

HISTORICALLY SPEAKING

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

Three Pioneering WBCCI Couples

In the early days of Airstream, caravans, and the WBCCI there were several famous club members that did some amazing and historic things using their Airstreams. Two of the couples discussed in this article have been recognized by having their membership numbers converted to Heritage Numbers, while the third couple has not yet been recognized in the same way. All were known to be good friends with Wally Byam, having each participated in several of his early caravans.

#165 Oscar and Etta Payne

Oscar and Etta Payne were transplanted Midwesterners who, by the time they purchased an Airstream, were owners of the Fountain of Youth Trailer Park in Thermopolis, Wyoming. The Payne's membership number was recently converted to a Heritage Number because they participated in the 1959-60 Cape Town to Cairo Caravan, but they contributed so much more to the club over their 30 years of caravan participation and 40 years of club membership. The Paynes participated in eleven numbered caravans:

- 5 – Mexico West Coast Winter 1955
- 8 – Europe Six Months 1956
- 16 – Mexico Winter 1958
- 17 – Central America Winter 1958
- 20 – Africa Holy Land 1959-60
- 24 – Europe Summer 1960
- 30 – Western Canada Summer 1962
- 48 – Alaska Summer 1966
- N6 – Post Int'l Rally Caravan 1977
- N8 – Post Int'l Rally Caravan 1979
- C1 – China Caravan #1 1985

Etta Payne authored two hardcover books about major Airstream caravans:

- **Home Was Never Like This – A Trailer's Eye View of Europe**, about the 1956 Europe Caravan.

- **Land Yachting to Central America – A Trailer's Eye View of our Nearest Latin Neighbors**, about the 1958 Central America Caravan.

Oscar and Etta were one of four Airstream couples to travel behind the Iron Curtain to Moscow in 1960 at the conclusion of the 1959-60 African and 1960 European caravans.



Etta Payne Pushing in Africa



Oscar Payne and Bubble in Russia

The Paynes then continued alone to India and the "Far East" into 1961 scouting a route for the 1963-64 Around the World Caravan. Their travels to Russia and "Round-the-World" were featured

as regular reading in the Airstream Caravan newspaper in the early 1960s.

Oscar and Etta's last caravan was the first Caravan to China in 1985, during which they celebrated their 65th wedding anniversary and Oscar's 91st birthday!

The Paynes only owned two Airstreams over the years. The first was a 1955 16' Bubble and the second was a 1957 16' Bubble. Both were adorned with the image of the Wyoming "Bucking Bronco" on both sides. In 1977, the Paynes claimed their 1957 Bubble had travelled 200,000 miles on only two sets of tires! Imagine doing all of those miles in one of the smallest Airstreams ever made.



Oscar Payne, 91, and wife Etta, 83, of Thermopolis, Wyoming, were eldest members of first China caravan

#616 Harry and Allene Halbritter

Harry Halbritter was a retired hotel and nightclub owner from San Diego, CA. Allene was an amateur artist and avid photographer. After an ulcer forced Harry's early retirement, he credited purchasing their first Airstream with saving his life as he and Allene quickly got hooked on personal travel and caravanning with it.

The Halbritter's membership number was converted to a Heritage Number because of their participation on the 1959-

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Harry Halbritter, World Traveler

60 African caravan but they participated in several of the biggest early caravans:
 2 – Mexico West Coast Winter 1952-53
 8 – Europe Six Months 1956
 16 – Mexico Winter 1958
 17 – Central America Winter 1958
 20 – Africa Holy Land 1959-60

The Halbritters quickly became close friends with Wally Byam, and by the time of the African Caravan Wally could rely on them to hang back and help fix trailers with the mechanic, orchestrate getting the rigs thru a mud hole using ropes and muscle power, take over as the temporary wagon boss for a few days while the normal wagon boss waited for repair parts for his broken truck, or just provide a quiet spot in their Airstream for Wally to temporarily hide from the rigors of leading the caravan.



Harry Halbritter Helps Fix a Flat in Africa

Allene had a detailed two-part article titled “Caravan to Cairo” published in the May and June 1960 issues of **Trailer Topics** magazine about their experiences on the 1959-60 African Caravan.

The Halbritters were good record keepers and their notes were the basis for the late 50s/early 60s claims that you



Allene Halbritter Shares a Drink with Wally Byam in Africa

could enjoy an Airstream Caravan for just \$10/day and live in your Airstream full time for just \$500/month.

#9 Fred (Pop) and Ethel (Mom) Riley

Fred E. Riley was a locomotive engineer for the Southern Pacific Railroad before his 1952 retirement at age 70. Ethel also worked for the railroad and that is where she first met Fred. It is reported that by 1960 the Rileys had already traveled more than 80,000 miles with their Airstream. Undoubtedly, many of those miles occurred during the first 10 of their eventual 16 caravans:

- 4 – Western Canada Summer 1954
- 5 – Mexico West Coast Winter 1955
- 6 – Eastern Canada Summer 1955
- 7 – Mexico Winter 1956
- 9 – Western Canada Summer 1956
- 11 – Mexico Winter 1957
- 13 – Eastern Canada Summer 1957
- 16 – Mexico Winter 1958
- 18 – Western Canada Summer 1958
- 21 – Eastern Canada Summer 1959
- 27 – Kentucky Derby-Indy 500 1961
- 28 – Eastern Canada Summer 1961
- 29 – Mexico Winter 1962
- 30 – Western Canada Summer 1962
- 31 – Western Mexico Fall 1962
- 39 – Eastern Canada Summer 1964



Mom and Pop Riley Circa Mid 1950s

The origin of the Rileys’ nicknames as “Mom” and “Pop” are unknown, but this is how they were affectionately known in the Airstream community. Pop was always quick to volunteer. He headed the Parking Committee on just his second caravan, the famous “Caravan 500” to Mexico in the winter of 1955 – the one with nearly 500 trailers! Pop is best known, though, as the first President of the Wally Byam Caravan Club, having been elected to that position at age 73 during his third caravan, the 1955 Eastern Canada Caravan. Wally Byam even selected the Rileys to lead the 1956 Western Canada Caravan that ran while he was leading the 1956 European Caravan.

Since the creation of Heritage Numbers at Escanaba last summer, it has been suggested that the Riley’s #9 should be nominated to become a Heritage Number. Is volunteering to become the first president of WBCC during the 1955 Eastern Canada Caravan an appropriate “historically significant” event to justify making such a nomination? Let me know your thoughts.



Pop Riley, Past WBCCI International President Circa Late 1960s

That’s it for now, until the next time we highlight some early WBCCI pioneers.

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