

St. Louis team members share what the MD-80 meant to them

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When American Airlines retires the McDonnell Douglas MD-80 aircraft fleet next week, it will close a chapter for Trans World Airlines and for team members in St. Louis, too.

All through the 1980s, American and TWA wielded brand-new MD-80s to compete with each other and other airlines on domestic flights. It was the backbone of the domestic fleets of both airlines in those years and a regular sight in St. Louis.

When American bought the assets of St. Louis-based TWA out of bankruptcy in early 2001, TWA team members joined American, and the MD-80s that had flown against each other became part of the same fleet.

“Over the years, I probably took more than 100 flights on the TWA MD-83s, which are now part of our fleet,” Customer Service Agent Scott Dixon said. “I think they have been a loyal workhorse for our company.”

Shiela Bachtell joined TWA in 1968 in Los Angeles as a Reservations Agent, planning to stay six months and earn enough money to go back to college.

“I got the travel bug, and I absolutely fell in love with my job,” she said this week. She has been with TWA and now American a combined 51 years. And she eventually finished her college degree, too.

Sheila now works as a Customer Service Agent in St. Louis.

“It was a family,” she said. “And we still are a family. Everybody worked together for 40-plus years — you grew up with your kids, you knew who was pregnant, who was having a baby. [And years later], you knew who was going off

to college.”

St. Louis was a large hub for TWA, with more than 300 flights per day, many of them on MD-80s. Even after the hub was gone, the MD-80 was still a regular sight at the airport.

“It’s a very plain airplane when you think about what we have right now, with newer planes delivered with power at every seat and high-speed Wi-Fi,” Sheila said. But customers loved the 2-3, or five abreast, seating on the MD-80 and grew fond of the plane and its reliable presence in St. Louis and around the network.

Just this week she spoke with an Executive Platinum customer who she has seen over and over through the years. “He told me, ‘That was my airplane. I can’t believe they’re taking my airplane away.’ People feel that way — it’s a metal object, but you know what? We were close to it.”

The last MD-80 was built at the McDonnell Douglas factory in Long Beach, California, and delivered to TWA in December 1999. That same plane, an MD-83 number N984TW, continued flying for American and will be retired along with the rest of American’s MD-80 fleet Sept. 4.

Sheila will be on the employee flight to Roswell, New Mexico, where the MD-80s will be stored for retirement.

“It’s going to be a bittersweet moment to see it go,” she said.

Kevin King works in Stores supporting team members at American’s Line Maintenance in St. Louis.

“The MD-80 has been a constant presence throughout my American Airlines career. There are so many memories and stories and in the end, they are all about the work and the dedicated people who did the work,” he wrote in an email. “Because the MD-80 has been the bread and butter for STL Tech Ops for decades, its departure from American’s fleet roster will be a significant milestone for every St. Louis-based American Airlines employee.”

The MD-80 made its mark on the history of TWA and STL.