

**TIN CAN TOURISTS OR COLD WAR CARAVANSERAI? WALLY BYAM,
THE AIRSTREAM, AND THE WBCCI**

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ABSTRACT

In 2005, Airstream, Inc., a US manufacturer of travel trailers (caravans) 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. Its products are broadly held to be classics of American design, and early models are now premium-priced collectors' items (Burckhart & Hunt, 2000). Byam himself is hailed as an expert designer, engineer and marketer who played a crucial role in the evolution and development of technologies associated with the adaptation of motor vehicles for long-distance travel and tourism, camping and outdoor pursuits.

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 the North American continent (see Exhibit 1). In 1955, a group of 55 Airstream caravanners formally incorporated the Wally Byam Caravan Club (from 1962 the Wally Byam Caravan Club 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 aims of the paper are three-fold and the structure will reflect this. In the first section of the paper, I explore the social, cultural and technological developments in the evolution of the travel trailer prior to the incorporation of Airstream just before the Second World War. I demonstrate the extent of co-evolution of technological and other factors, within multiple contexts (see Exhibit 2). During this time, there was significant uncertainty and interpretative flexibility about the travel trailer, its uses, purposes and markets, and this uncertainty was managed, in part, by manufacturers, suppliers, users and other stakeholders attempting to create camper communities (a theme built on

and extended by Byam and the WBCCI caravans). However, certain tensions - between poverty and extravagance, togetherness and independence, protection and despoliation of the environment, the indoors and the outdoors, and between 'travel' and 'tourism' – early became apparent, and continued into the second half of the twentieth century.

In the second part of the paper, I briefly discuss the history of the Airstream company under Byam, and outline certain themes in his business and technological leadership. I argue that in Byam's conception (and in his marketing) the Airstream iconically combined values of ingenuity, entrepreneurship and the technical excellence of the American engineer with a secular evangelism concerning travel, adventure and wilderness; and with a commitment to camping as a communal activity (Exhibit 3). I argue that this conception actively sought to blend appeals to modernist values of engineering and design excellence with the emblematic historical values of the pioneer communities of the early west. This appeal, consciously or unconsciously, was concealed and conveyed within a folk mythology of the common man (or woman) re-discovering their sense of place in a supportive community of fellow adventurers.

In the final part of the paper, I focus specifically on the 1950s and early 1960s caravans, and assess whether Byam and the WBCCI can unambiguously be classified as 'cold warriors'. Based on a detailed analysis of Byam's own writings and other contemporary accounts, I suggest that such an unambiguous attribution is somewhat problematic. Nevertheless, I conclude that the caravans embodied the company values (discussed briefly above) to the extent that the caravans were about putting Airstream, Byam and the WBCCI on display to the world, as a form of cultural diplomacy, as much as they were about self-discovery through travel and adventure.

References

Burckhart, B. & Hunt, D. (2000) *Airstream: The History of the Land Yacht*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books.

Byam, W. (1960) *Trailer Travel Here and Abroad: The New Way to Adventurous Living*. New York: David McKay.

Exhibit 1

Central America	Winter 1951-52
Western Mexico	Winter 1952-53
Eastern Mexico	Winter 1954
Western Canada	Summer 1954
Western Mexico	Winter 1955
Eastern Canada	Summer 1955
Mexico	Winter 1956
Europe	1956
Western Canada	Summer 1956
Cuba	Fall 1956
Mexico	Winter 1957
Kentucky Derby/Indy 500	Spring 1957
Eastern Canada	Summer 1957
Oregon Trail	Summer 1957
Cuba	Winter 1958
Mexico	Winter 1958
Central America	Winter 1958
Western Canada	Summer 1958
Mexico	Winter 1959
Africa and Europe	1959-1960
Eastern Canada	Summer 1959
Mexico	Summer 1959
Mexico	Winter 1960
Europe	Spring 1960

The Wally Byam Caravans. Source: Byam (1960: 302)

Exhibit 2

TIMELINE OF EARLY TRAILER DEVELOPMENT

- 1840 First record of an English (i.e. *gorgio*/non-Romany) caravan in Charles Dickens' *The Old Curiosity Shop*.
- 1852 Studebaker Brothers Manufacturing Company founded. Products include Conestoga-type wagons, and later (from 1902-4) Studebaker motor vehicles.
- 1872 Opening of Yellowstone National Park, followed by Yosemite and Sequoia (1890) and Mount Rainier (1899)
- 1880 William Gordon Stables orders the first 'gentleman's caravan' from Bristol Carriage Company. In 1886 publishes his *Cruise of the Land Yacht 'Wanderer' or Thirteen Hundred Miles in my Caravan*, to great public interest.
- 1885 Karl Benz invents his *motorwagen*.
- 1892 First US automobile production (Duryea Brothers), closely followed by Ford (1896) Olds (1899) and Studebaker (1902).
- 1900 8,000 (approx) motor vehicles registered in the US (see 1920).
- 1902 American Automobile Association (AAA) founded.
- 1903 Good Roads Bill creates Bureau of Public Roads. Incorporation of Ford Motor Company. Incorporation of Harley-Davidson.
- 1908 Introduction of Ford Model T. By 1919, Model Ts account for 42% of all automobile sales in the US. Production ends in 1927, with more than 15 million sold.
- 1915 AAA introduces emergency roadside service.
- 1916 Foundation of US National Park Service. 1st Federal Roads Act, allocating \$75m to road improvement.
- 1917 Introduction of US legislation to regulate working hours.
- 1919 Formation of the Tin Can Tourists (first auto-campers' organization). Introduction of Curtiss Motor Bungalow.
- 1920 8,000,000 (approx) motor vehicles registered in the US (see 1900). AAA produces first campsite guide. First Trailer Park opened (Arcadia, FL.)
- 1921 2nd Federal Roads Act, connecting 200,000 miles of highway into a national network. Most publicised of the 1915-1924 Ford-Firestone-Edison camping expeditions, largely due to the presence of President Warren Harding in the party.
- 1922 Introduction of first mid-price all-weather tent trailer body (Hudson Essex). Introduction of Curtiss Aerocar (premium segment).
- 1924 Formation of the Camping Tourists of America (TCT splinter group).
- 1930 First exhibition of Arthur Sherman's Covered Wagon; by 1935, Covered Wagon is the largest US trailer manufacturer. However, *Automotive Daily News* reports that of the estimated 160,000 trailers on the road, at least $\frac{3}{4}$ are still home-built.
- 1934 Introduction of streamlining in automotive and trailer design with the Chrysler Airflow.
- 1936 Bowler-Tellus design adapted and marketed by Wally Byam as the Airstream Clipper.

Exhibit 3

“In the heart of these words is an entire life’s dream. To those of you who find in the promise of these words your promise, I bequeath this creed ... my dream belongs to you.”

THE WALLY BYAM CREED

To place the great wide world at your doorstep for you who yearn to travel with all the comforts of home.

To provide a more satisfying, meaningful way of travel that offers complete travel independence, wherever and whenever you choose to go or stay.

To keep alive and make real an enduring promise of high adventure and faraway lands ... of rediscovering old places and new interests.

To open a whole world of new experiences ... a new dimension in enjoyment where travel adventure and good fellowship are your constant companions.

To encourage clubs and rallies that provide an endless source of friendships, travel fun and personal expression.

To lead caravans wherever the four winds blow ... over twinkling boulevards, across trackless deserts ... to the travelled and untravelled corners of the earth.

To play some part in promoting international goodwill and understanding among the peoples of the world through person-to-person contact.

To refine and perfect our product by continuous travel-testing over the highways and byways of the world.

To strive endlessly to stir the venturesome spirit that moves you to follow a rainbow to its end ... and thus make your travel dreams come true.

Source: Burckhart & Hunt (2000: 83)