

HISTORICALLY SPEAKING

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Wally Byam Slept Here

Rediscovering One of Wally Byam's Personal Airstreams

This month's article was inspired by the recent unexpected discovery of a historic Airstream that was once used by Wally Byam. Wally likely used more than a dozen different Airstream trailers over his years of personal travel and Airstream caravans. Some were probably standard production models, but others were custom trailers that tested out new features and floor plans that might (or might not) later appear on production Airstreams.

Until recently, only two Airstreams personally used by Wally and Stella Byam were known to exist. The most famous being the gold anodized 1957 22' World Traveler that Wally and Stella used on several caravans including the 1959-60 African Caravan. The other is a 1955 16' Bubble that Wally and Stella used during the summer of 1955 to scout a route for the 1956 European Caravan. That Bubble went to a new owner in Europe after selling in a Scottsdale, AZ auction in 2009.

In January of this year a third "Wally Byam Slept Here" Airstream was rediscovered quite by chance, and it might be the second most notable of Wally and Stella's personal Airstreams behind the gold trailer. It is the very custom "white" 1955 tandem axle 26' Cruiser that Wally



and Stella used on two caravans: #7 - Mexico Winter 1956 and most famously #8 - Europe Six Months 1956.

Upon first glance, the most obvious unique feature of this Airstream was that the entire exterior aluminum skin was painted a white color to exactly match Wally and Stella's Cadillac tow car, but an even more significant innovation was the use of stretch formed, rounded profile, 7-panel end caps at a time that production Airstreams were still fashioned with 13-panel end caps made from flat aluminum. This trailer was likely the prototype to test out that new construction technique which would not debut on production Airstreams until 1957.



Other unusual features include the use of "louvered" Jalousie windows on both sides of the trailer, a feature that would not become common on production Airstreams until the early 1960s, as well as a unique front kitchen floor plan and possibly the first use of a propane refrigerator and a Bowen propane water heater in an Airstream. The rear bumper was also modified to carry Wally Byam's motorized Solex bike during the 1956 European Caravan.



After the European Caravan returned home, Wally sold the trailer for \$3500 to friends Park and Esther Sowash, WBCCI

#92, of Big Bear Lake, CA, who then used it on the 1957 Eastern Canada caravan.

It is currently unknown how long the Sowashes retained Wally's 1955 Cruiser, but the whereabouts of this unique Airstream were eventually lost to time until it was re-identified on January 30, 2017. I'll let new owner Scott Goranson, WBCCI #8671, continue the story from that point forward...

Megan and I have been very fortunate in finding unique projects as part of our Airstream hobby. We have had help from great friends, including Joe, long time members of the Oregon Unit, and local friends that share the same passion for vintage Airstreams.

One of our very close friends, Wally Holsclaw, sent us an email in mid January with a link to an odd Airstream on the Portland, Oregon Craigslist. I'll confess I looked at it and dismissed it just as quickly. It was listed as a 1955 Cruiser, but was coated in paint, including butterflies all over, and only had 7 end cap segments instead of 13, so I just figured the seller was mistaken on what it was.



We had no need for another Airstream, but over the next few days I kept coming back to that ad. The Jalousie windows were certainly interesting, but it couldn't be a '55, or could it? I asked the seller for more photos and when I saw a refrigerator access door in the front corner, indicating it had a front kitchen, I knew it was something different.

The next morning I started texting Wally about the trailer and how it was something special, I just wasn't sure what and told him I needed to get off the phone and call Joe. I sent pictures to Joe, who instantly ID'd the trailer. It was the shortest conversation I've ever had with Joe, because I was off the phone and calling my awesome wife and telling her what it was and she said "go for it", so I called and put a deposit on the trailer.

Wally and I packed up equipment that evening and tried to get some sleep,

which didn't work. I was up shortly after 3am, and minutes later got a text from Wally asking if I was up yet. He couldn't sleep either. So I picked him up and we were on the highway by 4am, driving the first few hours in heavy snow before crossing into Oregon where the weather turned to rain. Roughly nine hours later we arrived, just after the rain stopped. We purchased the trailer, installed 4 good tires, and did some work to secure the front of the trailer because it was no longer connected to the frame. We arrived home safely 18 hours after we left and shoveled enough snow to get the trailer off the street.

Our family of four regularly camps in a 1963 22' Safari from the Around the World Caravan, but have wanted something with a bit more space for longer trips. Our plan is to restore this special 26' Cruiser to as close to original as possible, but still have it be something we can take to rallies and enjoy.

Our family hopes to attend our first International Rally in 2018 in Salem, OR with our Safari, but also hope to have at least the shell of Wally and Stella's trailer there too.

Megan and I are both teachers with the summer off, so the plan is to complete frame repairs, install a new subfloor, replace some exterior panels (where necessary due to serious corrosion and/or holes added by later owners), and rebuild windows so the trailer is weather tight. The winter months will allow us to turn our attention to wiring, insulation, and flooring. In the spring of 2018 we plan on returning the exterior to its original Cadillac Alpine White, with iconic lettering and badges, in time for Salem. We feel that is a realistic goal in the first year and will allow us to take our time over the following winter to restore the rest of the interior details.

This restoration process won't be without its challenges. Three front roof segments are completely rotted through, but luckily we've already found a craftsman in the Portland, Oregon area that will recreate those panels for us. The large 42" wide Jalousie windows differ from those used on later Airstreams and some missing window parts may have to be fabricated. The water heater was some type of prototype, and years ahead



of its time having both electric and gas heat and electronic ignition.

We've sourced out the correct style and size of cork tile for the floor and will be returning the interior to the original layout and finishes. We continue to search out the missing and damaged pieces to make it whole again with help from those in the WBCCI, VAC, and AirForums communities and via online auctions and networking with other owners of 1950s era trailers.

To accessorize Wally's trailer properly, we've already purchased a 1955 Cadillac in the correct color, but made the concession to get a 4-door instead of a 2-door because that will work better for our family of four. We hope to track down a 1950s era Solex moped for the back of the trailer. We've also located a Zenith Transoceanic Radio and other



interior accessories that Wally had during the 1956 European Caravan.

We are blogging the restoration process and part search online at: <http://www.airforums.com/forums/f492/found-wally-byams-55-cruiser-1956-european-caravan-trailer-162191.html> and appreciate feedback, knowledge, and eyes and ears for all the missing pieces of the puzzle.