

PATRICIA 'PAT' DELLER

Patricia 'Pat' Deller was born in Groton, NY to William McGregor Deller and Louise Roosa Rider in 1945, too late to be a war baby and too early to be a 'baby boomer'. This was just the beginning of a life that defies limiting roles, norms or expectations. She created, rather than followed, trends and traditions. She was to become a pioneer in a pioneering field. Pioneering is part of her heritage. Her well researched Roosa ancestors were among the first settlers in the Hudson Valley. She also has Dutch, Scottish, German, Welsh and English roots. Pat's residential and school history followed her father's career path from teacher to principal and to Superintendent of Schools and included King Ferry, Dundee, a Chicago suburb and Fairport, NY. While some students might talk about the struggles to adjust to new schools and friends through frequent moves, Pat talks about the adventures and advantages of those experiences, a viewpoint that is repeated throughout her life and career.

Looking at her childhood through the lens of her life and career, Pat describes her parents' expectations for their three children: they would each excel in all they did. And, they did. Pat's sister, a lawyer and professor at Georgetown University, is an internationally known author and advocate for women's rights. In her own way, Pat also had a significant impact on the lives of people from unusual places in unusual ways. As children, getting a "B" was not tolerated. It was taken for granted that they would go to college. Both parents were educators—by training and by nature. The dinner table was time for discussion and vocabulary challenges. Her mother, known as Lou, had paid her own way through college—Cornell at that. Lou's attitude and motto about that reality and any other challenge they faced was, "life is hard—work at it!" Even though her mother was not employed as a teacher, she was a 4-H leader and a Cooperative Extension agent for Cornell University. Lou made all the children's clothes. Pat can still recite the 4-H pledge seen at right. While it may seem just a nice motto for a very old organization, it can also be a guide for life. Lest it be presumed, given the parents' education and careers, that the family lived a life of relative financial ease, the family was for many years burdened by "colossal" debt due to her mother's battle with endocarditis and spinal meningitis. Still, Pat remembers that no matter how difficult the finances were, they still bought books. "We were all readers", she says. While sister Susan's career in academia was a logical progression from her upbringing and the family background, Pat, as was her nature, followed her



own path.



The family move to a Chicago suburb was a culture shock. Used to being at the top of their classes in small upstate NY school systems, class sizes of 350 presented a greater challenge. As usual, Pat found it all wonderful. There was a school club for every possible interest, and she had many interests. In particular, she was involved in the drama club, which led to a decision to major in speech and dramatic arts at the University of Iowa. At that time, she hoped to become the next Helen Hayes. However, after her third year, Pat dropped out of college—out of the mold. Lou, perhaps enjoying the empty nest and remembering some of Pat's personal habits differing from her own said, "I love you, but get an apartment."

Her apartment mate saw an ad for ticket agents with American Airlines. Pat didn't get that job but was offered a job in reservations at Buffalo. She packed her belongings in the trunk of an MG Midget and headed west. She stayed at the YWCA and worked on the 18th floor of the Statler-Hilton until a friend suggested they take openings posted with the airline in San Francisco. Pat said, "OK, let's do it". They headed west together for a few years until the assassinations of Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King. Pat decided it was time to be closer to home and returned to the AA reservations office in Buffalo. One night at bowling, a guy pointed out that for \$5.00, anyone could get a radio license and be eligible to work as airport operations agent, which involves calculating weight and balance factors for departures and providing landing data for incoming flights. Pat was in.



A fuel crisis in the '70's meant cutbacks at the airport, bumping Pat back into reservations. Instead, she took a customer service job at the computer center in Tulsa, OK. She was involved in creating the first help desk for American Airline's computer users. Pat hired, trained, supervised and eventually wrote the training manual for the call staff at the new customer service department. In the process, she developed contacts and friendships throughout the company and industry, a network that would be useful in her career and meaningful in her life. After a six month detour in NYC, Pat moved with the corporate offices to Dallas-Fort Worth. By this time, the airline was introducing computers to airports around the Caribbean. Pat coordinated it all through the company's training center. Changing jobs again, she took on a role that oversaw all the computer systems in all reservations and airport operations. When the systems went wrong, which could happen with catastrophic effects, it was her job to manage the staff that had to figure out how to fix it as quickly as possible. As challenging as that was, it was even more challenging to write follow-up reports to the senior airline executives

in a way they could understand extremely technical material without making them feel "talked down to." She thrived on the pressure, the 20 hour days, the chaos of each crisis.

Pat had 19 different jobs in 30 years with American. Many of the roles she took on were 'firsts'. They had not been defined by anyone doing them before her. They were at the crest of a major developmental wave in the airline industry. She says she was in the right place at the right time. Others might say she was the right person at the right time and place. Her willingness and ability to be flexible, to take on challenges with no road map and create solutions, to finesse the human factors might be rooted in that 4-H pledge, in her pioneering ancestry, her mother's adage, or her general outlook on life. A metaphor for her career could be seen in an early car buying experience. She saw a cute little convertible she liked at dealership. She went to the credit union to get the \$800 it cost and drove back to the car lot. As she was getting into the car, she asked the salesman to explain the gear shift pattern. Shocked, he asked her if she could drive stick shift. She said, "No, but I'll figure it out," and drove off, jerking and chugging. By the time she got home she could drive stick shift. Looking back, Pat thinks 'figuring it out' was always the challenge and the fun in her career.