Triumphant pilot Tony Jannus waves as he lands in Tampa on the first leg of that first regularly-scheduled airline flight in 1914. STATE ARCHIVES OF FLORIDA, FLORIDA MEMORY

NEW YORK - Millions of people step aboard airplanes each day, complaining about the lack of legroom and overhead space but almost taking for granted that they can travel thousands of miles in just a few hours.

Wednesday marks the 100th anniversary of the first commercial flight: a 23-minute hop across Florida's Tampa Bay. The St. Petersburg-Tampa Airboat Line was subsidized by St. Petersburg officials who wanted more winter tourists in their city. The alternative: an 11-hour train ride from Tampa.

That day, pilot Tony Jannus had room for just one passenger, the mayor of St. Petersburg, who sat next to him in the open cockpit. Three months later -- when tourism season ended -- so did the subsidy. The airline had carried 1,204 passengers but would never fly again.

Air travel was a risky business back then, according to DePaul University transportation expert, Dr. Joseph Schwieterman. "Those early flights were akin to a roller-coaster ride today, but the risk was real."

It took some time for the commercial airline industry to really get going. Back then, train travel ruled.
"Most people viewed air travel as an expensive extravagance at the time," Schwieterman said. "But this new mode of travel also captured everyone’s imagination. People knew that big things were coming and that air travel would be in the middle of it all."

In the 1920’s other regional, commercial airlines started to pop up, like the Detroit-Grand Rapids Airline, which charged $35 for a round-trip ticket.

Commercial air travel has changed a lot in 100 years, and with budgets stretched more and more, Schwieterman said we can expect . "We may soon get a taste of European-style no-frills services in which costs are at an absolute minimum. As crazy as it sounds, we could eventually see planes being akin to packed subways, in which people stand while clinging to overhead straps."

With the 100th anniversary in mind, The Associated Press reached out to today’s aviation leaders to see what they are predicting for the future of flying.

In five years, Richard Anderson, CEO of Delta Air Lines thinks small jets will start to be a thing of the past. "Just over a decade ago airlines seemed to be buying every 50-seat aircraft they could get their hands on," he says. "But the real utility of those small jets has come and gone and in the next five years we’ll see their numbers in the U.S. continue to dwindle."

In that same time frame, Gary Kelly, CEO of Southwest Airlines, predicts, "We’ll have fewer airlines, but they will be bigger, stronger and healthier."

Fast forward 25 years and Sir Richard Branson, president of Virgin Atlantic Airways said "I have no doubt that during my lifetime we will be able to fly from London to Sydney in under two hours, with minimal environmental impact. The awe-inspiring views of our beautiful planet below and zero-gravity passenger fun will bring a whole new meaning to in-flight entertainment."

Mark Dunkerley, CEO Hawaiian Airlines paints a less rosy picture. "Many of today's consumers will be priced out of the air," he said. "Failure to invest in aviation infrastructure and the insatiable appetite for regulation will not be offset by relatively modest further improvements in aircraft efficiency."

Jump ahead 100 years, and David Siegel, CEO of Frontier Airlines predicts pilot-less commercial craft and countless other innovations.

Doug Parker, CEO of American Airlines says in looking that far into the future, the sky’s the limit. "I am quite certain that Tony Jannus (who piloted the first commercial flight) never could have imagined the size and importance of commercial aviation today, or the impact it had on changing our world. Similarly, I cannot imagine what commercial aviation will look like in 2114."