

BALBOA



ISLAND LIVING

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Meet Your Balboa Island Neighbor
Teresa Power

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history

By **Pete Weitzner** – Balboa Island Resident and Co-Producer, “The Golden Age of Newport Harbor”



now exhibiting: The AirCal Story

NEWPORT FLYER LEFT A NOSTALGIC WHITE TRAIL

The newest exhibit at **Balboa Island Museum Newport Beach** takes you back to when one airline served John Wayne Airport. Recall **Bonanza Airlines** and its Fairchild F-27 Silver Dart prop planes?

Then in 1967, **Air California** took off.

“Air California was our hometown airline,” Retired Pilot, **Captain Roger Nilsen** said. “It’s the place we all wanted to work.”

Now you can share in the lore of the AirCal era. The exhibit went live March 1 and will be up through May with a panel event on March 22nd.

“Easy to put together,” Balboa Museum Executive Director, **Tiffany Pepys Hoey** said. “Everyone I talk to, flight attendants, pilots, want to contribute. They loved this airline. They hold reunions.”

Nilsen goes every year, the 55th confab was held on January 14th, as always, Friday closest to the airline’s founding day in 1967.

Air California was started as a regional, intrastate carrier by five businessmen in Corona del Mar – an airline headquartered in Newport Beach, hubbed at John Wayne Airport. It began the first regular flights from John Wayne to San Francisco – \$15.59 including tax – added San Diego, Palm Desert, Sacramento, San Jose. They often had 30-minute turnarounds—barely time for Captain Nilsen to take seafood orders from the crew for **Delaney’s Restaurant** on the second floor of JWA.

“Typical day was seven to eight takeoffs and landings,” Nilsen said. “When the winds were blowing, we’d come in sideways...we didn’t care, we were so good at it.”

“Early days were literally on a wing and a prayer,” Stewardess and Balboa Island Resident, **Susan Riddle** said. “We used these prop jets to go in and out of Tahoe. Every seat was like a Barcalounger. **Michael Landon** would fly up for ‘Little House on the Prairie.’ We had football charters. But we’d mostly fly gamblers and serve three drinks at a time on a 25-minute flight.”

The CdM businessmen that founded Air California included Developer **William Myers** and Architect **William Pereira**. In the mid-70s the airline fell into the conglomerate hands of San Diego Industrialist **C. Arnholt Smith**, original owner of the San Diego Padres, Peruvian tuna canneries, and other diverse ventures. Smith’s empire fell into bankruptcy, but his last asset to be disposed of was the profitable one, Air California.

In March 1981, Real Estate Developers **General William Lyon and George Argyros** outbid Air Florida and won Air California out of bankruptcy for \$61 million.

“They rebranded it AirCal,” Nilsen said. “Changed the uniforms, ran these fun commercials.” Those uniforms were designed by Award-winning Fashion Designer, **Mary McFadden**.

“Mary McFadden was really big,” Riddle said. “Before that, all airline uniforms looked very military, brown, and navy. These were Azure Blue suits, Cyclamen Rose blouses, and Mary McFadden signature-pleated scarves.”

AirCal didn’t just get you there. It marketed vacation packages, like the “Happy Hop: Your Ticket to Southern California.” The two-to-four-day tours included “unlimited use tickets at Disneyland.”

Nilsen met Lyon and Argyros each once. Lyon surprise-boarded a flight, asked to sit in the cockpit. “His airline, he didn’t have to ask,” Nilsen said. “He was very professional.”

The pilot was flying to Seattle when Argyros surprise-invited the crew to a Mariners game. (He owned the team from 1981 to 1989.)

“We had a blast. We were in his box. In those days there were two boxes, owners and media,” Nilsen said.

“Company would ask ‘you’re going over your required flight time can you do it?’ and we’d always say yes,” Riddle said. “We were a bunch of fun girls. We always got free Mariners tickets from George, we’d hop on a plane and go up to Seattle. And Judy (Argyros) was very friendly with the flight attendants.

At one point they needed a 10% giveback — bad financial straits, they said, ‘if you give us \$1, we’ll give you \$1.50 back.’ Son-of-a gun, two years later they handed every single one of us a personal check at a dinner.”

Lyon and Argyros made a handsome profit when they sold AirCal to **American Airlines, Inc.** in 1987, for \$226 million.

“It made sense,” Nilsen said. “The big airlines were gobbling up regionals, they were desperate for pilots and planes. We had both.”

Lyon Air Museum donated model planes for the exhibit. They’ll fly over the front-gallery display.

General William Lyon passed in May of 2020 at his Coto de Caza home. He was 97. Argyros, 84, lives in Newport with his wife Julia and was ranked #13 on the most recent Orange County Business Journal’s Wealthiest List. Both Argyros and Lyon are surefire first-ballot entrants to the Orange County Business Hall of Fame – AirCal is one reason why.

George and Julia Argyros are lifetime members and donors to the Balboa Island Museum Newport Beach.



Stewardesses Brett Lansdell and Susan Riddle in brown AirCal outfits



Air California First Flight tickets



Air California Jet on JWA tarmac (Photo courtesy of DepartedWings.com)



AirCal tray, wings and promo pin



AirCal Pilot ID for Roger Nilsen



Air California Boarding Pass

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