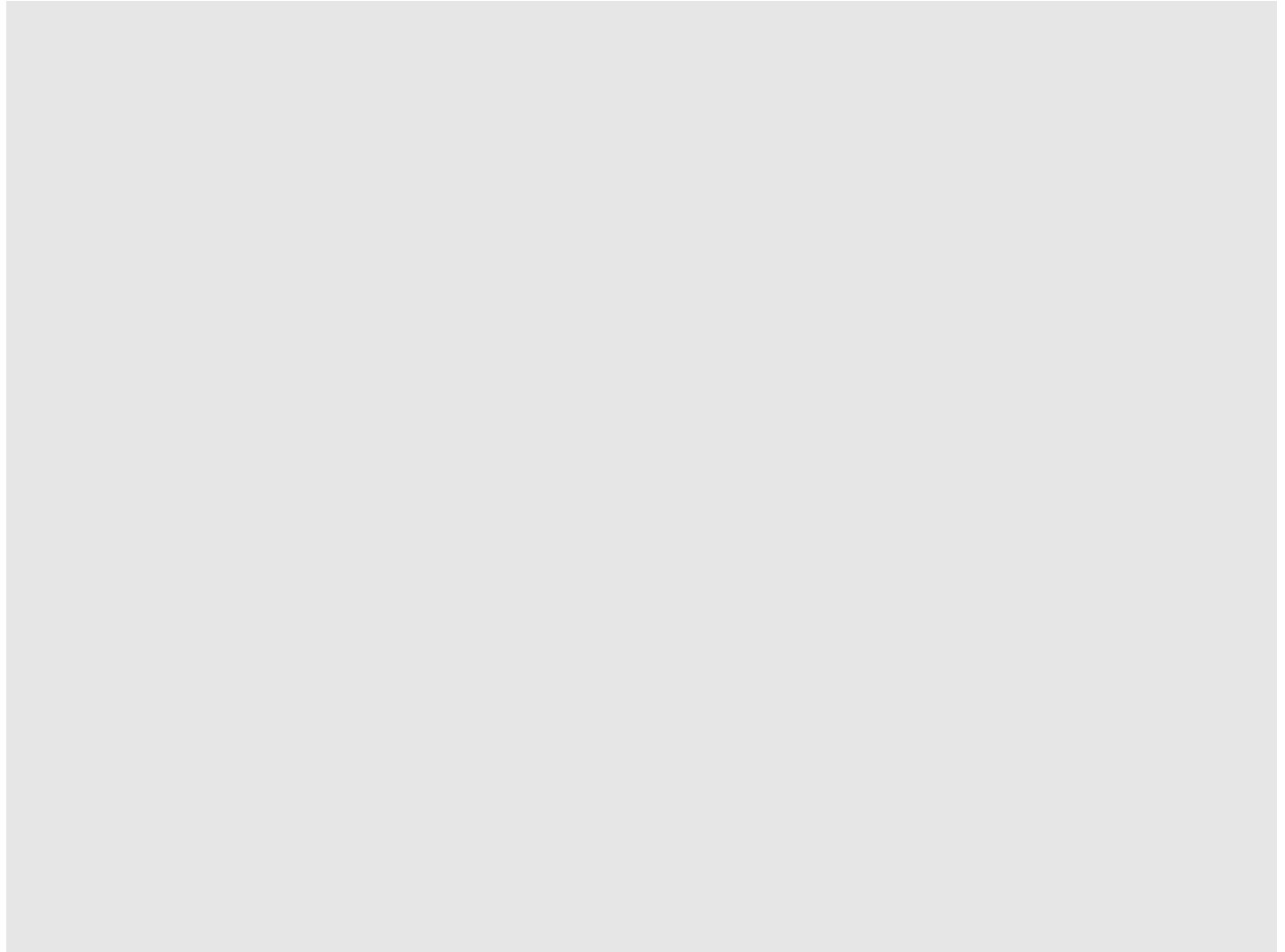


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## Wagner: For the Time Capsule: Rise, downfall of air travel

Apr 28, 2020



Our newsroom has put together a keepsake edition in today's Accent section: Time Capsule — COVID-19.

The idea was suggested by a member of our REVIEW creative team. A parent herself, she thought it important for parents and grandparents to collect coronavirus pandemic memories to share with future generations.

The section includes summaries, written by our reporters, on how COVID-19 has dramatically changed the everyday lives of N'West Iowa families and their connection to local businesses, churches and schools. The stories will be a good starting point for most capsules.

I'd have to include my thoughts regarding the sudden and drastic changes in the airline industry if Connie and I did a time capsule. I have flown thousands of miles during the last 40 years and seen customer comfort and service decline every decade. The airlines have been in the catbird seat and often taken their customers for granted.

When I first began speaking at conventions and seminars in the mid-1980s the weekend flights were part of the fun. That was before Congress deregulated the industry. It was a time when there were numerous airlines and much competition. The airlines had more space between the rows of seats and provided meals to coach class customers on all flights over an hour in length.

On some of my evening flights home the plane had so many unsold seats it was possible, once up in the air, to lie down and sleep across one of the empty rows of three.

Often, on a Saturday flight, when the professional travelers were home for a day, I would find myself bumped up to first class.

But all that changed with the end of deregulation. Many of the airlines were purchased by their competition — Northwest, Continental and US Airways are three examples — and the number of flight options declined while ticket prices went up.

The remaining airlines, which once struggled to remain in business — especially during the oil embargo of the 1970s — began showing huge profits but continued to reduce the space between their seats to add additional rows and eventually introduced new premium seating at additional cost. Connie and I were even expected to purchase, if we wanted one, the once complimentary small pillow and thin blanket when we flew Hawaiian Airlines last year. We passed.

Every plane I've flown in the last few years has been packed tight and many have been overbooked.

But COVID-19 has changed that. I watched a CBS news program recently that showed a selfie of a cross country flight flying with just one passenger and the required three airline attendants. The passenger was teaching the attendants the fancy movements that went with a popular new song.

The passenger count out of Rapid City, SD, is down to 5 percent of that airport's normal level. The airport manager said they never know when an incoming flight will be canceled nor why it was canceled. She suspects it was because there was not enough passengers to make it financially worthwhile.

I still hold frequent flyer status with Delta and get various e-mail saying these are serious times for the airlines that could result in real problems for future flyers.

At least half the passenger airplanes around the world are currently grounded. Delta, I'm told, has parked more than 600 of its jets.

Just one year ago, more than 2 million passengers were screened by TSA on a typical day. That daily number has fallen to just 90,000.

Delta Air Lines, after stopping all onboard service, even in first class, and closing most of its Sky Clubs, found itself with huge amounts of perishable and nonperishable foods. Rather than have it spoil, Delta donated it to Feeding America's food banks as well as to hospitals and workers. American Airlines followed suit and gave 81,000 pounds of unused food to Feeding America's food banks.

Average domestic fares, meanwhile, have dropped by \$146 per ticket.

Finally, airlines worldwide are losing \$1.6 million per day. Perhaps that is why I recently received an e-mail from Etihad, a United Arab Emirates airline, offering interactive games to play online and the opportunity to learn key phrases in Arab, the language of the UAE, on my computer. It's a neat trick to keep me thinking of flying its routes if I ever have reason to head to the Far East again.

But, as I said earlier, flying is never going to be the same. It will be interesting to see how it changes when the COVID-19 pandemic is over.

Will it get worse because of the huge financial losses suffered by the airlines or better because the carriers want to show they really need our business.

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*Peter W. Wagner lives in Sibley. He is the founder/publisher of The N'West Iowa REVIEW and may be reached at [pww@iowainformation.com](mailto:pww@iowainformation.com).*