Africa 1959 with the Wally Byam Caravan

Visuals and actuals by Dale Schwamborn, Advance Scout.[1]

Belgian Congo (Zaire)

Drum Hill

The first world takes it for granted that all road are wide, divided and fast. In the hilly land in Zaire there is "Drum Hill", one lane up and one lane down. One truck, one trailer individually one way south first, north next, south next, north last. To avoid bumper kissing and accidents there are strategic drums placed at the bottom on both sides and at the summit. It took many hours to ferry the Caravan up and over. The longest trailer, a thirty footer, hung precipitously over the steep land drop from the tire zone back. The Caravanner had great concern from bottom to the top and down.

Wash Board

North of "Drum Hill" the land flattened out for many miles. The road or the lack of a road was highlighted by the dustiest, widest expanse of flat land, complemented with the deepest, bone shattering corrugated wash board thorough fare ever traveled by a trailer caravan. One Caravan couple were Seven Day Adventists. Their Sabbath began half way through the shaky highway. Their rockers came out their awning went up and they read their scriptures until the next sundown. A second Caravan couple stayed behind to accompany them. The caught up with the main body of the Caravan in two days.

Pygmies

In the Ituri Forest, the Advance Scouts were one day ahead of the Caravan. Pygmies were walking the shoulders of the road, and standing when they saw the unusual shinny vehicle approach them. Naiveté and apparent lack of fear lead the Advance Scouts to park their vehicle, get out, and call to the pygmies, "Jambo." Unconventional and definitely not international sign language was exchanged. The pygmies gestured come on, come on with us. Several pygmy men, probably five, escorted two (2) NBA gringos into the brush. The first fifty or so yards was through brush, the brush and wild growth gave way to overgrown bushes with a hollowed out tunnel to move through. At approximately three feet tall they walked through their passage standing up. The Advance Scouts had to fold and drag to make it down the trail. This section went several hundred yards and opened up into a clearing. The clearing was a 200 to 250 foot diameter habitat for approximately fifteen to twenty families. They were proud of their transitory village. The clearing was opened 150 feet to the bottom branches of the canopy of the forest. Little huts of bowed branches provided secondary shelter. The area was pungent with the smell of smoldering green branch fires. As nomads, this gave them protection from the elements and the Belgian Air Force. The Belgians were trying to settle the pygmies in villages, as a controlling factor to stop their migratory travels. Several hours of human exchange occurred with out the need of words. Amazing!

Black Cape Buffalo

In Albert National Park a young teenage Caravanner was leaving his trailer to go visiting, a Black Cape Buffalo confronted him. Trembling he made a beeline for the nearest trailer, knocked, dove, slammed the door and avoided a potential goring. In passing we saw many interesting animals. A training school for African elephants to move and lift timber. The beautiful, but deadly, purple hewed Gabon viper, the recently discovered Okapi, a midnight rowdy crocodile hunt on Lake Tanganyika, a barroom with pester aquariums filled with puff adders, columns of army ants, walking sticks, and chameleons nestled in acres of pyrethrum. Many species and many miles.

Elephant Walk

Early evening the Advance Team left for the next rendezvous. For many weeks the Advance Team only led the group by one to three days. Some distance from Albert National Park driving up an escarpment we came across a herd of elephants, bulls, cows and calves. Never, never approach elephant calves. Why? Mom and Dad elephant

[1] There were two (2) advanced scouts Nick Charles and Dale Schwamborn.

are big, they're protective and damn right nasty if they think harm will come to their baby. There, at midnight, the truck in a slow reverse wimping backwards through the darkness. Wham, bang, bounce, spin, the truck frustratingly came to a halt in a runoff ditch prepared for the perennial monsoons. The truck was gifted with a four-wheel drive, a power winch but deep off the road was too much for special equipment. One bit of great news was the elephants were off to taller grass and shorter trees. After several hours a flat bed truck, no name make, came along. The dozen or so natives and the truck put the Advance Scouts back on the road in forty-five minutes. Late? Early? It was two o'clock in the AM and finally we were on our way.

Visitors

The next stop was a missionary school. Several soccer fields surrounded the school. We stopped, jumped into our sleeping bags and waited for the morning. Morning came in three or four hours. The first one up opened the door and stepped outside. Immediately a calculated voice called inside. "Getup, getup, getup now!" "Why?" "We have visitors." Outside were several hundred spear handling, bow carrying, loin covered natives. Whoops! Were we stew meat? Sunday clothes? Trophies? Or leopard bait? Deception of thought can paint savage thoughts. These natives were curious. Not often a shinny vehicular residence crosses the Equator and visits this part of Africa. Music has a way of soothing extremes and communicating friendship. Out came the battery operated record player. First Louis Prima, Keely Smith and Sam Butera and the Witnesses. Some great swaying, dancing and grunting. Almost, but not quite as rhythmic, was Ricky Nelson. After awhile the natives went on their way to hunt or to walk to solitary destinations. We went back into the trailer, and laughed how we had avoided a second potentially dangerous situation in less than twenty-four hours.[2]

Ethiopia

Quagmire

Our introduction to Ethiopia was the remnants of severe flash flood. With tongue in check the Kenyan Government gave the caravan a green light to travel through the Northern Frontier District. Their hesitation was their rainy season. The highway system was akin to a fragile ecological system. They saw ruts, more ruts and a totally impassable road being graded by two hundred and fifty plus tire treads slogging through quagmire roads. The rains didn't occur in Kenya. Had the rains came down we would have been stranded for the duration of the rain and the drying out of the roads. The rains did flood many miles of the "highway" just after the border crossing in Ethiopia. Every man woman and child grabbed a bucket, filled with dirt and dumped their dirt in the mud. This was repeated again and again by the bucket, by the pound and probably by several tons. We spent the many hours of a day to slip and slid each vehicle for a mile, possibly a mile and a half. This small gain, with a high labor effort got the Caravan on the road in Ethiopia. I even learned to pronounce quagmire!

Royal Escort

Royal guards from the Emperor Haile Selassie met the Caravan south of Mega. Approximately sixteen guards became the wards of the Caravanners. Sixteen families had uniformed, rifle toting Palace Guards as hitch hikers. Why? Civilization was many miles away in all directions. Due to bandits, tribal customs, tribal differences, and a whole bunch of general lawlessness the guards were necessary to secure our safe passage through the most of southern Ethiopia. This was the beginning of the fabled "solid gold trailer of the many strangers."[3] There were many unmentionable rituals that could befall the straggler, the unguarded traveler and the sacrifice might suffice as dowry for a bride.

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[2] We waited until late afternoon for the Caravan. By the time the group arrived we had trained several hundred missionary children to chant, "Willie Bee Am (Wally Byam)", "Willie Bee Am (Wally Byam)", "Willie Bee Am (Wally Byam)."

[3] Wally Byam's trailer was manufactured with gold anodized aluminum sheeting. It was different it was a glittery gold amongst a herd of shinny silver normal Airstreams. Wally Byam the founder of Airstream also led the Caravan.

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Where's the Beef?

The Guards willfully confiscated a herdsman cow. Dispatched it. Slaughtered it. Then distributed it. You can't image having someone place a warm chunk of beast in your stew pot. You boil, boil and boil the meat for what seems forever. You add wine, you add garlic, you add pepper, you add vegetables, you add the hope of something chewable. You boil some more and eventually you have dinner. Though fresh meat, that looked like meat, if was different, very different. The flavor was sinewy and the chew was tasteless. Fresh, fresh kill is not gourmet.

Retribution

As a sidelight the Guards were severely reprimanded for stealing the cow.

The Lost Caravan

Ethiopia was brutalized during the Second World War. The Italian Expeditionary Forces conquered Ethiopia and exterminated thousands and thousands of it's citizens. The government officials, the religious leaders the intelligentsia were systematic victims of mass murder. The Ethiopian army was destroyed by bombs, tanks and machine guns. Their spears, swords and stones were no match. From the south the South African army and the British army were joined together in Kenya to move northwards to fight the Italians. The first venue was to grade the roads and move their armies through southern Ethiopia. These were our roads. The same roads transported the Caravan that moved the victors. Sixteen years had passed. The roads were a typographic nightmare. The ruts on some hills were six and seven feet deep. Ruts in the road where only two wheels were on the ground simultaneously, this allowed us to teeter-totter up the hills. It was necessary to balance all four vehicle corners to avoid careening into the center road cavities. The rains, weather, ill-advised travel and absolutely no maintenance had left the roads impassable. Not quite impassable, but in such bad shape that alternative routes if available would have been used. We made a few miles each day. Several rigs did slip into the ruts.[4] Several four wheel vehicles with wenches were used strategically to pull the several rigs out of their misfortune. On several hills and several curves the wench vehicles were strategically positioned to pull each rig slowly, steadily, upward, over and past the deep erosion. These were days that we parked only on road side at night. Tired? You bet! Looking forward to the next day? Not exactly! We all wondered if the roads would continue to disappear, would the roads get worse, or had the very, very worst already happened. For several days they were worse then better, then worse and then better. This was a really bad portion of the trip. Finally we got to graded road and then pavement and then Addis Ababa. Word came to us in Addis Ababa that the world journalists had been writing about the lost tourists. We actually made the papers. For several weeks the outside world had lost us. The Caravan just wasn't visible we had disappeared deep in the ruts of Africa.

The Lion of Judah, the Descendent of the Queen of Sheba

The Caravan celebrated Thanksgiving in Addis Ababa, a November to remember. We also celebrated our arrival in the land of the Queen of Sheba with an audience with the Emperor Haille Selaise at his palace. Upon entering the palace of the Lion of Judah there were live, chained lions on either side of the stair case leading to the entry way. In the formal reception hall, he greeted each and every one of us. He spoke to the adults through an interpreter. With the children he spoke one on one in English. This was the man, the symbol, the image pleading at the League of Nations for help. Help to extricate the Italians from his nation. Daily we watched in awe when the palace guards would walk the palace lions through our camp site on the royal race track. When the word came down that the Emperor had accepted our invitation to visit the Wally Byam Caravan, our hoses ladders, soap, rags, mops, brooms were put to immediate use. Wow, did we sparkle. The Caravanners stood by their homes proudly. The royal entourage went from trailer to trailer greeting each owner, visiting the exteriors of several trailers. The final stop for Haille Selassie was a long meeting with Wally Byam in his trailer. This was what

[4] A rig is a nautical word adapted to refer to a tow vehicle and trailer, or any one of the self-contained units driven by the photographer, service man, or advance scout team.

dreams are made of. The headlines announcing the murder of Haille Selaise, regardless of political reasons , was very sad news. The memory, the image of this slight human being will always be remembered. Good-bye Lion of Judah!

Eritrea

Shangri-La

The oasis has always been a respite for the traveler, the Bedouin, the nomad and now the Caravanners. Our oasis was Kagnew Station, an American military listening station located in Asmara, Eritrea. We were there for Christmas. We received permission to shop and eat at the PX (Post Exchange). For the young set it was hamburgers, French fries, milk shakes, ice cream, soft drinks once, twice and again and again and again. The base radio had pop music, a time to catch up on the top forty hits from home. The post chapel for Christmas services. Human contact with Americans, a very special sojourn.

Riding Shotgun

After six weeks in the northeast part of Africa there were visual wanted posters etched in the minds of all bandits.. Get rich, get rich quick, capture the Solid Gold Vehicle owned by the American millionaires. The word was out and the word reached the American base. The post commander knew the area controlled by the ruthless bandits. He contacted the American Embassy in Addis Ababa. The green light was given. We left the base with a three jeep military escort. Jeeps with mounted 50 caliber machine guns, a driver and three soldiers. Our American military escort stayed with us until we were past the point of attack. Without the reality of attack, just having an escort with fire power made us look over our shoulders. Definitely a crisis left behind in the Ethiopian foothills..

Sudan

Water Hole

The eastern part of the Sudan is arid. This is the southern Nubian desert. The land is stark, flat and void. Miles from Khartoum is a water hole. Frequented by camel trains and nomads in search of water. There were several hundred people and scores of camels. The Caravan made a hit. Without words the camel drivers provides several hours of camel riding for the Caravanners. You've got to ride a camel. Not with a guide pulling the camel. A real honest hands on giddy up, rompin', stompin' ride as the jockey. Personally it is so much more than riding a horse. Encounters of people as people discards the borders of politics, class and ulterior motives. This small friend to friend interlude is just one more memory of a lifetime.

Two if by Rail, and One if by Sand

When the Caravan reached Abu Hamed a bull session was held to find out who would load their rigs on flat cars and travel to Wadi Halfa by train. Two-thirds selected the train, the other third the sand of the Nubian Desert.

Late night and early morning condensation caused by temperature changes created a thin paving on the sand. If momentum was kept up vehicles maintain their speed and direction. Slowing down and stopping was the same as skating on thin ice. Down, down, down and up to the axle in fine sand. Several of the Caravanners attempting to have bragging rights, wanted to take their trucks and trailers each inch of Africa by road, they got stuck. We hired Sudanese sandrunners to help us. They came from a small local village with their truck and six foot heavy gauge, tire wide steel tracks.[5] You place the tracks down to provide as solid road and as the rig passes by you run to the front of the truck with your platform and place it down again and again until you have passed through the treacherous sand. (Run to the front drop the platform, run to the back pick up a platform, run back to the front place the platform and on and on and on until each

[5] In preparation each of the rigs purchased their own steel sand platforms, each work vehicle had a set.

vehicle is up and gone.) Not only did the villagers run and place tracks, so did Caravanners, the Caravan mechanic and scouts also ran and heaved the platforms.

Several Caravanners fed up with the uncertainty of moving through the sand sought out the railway tracks. The severity of the bumps from the railway ties, wasn't any worse than the washboards roads in the Congo. They proceeded on the railway tracks until they reached their destination. The Sudanese National Railway had extreme displeasure with the Caravan. The railway tracks, though man made, were a fragile ecology system. The nature of the trucks and trailers loosened the ties and caused one mishap that required railway disaster equipment to be used. Further repairs required a maintenance train to re-secure the loose ties and rails. As unpleasant this was for the Sudanese government and the Caravanners, an apology and understanding of why it happened soothed the angry railway officials.

The photographer's truck, mechanics truck and advance scout truck choose to brave the sands and not ride the rails. They hit the Bermuda Triangle of sand pits. Each truck bogged down. It took hours and hours and a night's passage before the right combination of gears, directions, speed, and driving skills worked each vehicle out of harm's way.[6] We also finally made it to Wadi Halfa.

United Arab Republic (Egypt)

Abu Simbal

Egypt would not allow the Caravan to drive overland to Aswan. Several months earlier several vehicles left Aswan for Wadi Halfa. They were found stopped on the road and all persons had perished from the lack of water and food.

The Caravanners loaded their vehicles on barges and began the float to Aswan. In one respect our flotilla had a chance of a life time. We stopped at the ancient site for Abu Simbal and spent hours walking through the site. This was prior to the High Aswan Dam's completion, the filling of Lake Nasser and movement of the site to higher ground.

We Speak American, We are Americans!

After Aswan the scout truck and mechanics truck took a wrong turn on the way to Luxor. Egyptians began screaming and shaking their fists. They were chanting, "Down with the English, go home English." It was a bad, bad scene. I yelled, "We speak American, we are Americans. We are not English, we do not speak English." The eruption subsided, a potentially violent situation became a good ole buddy reunion.

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Quite frankly looking back the vehicles could have been easily abandoned with no hope of ever getting them out of the sand. Amazing what can be accomplished.