

HEINLEIN GENEALOGY

GREATER PITTSBURGH AIRPORT

storytelling

For a cheap but glamorous date, take your darling to Greater Pittsburgh Airport (in the 1960s)

Back in the 1960s, this cash-strapped pseudo-Lothario was dating his future wife, Adele. We frequently spent our date nights in an elegant world populated by the wayfaring rich and occasionally famous.

Admission to this wonderland required a mere 35-cent parking fee, and the entrance to the stepped — ziggurat like — building that encompassed it was accessorized by a spouting fountain whose copious sheets of billowing water cascaded into a collection of descending rectangular pools illuminated by iridescent lights.

Few places in Western Pennsylvania could rival the imposing augustness of the former Greater Pittsburgh Airport terminal — especially, if you grew up in a tough, riparian mill town like Aliquippa.

When I was lucky enough to borrow my dad's 1959 turquoise Impala, I'd bop on over to Ambridge and pick up Adele. We usually headed straight for the airport. It was a 20-minute cruise, steeply uphill, once we crossed the Ohio River. I was a strange kid who never liked contemporary music — Montovani and Ferrante & Teicher were my speed (still are). So good ol' Adele would pretend to enjoy "Party Line" on KDKA as Ed and Wendy King did their thing.

In the '60s, airports weren't the aggravating, security-obsessed, crowded, flyer-processing factories they've become. Most air travelers were well-heeled citizens who

expected good service and — I'm not kidding, or exaggerating or hallucinating — got it! Pilots were minor celebrities and female flight attendants were the epitome of sophistication and glamour.

You were expected to mesh with the ambiance. Fastidious Adele and her disheveled pal were always nattily attired.

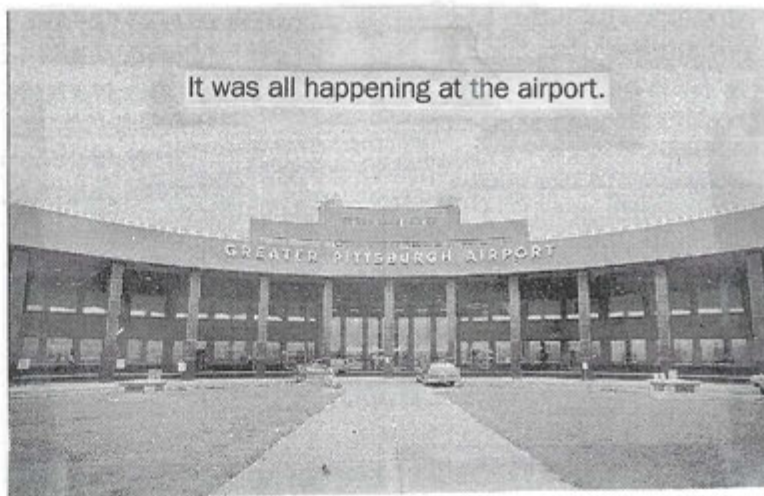
Our first stop, once inside the terminal, was a game arcade filled with pinball machines. Unlike me, Adele was intelligent, articulate and winsome; however, she hadn't wasted much of her youth on Aliquippa's Franklin Avenue playing pinball and shooting pool. I wowed her with my skill, and her praise fed my male ego. After a few dates, however, she surpassed me and never looked back.

If we had the dough, catching a flick at the airport theater was next. Movie theaters of yesteryear allowed you to enter and leave at will, so we often saw the end of a feature and then watched the beginning. A bugaboo that made this theater unique — besides its in-the-terminal location — was a film's dialogue often couldn't be heard over plane engines roaring nearby.

for the movie.

Another diversion, weather permitting, was provided by the second-floor outdoor observation deck. Hordes of visitors braved the mind-numbing noise and aviation-fuel smog to catch a glimpse of aluminum-skinned birds landing and taking off in their natural habitat.

It was all happening at the airport.



The hub of this airport's bub was the magnificent main lobby. Many rows of comfortable seats made this area a Mecca for people watching. Adele and I would wile away the hours chatting and observing the resplendently attired excursionists. We'd dream about flying to intriguing destinations like Paris and Hong Kong. (Eventually, our dreams materialized, but by then flying had lost much of its glitz but none of its glitches.)

Well-known people occasionally strolled through this area, usually professional athletes and local television personalities. The only movie star we ever spotted was Richard Egan. He appeared mainly in B-features, but what the heck do you expect for 35 cents?

After exiting the terminal, we walked to the fountain, made silent wishes with closed eyes, and then threw a single penny each into one of its shimmering pools.

Our next stop was at nearby (now demolished) White Swan Park, where we played a skeeball game that awarded redeemable prize coupons. Over several years, we amassed enough coupons for Adele to take home a stainless steel cake server she used at our wedding reception.

Yessiree, I sure pitched a lot of skeeballs and pennies and woo, back in the 1960s.

Our Storytelling series about simple pleasures on the cheap