

HISTORICALLY SPEAKING

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Virgil and Grace Golden (Heritage Number 692)

We have previously discussed a few of the pioneering WBCCI members that have had their WBCCI numbers converted to Heritage Numbers. This month we'll discuss another couple whose WBCCI number has been so recognized, #692 Virgil and Grace Golden of Salem, OR. Before their retirements, Virgil was a funeral director and Grace was a registered nurse. According to their son Tom, Virgil and Grace were a quiet couple who would be surprised at this attention.

The Golden's had traveling in their blood, beginning with local trips in a pop-up tent camper in the 1930s and evolving into Airstream Caravans with Wally Byam and the WBCCI in the 1950s and 1960s. Virgil was fond of saying "You only die once, and I'm not going to sit home and wait for it." After three Airstream Caravans to Canada, the Golden's really got adventurous and signed up for the 1959-60 African Caravan. They were one of seven couples that participated on both groundbreaking caravans that have been recognized for Heritage Number status: the **1959-60 Africa – Holy Land Caravan** (a.k.a. Cape Town to Cairo), and the **1963-64 Around the World Caravan** (see sidebar). In total, this pioneering couple participated on eight important early caravans:

- 9 – Western Canada Summer 1956
- 13 – Eastern Canada Summer 1957
- 18 – Western Canada Summer 1958
- 20 – Africa-Holy Land 1959-60
- 24 – Europe Summer 1960
- 29 – Mexico Winter 1962



Virgil and Rig in Africa

- Highroaders Caravan to Panama 1963
- 35 – Around the World 1963-64

For the **1959-60 African Caravan**, the Golden's purchased a 4x4 International Travelall to pull their 1957 22' Airstream Caravanner, and brought along their 19-year-old son Lee, to help them drive. The Golden's



The Golden's Rig Near Khartoum, Sudan



Grace at Customs in the Belgian Congo

arrived in Cape Town, South Africa on July 11, 1959 to become part of the 106 people and 41 Airstreams (plus 3 support trucks) to assemble for the African Caravan. On July 17, 1959 they departed Cape Town bound for Cairo, Egypt and their African Caravan was officially under way.



Virgil, Grace and Rig at the Equator in Uganda, Africa

Goldens visited the biblical towns of Damascus and Jerusalem in Syria, camped among the Roman Ruins in Jerash, Jordan (a feat that would be repeated four years later during the Around the World Caravan) and crossed from Asia to Europe

by ferry across the Bosphorus Strait in Istanbul, Turkey.

This caravan was hard on people, Airstreams, and trucks. Rigs had to be pulled thru the mud by hand. Roads were repaired by the caravanners. Tires went flat and axles, springs, and other parts broke on trucks and Airstreams. The Golden's Airstream even had to be bolted back down to the frame using custom U-bolts that were fabricated in Africa. Such repairs were very common, possibly explaining why not many African Caravan Airstreams are known to still exist today. To make the trip even more challenging, Virgil, Grace and Lee were frequently sick during the caravan. These types of hardships caused some caravanners to drop out along the way, but the Goldens were hardy and persevered to meet Pygmies and the giant Watusi tribe and see all the wildlife and natural beauty that Africa had to offer. For maximum adventure, the Goldens were one of only seven caravan families to tow their Airstream across the Nubian Desert in Sudan (accompanied by the three support trucks and one other caravan tow vehicle without its trailer), rather than ship around it on railcars with the main body of the caravan. Despite everyone constantly getting stuck in the sand and breaking parts on their trucks and trailers, they made it 580 miles across the Nubian Desert sand in 9 days. The Goldens were then one of 29 Airstreams out of the original 41 to camp below the Pyramids in Giza, Egypt. They arrived in Cairo on February 6, 1960, a full two months later than originally planned.

The Goldens continued with the 1960 European Caravan for a while before breaking away to explore Europe at a quicker pace on their own. They visited Austria, Germany, Denmark, Belgium, France, Luxembourg and Holland before shipping home on July 15, 1960. In total, the Goldens were on African, Asian, and European soil for just over one continuous year for this grand adventure!

Fast forward a few years. For the upcoming **1963-64 Around the World Caravan**, the Goldens custom ordered a 1963 24' Tradewind Airstream and received it in October, 1962. This Airstream was equipped with optional tandem axles and "scare lights" on all four sides. These and other custom features were meant to deal with the challenging conditions they would face going around the world.

As a "shake down" trip for their new Airstream, the Goldens participated on the first caravan of Airstream trailers to drive all the way to Panama: the January-April, 1963 **Highroaders Caravan to Panama**. While some



The Goldens Get a Tow in Thailand during the ATWC

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caravanners on the 1951 and 1958 Central American Caravans had reached Panama by plane after driving to Managua, Nicaragua, none had made it all the way to Panama pulling their Airstreams until this informal 1963 caravan. The Highroaders Caravan was a group of 28 Airstreams and 56 people, all WBCCI members, that made this trip while neither being sponsored by Airstream, nor WBCCI. Their name came from the fact that they would take the "high road", reaching 11,000 feet, through Central America on their way to Panama. The roads on this caravan were rough – a good simulation of the primitive roads they would encounter going around the world.

Getting back to the 1963-64 Around the World Caravan (ATWC), the Goldens arrived in Singapore on October 16, 1963, and their Airstream and new 4x4 International Travelall arrived a few days later. On October 24, 1963 they departed Singapore to begin this epic overland journey as part of a caravan of



At the India Gate in New Delhi

105 people, 45 Airstreams, and 2 support trucks. By now, the Goldens were "old hats" that were unshaken when the caravan encountered difficulties like pulling thru the deep mud, rebuilding bridges and fording rivers in Thailand; trusting bamboo bridges to support their rig in India;



On the Road in Iran

and traveling on the Khyber Pass road to Afghanistan while hoping no one would shoot at them. They were amply rewarded. They saw Angkor Wat in Cambodia, the Taj Mahal in India, the Kremlin and St. Basil's Cathedral in Moscow; they rode elephants and camels; they met Maharajahs

and Ambassadors; and they entertained locals in their Airstreams. The Goldens continued with the ATWC almost to its end, shipping home from Holland on September 14, 1964. This time they were only on Asian and European soil for about 11 months.

Their first destination upon arrival in the USA was Jackson Center for a few days of trailer repairs, though this Airstream had fared much better than their African trailer (which was ready for the scrap heap at the end of that caravan). The Goldens continued to use their ATWC Airstream for the remainder of their trailering days. Eventually, it was sold and its whereabouts were lost to time.



Virgil and Grace after the ATWC

The Airstream travel bug goes far deeper in the Golden family than just Virgil and Grace. Besides their son Lee accompanying them on the African Caravan, son Tom and wife Ethelwyne purchased an Airstream in 1995 and joined WBCCI being assigned membership number 16921 (notice Tom's parents "692" embedded in their number!). Tom and Ethelwyne participated on a historic Airstream caravan of their own, Airstream Company Caravan 255A – 50th Anniversary Caravan to Central America and Panama in 2001, seeing some of the same sights Virgil and Grace had seen on their trip to Panama in 1963!

A few years ago, Tom and Ethelwyne decided to try to find Virgil and Grace's ATWC Airstream and buy it back. This multi-year hunt finally came to fruition just a few weeks before the 2018 International Rally in their home town of Salem, OR. After re-purchase, Tom gave the trailer a good cleaning and brought it "as found" to be part of the ATWC Airstream display at the International Rally.



Tom and Ethelwyne with the ATWC Trailer in Salem (photo by Bill Ferry #8558)

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