

HISTORICALLY SPEAKING

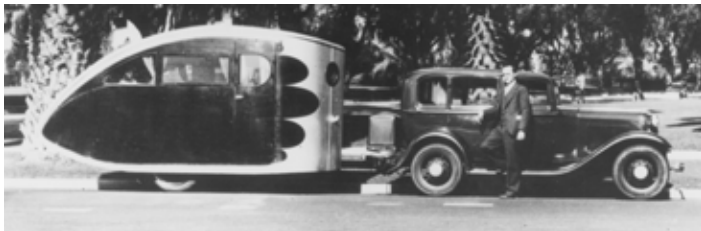
Joe Peplinski WBCCI #6768, WBCCI Historian
history@wbcci.org

A Brief History of the Airstream Company

Most WBCCI members probably know that the Airstream Company was founded by Wally Byam in the 1930s and is currently owned by the Thor Corporation, but what happened in between? All written histories of the Airstream Company known to the author are incomplete and often contain errors. It is hoped that the Airstream Company timeline that follows, while purposely brief and definitely not complete, corrects a few misconceptions and presents a few new details. Some of this information came from rare stockholder publications issued during Airstream's brief period as an independently traded company in the mid-1960s, while other details came from a variety of sources including articles in old Caravaner newspapers, trailer brochures, and the recollections of Wally Byam's cousin, Dale "Pee Wee" Schwamborn.

1929 – Wally Byam begins building trailers in his back yard.

1931 – Wally opened a small factory to produce travel trailers, although the company did not adopt the name "Airstream" until 1934, when advertising indicated that its trailers "tow like a stream of air". The company's first product was a Masonite sided travel trailer called the Torpedo Car Cruiser. Airstream also sold Torpedo plans and kits for those that wanted to build it themselves.



Wally Byam and Torpedo Car Cruiser circa 1932

October 1934 – Hawley Bowlus, designer of Lindbergh's Spirit of St. Louis plane, offers the first riveted aluminum travel trailer for sale, the Bowlus Road Chief.



Bowlus Road Chief

1935 – According to Bowlus family members, Wally Byam sold Bowlus trailers alongside Airstreams on his own sales lot.

January 1936 – The riveted aluminum Airstream Clipper is introduced months before competitor Bowlus began to offer a new mid-kitchen model in April 1936 and closed its doors for good in September 1936, which dispels the myths that

Wally bought out Bowlus and that the Clipper was merely a rebadged Bowlus Road Chief. The Clipper sported many design improvements over the Road Chief, with the most obvious being the door location moved from the tongue to the side, but the most significant was a different frame design and trailer construction method.

It should be noted that Airstream only made a limited number of pre-WWII aluminum Airstream Clippers, each custom designed to the purchasers' requirements with a high price to match. Production of more standardized and much less expensive Masonite Airstream trailer models, including the Torpedo Junior, Airlite, and Silver Cloud, continued and represented the largest volume of Airstreams produced before WWII.



Airstream Employees and Trailers - March 19, 1936
 (Silver Cloud on left, Clipper in center, unknown model on right)

1941 – The last Airstream is built before Airstream closed its doors for WWII due to materials rationing.

1941-1945 – Wally Byam worked at the Lockheed aircraft company, where he met future Airstream employee Andy Charles.

Late 1945 – Wally Byam went to work for a man named Curtis Wright as designer and production manager of a new line of travel trailers at Curtis Wright Industries, which has sometimes been confused with the Curtiss-Wright aircraft company in the past, although they were separate companies with no business ties.

January 1946 – The first Curtis Wright travel trailers are for sale and are soon joined by a riveted aluminum model called the Clipper that bore a significant resemblance to the pre-WWII Airstream Clipper. Future Airstream employee Art Costello begins to work for Wally Byam at Curtis Wright.



continued on page 26

HISTORICALLY SPEAKING

continued from page 24

May 15, 1947 – Wally Byam restarts Airstream after leaving Curtis Wright. Art Costello joins Wally as the first employee at the new company, which now only builds riveted aluminum Airstream Liners that are very similar in appearance to Curtis Wright Clippers.



November 1, 1948 – Airstream is formally incorporated in California, with Art Costello named as its Vice President.



Airstream Employees circa 1950 (Art Costello in center of front row; Wally Byam in the beret)

1950 – Andy Charles joins Airstream as a production specialist.

July 1952 – Airstream opened a second production facility in Jackson Center, Ohio. Andy Charles moved from California to Ohio to set up and manage this factory.

1954-1955 – The Wally Byam's Holiday travel trailer company is formed in Jackson Center, OH. Some brochures called this company a "Division of Airstream Trailers, Inc."



Holiday trailers had a "canned ham" shape with flat sides, a riveted aluminum skin, and a wood lined interior. Most Holidays were 15' single axle models, but a few 21' tandem axle models were also made for 1955. The single axle Holiday floor plan was very similar to that of the 1955-57 16' Airstream Bubble.

Wally Byam's Holiday trailers are rare, with perhaps a little more than 100 originally built and probably less than a dozen currently known to exist. They have been a part of WBCCI since the 1950s and their eligibility for club membership was recently reaffirmed by the WBCCI Executive Committee.



August 3, 1955 – The Wally Byam Caravan Club was formed during the Airstream Company sponsored 1955 Eastern Canada Caravan. Club administrative support would be provided by Airstream Company employees, led by Wally's cousin, Helen Byam Schwamborn, for many years to follow.

1958-64 – Airstream created a **commercial division** to sell trailers to industrial customers. Most went to the Southern Pacific and Western Pacific railroads to house work crews. A couple of 35' prototypes were built in January 1958.



Between January 1960 and March 1964, almost 270 additional trailers were built, with most varying between 32' and 40' long. The 1958 and 1960 units were designed and badged as Airstreams, but in mid-1961 the units started being identified as **Mobile Industrial** trailers.



The Mobile Industrial trailer badges listed the same 12804 E. Firestone Blvd, Santa Fe Springs, CA address as the California Airstream plant. By 1963, the design changed to a distinctly different appearance utilizing flatter sides with a subtle ribbed appearance and fiberglass front and rear exterior endcaps that were painted silver.



1964 40' Mobile Industrial Trailer

July 22, 1962 – Wally Byam passed away. At this time, the Airstream business was composed of three affiliated corporations:

- One solely owned by Wally Byam
- One co-owned by Wally Byam (75%) and California Plant President Art Costello (25%)
- One co-owned by Wally Byam (75%) and Ohio Plant President Andy Charles (25%)

November 1, 1962 – The California and Ohio Airstream companies were merged into Airstream, Inc., when Art and Andy transferred their ownership shares in exchange for new Airstream, Inc. stock. Art Costello was named President of Airstream, Inc. and Andy Charles was named Chairman of the Board of Directors.

continued on page 28

HISTORICALLY SPEAKING

continued from page 26

January 1963 – Airstream, Inc. acquired all of Wally Byam’s shares in the three prior corporations from his estate. Stock shares were sold to other members of the Airstream Board of Directors, bringing Airstream ownership shares to:

- Art Costello – 30%
Airstream President and CEO
- Andy Charles – 30%
Airstream Chairman of the Board
- Charles Manchester – 10%
Airstream VP and Director of Marketing
- Edwin Charles – 10%
Airstream Secretary and Director
- Jack Garmhausen – 10%
A partner at the law firm that handled Airstream business
- Paul Guerin – 10%
President of Airstream’s outside advertising agency

February 15, 1966 – Brothers Andy and Edwin Charles sold their shares to the other four stockholders and retired from the company.

June 3, 1966 – Airstream’s Initial Public Offering (IPO). About 29% of the existing shares were sold, coming from each of the 4 current stockholders in like proportions. Other members of the Airstream Board of Directors bought minor shares. At the completion of the IPO, about 71% of Airstream stock was still held by the Airstream Board of Directors.

December 1967 – The Airstream Company was purchased by the Beatrice Foods Corporation, ending its short 17-month run as a publicly traded company.

March 21, 1972 – A new plant was opened in Versailles, OH to produce the painted Argosy trailer line. It should be noted that a few Argosys were also produced by the California Airstream Plant in the years that followed.



1974 – The first painted Argosy Motorhomes are introduced.

Mid-Late 1970s – The fuel crisis and recession hit the RV industry hard and sales dropped dramatically.

1979 – The Versailles, OH Argosy plant was closed, and the Argosy brand was shut down. Production of Airstream Motorhomes begins, with the first units being painted like Argosy Motorhomes, but soon Airstream Motorhomes transitioned to a traditional shiny riveted aluminum appearance.



October 1, 1979 – The California Airstream plant was closed and WBCCI was made independent of the Airstream Company.

August 29, 1980 – Airstream was sold to the Thor Corporation and Thor returned Airstream to profitability within one year.

This completes a brief review of Airstream Company history up to its purchase by Thor. It should not be relied upon as complete as many details have been omitted to keep the article length manageable, but hopefully you enjoyed learning a little bit more about the company that built your Airstream as well as some closely related brands.

Visit the Wally Byam Airstream Club Store at:
<http://store.wbcci.org/>

