



## Pee Wee's Memories of the first Caravan to Mexico and Central America

### *In the beginning...*

My journey to Mexico and Central America on the 1st Caravan began in September 1951, when Wally invited me to join his group to hike through the Sierra Nevada's. Our group consisted of Wally, Estelle Hall, Clive and Gareth Glassey. The five of us went in at Onion Valley and hiked over the Kearsarge, Forester, and Whitney Portal passes. This took us a week. All five were on their way to the 1st Caravan. Being the youngest and smallest in the group Wally christened me Pee Wee. This nickname has stayed with me on Caravans and Airstream functions.

Knowing Wally he had planned to take me on the Caravan before High Sierra trip. He probably wanted to see how I would get along with group. We did well. Sometime in October the ball got rolling. Permission from the school district to have a leave of absence. Guardianship documents for transferring my welfare to Wally. Shots! Police report assuring everyone that I wasn't a hardened criminal. Lastly a passport. Of course shoes, shirts, Levi's, hair shellacked, socks, and toothpaste and brush...and whatever else. My passport never came...this is a later point of interest.

I was 12 yrs old at the time of this caravan and one of the very few kids. I traveled with Wally and am listed on one of Wally's passports as his son.

### ***Planning & logistics***

The trip was a combined plan of Wally's, Airstream, an RV publications, and the L. A. Times. The group consisted of Airstream owners, and many, many other brands of trailers...even a short Spartan. I don't remember the exact number in the group. Somewhere +/- 100 rigs. The immediate group was Wally and I in his trailer. Estelle and her Mother with their rig. Clive and Gareth Glasses had a new Dodge Power Wagon and the 1947 European Airstream used by Wally and Neil Vanderbilt Jr.

Clive and Gareth became the mechanics, camp setter-uppers and Wally's main support. Wally had two generators to provide lights for the group. This was a job. They had hundreds of feet of auxiliary electric cable that was laid out for the group to plug into. Wally was a gadget person. Not only new hardware and products for the Airstream, but camping items. He had a revolving door at War Surplus stores. For the 1951 Caravan he had two power generators. One was an American generator; the other was a generator from a German panzer tank. Wally was amazing, thinking of everything.

Major Millender did the scout work. I don't remember if he did it the entire trip. But we knew our campsites. Wally had delivered a trailer to President Cardenas in 1937 or 1938. Wally was familiar with Mexico.

The roads were typical 1951 two lane Mexican roads. After leaving Oaxaca south to Arriaga we took the train to Guatemala. IN 1951 the Pan-American Highway was still a dream. Guatemala had terrible washboard roads. Most of Central roads were dusty roads. The 1947 Byam and Vanderbilt Jr. European trailer kept filling up with dust. Wally had Gareth Glassey tow the vehicle while he traveled inside. He saw were seals around the door the windows and few other areas were leaking dust. One must remember that the roads in Central America were not typical of the roads used by the majority of Airstream owners. Always...always when Wally found these problems he wrote letters the factory (ies) to correct the problems and make a better Airstream. This is the power of Airstream, improve, improve, improve.

## ***Caravan Adventures***

The Caravan rendezvoused in El Paso, Texas.

In Chihuahua, located in northern Mexico, we visited the home of Senora Pancho Villa. This was a treat not only to meet her, but also to see pictures and artifacts of her late husband. The really big item was the automobile that Pancho Villa was assassinated in...chock full of bullet holes.

One of the "must see" invitations is the breeding ranch for bull fighting bulls. When we reached Aguascalientes on the south part of a trip we went to a rancho. Not only do they breed the bulls, but also they train them for the corrida. We watched the trainers work with bulls and do a Paso doble routine. I was coaxed out of the stands to the approval of the Caravanners. I was given a cape. From the tunnel a little baby bull was released. He came towards me. I took his move as aggressive. So.... I wrapped the cape around his head and ran quickly to the safety of the stands. Did the Caravanners support me? Yes, they laughed for minutes.

What can you say about Mexico City? Broad avenues. Tall buildings. Teeming population. Ancient Indians. Hotels serving prime Argentinean Beef. Aztec ruins. The Caravan stayed at a private school behind closed gates and high fences.

I had just had my 13th birthday on December 20th. A group of Caravanners were going to downtown Mexico City. When we arrived in heart of the city, I asked to get out. I'm not sure where the irresponsibility lies, but someone is guilty. I meandered down one street for five or six hours. I looked in shops. Bought firecrackers. Bottle rockets. They are neat. Hold them by the extension member, light them, was for ignition and wow...off they go into the sky and then bam...they explode. I was having fun. Then the time of night registered. Where was I? How do I get back to the school? I used several same sounding Spanish words for taxi. I couldn't find one. Then like a miracle I saw a driver putting his pride and joy to sleep for the evening. I told him in Spanish where I wanted to go. He understood. Back to the school. Wally asked me what I had been doing. I told him. He wasn't cross, but did explain his responsibility for me.

Wally was responsible for me. He had been given charge of me by my parents. Later on I found out that he struggled over keeping me on the Caravan or flying me home. Guess what? I continued on and finished the tour with him. This was the only time that this happened, but it was fun for me at the old age of 13.

In Nicaragua we visited coffee fincas, sugar plantations, met the President of Nicaragua and toured his sugar plantation.

We flew from Managua to Panama City, on to San Jose, Costa Rica and back to Managua. This was my first plane trip. We stayed in the primo hotel, at the time, in Panama City. I remember buying a large tin of Cadbury chocolate covered almonds. Wow! What a treat!

## ***Food and memorable meals***

Very early on I acclimated to eating food in Mexico. Do not eat vegetables that you can't peel or cook. Don't drink tap water. Always wash your fruit before peeling. I ate any cooked food, drank my favorite "naranja crush (croosh), Orange Crush in a dark amber bottle, and beer on a limited basis, very limited.

On the trip to mountains Stel cooked spaghetti one night. Altitude changes your boiling levels. When the pasta done had become paste-a. A truly large wheat dumpling. We all laughed and we dubbed the dinner Stella-paste.

In Aguascalientes Stel and I went shopping. We found some great beef, and had it cubed. We bought vegetables; potatoes, carrots, onions and such.

Stel cooked the meal and her mother, Leila North, Wally, Clive, Gareth and I went to dinner. We all tasted it at the same time and went through the roof. Oh, I forgot to tell you we bought a beautiful, bright red pepper. The legend of the Too Hot to Eat Stew was born that evening. Wally took us all out for dinner.

Arriaga, Mexico is a railhead terminal in southern Mexico. The Caravan arrived there for the big railroad trip. We loaded our rigs on flat cars for our trip to Tapacula, the border city and last city before entering Guatemala.

In Arriaga the Caravan parked next to the cattle yards used for pre-railway shipments of the animals. Where notions come from can be mysterious. I became Simon Sez, follow the leader, put your left foot in, put your left out. It began with a few Mexican children. Before it all concluded I had a rebellion of several hundred children following me. A regular piper. It got out of hand, but not violent...but memorable.

I was cooking in the trailer and the train jerked. I poured a two-quart pan of boiling water on my arm. Scalded, with pain and dragging loose skin. No doctor that I remember. Whatever you rub on a scald was done, and I was young and it went away in two or three days.

## ***Traveling incognito***

On the way back from Nicaragua there was a dilemma. My passport didn't arrive in time for me to take on the Caravan. I did have tourist visa for Mexico. Wally carried me on his passport as his "hijo" or son on several of his visas. Good? Yes! With one exception. Between the borders of Honduras and El Salvador Wally had me lay flat on the back seat of the car, he covered me with a blanket. We cleared the border. The all clear was given, and I became a passenger again.

## ***Lesson learned***

We stayed at Lago de Ilopango. A resort and relaxation station for the resident of El Salvador and Salvador. The rage was the mambo. Perez Prado the Cuban master of the mambo played from the jukeboxes. Que Rico Mambo, Mambo #5 and others. A typical dance area had a bar with beer, food and a concrete floor. Don't forget the Wurlitzer. There were many stands that repeated the dancing and drinking format as mentioned. I actually learned to do the Mambo. One night someone came through the area with a jaguar on a chain.



*Here is a picture of the ax I bought Wally to replace an ax I had broken in Central America. I have a letter from Wally returning the ax and the cost of the ax.*

It was here during our stay I learned a lesson, as only Wally could teach me. Wally asked me to do something. I used his hatchet. I broke it. I probably put it away. First lesson when you borrow tools you become responsible for the tool. Second lesson if you break the tool show it to the owner. Third lesson you replace the tool.

I did replace the tool after I returned to Bakersfield. Several years later Wally gave me the hatchet, a check and a letter.

I have the letter. It basically asked me to spend the money on something frivolous. Do not save the money. Do not buy a gift for parents. Buy bubble gum, or something that you might not buy. That when he was young he had a frugal beginning and never really had money to go and do something for himself.

## ***Dressed for the occasion***

When we returned to Oaxaca on our return from Nicaragua, I found a suitcase. It probably fell off a bus. Inside there wasn't much. There was a suit of clothing. They were clean, but wrinkled. I tried them on. It was a perfect wartime zoot suit, or at least that is the way they fit me. Wally had a sense of humor. He had the suit cleaned, pressed, and had me wear them on the Greyhound home. My parents hadn't seen me in four months. There they were at the terminal. And there I was coming off the bus in my best new-found zoot suit. Shock. Contained. But it was a subject of conversation for years to come.

## ***Educational Experience***

The trip was an education for a 12-year-old lad from Bakersfield. It was an education different than math, history, tin shop, and English. When I returned the Principal and the Board of Education wanted to keep me from entering high school.

Wally took charge.

I don't know the specific discussion, but know the general gist of the conversation, that Wally had with the Principal.

I understand you are not going to allow Dale Schwamborn to move forward with his classmates to high school. I have traveled with Dale on a day-to-day basis for four months. My background is owner and founder of Airstream Trailers, you may have heard of them. I am a good judge of character and knowledge. I deal with thousands of people each year from every walk of life. For a 13-year-old Dale is beyond his years and should be graduated to the 9th grade.

Have you ever met a President of a nation? Dale has, Somoza of Nicaragua.

Do you speak Spanish? Dale can handle himself on the streets of Mexico and Central America. He can find food, markets, and interact with his peers in these countries.

Do you know the capital of Honduras? It is Tegucigalpa.

Wally in a pleasant, logical, meaningful manner convinced the Principal that my promotion to the 9th was okay.

The main make-up was the Constitution of the United States. Done. On to East Bakersfield High School.

And whoopee...I was out of the classroom for four months...how-about-that?

**Wally Byam, what a man, friend, and cousin.**

