Baby Boomers by Air
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04.17.2007 | Faculty  The attention from The History Channel grew out of her 2003 book Dreams of Flight, which she co-authored with Michael H. Bednarek, her husband, about the history of aviation. Bednarek, a professor of history at UD, was interviewed frequently in 2003 during the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Wright Brothers' first powered flight and continues to lend her expertise when people seek to understand the history and impact of aviation.

According to Bednarek, baby boomers' views of airplane travel were dramatically different from previous generations because they were shaped by advances in jet technology, low-cost fares, television and spiced with a 1960s-era sensibility of romance and idealism.

During the 1960s and early 1970s, airlines went after the youth market, she said.

"From the beginning of air travel many believed that airplanes would help promote world peace, bringing people together. Similarly, the hippie-backpacker culture, much like the Peace Corps, believed that better international relations could come of Americans going out into the world to meet people and work with them on an individual basis. So, on an idealistic level, air travel to distant lands appealed to many young Americans," she said.

The airlines also realized that once people started using air travel, they would be more likely to use it again, and it was easier in many ways to convince young people to take that first flight, she said.

Bednarek said with the advent of jet travel, flying became much more comfortable because it was faster, smoother and air conditioned. Airlines also worked hard to convince Americans that flying was safe, efficient and routine, she said.

Walt Disney's popular television shows promoted travel to the Disney amusement parks and the growth of nature shows such as Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom, created a desire to travel to more exotic lands, she said.

Bednarek's work was also selected as one of 10 essays in the second annual Best Essays in American History 2007, which showcases the best American history articles published from the summer of 2005 through the summer of 2006.

Her essay, "The Flying Machine in the Garden: Parks and Airports 1918-1938" describes the early days of airports which were regarded as recreational areas, rather than as transportation hubs.

"Many people (sometimes thousands) would venture to the airport simply to watch airplanes take off and land," she said, noting that in those days airports were often managed by city parks departments. Her essay traces the evolution of airports in Omaha and Minneapolis from parks to aviation centers.

The book, published by Palgrave Macmillan, was introduced at the national Organization of American Historians annual meeting in April.

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