

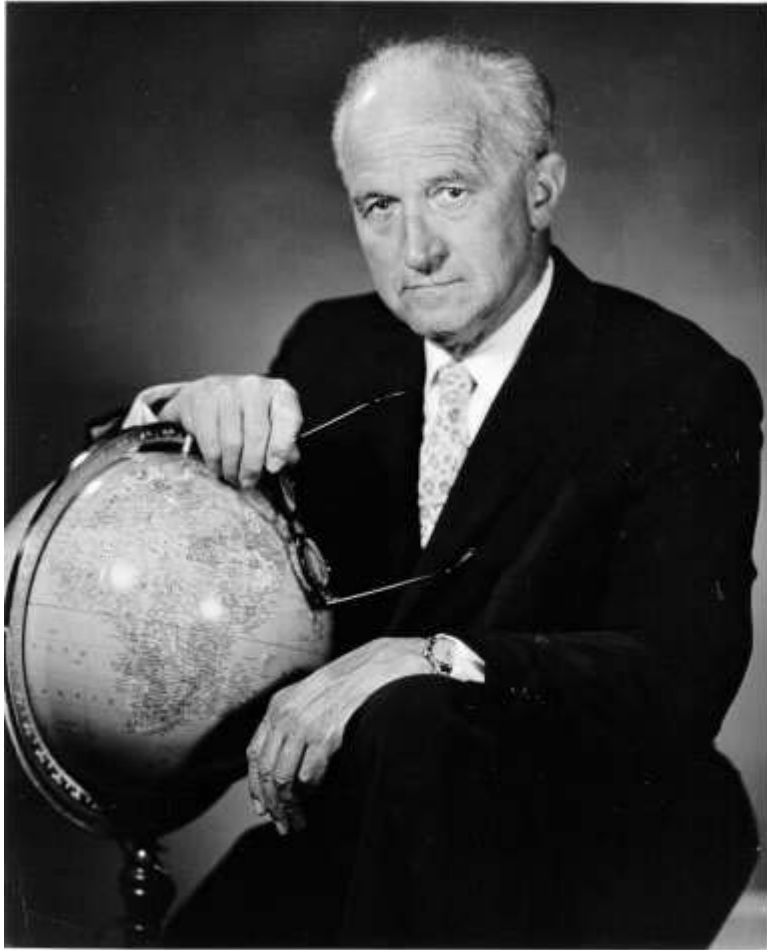


Tin Can Tourists or Cold War Caravanseraï? Wally Byam, the Airstream and the WBCCI

Charles Booth

*University of the West of
England*

Wally Byam and the WBCCI



Airstream, Inc.

- ❖ In 2005, Airstream, Inc., a US manufacturer of travel trailers and motorhomes, celebrates the 75th anniversary of its incorporation.
- ❖ Founded by Wallace M. (Wally) Byam (1896-1962), the company is one of only two surviving US trailer manufacturers from the 1930s.
- ❖ Company products are generally celebrated as a US design classic: visually appealing, technologically sophisticated. Early models are now premium-priced collectors' items.

The WBCCI

- From 1951 to 1960 Byam planned and led a number of 'caravans' – groups of travellers living and travelling in Airstreams – to Central America, Europe, Africa and within North American.
- In 1955, a group of 55 Airstream caravanners formally incorporated the Wally Byam Caravan Club (from 1962 the WBCC International – WBCCI). The WBCCI now has over 10,000 members and organizes hundreds of rallies yearly. The club celebrates its 50th anniversary at a rally in Springfield, Missouri, in June/July 2005.

The development of auto-camping

- /// Co-evolution with multiple contexts (see timeline)
- /// Contrast between bought, customised and self-built rigs. During early period (pre-WWII) majority of campers were self-built, many off plans published in popular media. Sharp shift post-WWII.
- /// From the start, tension between 'gypsies' and 'gentlemen' in auto-camping
- /// Significant uncertainty and flexibility about **what** was being bought, sold and used
- /// Manufacturers, suppliers, users and other stakeholders attempt to create camper communities

National tourism, national identity

- ❖ National tourism in the US developed between 1880 and 1940, with the emergence of print media, national transportation systems and technologies, mass markets and marketing, and increased disposable income and leisure time.
- ❖ Tourism marketing strategies (“See America First!”) publicised messages of patriotism, loyalty and heritage within the promotion of tourist landscapes and the consumption of tourist experiences.
- ❖ Within the specialised area of auto-camping, in particular, the intersection of the technological and the pastoral (“The Machine in the Garden”) promoted a communal reproduction of US identity which looked back to the values of the frontier while being securely fixed in modernity.

Byam's vision

- ▣ In Byam's conception the Airstream combined the ingenuity, entrepreneurship and technical excellence of the American engineer with a secular evangelicism concerning travel, adventure, and wilderness; and with a commitment to auto-camping as a communal activity: "The four freedoms: freedom from arrangements, freedom from the problems of age, freedom to know, freedom for fun". (Byam 1960)

Byam's vision

- ▣ This conception thus sought to blend appeals to modernist values of engineering and design excellence with the emblematic historical values of the pioneer communities of the early American west. This was conveyed within a folk mythology of Everyman (and woman) re-discovering their sense of place in a supportive community of fellow adventurers.

Byam's folk wisdom

- ❧ "Whether we like it or not, any fool can see that this Earth is gradually becoming one world. Nobody knows what the form of the 'one' will be, but it's going to be one or none."
- ❧ "Adventure is where you find it – any place, every place, except at home in the rocking chair ... Keep your eyes on the stars, and the stars in your eyes. See if you can find out what's over the next hill, and the next one after that."
- ❧ "It was impossible, so it took a little longer to accomplish."
- ❧ "It is better to wear out than to rust out."
- ❧ "Let's not make any changes – let's make only improvements."

Sentimentality and global integration

- ▣ Twin ideological and policy discourses in the Cold War: of containment and of integration.
- ▣ Containment was a discourse of otherness: creating social and cultural practices which, for example, rendered difference and deviance a source of anxiety and an object of investigation; “a force of restriction, intimidation and suppression” (Klein, 2003).
Containment was “one of the most powerfully deployed national narratives in recorded history” (Nadel, 1995)
- ▣ Integration, however, “constructed a world in which differences could be bridged and transcended” (Klein, 2003), defining the US within relationships rather than oppositions. Integration was a sentimental discourse of self-in-relation, the transcendence of difference and particularism, grounded in reciprocity and exchange, particularly emotional and sympathetic (Klein, 2003).

WBCCI and the Cold War

- ▣ Paradigm example of the integrationist impulse: emphatic reliance on both internal community and identity, and external connection and reciprocity.
- ▣ Represented an act of cultural diplomacy which self-evidently demonstrated US technological superiority within a sentimental narrative of global citizenship.
- ▣ Simultaneously contradicted the isolationist mode of earlier national tourism practices while exemplifying their essential reference to a technologised pastorality to be explored as part of a communal pioneer heritage.