

Do us a favor and go away

BY BETSY SMITH
EDITOR

Ed and I have been tossing around the idea of traveling to the west coast later this summer, but every time we get excited about someplace we realize it requires flying and the excitement dissipates. Absolutely no one I know who traveled last summer got where they were supposed to go when they were supposed to get there—often it wasn't even the same day. I heard enough nightmare stories about airline travel to make me believe booking a ticket to anywhere is a crap shoot at best. Whatever happened to the "friendly skies" about which United Airlines once bragged? The industry has definitely lost any charm it once had.

My first big girl job was at a travel agency in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and I have lots of fond memories. Working in the travel industry was cool, and "The Hill" was a fun place to live. (Though Google AI says there is no proof he really said it, when a state zoo was being proposed conservative Sen. Jesse Helms supposedly quipped, "Why build a zoo when we can just put up a fence around Chapel Hill?")

Circle Travel had an appropriately sassy motto: "Do us a favor and go away." When I became Circle Travel's receptionist in 1988, the internet was still in its infancy. The agency was in the process of switching over to Sabre, which began as an internal ticketing system for American Airlines but had expanded to encompass other airlines and travel-related businesses.

It was all felt very new and exciting. Hertz had an online reservation system, and they had a fellow who posted recipes daily. Recipes! I can't remember his name, but his garlic bread was amazing and lethal (slathered in garlic butter, swiss cheese tucked between the slices, bacon on top).

The travel agents were still getting familiar with Sabre and their new computers, and they were obsessed with the ability to vary the color of their screens and text. All around the office, there were poison green screens with red text or purple screens with aqua text.

I soon memorized the three-letter codes of sooooo many airports so I could look up flight availability for clients. (Given the fact that I don't know how to use my smart phone or the TV remote, it's hard to believe I once stood on the cutting edge of technology. I did

not catch the wave. Our clients were a mix of pleasure travelers and business travelers. By a country mile, we preferred the business travelers. Sure, they were demanding, but they knew where they were going and when they needed to get there.

The pleasure travelers did not. The pleasure travelers mosied in and out of the office, looking at brochures, changing their reservations and worrying about vertigo.

Business travel was often arranged by secretaries, whom we all got to know fairly well.

I recall Geri at MDC was a lovely person to work with, but her southern accent was so strong! I recall one of the agents struggling to figure out where Goforth, Mississippi was. Geri was talking about Gulfport.

The business travelers could be self-important, but agents knew their preferences and took pride in getting them where they needed to go, even at the last minute when there was little availability.

My friend Angela had a particularly good relationship with a client who brought her back a small piece of the Berlin Wall after he traveled to Germany in late 1989. Talk about a cool souvenir!

Airline travel was more relaxed and enjoyable back then, pre-9/11.

You didn't have to get to the airport hours early and stand in interminable lines. You never had to take your shoes off, for starters.

You didn't have to say goodbye to loved ones at security or wait for them to return at baggage claim. Children could watch their grandparents' plane taxi to the gate and then could rush into Grandma and Grandpa's arms the second they de-planed.

The flight itself was more enjoyable. Occasionally a flight attendant would put a "kick me" sign on a co-worker's back or pass out complimentary champagne at the end of a long day.

They fed you actual meals.

Thirty-five years after leaving Circle Travel, I find it hard to make myself go anywhere that requires flying. The whole experience is simply unpleasant.

I can't help but think how hard our job would have been in 1988 if the airline industry was as unpredictable and unstable as it is now. We'd have had to be on call 24/7.

And it's hard to imagine any agents these days enjoying the simple pleasure of a lime and turquoise screen these days.

On losing the critical hand up

BY BRUCE FLORENCE
COLUMNIST

Sitting here tonight we have all been warned that dangerous weather is a strong possibility after dark. Truthfully those of us in this area have been watching the sky on an almost daily basis.

Far be it from me to complain about rain. We all remember too well when the rain stops that our crops, flowers, yards and stock suffer. When driving in the country this season, it is all too evident looking at all the dead trees that last summer our rainfall stopped.

Farming communities have learned from years and years of rain, too much rain, and too little rain how to cope. We dig cisterns and holding ponds, buy irrigation pipes and hoses, conserve, reuse and plan well.

But what happens when a community finds itself face to face with the incredible destruction of tornadoes, hurricane

winds, deadly ice storms, flood waters, earthquake, sweeping fires and more?

In less than 30 seconds your house, the neighboring houses, even your downtown buildings can be destroyed with almost no warning and the saddest part is that even with some warning there is almost nothing you can do to stop such heart-break.

Your income, your church, your schools—you name it, and it could be gone with nothing left but tatters and splinters. What can you do to feed your family, get them safe shelter, find a doctor, or even find enough water to wash your face?

This nightmare happens over and over to people just exactly like you and me. You wake up to a desolation of ownership and spirit. Tears don't help, the pain is deep and your choices are almost non-existent.

One of the remarkable blessings of living in this free country is that our

governing folks discovered as early as 1803 that wide destruction from fires, etc. could be addressed by using funds all of us as taxpayers contribute to when we pay our taxes.

President Carter almost 50 years ago went even further and established FEMA, an organization that those most affected will find offering help in their towns and villages almost as soon as the storm or fire or wind stops. All of us could find ourselves victims of catastrophe, and the hands of those men and women who spend their lives reaching out to save us with all the kinds of help we need most—food, water, shelter, medicine and caring hugs—would make the difference between despair and the beginning of hope.

But sadly, FEMA is in the gun sights of those governing today with little if any concern about human beings, their needs and the importance of governing for

everyone. We are being told that we are going to lose FEMA—that it will no longer be there to save who and what is left after a tragedy.

I know lots of folks in this community and of all those that I know not a single person thinks it is a good idea to stop the good that FEMA does for those of us who are in the deepest crises and need. It would be a very good idea if you who are reading this made a move to let your congressman know how important it is to save FEMA.

The storms did pass over with little if any damage here but what if you lived in London or Somerset? They now have farms, homes, schools, churches, businesses all laid waste. If that happens here who would come? Where would we find the kind of recovery opportunity that is currently available? The truth? No one—what a lonely feeling. We need to act now to save others as well as ourselves.

The power of a mother's love

BY MARK MATTMILLER
COLUMNIST

A parent's love for their children is an incredibly powerful thing. It was years ago when a neighbor of mine had a pet dog that he took with him everywhere he went. At the time, he didn't have any children, and he insisted that he loved his dog as much as anyone could love a child.

Then his wife had their first child, and believe me, his perspective changed.

His dog was instantly demoted to second place. I think he even got a doghouse for him. It was an awakening experience for

him, and he became acutely aware of just how powerful a parent's love can be.

A mother's love for her children knows no bounds. It makes no difference what the child look like, who they are, or any other considerations. The love is unquestionable and unconditional.

We see the power of this love in the animal kingdom as well. Have you ever walked up to a mother goose sitting on her nest? If you have, I'm sure you haven't forgotten the hissing that came along with her charging after you.

And have you seen on television how the adult elephants make a tight circle around their very young calves whenever they perceive a threat? If a lion lingers around, they immediately make the circle. It's like they are saying, "Okay Punk. You think you're bad, just come on down." I saw where they even did it when they felt the rumble from a distant earthquake.

What about on our own cattle farms? The pregnant heifer cares about nothing but herself. Her only thoughts are whether she is thirsty, hungry, hot or cold. She

frets with the irritations of the flies, and if she is tired, she goes to lie down.

But then when she has her first calf, it all changes overnight: She could care less about herself. Her only concern is for the health and safety of her newborn calf. (Don't get between her and her calf.) It is truly a spontaneous miracle.

We would never have evolved to be where we are today without this instinctive power. It is what keeps us alive from birth until young adulthood. What a blessing!

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**Sealed bids will be opened on:
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