

April 15, 2010

Posh Airline's Legacy Now Mere Cookie Crumbs

By: Lisa Holewa

IdeaWorks contributed information to this article - - see italics.

MILWAUKEE (April 14) -- It's all over but the cookies.

Midwest Airlines, once known for its two-per-row leather seats, gourmet meals served on china with wine or champagne, and its fresh-baked chocolate chip cookies, will soon officially cease to exist after more than two decades in the skies.



The airline will fly under the Frontier name starting later this year, its new owner announced this week -- adding that the new airline will still hand out chocolate chip cookies to all its passengers.

"The cookie is alive and well," said Republic Airways Chief Executive Bryan Bedford, noting that the tradition "transcends economics."

But airline consultant and former Midwest executive Jay Sorensen is among those left wondering what, exactly, the cookie's survival means.

"The idea served the airline very well at one time. But I don't think it applies anymore," he told AOL News. "They're trying to create some warm and fuzzy feeling that has been long lost."

Indianapolis-based Republic Airways bought both Midwest and Frontier last year, and in announcing plans for both airlines, Bedford said Tuesday that the Frontier brand won out because it is more closely associated with low fares.

With friendly animals painted on its airplanes' tails, Frontier was the front-runner among industry analysts as the more recognizable brand ever since Republic announced its plans to choose between the two.

Midwest, on the other hand, has long been touted as Milwaukee's "hometown" airline, with a brand identity centered on a slogan that's decidedly not low-fare-friendly: "the best care in the air."

"As we work to integrate these two brands into a unified Frontier Airlines, you can expect to see a lot of influence from the Midwest brand," Bedford said at a news conference. "This will include the introduction of the iconic Midwest Airlines chocolate chip cookie on all Frontier flights this summer."

Sorensen knows all about about the cookie. He began working at Midwest shortly after it was incorporated in 1982 and left the company in 1996 as its marketing director. In his current office, he keeps a plaque, given to him when he left Midwest and signed by all the employees, that reads, "We won't let the cookie crumble."

According to Sorensen, now president of the airline consulting firm IdeaWorks, the cookie idea dates back to 1984, when he was one of three people in Midwest's marketing department and the company was operating charter flights outside of its regular flight schedule.

For one charter flight for a college basketball team, Sorensen offered to bring the snacks. Stopping at a grocery store on his way to the airport, he bought some pizza rolls, popcorn and oil, and a few packs of cut-and-bake cookies.

"The pizza rolls tasted about as good in the air as they do on the ground," he said. "I almost started a fire heating the oil in the oven. ... But the cookies, they worked perfectly."

With the aroma of the cookies drifting through the cabin, Sorensen realized he had hit upon a great idea. And the airline began baking cookies on all its flights.

As the airline grew, the cookies -- served by hometown flight attendants in linen-lined baskets -- remained one of its signatures. Boasting a local headquarters in a suburb neighboring Milwaukee's airport, Midwest prided itself on its growing list of unique perks for business travelers: complimentary gourmet meals, wine and champagne, and wide leather seats.

Nearly all of those amenities, however, disappeared over the past decade due to the airline's financial struggles. After fighting off a hostile takeover bid from AirTran Holdings in 2007, Midwest was sold in January 2008 to TPG and Northwest, which was then bought by Delta. Later that year, with travel plunging in the deepening recession, Midwest made huge service cuts and laid off hundreds of employees, including about 800 crew members.

Although Republic has added several hundred local jobs since buying Midwest, only a few former pilots and about five dozen former Midwest flight attendants remain.

And as for the cookie?

"More than anything, I think it stood for home," Sorensen said. "The cookie was not, by itself, the success. The cookie was a metaphor for the whole culture, the relationship that existed between flight attendants and their passengers.

"Now it's just a dinner mint at a restaurant. ... I guess it's a nice thing. But it's just a free cookie. I don't think it's an icon anymore."