Travel Down the Wally Byam Highway

Around the World Caravan Background Notes

by Dale Schwamborn #00002

It's hard to believe that time goes by so fast.

Wallace Merle Byam was born on the Fourth of July, 117 years ago in 1896. His cousin Helen Byam (Schwamborn) would be 109 years old this year.

Airstream Trailers, Inc. celebrates its 82nd anniversary this year.

But what to become world renowned events began in 1951, only 62 years ago. Only 62 years ago.

You ask what event occurred. The first Airstream Caravan, better known as the Wally Byam Caravan, went to Mexico and Central America. Quite a feat in those days, considering that the Pan American Highway was disconnected and passable in parts by train, and then unpaved roads almost impassable and in disrepair.

In 1956 the first Airstream sponsored Wally Byam Caravan went to Europe. Then the impossible Caravan was planned and executed in 1959: Cape Town, Union of South Africa to Cairo, Egypt and beyond to Europe. From July 1959 until February 1960, the African Caravan made its way through Africa, and to sail from Alexandria, Egypt to Beirut, Lebanon.

Sadness happened in 1962 - Wally Byam passed away. His retirement was to sail his Ketch Caravan to the four corners of the globe.

At the time of Wally's passing, there was another barn-burner of a Caravan being planned. To take Airstream families from the Asian Pacific side of the earth's land mass, to lands' end in Portugal at the furthest point in the Western Europe kissing the Atlantic Ocean. This magnificent, outlandish, we-can-do Caravan was to be called the Wally Byam Around-the-World Caravan.

Let's turn the clock back to 1953. After Wally and Neil Vanderbilt Jr. went to Europe with an Airstream in 1948, Wally returned to Europe numerous times. In 1953 he went to the International Caravan or Trailer Rally while he was in Europe. On file are several interesting documents he picked up that year. It seems that a French Touring Rally had plans to go from Paris, France to Bombay, India.

Wally, having seen what the French had in store, began dreaming and planning an east to west Caravan that would go from the Pacific to the Atlantic.

With his death, Airstream assigned the leadership role to Andy Charles. The planning was in the hands of Helen Byam Schwamborn. The two of them were to take the dream and make it a reality.

At headquarters, Helen continued to do what she did best, organize and take care of the necessary details. She learned from Wally very early in her tenure at Airstream how to detail and execute foreign Caravans. She and Andy worked on the logistics and itinerary.[1]

Helen worked with embassies, negotiated freight rates, made the reservations, bulletins and paperwork to Airstreamers. She made frequent trips to Washington D.C. to visit the United States State Department, and to meet with ambassadors and attachés in the various embassies whose countries were on the itinerary. She assisted in obtaining visas for the Caravanners.

Then, on to New York to negotiate and meet with the various shipping companies for rates and scheduling for the Airstreams, tow vehicles and passengers.

Without her knowledge from two European Caravans, Africa, and numerous tours to Mexico, Central America, Canada and Cuba; the Around-the-World Caravan may have never become a reality.

Helen went with Andy and Connie Charles on the S.S. Cleveland to Singapore. She spent almost a month flying to various destinations on the itinerary to introduce the Caravan and make additional arrangements.

The ATW, as it is known today, reached lands' end in Portugal. All told, the Caravan was +400 days.

This year is a milestone for the Around-the-World Caravan. This is the fiftieth anniversary for this monumental Airstream Caravan.

Those celebrating this event have stories acquired from others, photographs also, and even vintage Airstreams.

As you celebrate, please include Wally Byam, Helen Byam Schwamborn, Andy Charles and Airstream. They represent the four corners that made it possible.



[1] In addition to arranging the Around-the-World Caravan, Helen had the WBCCI to maintain, plan the WBCCI International rallies, edit the Airstream newspaper "The Caravanner", the WBCCI monthly "Blue Beret", attending various WBCCI Unit rallies and being on the Airstream Board of Directors. A full plate!