

# HISTORICALLY SPEAKING

Joe Peplinski WBCCI #6768, Chairman, Historical Committee  
[history@wbcci.org](mailto:history@wbcci.org)

## 45 Great Years of Airstreaming

*In the November 2016 **Historically Speaking**, I asked for feedback from WBCCI members so that we can celebrate the historic achievements of current club members. I received a few responses, but can always use more. KEEP THAT FEEDBACK COMING! One response was from 45 year member #26071 Bob Vasser, who with wife Elaine, still owns the Airstream they bought new in 1972. Bob sent me a story about some of the travels he and Elaine took with their children and grandchildren in that Airstream. I enjoyed Bob's story and writing style so much that we are going to feature his story in his own words this month. Enjoy!*

Over our 54 years of marriage, nothing compares to the enjoyment we've had taking road trips across North America, especially with family and friends. It started with simple camping trips in California using tents and sleeping bags while working our way through college. Shortly after the birth of our two sons, we decided family camping would be easier with a travel trailer, so we invested in a non-self-contained, 19' SOB (some other brand) and a Suburban.

We used our trailer at every opportunity and appreciated that it was a step up from tent camping. During walks around campgrounds with our sons, we began encountering Airstreams and their owners always seemed to be a whole lot more comfortable than we were in our trailer. We started researching Airstreams via phone calls and visits to dealerships in the San Francisco Bay area and learned that Airstreams had an excellent reputation for quality construction, comfort and towing ease. Another benefit was the opportunity to join the WBCCI for unit activities and better yet, caravans! We ordered a brand new 23' Safari in



The Vasser's Airstream and Suburban on the 1975 Caravan

early 1972 and it was delivered to our driveway about a month later.

When Airstream advertised its 1975 company caravans to Yucatan and Guatemala, we signed up for both, hoping that I would be granted a sabbatical leave from my school district. It was approved and worked out well because I was able to link my archaeology unit of study with Mexico's Aztec and Mayan cultures. We had a unique trip, doing half of each caravan, switching in the middle.

These caravans were unique in so many ways. The most impressive feature were their sizes, with close to 200 rigs each. Wow! One can only imagine what that many Airstreams looked like on a travel day. It was always a beautiful sight. The caravan leaders were extremely organized in all their planning, especially for the parking and de-parking of so many rigs. The drivers' manuals were quite detailed, since no one had even heard of a GPS in 1975. Mexico City was the only time these caravans enjoyed hookups. We parked in soccer

fields, fairgrounds, military camps, or most often in fields owned by farmers.

At each stop, water trucks were waiting for the caravan to arrive. Five gallon bottles of water were inexpensive and were used to fill holding tanks with safe drinking water. In 1975, Mexico allowed releasing wash and black water into gopher holes and filling them with dirt before departure, so also waiting at every stop were local men with shovels and post hole diggers who would quickly dig gopher holes for those requesting the service. The Mexican government provided a tow truck and a bilingual driver, known as a Green Angel, that served as each caravan's caboose. An insurance adjuster traveled with each caravan as well. Should anyone have an accident, like running over a cow, the owner would be paid for his



loss on the spot. Airstream provided a much appreciated service by sending trained mechanics with fully stocked trucks of parts, for anyone needing a trailer repair. Nice. Another provided service was bus shuttles at every stop. No matter where we were, a local bus company was there to make round trips to the town plaza throughout the day, so everyone could leave their tow vehicles in the campground when they shopped or toured local attractions.

The Mexican people seemed to love children. Throughout the trip as we rode public buses, shopped, or toured local attractions with our two boys, the local people reached out to us with kindness, smiles, and consistently responded when our oldest son tried to talk to them in Spanish. Since both boys were blond, it was not unusual for women to gently, almost unnoticeably, pass a hand over the head of one of them as we passed, trying to find out how blond hair felt. This



**Atop a Pyramid at Chicken Itza**

happened throughout Mexico and after a short while, my sons paid no attention to this friendly touching.

We started with the Guatemala Caravan travelling down the west coast of Mexico, including stops at Mazatlan and Puerto Vallarta, before heading inland to Mexico City, where we enjoyed ice cream sundaes made with American ice cream and had great seats for the world renowned Folklorico Ballet. We then left the Guatemala Caravan and headed east to join the Yucatan Caravan at the gulf port of Vera Cruz just before they entered the Yucatan Peninsula. Yucatan was and perhaps still is one of Mexico's most impoverished states.



**1975 Caravan Sunset at Chetumal in Yucatan**

As an experienced collegiate soccer player, I entered many pick-up games throughout the trip by standing on the sidelines, wearing soccer shorts and cleats, and asking, "Uno mas?" (one more?). I was always invited to enter games. Sports often break down social barriers and it always did when I played with the locals. At the end of each match, I would explain where we lived in California and that we were with the nearby Airstream caravan. I'd invite players to the campground and they always enjoyed visiting our trailer. In return, we were invited to attend weddings at two different stops which were memorable experiences. At our Puerto Vallarta stop, I skidded on my backside on a gravel soccer field, suffering a serious abrasion. In a week's time, I was dealing with a painful, stubborn, infection. As luck would have it, the caravanner in the Airstream next to us noticed me limping and asked about the injury. After showing him the wound, he said he was a veterinarian and had a medicine that he used on horses that would probably cure the infection. I gratefully accepted his offer. I used the powder as he directed and two days later my problem was resolved. With the

caravan so large, we never again parked close to one another.

It was in Yucatan that the caravan stopped for several days in the rural town of Peto. The region was heavily perfumed with the delicious fragrance of blossoming citrus trees. The people were extremely friendly, roosters crowed regularly, pigs and chickens wandered the streets, and the climate was balmy. At this stop, the local school invited everyone in the caravan to the town plaza for a special evening of music, singing, and dancing. What a night it was! The master-of-ceremonies was the parish priest, who spoke perfect English. As I recall, he was from the Bronx. As talented local musicians played their instruments, Peto's children danced for us. The boys and girls danced with great pride and happiness. The program included traditional music, distinctly associated with the culture and history of Yucatan. That night of dancing, singing and playing songs made it one of the most unforgettable events of the entire trip.

After the caravan traversed the Yucatan Peninsula, it headed back to the United States by way of Oaxaca and Mexico



**Local Weavers in Oaxaca**



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City, crossing the border at Brownsville, Texas. It was an absolutely wonderful caravanning experience: we stayed healthy, the route and planned activities enabled us to see the best of Mexico, our Suburban's mechanical issues were easily resolved by excellent Mexican mechanics, and very importantly our trailer provided us with the same safe, comfortable, and reliable service that we appreciate to this day.

Fast forward to 1997. As the principal of an elementary school in San Rafael, one of my students got into trouble that required a parent-principal conference. In our post-conference small talk, the father mentioned he was from Mexico. Having traveled extensively in his country, I inquired where in Mexico. He said it was a state that I probably knew little about, Yucatan. I told him that I had been to Yucatan and perhaps I had visited the town where he grew up. He responded by saying it was unlikely I had been there, but it was Peto. I immediately shared with him our wonderful Airstream caravan experiences in Peto - the magical night with children dancing, musicians playing beautiful music, the delicious scent of blossoming citrus permeating the night air, and the parish priest who spoke perfect English. To my surprise and delight, he proudly said, "Mr. Vasser, I was one of the children who danced that

night!" It's hard to put in words how much we enjoyed talking about his home town, the night his school performed, the Airstream caravan, and the fact that only one caravan had ever stopped in Peto and it was ours in 1975.

We are proud of the fact that our Airstream turned 45 years old this year as well as our WBCCI membership. Our 9th membership star was put in place shortly afterward. In addition to numerous family trips throughout the United States, we've been on 22 caravans (Company, WBCCI National, WBCCI Overseas, and Unit) over the years. We enjoyed each and every one. Caravanning throughout Mexico in 1975 was a standout trip. The seven week WBCCI United Kingdom Caravan, in 2001, was another truly exceptional experience. During last year's Alyeska Caravan, we had a great time making new friends, seeing a variety of



Putting the 9th Star on the Airstream

wild animals in their natural habitat, and enjoying spectacular scenery.

Airstream owners frequently take an interest in our 45 year old Airstream because we've done our best to preserve as many original aspects as possible. It has always been stored outside and the exterior has never been buffed out. Our avocado counter tops are a distinct feature that reflect a favorite color during the early 1970s. We ordered an optional bunk bed and even the suspension cables came in avocado to match the shag carpet and counters. At the 2003 International Rally in Burlington, Vermont, our trailer took first place in the Best of the 70s category at the Vintage Airstream Club's annual Concours d'Elegance. The judges appreciated that our trailer still looked very much like it did when it was delivered to our driveway in 1972.

I turned 74 this year and I have every intention to continue making good use of our trailer as I fulfill an important item on my bucket list. Our four grandsons (ages 15, 14, 14, and 12) live within five minutes from us. My goal is to take them to all 50 states before they head off to college. We've visited 28 states so far in our trailer and they continue to ask me, "Where are we going this summer, Grandpa?"

Bob Vasser, #26071



In Denali National Park on the 2016 Alyeska Caravan