all kinds of things on planes that you could then take home as a souvenir of your flight experience. Playing cards, little toys, captain's hats for the kiddos, and more.

**Matt:** Today, that's not really so much of a thing, and that has to do a lot with changes in the airline industry in the late 1970s. However, there are still a few holdouts that either offer you cool stuff, or will give it to you if you ask for it.

**Emily:** We asked for it, and we'll tell you all about it today on AirSpace.

*AirSpace theme up and out*

**Emily:** Matt, I don't always think of free stuff as memorabilia, but I suppose it can be. What's the coolest free thing you ever got?

**Matt:** You know, I can't think of anything that I've gotten for free.

I mean, I have a lot of memorabilia here in my office, mainly stuff that I've bought off of eBay because I have a terrible eBay habit, but a lot of the stuff that I've bought is stuff that you could have gotten free back in the day. So like, I have a whole drawer full of typewriter ribbon tins<sup>1</sup> that were these little advertising tins that you got for free every time you bought a new typewriter ribbon.

The ribbon came inside of the tin and you would keep the tin you'd put your paperclips or whatever else in it and then when you needed a new typewriter ribbon you would remember that brand and you'd go back and get another and maybe they had changed the tin design by then or they had another one so you could sort of start to collect them and put them around your office.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.ebay.com/sch/i.html?\\_from=R40&\\_nkw=typewriter+ribbon+tins&\\_sacat=0](https://www.ebay.com/sch/i.html?_from=R40&_nkw=typewriter+ribbon+tins&_sacat=0)

Now, they don't do that anymore. They stopped doing that back in the 1960s. So I have to get them off of eBay, which is a stupid habit that my wife completely hates. But I now have like, I don't know, 40 or 50 of these typewriter ribbon tins of all different designs. The ones I like especially are the ones that either have space themes or they have aircraft on them. So I have a big collection of air and space themed typewriter ribbon tins and yeah, it's completely useless, but it's beautiful old memorabilia that you used to get for free

**Emily:** So, what I'm hearing, Matt, is that maybe you and I are going to have to compare collections and office swag at some point because I don't have a niche collection like you do, um, but I have started collecting Barbies since our Barbie episode and everything else is just random space themed stuff that I decided was cool and brought to work and put in my office. So maybe we'll have to do an episode that's just all of our space memorabilia that we have collected, and, uh, at least you're lucky. You have two full sized offices, one at home and one at work. That is a lot of typewriter tins.

**Matt:** Still there's never enough room.

**Emily:** So what we're talking about today, what we're defining as memorabilia is something that's collectible that you get for free. Not all memorabilia, as you well know, Matt, you and eBay.

It's not free always, but it maybe used to be free. Um, and so we might say free with quotation marks because you didn't necessarily get it by handing over money. It's kind of a perk that you got.

**Matt:** Yeah, I think in today's terminology you might think of this stuff as like swag, right? It's the giveaway. It's the free thing that the company gives you so that you remember them and keep coming back.

**Emily:** It turns out there isn't just a database or, you know, a niche collector's website where we were able to look up every volume of trading cards or playing cards that were being distributed by certain airlines during a certain period of time.

And so, there's a lot of stuff we don't know about because we don't know we don't know about it. No, we know we don't know about it, but because we don't know about

**Matt:** You've got your known knowns, you known unknowns, and then your unknown unknowns, and

**Emily:** this is kind of like a known unknown in that we know that there's a lot of stuff we don't know about. Is that, is that what you're

**Matt:** Yeah. Yeah. There's a lot of stuff that we know we don't know, and then there's stuff that we don't even know we don't know. Yeah,

**Emily:** Exactly. So, dear listener, please help us. If you've ever gotten something really cool when flying on an airplane or you have a family member who was flying in the, you know, 50s, 60s, 70s that maybe got something really cool and they still have it. Let us know. Our DMs<sup>2</sup> are open @airspacepod<sup>3</sup>. We want to hear about it and we definitely want pics

**Matt:** Yeah, but to find out what we do know about this memorabilia, we talked to one of our, um, in house historians, one of our curators, our colleague, Bob Van der Linden<sup>4</sup>.

**Bob:** I'm Bob Van der Linden. I'm the curator of air transportation at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum.

First off, we do have a good collection of it, but I don't and never have in the many decades I've been here deliberately tried to collect that. But a lot of it is, um, you know, it's personal interest stuff, popular culture stuff, you know, swizzle sticks, things like that.

When I get a collection in, say for a Pan Am uniform or something like that, and they, some of that comes along with it, we'll take it, but I don't actively collect it.

**Matt:** We're talking about airline memorabilia. So of course we're talking about airlines and what airlines were doing back in the early days of commercial aviation into the 1960s and 70s to make themselves known to the customers, the paying customers. So they were giving things to passengers as mementos of their flights as a way to keep passengers entertained and engaged and keep the name of that airline, you know, sort of on the top of the mind of that consumer, because back in those days, they didn't have that many ways to compete for customers. They weren't allowed to try to undercut each other with lower fares.

**Emily:** Well, in addition to really trying to gain recognition for a brand and create the mystique around airline travel and get folks excited about it, memorabilia was also a way for people, the customers to really remember their trips and maybe show off to their

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/airspacepod/?hl=en>

<sup>3</sup> <https://x.com/AirSpacePod>

<sup>4</sup> <https://airandspace.si.edu/people/staff/bob-van-der-linden>

friends a little bit, um, especially in a time when it wasn't super common for people to be traveling by airplane. Um, and so it was a little bit of a flex.

**Bob:** Air travel was seen as very romantic<sup>5</sup> and it was obtainable, but not without some expense. So it was somewhat exclusive. So if you were flying, you were seen as being least upper middle class, something like that, but it was an event.

Flying was an event for the longest time and something worth remembering. So these little, trinkets, whatever, helped very much in you remembering or brought the kids along, them remembering their trip. And again, it was good marketing. But it was a, not everyone could, could, could afford to fly. And it was a big deal.

As I said, you know, people will go to the airport not to get on the airplane, but to watch airplanes come in and go out because, uh, even by the, you know, by the fifties and sixties, not everyone had flown. I mean, today. It's estimated that over 80 percent of the population has flown.

**Matt:** Right. I mean, today we talk about flying in airplanes and it can be sometimes sort of a fun experience, but most of the time you're just trying to get from A to B and it's kind of become so routine that we don't really think of the kind of incredible thing that's happening, that you are up in the sky, moving from one city to another very quickly.

Instead, we think about all of the hassles involved in getting to the airport, going through security, getting on the airplane and everything right, that you have to pay for as you're going through that process. And you are this captive consumer going through the travel process.

But back in the day, it was a little bit more romantic and people actually not only wanted to get on planes. They wanted to go and watch planes take off and land. There is still a small subset of people who like to watch planes take off and land. And I'm not going to lie. It is a fun thing to watch, but it's not something that a lot of us go out of our way to go and do anymore.

**Emily:** I mean, maybe you and I go and do it, Matt. There's a place here near, um, National Airport<sup>6</sup> where you can go bring an amazing picnic and the planes fly right over your head, um, when they're both taking off and landing. And it is a really fun experience and I've definitely done it more than once. When it's a beautiful day out, it's exactly the place you want to be.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/1197960905?ft=nprml&f=1197960905>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.virginia.org/listing/gravelly-point/6559/>

But beyond that, air travel has become so common that it's not the event that it used to be, right? It wasn't, oh my gosh, we have to get dressed up and we're going to have this, like, five star meal, and have this amazing experience. Airlines were structured really differently, and these little trinkets, these little things that they were giving away to passengers was really a way that airlines tried to set themselves apart from different competitors, much in the way we see in the retail market these days.

**Bob:** Almost all these objects had branding on them. You know, if you've got a set of playing cards, it had TWA on it. It was to remind you where you were and who you had flown with.

And also once you got off the airplane, you'd show these things to other people. They say, 'Oh, look, Hey, you flew United, American, whatever.' It's all part of branding and marketing because that. You want to entice people onto the airplane, but before deregulation, which was in late 1978<sup>7</sup>, the airlines were not allowed to compete on price. Prices for all the flights were fixed by the government, by the Civil Aeronautics Board.

**Emily:** But in 1978, the government passed a set of laws that deregulated airlines, allowing them to start setting their own prices for the first time, which really opened up a market that kind of hadn't been there before in the same way, because rather than trying to entice people with all of these amenities and experiences, airlines were now able to lower their fees in a way where they could use that as a way of trying to entice folks onto their airplanes.

**Bob:** And that just sort of opened the floodgates when it came to air travel<sup>8</sup>. It also allowed you as a passenger, uh, to be a savvy customer. So you can shop around for the best price. After deregulation, all these different factors that came in and it's, you know, it's mind numbing how many different permutations of a ticket price you can get.

You ask anybody on an airliner today, uh, what they paid for their flight. And almost guaranteed, everyone paid a different fare, high, low, somewhere in between, but it was different because they wanted to go to a different time. They were booked at a different time. They want certain amenities or didn't want certain amenities so on and so forth.

But now it's up to you as the shopper to look for the most affordable seat. If that's what you're interested in, you couldn't do that beforehand.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://airandspace.si.edu/stories/editorial/airline-deregulation-when-everything-changed>

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<https://hls.harvard.edu/today/airline-deregulation-may-be-why-flying-is-such-a-miserable-part-of-holiday-travel/>

**Matt:** Right. And I can say from my experience, I was born in 1976, so just before deregulation kind of, you know, went into effect. It didn't go away overnight. Like I remember getting playing cards. I remember getting, you know, the little wing pins that you could put on that had the airlines logo on it, and you could kind of, as a kid, pretend that you had been part of the flight crew or whatever on, on that particular flight that made it kind of fun as a kid to fly.

You know, I remember my first flights were kind of a big deal. I liked it. And I didn't realize that it went away because I grew out of it and didn't realize kids weren't getting it anymore until we did this episode.

**Emily:** I didn't fly as a kid, so I didn't know that was a thing that kids got on airplanes because I didn't really start flying frequently until I was an adult. We just didn't fly anywhere.

Like, we didn't travel. If we couldn't get there in our minivan, we weren't going, right? Um, so I had no idea that this was a thing. I always saw little kid things being distributed on planes, but mostly it was for the purposes of making sure that that child remained entertained from before they started boarding that plane until after they deplaned for the comfort of not only the child but for the comfort of the rest of the passengers.

**Bob:** All of that was just to keep everybody happy. Uh, especially, you know, the airplanes in the 50s, they were piston engines. So, um, the flights were a good deal longer than, uh, jet travel. So you had to entertain the passengers, particularly the children, and there were no movies and that sort of other types of entertainment on it. So it was up to mom and dad and the flight and the cabin crew to keep the kids happy. And this is one way they did it.

Of course, you know, you could also, as a kid, go up front and visit the pilots in the cockpit and they give you a little hat and the pins, you know, you're a little junior pilot. You actually sat up there and quote-unquote 'helped fly the airplane.' Well, yeah, that day's long gone, but, uh, that did happen and quite a lot. I think a lot of, a lot of kids became interested in aviation that way and wanted to become airline pilots because of that.

**Matt:** Yeah, and today that I think falls more on the parents than it used to fall on the cabin crew because now all the kids are traveling with their iPads and their snacks and everything like I've seen parents on flights the last few flights I've gone on and it's like they have to pack a whole little entertainment center for their kids in order to keep them busy for the three or four hours from point A to point B.

So it's definitely a changed expectation, both in terms of what the airline is going to provide and what the kid really is going to want. And the same is true for adults, too, right? We're all carrying around phones and iPads and computers, and we can just sit down and watch a television show, watch a movie.

The airlines are now providing us with Wi Fi on the flight so that we can connect and watch whatever they've got in their system, or we can pay extra and we can have full internet. So like, we're not so much in need of a deck of cards anymore as we might have been in the 70s or 80s.

**Emily:** And all of that is a big part of why I think a lot of airlines are no longer offering these little mementos or these little trinkets to their passengers.

**Matt:** Or they're at least not handing it out to everyone, sort of, you know, willy-nilly as they come on the plane. You might get a hand wipe and a package of peanuts or pretzels, but you're not going to get, you know, some cool swag. Unless, you ask for it. So there are still some airlines that will give you things if you ask them.

For example, there are trading cards that you can get for some of the airplanes that are in the different airlines fleets, but we've found out you have to actually ask the captain, not while you're flying, but you know, maybe once you've landed when the captain or co-pilot are standing there at the door of the plane saying goodbye to you as they often do you can ask them for a little something to remember your flight.

**Emily:** And our producer, Jen, did the hard work for us. She tested this out. Jen was recently on a Delta flight<sup>9</sup>. And what she did is she waited until everybody was deplaning at their destination. And she asked the flight attendant if they had any trading cards and Jen was directed to go talk to the pilots. Now this isn't on every airline, but

**Matt:** Delta is not alone in offering these trading cards. We know that United<sup>10</sup> does it as well. And we don't know if any other airline is also doing it because like we said, we have a limited experience of this type of memorabilia and we want to know if any of you have received anything like that from another airline.

And aside from when you're traveling in the air, if you go to an air show, you might also be able to pick up some cool airline swag. So our social media manager, Amy, who we always note in the credits actually got a really cool Team USA<sup>11</sup> airplane trading card in honor of the Paris Olympics from a Delta booth at an air show recently.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.woodbywright.com/delta-airlines-cards>

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.reddit.com/r/unitedairlines/comments/185m02j/united\\_trading\\_cards/](https://www.reddit.com/r/unitedairlines/comments/185m02j/united_trading_cards/)

<sup>11</sup> [https://www.reddit.com/r/delta/comments/1e42tnc/team\\_usa\\_trading\\_card/](https://www.reddit.com/r/delta/comments/1e42tnc/team_usa_trading_card/)

So we don't know how generally available these cards are, but if you do find yourself near a Delta booth sometime soon. Go and ask, cause it can't ever hurt to ask, right?

**Emily:** I mean, I think it can never hurt to ask politely.

**Matt:** Politely, I, yeah, don't make demands. Never make demands.

There are also, you know, the things that you can get for your kids. They're still giving out the pins. Again, it's only if you ask for them.

**Emily:** If you know of any other airline that is giving out trading cards or you've come across anything recently that maybe isn't a trading card. We want to know about it. We want to see pictures of the cool things that you got, um, especially if you're one of the lucky people who gets to fly first class because rumor has it, Matt, there's some cool stuff in first class.

We have heard that if you fly KLM in first class, they serve gin in these teeny tiny little Delft houses<sup>12</sup>. And Delft is a blue and white porcelain. And KLM comes out with a new design every year of this little tiny house that has gin inside of it, which sounds like all of the lovely things wrapped up in a cool package. And apparently the designs of these little buildings are of real buildings in the Netherlands.

And one of our summer interns, Charlotte let us know that people in the Netherlands will actually have collections of these little blue and white houses in their windows as kind of a niche status symbol, which is very, to me, kind of like throwback to how the early days of airline memorabilia was kind of this little like niche quiet luxury – is that what we're calling it? – kind of symbol kind of showing off your airline experience in the way before times, we're talking about it being a status symbol because you were traveling by air. And nowadays with these little Delft houses, it's a status symbol in that not because you were flying in on an airplane, but because you were flying in first class.

**Matt:** And I think KLM has really leaned into the Delft thing there because it was back in 2019, so I don't know if this is still the case now, but when I flew KLM in 2019, their flight safety video was done in basically like stop motion, Delft China. It was beautiful. Beautiful!

**Emily:** Stop it Matt, that's so cool. I think we had to, I think we watched that when we were talking about airplane safety videos<sup>13</sup>. Um, but you're right, KLM has really leaned

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.klm.com/information/travel-class-extra-options/houses>

<sup>13</sup> <https://airandspace.si.edu/stories/editorial/airspace4ep8>



into it too because, they actually have an app where you can track and learn about all of the designs they've done, and they've so far done 104 of them.

But if you're like us, who can't afford lots of first class tickets to build our collection, Matt, we always have eBay.

**Matt:** Yeah, we're really stuck with what we see, you know, when we're out in the world and when we go to these airline events that we occasionally go to, one of the coolest things I've seen is the little rubber duck that Lufthansa<sup>14</sup> gives out to its first class passengers. And some of these have fun outfits. I think the one that I saw was dressed up as a flight attendant and some of them just say Lufthansa first class on them.

Um, and you can buy these on eBay, like almost everything you can buy it on eBay. But, you know, the true, uh, collector, I suppose, would be the one who actually flies first class and gets the thing as not just a collection of a thing, but the collection of an experience.

*AirSpace theme up then under*

**Matt:** AirSpace is from the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum.

It's produced by Jennifer Weingart and mixed by Tarek Fouda. Production help by Erika Novak and Sofia Soto Sugar. Our social media manager is Amy Stamm.

For additional content, photos, and more, follow AirSpacePod on Instagram and Twitter, or sign up for our monthly newsletter using the link in the show notes.

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<sup>14</sup> <https://lufthansaflyer.boardingarea.com/lufthansa-first-class-duck-gallery/>