

Throughout the 1920s, travel by air was slowly, but steadily, gaining popularity with passengers. One of the reasons flying wasn't more popular with the public was the fact that most people still considered flying too dangerous. In order to win passengers away from trains, the airlines needed to convince the public that flying was, indeed, safe. The one person who would help redefine the image of airline travel in the 1930s was Ellen Church.

Church was a registered nurse from Iowa who was so captivated by flying that she began taking flying lessons.

In fact, when Church initially approached Steve Stimpson of [Boeing Air Transport](#) for an airline job, it was for the position of pilot. Although Stimpson wouldn't hire Church as a pilot, he did see promise in another of Church's ideas. She suggested placing nurses onboard planes in order to combat the public's fear of flying.

For seeing the tremendous publicity that would result from having nurses on their planes, Stimpson sold the idea to his superiors. In 1930, [Boeing](#) Air Transport (BAT), the predecessor to [United Airlines](#), began what other airlines thought at the time to be a bold experiment. BAT hired eight nurses to work as stewardesses on their flights for a three-month trial run. On May 15th,

Ellen Church became the world's first stewardess, working the BAT route from Oakland to Chicago. The addition of stewardesses would prove to be an unquestionable success for BAT. Within the next three years, most airlines followed BAT's lead in hiring stewardesses.

The requirements for stewardesses in the 1930s were strict. In addition to being registered nurses, the women had to be single, younger than 25 years old; weigh less than 115 pounds; and stand less than 5 feet, 4 inches tall. The responsibilities of stewardesses in the early years were far from glamorous. In addition to accommodating the regular needs of passengers, stewardesses at times needed to haul the luggage on board, screw down loose seats, fuel planes, and even help pilots push planes into hangars. For their services, the first group of BAT stewardesses earned \$125 a month.



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Ellen Church (Marshall)

1904-1965



The World's First Stewardess

Cresco, Iowa

Ellen Church was born on September 22, 1904, on a small farm near Cresco, Iowa.

Ellen Church combined imagination, persistence, and her own personal warmth to meet life's challenges along the way.



Humanitarian, war heroine, and aviation pioneer, Ellen Church dedicated her indomitable spirit to the service of mankind.

As the world's first airline stewardess, she created a new and exciting profession for young girls of the twentieth century.

Employed in 1930 by United Airlines she organized the pioneer group, "Sky Girls."

As a young nurse in San Francisco, Miss Church approached the officials of the Boeing Air Transport, a parent company of United, and proposed that stewardesses be added to flight crews. Her idea was accepted. She and seven other nurses began flying between Chicago and San Francisco on May 15, 1930. Little did they know the 20-hour, 13-stop flight was the launching of an aviation career that today employs over 14,000 flight attendants for United Airlines.

Miss Church flew for over 18 months. Grounded by injury in an automobile accident, she enrolled at the University of Minnesota and earned a bachelor's degree in nursing education. In 1936 she resumed hospital duty as supervisor of pediatrics at Milwaukee County Hospital.

In December 1942, she took to the air again, this time as a captain in the Army Nurse Corps, Air Evacuation Service. For distinguished work in North Africa, Sicily, England and France, she was presented with the Air Medal.



Miss Church was nationally honored by United and the air transport industry.

As a much dedicated air Corp nurse in World War II, she brought comfort and relief to thousands of American soldiers who were wounded on battlefields of Europe. As a peace time nurse and instructor and hospital administrator, she guided vast numbers of young women along the path once trod by another humanitarian, Florence Nightingale.

Following Miss Church's Army discharge, she served as the Director of Nursing at the Sherman Hospital in Elgin, Illinois, and later

received her Master's Degree in nursing from the University of Chicago. In 1952 she became the Administrator of Union Hospital in Terre Haute, Indiana, where she served for nearly thirteen years. Ellen married Leonard B. Marshall Sr. former president of Terre Haute First National Bank in 1964.

Thirty five years after she made aviation history as the world's first stewardess and eleven days before her one year wedding anniversary, Mrs. Marshall was thrown from her horse during a morning ride and died during related surgery. Mrs. Marshall would have been 61 years old the following month.

Ellen Church Marshall was truly a dedicated woman. United Airlines contributed \$25,000 to Union Hospital in the memory of Ellen Church Marshall.

The Cresco Municipal Airport is named the Ellen Church Field in her memory.



Her name will serve forever as a symbol of the selfless devotion that resounds in the hearts of nurses and stewardesses all over the world.