

Icarus Revisited:

The Folklore and Folklife of Flight

by Jack Santino

Why are there airplanes at the Festival of American Folklife? What is the aviation industry doing at a folklife festival? Are the pilots, flight attendants, and maintenance workers who support the airline industry “folk?” If they do not play banjos or sing old songs, why are they here?

Questions such as these are asked by puzzled visitors whenever a contemporary occupational group is presented at the Festival of American Folklife. Because folklore is often identified with old and dying customs, contemporary traditions which have grown out of work experience and are organized around job skills and occupational identity seem incongruous. But folklore is not simply a list of “things,” such as old songs or “tall tales.” It is a way people relate to and communicate with each other. Folklore is small scale, face to face; it is imbued with personal artistry and group sensibilities, derived from one’s ethnic, regional, religious or occupational affiliation.

Most of the people participating in the festival are bearers of age-old traditions. Such traditions are highly visible and call attention to themselves: people may wear special costumes, perform music and dance, or conduct rituals. Such artistic and often beautiful genres clearly deserve recognition and validation, especially in an age when rapid technological change threatens their integrity and vitality. But whenever people need to relate to each other, they develop ways of passing on important information, of maintaining a social good, of entertaining and improving the life of the group. This happens most effectively with occupations such as those of the aviation industry, whose workers must cooperate to ensure the overall safety and success of the task, and who spend as much time with each other as they do with their families.

1983 is the 200th anniversary of man in flight, commemorating the first Montgolfier manned balloon flight in France on November 21, 1783. In Greek mythology, Icarus put on wings made of wax and took to the heavens, only to fall to earth when his wings melted as he flew too close to the sun. This tale may have evolved to portray flying as inappropriate to human beings, but, undaunted, men and women have continued to improve on Icarus’s wax wings. In 1903, Wilbur and Orville Wright successfully sustained flight for 12 seconds in their home-built flying machine. Today’s aviation industry traces its origin to that mythic moment, when man stole the power of flight and dominion of the air from the gods, just as Prometheus had once stolen fire.

The range of folklore in the airline industry is surprisingly wide. Legends about ghosts and haunted planes, for example, are told, such as this anecdote by a flight attendant:

I guess it was a Lockheed 1011 that went down in the Everglades, and the engineer was killed. Now, I’ve heard this story from so many people. He was killed and all the other crew members and the passengers made it. He died of smoke inhalation or something like that. Well, he has shown up as a ghost in subsequent flights. He has shown up in the cockpit; he has shown up as a face in the oven downstairs, because the DC-10’s in Lockheed 1011’s have two elevators that go down into the belly, and that’s where the kitchen is on that airplane. He has shown up walking through the airplane. It’s hard for people like me to even admit it, but yes. It’s this one airplane, it’s the only airplane he shows up on. But anytime he has shown up, he’s come as a warning signal. It gives me chills to talk about it. He shows and it’s usually as a warning. He showed up in the oven once, just his face, and there was a fire down there five minutes later. He showed up in the cockpit on the radar screen and something went wrong on that airplane before they took off. They have taken this airplane out of service; people would not fly on it; flight attendants walked off; pilots walked off.

The Folklife of Flight Program has been organized in conjunction with the National Air and Space Museum.

William C. “Tex” Guthrie — barnstormer, crop-duster, and retired commercial pilot.
Photo taken in front of Kinner America Eagle, 1934



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Suggested reading

Auburn, Paula. "Flights, Trips, and Checks: Ethnography of the Airline Stewardess." In *The Cultural Experience: Ethnography in a Complex Society*, eds. James P. Spradley and David W. McCurdy, pp. 191-198. Chicago: Science Research Associates, 1972.

Byington, Robert H., ed. *Working Americans*, Smithsonian Folklife Studies No. 3. Washington, D.C., 1978.

Santino, Jack. "'Flew the Ocean in a Plane:' An Investigation of Airline Occupational Narrative." *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, 15 (1978).

Other supernatural lore is found among airline workers such as beliefs about Unidentified Flying Objects and the Bermuda Triangle. In fact, transportation industries in general, because of the danger inherent in traveling long distances in big machines, often have large repertoires of stories concerning "occupational ghostlore" in which supernatural beings come to the aid of workers in times of danger.

Other kinds of folklore permeate the various jobs involved in aviation. For instance, workers develop homemade tools and better ways to get a job accomplished correctly. This knowledge is passed from the skilled worker to the newcomer, much as craft skills are passed from master to apprentice through personal instruction and observation – all outside of official training classes and handbooks.

There are also many stories about the first time on the job, including such themes as "how I got started," first trips, and initiation pranks played on newcomers. Such a prank was recounted by flight attendant Marti O'Rourke:

When you first start to fly, everybody is out to get you. They know that you're brand new just because you're so happy and effervescent and bouncing around. After awhile, you don't bounce so much anymore.

But when I first started to fly, I had been flying about a week, and I was taking a trip through Buffalo to New York. And I guess the crew had told the agent that was working that particular trip that I was brand new. So when I got to the airplane he called me over and he said "Listen, sweetheart, first class is going to be full of chimpanzees today. They're all going to be dressed in little suits with hats on, and they're all trained monkeys. I want you to check catering and make sure that you have 36 ripe bananas and that everybody in coach knows that there are nothing but monkeys in first class."

So I said, "Hey, that's great!" You know, I thought all these little monkeys are going to be dressed up and everybody in first class is going to be a monkey. So I went to the back and said "Listen, ladies and gentlemen, now don't be nervous. There's nothing but monkeys in first class and they won't hurt you, they won't bother you, they won't bite you, they won't do anything like that. Just be prepared for a bunch of monkeys up front." And so they all thought that was great.

Well, I got to the catering guy, and still I'm going on thinking that twelve little chimpanzees are going to sit down in the front. So the catering truck came on and they had catered me and I turned around to the guy and said "Excuse me, pal, but where are my bananas?" And he called up the guy in the catering truck and he said "Joe, come up here. You're not going to believe this one." I said, "No, I'm having a lot of monkeys in first class today, and I need bananas for them." And he said, "Well, I know, they are always monkeys, but we don't give them bananas."

"No, you don't seem to understand. There are going to be real chimpanzees."

By this time, being brand new, I was petrified. I thought "What am I going to do with these monkeys, I don't know how to entertain them."

So I went flying out to the agent. There are all these passengers standing around, and I just burst right through, went up to him and I screamed; "I'm having all these monkeys in first class, they aren't giving me any bananas. What am I going to do with all these bananas?"

A passenger turned around and he said, "Excuse me, but I'm one of the monkeys and I don't want a banana!"

And I realized I was the fool!

The airline industry is made up of people whose jobs are often dangerous, often adventurous, at times heroic, but more often simply mundane. The folklore of this industry captures all of these aspects. At the Festival, workers will present their stories, demonstrate their skills, and talk with the public about their work and their lives. It is our chance to learn about the human beings who are responsible for the safety and smooth sailing of those great silver ships in the sky.