



American Airlines' Astrocolor IFE system on one of its Boeing 707s in the 1970s.

It's been almost a century since the first, primitive experiments with in-flight film projection took place in an Aeromarine Airways Curtiss F5L aircraft. It was 1921, and the 11 passengers on a sightseeing flight over Chicago were shown a silent movie promoting the city. But it wasn't until 1961 that David Flexer's Inflight Motion Pictures brought regular in-flight entertainment (IFE) to passengers on Trans World Airlines' early jets.

Reel Time

True fact: Movies were once projected to an airplane full of passengers via a filmstrip running along the ceiling.

BY HOWARD SLUTSKEN

A single movie was spooled onto a giant 26-inch-diameter reel of 16 mm film that was mounted to the airplane's ceiling. The film was fed from the front of the aircraft, and as it traveled through each of the three or four cabin classes, it passed through a projector.

Passengers watched a single screen at the front of the cabin and listened to the audio track using uncomfortable hollow-tube earplugs. If everything went smoothly, the film didn't break and the audio was properly synchronized to the film.

The ultimate, and perhaps most absurd, evolution of this technology appeared in American Airlines' Astrocolor system, manufactured by Bell & Howell. Starting from a single, massive 30-inch reel in a forward cabinet, the film was fed to 20 or more small projection units mounted above the seats in the airline's Boeing 707s.

Perhaps the best description of Astrocolor comes from the late John Norman White, the longtime editor and publisher of *Avion*, the precursor to *APEX Experience* magazine. White was the industry's unofficial, self-appointed, but well-respected, historian.

"The film started out from the forward, starboard section of the airplane and followed a 260-foot path that involved six 90-degree turns," White explained in his 1994 article, "A History of Inflight Entertainment."

"On some aircraft, the film trail approached 300 feet. What this meant was that a first-class passenger sitting in a seat on the port side would see scenes and hear sound seven and a half minutes after the passenger on the starboard side of the airplane had experienced it," he wrote. "It was marvelously innovative ... but it was also impractical and short-lived."

By the 1970s, small, easy-to-handle 8 mm film cassettes replaced the unwieldy 16 mm reels, but only for a short time. Video display systems were soon introduced and quickly became the standard for IFE.

Nowadays, of course, the cabin crew doesn't have to worry about the film breaking on the one-and-only movie. Onboard digital storage holds hundreds of hours of content shown on seatback screens or delivered via Wi-Fi to personal devices — and technology. ■