

Wally, Me and Pee Wee

by Dale "Pee Wee" Schwamborn #00002

Fifty years ago Wallace Merle Byam passed away on July 22, 1962. This founder and owner of Airstream Trailers is affectionately known as Wally Byam.

I lost a friend, a mentor, an employer, a surrogate father and a cousin (once removed.)

One late evening in Oceanside, California the traffic heavy from returning weekenders from the Del Mar Race Track and Tijuana, Mexico, a car towing an Airstream pulled up along the curb. It was Wally Byam. The Schwamborns were visiting Helen's parents. Sue Boyce, her mother, was also Wally's Aunt Sue. This is 1949, no interstate highways. US101 was the corridor from Los Angeles to the Mexican Border, and Hill Street through the center of Oceanside is the thoroughfare. Wally camped often in Del Mar, California. This is my first glimpse of an Airstream.

St. Andrews Place is a north - south street in Los Angeles. Wallace Merle Byam and his first wife Marion lived there from the late 1920's until their divorce in the early 1950's. The garage nestled on the back of the property is reported to be the birthplace of the Airstream. Wally hand-crafted the Torpedo within its walls before he had a factory, a very humble beginning for one of the world's foremost icons.

The house was a very typical California bungalow. When you entered there were rooms on either side, one a sitting room, the other a den. The den fascinated me; there was a bear rug complete with head and menacing teeth, killed by Wally's father Bert Byam. There were two bedrooms behind the bear cave. The first bedroom was Marion's mother, who I called Aunt Libby, and her rotund orange cat named Pumpkin. Central to the house was the dining room, and behind it the kitchen and back porch.

When I visited I looked forward to the mornings when Wally and I took the dogs for a walk down West First Street. Skipper, a champagne Springer Spaniel, and Robin, a black cocker spaniel looked forward to each morning.

Twice while visiting Wally and Marion I went to a local theatre on Beverley Boulevard. The *Black Narcissus* certainly wasn't a movie for an eleven year old. By today's standards the movie might be NC-17 or even R. Considering it dealt with nuns and sordid consequences it was an eye-opener to me. Several years before I actually attended a Catholic School at Mission San Luis Rey, I had mutual respect for the nuns. Even if I had been rambunctious, the nuns did control the ruler.

The other movie was the *Kind Hearts and Coronets* with Alec Guinness.

One visit at Wally's home I "wandered off," not really because I found someone my age to play with. Time went by and I was late for dinner. Two lessons, one let adults know where you are, who you are with and don't be late for dinner.

Unlike today, in 1948 young boys played cowboys and Indians, we didn't have iPods, iPhones and electronic games. We went to Saturday matinees to see our heroes, Gene Autry, Roy Rogers and John Wayne. Always highlighted with a serial adventure that left you at the edge of our seat beckoning you to come back next week to see how the hero escaped his peril, only to have a new life-threatening ending.

One of my childhood five star memories visiting Wally and Marion was one evening he wheeled in a 16mm projector and two film reels into the "bear cave." He had borrowed from one of the studios *Fort Apache*, starring John Wayne, and Henry Fonda. Wow! Televisions were in their infancy and few people had them.

To see a first run film in a home was very, very special. Wally never owned a television.

Later that year in Bakersfield, California Wally pulled up to the front our home with an Airstream. It was October 31, Halloween night. I was dressed ready to go trick or treating. I had a sombrero and a kerchief around my neck. Wally saw this. He asked if he could change my appearance. Yes! He went to his Airstream and came back with a burnt cork and a bandana. With a few knots he tied the bandana over my head in a jaunty manner and with the burnt cork he gave me a facial makeup to rival any salty dog. Dale, you are now a pirate of the Seven Seas.

One day my mother and I joined Wally in Hollywood for lunch. Afterwards the three of us went to a Woolworths, or Newberry's five and dime store. Wally was searching for doll house furniture. Was this to be a new Airstream floor plan? No! He had a model and floor plan of his new home on Roseview Avenue. He wanted to play around with the placement of furniture.

One Christmas Wally gave me two balsa wood model airplane kits. Complete with glue, propellers, wheels, tails, wings, fuselage ever required to make a model airplane. I have never been mechanically inclined and the airplanes offered a challenge that I couldn't fulfill. However, I collected all of the individual parts into a pile of tires, propellers and other little items. Maybe this was a prophecy of my adult life in materials management and purchasing, where I dealt with "parts" on a daily basis.

These were wonderful memories for a young boy and his friend, Wallace Merle Byam.