

TWO DELIGHTFUL SCRAPBOOKS recently donated to the Minnesota Historical Society chronicle the career and continuing interests of one of Northwest Airlines' earliest stewardesses. Helen Jacobson Richardson worked for Northwest from 1939 until 1942 when, following industry rules, she resigned in order to marry. Her scrapbooks illuminate

the world of the airline stewardess, from the daily routine of life in the sky and professional development to the poise required of these pioneering women and the celebrity they enjoyed.

The passenger airline industry was just developing during Richardson's time as a stewardess. Her scrapbooks chart innovations, changes,

and the evolution of many things we now take for granted: advertisements promoting travel, the development of the oxygen mask, unpressurized cabins (stewardesses handed out chewing gum to ease ear pain), and 30 years of uniform styles.

The scrapbooks also contain the transcript of a 1941 radio interview in which Helen explained why stewardesses were first employed.

In scrapbooks she maintained until the 1980s, early stewardess Helen Richardson (pictured below) chronicled vital aspects of Northwest Airlines' passenger service. Included in her donation to MHS were her uniform and this case that held the gum she gave passengers to ease ear pain.

When a co-pilot was originally assigned to a flight, a part of his duties were to look after the needs and the comfort of the passengers. With the increased passenger travel and larger planes, however, more of his time was required to assist with the operation and the safety of the plane. . . . After considerable research and thought, one of the airlines decided to employ young women as stewardesses and relieve the co-pilot of any responsibility . . . [for] the personal comfort of the passengers.

Job qualifications for early stewardesses were strict, as Richardson recalled in a 1969 Northwest newsletter now preserved in her scrapbook. Many were registered nurses. They had to be "unmarried; age 21-25; 5 feet 2 inches to 5 feet 5 inches tall; weight not over 120 pounds." Clippings like this, plus the great variety of photographs, luggage tags, tickets, advertisements, correspondence, and flight reports make Richardson's scrapbooks a valuable time capsule of the ever-evolving airline industry.

—Molly Tierney,  
curator of manuscripts



ERIC MORTENSON / MHS



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