Newt Wilson of Sky Chefs, Inc. is the pantry pioneer who perfected meals in the air

Food on the

by EDITH M. STERN

WHEN AN airline passenger lights up a cigarette after a delectable, filling meal aboard the plane, he might well ask himself a few questions: without a stove, how was the food kept hot? Where, in a vehicle with such little space to spare, was there room for food, plates, trays, silver and all the trappings of a full-course meal? Where did the food come from? Why was there no odor? After puzzling on these posers for a while, he will doubtless want to thank the man who answered them for him—Newton Kennedy Wilson.

In 1936, Wilson, then responsible for American Airlines' passenger service, decided that something must be done about serving meals aboard planes. For, despite nearly a decade of improvements, the food situation for air passengers was still pretty bad. There was no variety in the menus, food was often cold and tasteless.

For a year, together with two assistants, Wilson devoted himself to working out plans and equipment for winged catering. Ordinary silverware was too heavy, so he devised special undersized pieces. He cut serving utensils in the plane's pantry to a minimum. There, the stewardess has only a ladle, a wood-

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en spoon and a two-tined fork to work with.

Metal trays on which dishes slid back and forth in rough weather gave way to a contraption made of fiber, with holes in the surface into which all receptacles for food fit snugly.

But perfection in equipment was only the takeoff. Newton Wilson, a modest, quiet, somewhat academic man who never leaps before he looks through, in and around a situation, became the 20th century innovator of precise recipes—a sort of Fanny Farmer of flying. Tirelessly he worked on revising and re-revising recipes to make them suitable for aerial use. Not because altitude makes whipped cream and meringue fall, but because of the time that must elapse between preparation and serving. Air meals are always put aboard at the stop nearest mealtime. On some trips this means they must stay in their containers for several hours.

If stuffed green peppers for example, were slow-cooked, they would be a green mush in the hour or more before they reached the passengers. Therefore, peppers that fly are cooked only five minutes. Steaks, on the other hand, have to be served medium or well done; if rare, the surface heat would escape and there would be no heat coming from inside to replace it. Thus the steak would be cold by serving time.

Some things are out altogether for sky service. Omelets wouldn't keep their shape during the trip from kitchen to plane to passenger's plate. Eggs are never set on toast, for the toast would get soggy in the

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time between preparation and consumption. Brussels sprouts would fall apart after four hours even if, like other air-destined vegetables, they were only medium-done.

Thick soups that need last-minute stirring, or soups containing solids like vegetables or noodles, are out, too. The heavy globs of solids aren't suited to pouring out of the Thermos jugs. Picture the splash that would result from a soggy piece of tomato plopping into a half-filled soup bowl. On the trays, there's no space for the conventional wedge of pie; desserts must fit into small cups. Spinach, asparagus and broccoli are difficult to dish out quickly. And then of course there is the problem of smell. Foods such as cabbage and fish are too odoriferous for a plane cabin.

DESPITE all limitations, however, airline passengers do very nicely on dinners consisting of consomme, radishes, celery, olives, to start with; an entree of lamb chops and corn O'Brien with mixed green salad, Russian dressing and rolls on the side. Chocolate sundae, coffee and mints conclude the spread. Lunches might include strained vegetable soup, radishes, celery, olives, followed by chicken à la king served in patty shell, lettuce and green pepper salad, Thousand Island dressing, rolls. Then for dessert, a rhubarb tart and coffee.

All meals on planes are served free. This policy was reached through some unbelievable-but-true bookkeeping which proved that since passengers have no choice of food, the millions of dollars the airlines lay out annually on meals

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amounts to *less* than if passengers bought food à la carte, with ensuing wastage. Besides a survey has shown that passengers overwhelmingly prefer the present no-charge, no-choice arrangement, anyhow.

With equipment, menus, cooking specifications and the finances of sky service pretty well stabilized by 1940, anyone but Newt Wilson might have called it a day. He still felt, though, that he would like to have all meals standardized to his high specifications for the American Airlines.

Here was the problem he faced: United was the only airline having its own extensive system of kitchens. TWA had one kitchen of its own, Northwest three or four. For the rest, airlines depended on the Hull Dobbs chain of restaurants for some five or ten per cent of their sky catering, or on airport restaurants and individual caterers.

If the caterer at the nearest-to-mealtime stop was good, Wilson found, the meal was good. If he wasn't, it wasn't. Many a competent restaurant chef, moreover, is a washout when it comes to preparing food for air passengers. In this business there is no room for artistic temperament or original recipes; food has to be prepared by rule, on the clock, and often on very short order.

For two and a half years Wilson tried to sell the airlines on the idea of doing their own catering. Then, in 1942, he resigned from American Airlines to become the president of Sky Chefs, Inc., the only restaurant chain exclusively serving air travelers. The two airport restaurants he started then have increased to eighteen today, and from his kitch-

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meals served on American Airlines —which carry one-third of United States air passengers. Sky Chefs, Inc., also serves about fifteen per cent of the meals served on other continental airlines.

Over ninety per cent of Sky Chefs' employes are women. And this isn't just a war-emergency policy. Wilson prefers women cooks. "They'll accept training," he says. "Men want to do things their own way. And women are also more dependable for setting up the trays right. That's important. After all, stewardesses can't go back to the kitchen for something that's been forgotten."

If you ever happen to see a shortish, pleasant looking man with a big cigar, gravely taking notes at mealtime on a plane, very likely it will be Newt Wilson. And after the flight, the manager of a Sky Chefs restaurant somewhere will receive a polite little memorandum, perhaps concluding, if the meal has been praiseworthy, with "Hope this information will be of help to you," or if the comments are unfavorable, "Please let's do everything possible to bring the service up to our standards."

Nothing escapes this man with a head full of big ideas and an eye for detail.

"I've only done the same things anybody else would do, confronted with the same problems," Newt Wilson says when he's complimented for his air-meals pioneering. He assures you he has only started and, like every other executive, he's full of plans for improved post-war equipment and service.

However, from the viewpoint of

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the average passenger, who is already greatly impressed, improving sky meals would seem to be a case of gilding the lily.

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