Before air lines became airlines, indeed a full year and a half before there was a Piedmont Airlines, the following story appeared. First seen in the August, 1946 edition of Fortune magazine, this condensed version of that Fortune article ran in the November, 1946 issue of Readers' Digest.

Plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose (the more it changes, the more it's the same thing), said A. Karr. And that too was probably before airlines.

What's wrong with the airlines?

Looking back through some of Jack Brandon's pictorial history of Piedmont we found several cartoons that were good then and are better now when note is taken of the dates they were drawn. He created this stagecoach commentary in 1965.

In the sky there are moments of beauty and wonder such as surface travelers cannot know. But beauty and wonder are about the only compensations for air-line travel in 1946. To travel by plane a passenger must now sacrifice his comfort, his sleep and often his baggage. He must endure inconveniences that rise to the level of punishment. And sometimes he finds he could have got there faster by train.

The cause of the trouble is simple enough: boom business.

In 1941 the air lines flew a billion and a half passenger-miles. It is probable the figure for this year will be **seven billion passenger miles.** For months the air lines have been adding flight after flight to their schedules, and turning away as many as three passengers for every one they have carried. In the old days they carried one seventh of the Class A (Pullman) passengers; by 1948 they hope to carry half. Rates have been reduced ten percent since 1941, making it cheaper in many cases to travel by air than by Pullman — bringing in ever greater hordes of travel-bargain customers.

This vast boom in air travel hit the air lines before they had time to recover from the shocks of war, when half their planes and many of their top executives had been drafted for the struggle.

The first effect of the boom was to diminish the old-time service standards, astonishingly well maintained through the war itself, toward the vanishing point. Standards of service are off in all businesses; 1946 simply is not a year of plush comfort. But, based on prewar standards — and postwar advertising — something more is expected of the air lines; and it is the highest tribute that air lines could ask.

The average passenger's difficulties begin with the telephone and go on through a long series of vexations.

1. **Telephones:** Air-line telephones always seem busy. The telephone jam is unbelievably thick, with callers vainly trying to get in through the busy signals. Passengers are unable to reach the air line even to cancel their reservations; in the congestion, the air lines handle from seven to 12 calls for each passenger actually flown. With more new equipment in sight, relief is expected soon.

2. **Reservations and Tickets:** The waiting list in many places has become a joke, for the simple reason that it is easier for the air line to sell to the "go-show" than to make a dozen calls checking a waiting list. "Go-show" is air-line jargon for the passenger without a reservation who takes his chances on getting aboard at the last minute in place of the "no-show" — the passenger with a reservation who does not show up. The ordinary passenger calling hopefully about the waiting list is happily unaware that the person with the pleasant voice, instead of checking the lists, has merely laid down the phone before saying, sorry, nothing has opened up.

Pressure long ago forced the air lines to discard the detailed manifest to be filled out for each flight; this became impossible when the bigger planes required counter clerks to check through 50 passengers per plane in a few minutes. The newer procedures, however, are still over-complicated. Things are always going wrong: at the airport there is no record of the passenger's reservation made at the downtown office. Or his passage is cleared only part way through. On a cross-country flight it is not unusual to have something seriously wrong with at least one person's ticket at every stop. If there is one more ticketed passenger aboard than there are seats, every passenger has to be examined all over again, the luckless one evicted, and the entire plane's baggage unloaded and reloaded. Result: a long delay, with not one passenger irritated but all of them.

This reservation snarl is only too often the direct fault of the air lines in overselling tickets — a practice denied by shocked executives but freely admitted by counter clerks. When too many seats have been sold for a flight and all the passengers show up, the air line's safest procedure is to cancel the flight — since legally each oversold passenger may sue the line. However, credit must be given to the air lines for one clean performance record — there is no black market in air tickets.

3. **Limousine Service:** This is bad throughout the United States — dirty, uncomfortable and often a factor in delay. The air lines generally protest that they do not want to go into the bus business, and leave it at that. The bus concessionaires argue that they cannot buy new cars, and leave it at that. Most airports are inconveniently distant from downtown districts; the Civil Aeronautics Administration figures that the average driving time is 40 minutes each way. Any poll would probably show that passengers blame the air lines for the limousine service.

4. **In the Planes:** Efficiency of pilots and maintenance crews has been maintained at prewar standards, but service en route has fallen off badly. The problem of feeding 50 passengers in the big four-engined planes is much more complex than feeding 21 on DC-3's. The faster new flights permit only the sketchiest of services, at super-cafeteria speed. The food is not very good and often there isn't enough to go around. Air-line coffee, at best, is merely warm.

And where a few dollar-greedy lines converted their C-54's to carry as many as 60 seats, the seats themselves are boys' size — three abreast with a narrow aisle and then two abreast. The plight of the man in the middle seat, with no armrests, beggars description.

5. **Airports:** Even if both the cities and the air lines had fully foreseen the vast mushrooming of air travel, they could not have done anything substantial to improve airports. First the war and then the transition period have blocked building programs. Men and materials have been unavailable.

The half-dozen largest city airports handle a million people a year apiece. A million passengers jamming through one small room, such as Chicago's little air terminal, instantly create a problem.

Chicago is the worst; its airport is a slum. Chewing gum, orange peel, papers and cigar butts strew the floor around the stacks of baggage. Porters can't keep the floor clean if people are standing on it day and night. At almost all hours every telephone booth is filled, with people lined up outside; the dingy airport cafe is filled, with standees. To rest the thousands there are exactly 28 broken-down leather seats. One must line up even for the rest rooms. Weary travelers sit or lie on the floor. The drooping grandmothers, the crying babies, the continuous, raucous, unintelligible squawk of the loudspeaker, the constant push and jostle of new arrivals and new baggage tangling inextricably with their predecessors make bus terminals look like luxury. The beat-up traveler ponders bitterly on the brilliant advertisement that lured him to "Travel with the Easy Swiftness of Homeward-Winging Birds."

To say that the airports at San Francisco and Los Angeles are less squalid than Chicago's is faint praise, for the difference is slight. Most major airports were built to handle a few hundred passengers a day, and facilities are now so completely jammed that every possible service suffers.

No major airport terminal buildings are functional in design, except National Airport in Washington — and architects can make out a good case against that. It can be argued of course that the air lines are not responsible for terminal buildings. Or it can be argued that the air lines made a basic error in accepting municipal subsidies instead of building and operating their own terminals like the railroads. What is certainly clear is that the air lines, by their overcompetitive attitude in local situations, have often lost sight of he heart of the problem: the welfare of air travelers. For one thing, this has forced many costly and inefficient duplications of facilities. In effect, each line has — unsuccessfully — tried to install comforts for its own passengers, meanwhile letting the main burden of handling **all** passengers fall on the municipally managed, politics-ridden airports.

Any amateur efficiency expert could suggest many possible emergency improvements at almost any U. S. airport — for example, cheap marquees to keep rain off the passengers on the long walks to the loading gates; simple wooden barriers in the waiting rooms to keep the lines orderly; temporary shelving to keep baggage off the floor; wooden benches just for people to sit on; emergency information booths to keep information seekers out of the ticket lines.

The air lines have exerted every little pressure to get this sort of ugly, temporary but urgent building done. What is needed is emergency action and **temporary** improvements — in short, a mere recognition of the crisis. This recognition has only begun to dawn in the last

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Piedmont bags bound for Miami and Chicago's O'Hare were warned of a possible delay in 1968.

Air traffic control as Brandon saw it in 1967.