

## The story behind Phoenix Sky Harbor's fly-in chapel

<VALLEY 101 THEME SONG>

**KAILA:** Welcome to Valley 101, a podcast from The Arizona Republic and azcentral.com where we answer the questions *you* ask about metro Phoenix. I'm your host, Kaila White.

**KAILA:** Back in the day, when Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport had a Terminal 1, it also had a chapel. That's right. A chapel. It opened in 1937... But in the '40s, it closed. Today, the chapel -- and the terminal for that matter - are history.

**KAILA:** But what is the story behind the chapel? Why did it exist in the first place? And why was it so short lived? Today, we fly back in time to share the story of the fly-in chapel. Here's producer Taylor Seely.

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### The impetus for the chapel

\*old timey romantic music\*

**TAYLOR:** Once upon a time, in a land known as the United States, you couldn't just get married any time or day you wanted.

**Gary Martelli:** [00:01:20] So in the nineteen thirties, many states, including California, had a waiting period to get a marriage license [00:01:28] [8.2]

**TAYLOR:** That's Gary Martelli.

**Gary Martelli:** [00:01:05] and I'm the Phoenix Airport Museum director. [00:01:06] [1.9]

**TAYLOR:** Like Gary said, most states had a waiting period before. It was a 3-day waiting period, to make sure you were really sure you wanted to get married. You even had to take a blood test! This was a test to check for venereal diseases. [According to a county health department in Missouri, which was one of the states that mandated this blood test](#), syphilis was a major health problem in the 1920s. If either person tested positive, many places across the U.S. would prohibit the marriage until the infected person was treated. But in Phoenix? We didn't have those rules, so our city decided to capitalize on that.

**Gary Martelli:** [00:01:28] and Arizona did not. And so the Phoenix Junior Chamber of Commerce came up with this idea to have a wedding chapel built at Sky Harbor Airport with the idea to entice kind of

Hollywood celebrities to fly over from California and come to Sky Harbor and get married at this wedding chapel. [00:01:51][23.0]

**TAYLOR:** Again, the idea being, why wait when you can come fly to Arizona and do it right away? And for celebrities, doing it quickly could presumably reduce the chance of being caught by paparazzi. For Arizona, it gave us the opportunity to be seen and enjoyed by more tourists. We could show off our great weather.

**Gary Martelli:** [00:11:49] so the chapel was conceived in the late 30s and in nineteen thirty seven is when the Junior Chamber of Commerce constructed an adobe, basically openair Spanish style chapel, which consisted of an archway and then kind of a tower with another archway with a big cast iron bell and a wooden cross on top of the the on the very top. [00:12:18][28.8]

**TAYLOR:** It was located at the airport's first-ever terminal, which was also designed in an adobe, Spanish style aesthetic. The bell was 100 years old. And based on photos, Gary estimates the tower was about 20 feet tall.

**Gary Martelli:** [00:12:26] And it was right near the runway, like right off the runway. [00:12:29][3.8]

**TAYLOR:** So basically, Phoenix was the original quickie wedding hot spot, even before Las Vegas. Or at least, it was trying to be.

**Taylor Seely:** [00:06:39] so how did it end up playing out? Was this a hot spot for celebrities? [00:06:42][3.0]

**Gary Martelli:** [00:06:44] There were a few celebrities that did come and get married, but of the 42 weddings that were performed there in the late 30s and 1940s, the majority of them were by locals. And the very first wedding that took place, the people actually drove to Sky Harbor to get married. [00:07:00][4.3][18.3]

**Taylor Seely:** [00:21:49] Was there any particular reason why it would have been appealing? [00:21:52][3.0]

**Gary Martelli:** [00:21:54] I would think it was probably a novelty, but it was also from a time when it was really fun to go to the airport. [00:22:00][5.6][8.5]

**TAYLOR:** Remember, the airport was still new in Phoenix. Phoenix had only officially purchased it from Acme Investment Company two years prior in 1935. So families, for fun, used to drive there with their kids to watch the airplanes take off. It was a cool, new place to be. And while the chapel was mostly used for locals' weddings, there was at least one notable celebrity couple who got married there.

**Gary Martelli:** [00:07:34] one was Don Novis, who was kind of a radio celebrity. And I believe he was marrying like a Broadway show girl. [00:07:41][7.9]

**TAYLOR:** Friday, January 28th 1938, an article in The Arizona Republic ran, "Donald Novis Marries here." A photo shows Novis kissing his bride, Dorothy Bradshaw, the Broadway show girl. The article said the couple spent the day visiting Phoenix before returning to their home in Hollywood, California. Now.. this is just a guess, but perhaps the celebrity marriages didn't pick up is because it appears getting married in Phoenix did NOT reduce paparazzi. The article said 100 people greeted Novis and Bradshaw when they arrived, including chamber of commerce folks, newspapers photographers, and local residents who were excited to watch celebrities get married here. Even KTAR, the local radio station, broadcasted the chapel ceremony!

**Gary Martelli:** [00:07:44] And then there was another wedding where somebody married an actress named Sylvia Sidney. [00:07:49][5.4]

**TAYLOR:** The Republic wrote about that wedding on Oct. 2, 1935. That was two years before the fly-in chapel opened. And perhaps it was the inspiration behind the fly-in chapel because Sidney is quoted in the paper as saying they selected Phoenix because it didn't have the 3-day waiting period. The story also noted how Sidney worked to dodge the photographers because she was afraid of having a bad photo taken.

\*music\*

**TAYLOR:** But as the city grew, so did the airport. Newer terminals were being built and the one where the chapel existed would eventually be demolished. The airport closed the fly-in chapel in advance of the close in the 1940s.

## **The next chapel in Sky Harbor's history**

**TAYLOR:** Gary isn't sure what happened to the chapel's wooden cross, but the bell was put into storage for safe keeping. The airport opened a new chapel with the opening of Terminal 2 in 1962.

**Gary Martelli:** [00:16:36] And it was not really promoted for weddings. [00:16:41][4.8]

**TAYLOR:** It was supposed to be more commemorative.

**Gary Martelli:** [00:16:46] And so it had a plaque on it talking about how it was used in the original terminal [00:16:53][7.4]

**TAYLOR:** This time, the design was different. It was smaller. You couldn't stand under the concrete archway, you had to sort of stand in front of it. With the wooden cross gone, the airport shaped it to compliment the new terminal. They constructed a new stylized metal cross.

**Gary Martelli:** [00:16:58] terminal two was very much a mid century modern design, and so this belfry was designed very much like that as well. Very streamlined cast cast, concrete archway. Completely different from its original beginnings, which looked very rustic and and Spanish style. [00:17:20][19.1]

**TAYLOR:** While it wasn't advertised as a place to get married, the airport did document at least one wedding there in 1965.

**Gary Martelli:** [00:18:55] And then once it was at Terminal two, it wasn't there a long time either, because then Terminal two got remodeled [00:19:02][7.2]

**TAYLOR:** The belfry structure was moved to the northside of the airfield, in front of a restaurant called The Left Seat. It was a popular spot for airport enthusiasts because you could watch airplanes take off and land. And finally, once THAT restaurant closed, the bell and cross went into storage for good... This is... until most recently.

\*music\*

## **What exists for members of faith at the airport today**

**TAYLOR:** In December of 2020, Phoenix Sky Harbor opened up a pop-up display commemorating the fly-in chapel in Terminal 4.

**Gary Martelli:** [00:23:06] right now, what we have on display is we have the original bell, which probably weighs a good one hundred pounds. It's about twenty four inch diameter diameter. And then we have the metal cross that was constructed for the terminal 2 chapel.[15.8]

**TAYLOR:** There's information about the history of the fly-in chapel and passersby are invited to snap photos with or of the display. But there's one main thing Gary wants to make sure you all know: there are NO weddings allowed at Sky Harbor anymore. It's an operational hazard and the airport disallowed it years ago. So, sorry listeners. If you had dreams of saying I DO at Sky Harbor, it's not going to happen.

\*theme music\*

## **OUTRO**

**KAILA:** Well, Taylor, thanks for uncovering that old piece of history about Arizona's fly-in chapel. We know weddings aren't allowed at the airport anymore, but did they ever reopen a chapel?

**TAYLOR:** They don't have a chapel anymore, but they do have an interfaith space where airport visitors can go to have some quiet time and reflect, if they'd like.

**KAILA:** Well, listeners, that's all we have this week. If you liked this episode, check out Taylor's episode on what happened to Terminal 1. It was released in March 2019, so you'll have to scroll back in your feed a bit. While you're there, if you like our show, leave us a written review in your podcast app! Submit your questions to valley 101 dot a z central dot com and share our show with a friend. We'll see you next week!