

QueerSpace Episode 1 - Fly the Friendly Skies

Music in and under

Erin: Hello! And welcome to QueerSpace, a project from the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum, from the people who usually bring you AirSpace.

Sofia: And I'm Sofia from the National Air and Space Museum, and my pronouns are she/her.

Erin: And I'm Erin, from The Story Collider. My pronouns are she/they.

Sofia: We're working on the next season of AirSpace as we speak, but today, we're excited to launch this limited series featuring people and stories that have been historically and intentionally ignored at the intersection of aviation, space, and LGBTQ+ history and culture.

With QueerSpace, we're focusing on queer stories as ones that challenge the norm or binary. While any of these stories would be at home in a regular AirSpace season, we're putting these episodes together in a limited series to highlight the scope and diversity of queer experiences found across human flight and space science.

Erin: I'm so excited to get started, are you ready?

Sofia: Ready

Music up and out

Erin: For this first episode, we're going back to the 1970s with a story about flight attendants and community building. Sofia, what pops in your head when you think about flight attendants?

Sofia: They're always super poised, they're very safe, definitely very strong from closing all those overhead bins and I feel like they're sometimes even funny. I love, I love when they make little jokes

Erin: Yes, definitely all of those things. And when we think about the stereotypical gender of a flight attendant some people might think of women, and that's true of about 75% of cabin crews today. This story gets into a bit of the history as to why this became the norm.

Sofia: Yeah, so the stereotype and statistics show us that the modern flight attendant is a woman, but that hasn't always been the case.

Very early on in commercial aviation all stewards, as they were known then, were men. It was in the late 30s, then into the 40s and 50s that nurses specifically and then women more generally started getting hired, then women slowly came to dominate the profession.

Over the decades, being a stewardess, as they were known then, was seen as a glamorous profession for young women to have grand adventures before they settled down to be wives and mothers.

But through the history of commercial aviation, flight attendants have almost always been both men and women.

Phil Tiemeyer: So we've got this really interesting, textured, complex history of what was always a gender-integrated flight attendant corp and has always been misunderstood as sort-of mono-sexual or mono-gendered.

Phil: My name is Phil Tiemeyer, I'm associate professor of history at Kansas State University back in 2014 I authored the book 'Plane Queer: Labor, Sexuality and AIDs in the History of Male Flight Attendants.'

Erin: So now we're in the 1950s, and most people aren't flying yet. Airfare is expensive and flying is seen as both a luxury and kind of dangerous. Then, a couple things happen.

First, most of the flying public at this point are rich men flying for business. And they like young, pretty women waiting on them.

Also, the women that do fly, do so with their families and are often in charge of making travel arrangements for the trips, and if women don't see themselves in the air, they won't fly. So for them, seeing the women flight attendants can put their minds at ease.

Sofia: And also as planes get safer, flying starts to feel like a little home in the sky, and the flight attendant's job is to serve the passengers and make them feel more comfortable.

Airline executives start to feel like passengers will be uncomfortable seeing young, fit, white men in a servile position. This is one of the many places in the history of commercial aviation where you see societal race and gender roles really coming into play.

Erin: And airlines realize that because of societal norms, and sexism, they can have more control over women flight attendants and pay them less. So they start hiring more women, and fewer men.

Sofia: Then in Miami in 1954 an Eastern Airlines Steward named William Simpson was murdered in a robbery that had gone wrong. It came out in court, and in the press, that William's murderers had singled him out to rob because he was gay.

Erin: And since William was a flight attendant, and was definitely not the only gay flight attendant at Eastern, or any other airline, the stereotype that all stewards were gay spread. And the airlines did not like that. So the practice of hiring women to be flight attendants became a policy at a lot of airlines out of fear of negative press.

And for about 20 years, those policies stood.

Phil: That leads us to the 1970s and there was actually a court case that did force every airline to hire men and women on equal terms, thank goodness for that. That is a court case was actually filed by a man who claimed sex discrimination in order to try to become, and he was never able to do so, a flight attendant for Pan-Am Airways.

Sofia: That aspiring flight attendant was Celio Diaz.

And the reason he never got to be a flight attendant was because by the time he won the case he was older than Pan-Am's age cut off. But Celio paved the way for many other men to become flight attendants.

Phil: So three or four percent of flight attendants are men by the 1960s, the late 60s and then when Celio Diaz wins his case and airlines across the United States are forced to hire men starting around 1971-1972 you see a big jump. That's where it goes up toward 15 percent, it takes a little while to get there.

Erin: And not all of the men who were now allowed to be flight attendants were gay. There's no way to put a number on how many were or were not, but it slowly started to become known as a career that gay men could have with some job stability because they were less likely to be summarily fired if they were outed. One flight attendant that was able to take advantage of the court-mandated gender equality was David Hinson

David Hinson: My name is David Hinson. I started with National Airlines in 1977 and then worked for Pan-American World Airways and then Delta Airlines. I left Delta in 1997.

David: When I was working on my masters in reproductive animal physiology (laughs) I decided I was going to go study for one of my finals at the University of Tennessee at the library. And it was getting close to spring break and I thought 'you know, I believe I'll go to Fort Lauderdale for spring break but I don't know how I'm going to get down there, so I said let me look' and I got some airline books and they were talking about that if you apply for an airline

they'll fly you to wherever you wanna go for your interview and I looked and National was hiring in Miami and I thought 'that's good I'll just go down for an interview and stay for Spring Break' And they actually sent me down for an interview but they sent me back the same day, they offered me a job the same day I was down there and I had to leave and come back. So it worked pretty well for me... Except for my Spring Break, right.

Sofia: David and the many other men that were hired at the airlines in the 70s jumped into a very public facing job that, by this point, carried a fair amount of stigma and public assumption.

David: Well you know, back in the 70s when I started flying everyone assumed, just about, that if you were a male flight attendant, you were gay. I mean, that was just the assumption back in the day. But it was far from true. But even I assumed that. Even when I would get on a plane with other coworkers or males that I didn't know I would think are they gay or not gay? That's what I would think. You know you would always talk and find out pretty quickly all the information you needed to know. But I would say that most passengers assumed that all male flight attendants were gay. And there was a real close bond between the gay male flight attendants, with any airline just about, because you pretty much knew who was gay and who wasn't at the time but it just was an assumption at the time that all male flight attendants were gay.

Erin: David says the community of flight attendants and gay male flight attendants was like a family, and he found more friends than partners among his colleagues.

And there were a lot of gay male flight attendants, then and now. But how they got there wasn't on purpose.

Phil: So how did the gay men get there? Well, there was a tradition of gay men even back in the 50s and 40s and 30s seeking out this job and finding a workplace that you could be gay and be accepted. Your employer wouldn't encourage you to be gay and didn't necessarily like that fact but they also weren't going to fire you and as long as you did the job well, you could stay. So there's that but then in the 70s there's all these new hires and by this time it's really interesting right? Because a majority, a vast majority, of the senior flight attendants at every airline are female and a vast majority of the hiring committees at airlines to hire new flight attendants are composed of female flight attendants, right? So what they're looking for when these men come to apply for work is they're looking for men who can enter a collective workplace where you have to work together effectively and you have to take orders from women. Turned out that the vast majority of men who could do that, who could listen to women and respect them in a communal workplace happened to be gay. So there is this really interesting and important link between the growth of feminism in a workplace in the United States and an acceptance of LGBT employees in those same workplaces.

Sofia: Phil says the links between LGBTQ+ and women's rights in the workplace can be directly tied to the sexism and homophobia in society.

Phil: For that period, male flight attendants have always been around but there's always remained that stigma that somehow these are somewhat 'compromised men' which allows us to look at men after the 1970s and sort of chronicle how perceptions of men's sexuality and women's work is an interesting social phenomenon to say the least, how homophobia was a part of this workplace, and how the beginnings of an LGBTQ rights effort also penetrated this workplace, which was indeed was a place where there were a lot of LGBTQ employees.

Erin: Then, in the late 1970s and early 80s the robust and supportive community of flight attendants would be tested, first by changes in how airlines were allowed to operate, then by something much more severe, AIDS.

David: We stopped going out. Nobody wanted to go out to the bars anymore, nobody wanted to go out to the clubs because we didn't know really how you were catching this disease, at the time and we knew it was a death sentence at the time, so if you caught that disease you were pretty much gonna die.

Erin: The men were scared — in the early days there was hardly any information about AIDS. Flight attendants were scared that the perception of all male flight attendants being gay was going to result in negative reactions from passengers and crew. Certain sources even cited a single flight attendant as responsible for bringing the virus to the United States--a claim that was denounced by scientists at the time and proven impossible by later genetic testing.

And some flight attendants did face negative reactions from their co-workers and passengers, but not all.

David: Right when AIDS came about, we really thought...and we lost a lot of flight attendants to HIV, a lot of flight attendants. And people were dying and we didn't know why. I lost my best friend back then. You really didn't know what was causing it and because they didn't have a cure for it we felt like, as proudly gay men that passengers and other crew would probably be sort of standoffish towards us but it was just the opposite, nobody ever said a word, on one every mentioned it, nobody felt afraid to be around us or afraid that we had something that they were going to catch.

Sofia: But not everyone's experience was like David's.

There was a policy that started early in the AIDS pandemic to ground all flight attendants with AIDS diagnoses and put them in positions that were less public facing and paid less.

Some were still fired outright, even if they had doctor's notes that said they were fit to fly.

Erin: It took another court case to get airlines to allow flight attendants with AIDS to keep their jobs. And even then, some airlines made it a policy to pay flight attendants with AIDS their regular salary to stay home. And since the unions were busy fighting against more general labor issues relating to big changes in how airlines were regulated at the time, flight attendants with AIDS tended to slip through the cracks.

Sofia: Even though these men suffered injustices from both their airlines and their unions, David says the community was strong and they were able to support one another.

David: We all supported each other during that time, we would help them make sure they got to the doctor, make sure they got back. You know, you were just there for support the whole time.

Erin: To this day there remains a strong network of queer flight attendants, backed by a strong history of community, respect and support that stretches back into the 1970s and further, to the first stewards that took to the air.

Music up and under

Sofia: Many thanks to David Hinson and to former National Air and Space Museum fellow, Professor Phil Tiemeyer for their work and conversation. For more on “labor, sexuality, and AIDS in the history of male flight attendants,” you can read Phil’s book, *Plane Queer*.

A lot of people have written about the intersection of space a queerness if you want to learn more, check out the writings of José Muñoz and John Paul Brammer.

QueerSpace is brought to you by the people behind AirSpace at the Smithsonian’s National Air and Space Museum. It is produced by Katie Moyer, Jennifer Weingart, Nick Partridge, Amy Stamm and me, Sofia Soto Sugar. Mix by Tarek Fouda. QueerSpace is presented by Olay and distributed by PRX.

Sofia: Do you like personal stories about science? As told by the people who experienced them? Then you may like Erin’s podcast, *The Story Collider*!

Erin: On The Story Collider podcast, we share true, personal stories about science, from scientists, journalists, comedians, and more. Some hilarious, some heartbreaking, and everything in between. Find it wherever you listen to QueerSpace.

Sofia: Thank you for listening to QueerSpace! We'll have another episode for you in two weeks. And new episodes of AirSpace will be hitting the feed in April. Did you know there's also a monthly AirSpace newsletter?! You can sign up through the link in the show notes. And follow us on Instagram and Twitter @airspacepod.

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