

HISTORICALLY SPEAKING

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The First Domestic Caravans

Wally Byam's first trailer caravans were to foreign countries; all the way to Central America in 1951-52, Mexico annually starting in 1953 and Canada annually starting in 1954. In 1956, he led caravans to Europe and Cuba, but it was not until 60 years ago, in 1957, that the first two Airstream caravans were offered entirely within the boundaries of the U.S.A. Here are their stories.

1957 Kentucky Derby-Indianapolis 500 Caravan: This month we celebrate the 60th anniversary of the first of those domestic caravans, the 1957 Kentucky Derby-Indy 500 Caravan that attended two iconic sporting events held each May. It should be noted that this was the first caravan for Wally Byam's famous gold 1957 World Traveler Airstream. Wally's gold Airstream even participated



1957 Kentucky Derby-Indy 500 Caravan Camped at Louisville, KY

in the Kentucky Derby Parade, fittingly following behind the Fort Knox float! Wally later went on to use this same gold

Airstream on the 1958 Central American Caravan and the famous 1959-60 Cape Town to Cairo African Caravan.



1957 Kentucky Derby-Indy 500 Caravan Lined Up Along a Road
 (Note Wally Byam's Gold Airstream 2nd in line)



Caravanners Getting Ready for the 1957 Oregon Trail Days Parade in Gehring, NE

Much of the credit for developing the Kentucky Derby-Indy 500 Caravan goes to veteran caravanner Col. William S. Taylor of Louisville, KY who did much of the planning for the Kentucky part of the caravan, but local caravanners all along its route helped find camping sites and local tours in their home areas.

This caravan actually started out west in Las Vegas, NV at a rally sponsored by the Western Unit of the Wally Byam Caravan Club on April 13-16, 1957 that featured nightclub tours, bonfires, square dancing, potlucks and prizes. From there the caravan took a leisurely 10 day jaunt towards Kentucky, seeing the Grand Canyon, Petrified Forest, Merimac Caves and Abraham Lincoln's home in Springfield, IL along the way. After this group entered Kentucky, they picked up 21 more, mostly "east coast", Airstreams that had started out from Jackson Center, Ohio bringing the total to 69 Airstreams and 138 people, before heading to Louisville, KY.

On Saturday, May 4, 1957 the caravanners attended the 83rd running of the Kentucky Derby in Louisville, KY where they saw one of the wildest Kentucky Derby finishes ever when the horse Iron Liege won by a nose over Gallant Man after its jockey, the great Bill Shoemaker, stood up too soon before the finish line causing Gallant Man to slow. After the Derby, the caravan meandered thru the Smoky Mountains and Blue Ridge Mountains on their way to Washington, D.C. When they were finished touring

Washington, D.C., they stopped at the Airstream Factory in Jackson Center, Ohio, camping on the factory grounds. Andy Charles, the President of the Ohio Airstream Factory, provided the caravanners with fresh corn on the cob and a weenie roast upon their arrival, and offered them a factory tour the following morning.

From Jackson Center, the caravan headed to Indianapolis, IN, the site of a curious story. Otto Kinney, a new club member from Modesto, CA who was on his first caravan, had skipped Jackson Center and travelled ahead of the caravan from Washington, D.C. straight to Indy to see the Time Trials and check out the camp site. Finding the camp site too small for the caravan group, he rented a bulldozer, expanded the site, and ran water pipes and electric lines. No wonder Otto went on to quickly become the 1957-58 WBCC International President!

On Thursday, May 30, the caravanners attended the 41st running of the Indianapolis 500 race where they saw 42 year old Sam Hanks win the race on his 12th try and immediately retire from racing. The caravan terminated at a Rally sponsored by the WBCC Midwestern Unit in Michigan City, Indiana from May 31 to June 4, 1957. This rally featured a barbeque, a fish fry, square dancing, and a tour of Chicago. It was a good way to end the very successful first domestic caravan.

As a side note, the Kentucky Derby-Indy 500 Caravan was only offered one additional time by Airstream, in

1961, although the WBCCI Kentucky Unit hosted a Kentucky Derby National Rally from 1968-2002 and the WBCCI Central Indiana Unit hosted an Indy 500 National Rally from 1968-2005. The WBCCI Springtime in Kentucky Caravan has included viewing of the Kentucky Derby since 1993.

1957 Oregon Trail Caravan: The second domestic caravan was developed and led by Ohio Airstream President, Andy Charles. The intent of this caravan was a unique one - to teach youngsters some of the history of this great land. The number of participating Airstreams and people is not known, but this was a smaller than average Wally Byam caravan for the time. The caravan rendezvoused in Independence, MO on July 13, 1957. At their first meeting, they unanimously elected Andy Charles as their Wagonmaster to lead their aluminum covered wagons safely to Oregon. Each caravanner, young and old, signed a facsimile of an authentic Oregon Trail contract in which they pledged mutual aid along the way and even a decent Christian burial.

Once on the road, the caravan hopped from State Park to State Park on its way to attend the Oregon Trail Days Celebration in Gehring, NE. A Ranger from the local museum gave a special talk about the Oregon Trail and took the caravanners on a tour walking in the ruts of the old

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trail routes looking for artifacts. One Airstream participated in the Oregon Trail Days Parade sporting an “Oregon or Bust” sign and 4 children looking out its windows.

From Gehring, NE the caravan faithfully followed the Oregon Trail route into Wyoming to Fort Laramie, Fort Kasper, Independence Rock, the ghost town of South Pass City (where the California Trail branched off from the Oregon Trail), and Fort Bridger. They then took a short break from the Oregon Trail for a few days at the new Colter Bay Trailer Area in the Grand Tetons National Park, where they enjoyed a fish fry, swimming, ranger talks and hiking trails. They rejoined the Oregon Trail near Pocatello, ID and followed the Snake River into Oregon. After a police escort into Wally Byam’s home town of Baker City, OR, Wally entertained the caravan with a steak dinner and pictures of his European and Mexican caravans. Near Baker City, caravanners toured the Brownlee Dam project, which was under construction at the time, and an abandoned gold mine in Cornucopia, OR where one of the children found a gold nugget. The caravan’s last stop was at Fort Stevens State Park where they enjoyed swimming in the Pacific Ocean and a seafood banquet before departing in the modern aluminum covered wagons for their individual and varied next destinations.

According to an article published at the time, this was a unique caravan. While the Wally Byam name opened doors not available to the average tourist, the small size allowed camping in sites not available to a larger group and it allowed caravanners to become better acquainted with each other. The emphasis on providing fun for the children meant more frequent stops, but it kept everyone young in spirit. The stories of historical events related by local citizens as well as by Andy and Connie Charles gave everyone new insights into the many assets of this country and the conquering of the West. The children were well armed with a wealth of material to use when they returned to school.

This caravan was never repeated by Airstream, but WBCCI did offer its own Oregon Trail Caravans in 1985 and 2009.

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