

HISTORICALLY SPEAKING

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The 1959-60 African Caravan Part 1: Introduction and Overview

It is time to celebrate the 60th Anniversary of one of the greatest Airstream adventures ever undertaken, the:

1959-60 African Caravan
(a.k.a. "Cape Town to Cairo")

We cannot be sure when the idea for an African caravan first occurred to Wally Byam, but in December 1952, during a caravan to Mexico, he mentioned the idea to eventual African caravanner Harry Halbritter. After the formation of the Wally Byam Caravan Club in 1955, Wally finally had his cousin Helen Byam Schwamborn in the perfect position to act upon the idea.



Helen Tracks the African Caravan Route

Certainly, this major undertaking required many months of detailed planning. Proposed routes, passports, visas, carnets (passports for trucks and Airstreams), international drivers' licenses, and insurance all had to be arranged. One underappreciated task was that of ensuring an adequate supply of gasoline and butane along the planned caravan route as they would be traveling in very remote and primitive areas.



Arrangements were made to truck 50-gallon drums of gasoline to remote locations along the route so the caravan could refuel. Butane availability was just as critical as it allowed the caravanners to boil their drinking water and keep their refrigerators cold.

The first formal announcement that an African Caravan was in development occurred in the



Wally and Stella at Palm Springs

September 1958 edition of the Caravanner newspaper. The African Caravan was then heavily promoted at the Palm Springs Airstream Rally in October 1958.

A series of thirteen bulletins were published for prospective African caravanners advising them on all sorts of details including required paperwork, vaccinations, spare parts, and overseas shipping options. In anticipation of poor road conditions, one of the most important requirements was a 4-wheel-drive tow vehicle, with International Harvester trucks being specifically recommended. These trucks had to be able to carry enough fuel for 600 miles between fuel stops.

The bulletins were critical for the success of the caravan, as 25 of the 41 families had never participated on an Airstream caravan before.

Some were such “newbies” that they had never traveled in a trailer before and bought their first trailer, an Airstream, specifically for this caravan. The members of the 41 families that made up the caravan numbered 106 in total, and ranged in age from 6 to 86, including 21 children and young adults. Most caravanners were of retirement age and many came from comfortable backgrounds and were not necessarily familiar with changing a flat tire, or leaf spring, or the rear axle on their truck, but they would become adept at these tasks during the caravan as the provided mechanic could not keep up with the breakages. Very importantly, caravanners included five doctors whose services would prove to be truly lifesaving during the caravan.

Wally Byam also had some very experienced caravanners on this adventure who he could lean on for any help he needed. One of the most important was #50 Louis and Mildred Mousley, with Lou serving as the Wagon Boss for the caravan. Another was #616 Harry and Eileen Halbritter. Harry assumed the Wagon Boss duties on at least two occasions when the Mousleys broke their truck and had to stay behind waiting for repairs. Harry also assisted the mechanic and became very adept at quickly replacing broken springs and axles.

Two special support trucks were provided to assist the caravan, each featuring a shortened Airstream body on a 4-wheel-drive Chevrolet chassis. One was used by the Advance Scouts, Dale Schwamborn and Nick Charles. Dale was 21, the cousin of Wally Byam and son of Helen



Wally, Gold Trailer and African Caravan Tow Vehicle

Byam Schwamborn. Nick was 17, the son of Ohio Airstream Plant President Andy Charles.

The second similar truck pulled a small parts trailer and was for Mechanic Arturo (Art) Ruiz. A third support truck for the Photographer, Pete Turner, sported a white camper body on a 4-wheel-drive International Harvester chassis.

No discussion of the African Caravan would be complete without a mention that this was the last and most famous trip that Wally and Stella Byam took in the Gold Airstream that now resides at the Airstream Factory in Jackson Center, OH. Besides the gold anodized exterior skin, this trailer was a test bed for new technologies, including prototype Duratorque torsion axles. While every other trailer on the African caravan was breaking leaf springs, Wally's trailer was riding comfortably on the rubber rods contained in its torsion axles. This success led to the Duratorque torsion axle becoming standard equipment on 1961 Airstreams.

The official labeling on the trucks used by Wally Byam, the Scouts, and the Mechanic initially read:

**Wally Byam's CARAVAN
Africa – Bibleland – Europe**

but by the time they visited the Pygmies in the Belgian Congo the labeling had been changed to:

**Wally Byam's CARAVAN
Africa – Near East – Europe**

so that they could enter the predominantly Muslim countries in northern Africa and the Middle East. If you are puzzled by the inclusion of “Europe” in the truck labels, that is because from the start, touring Europe was always part of the plan for this grand adventure. Many of the African Caravanners did indeed continue with the caravan to tour the Middle East and then Europe. Eventually, the European portion of the caravan was opened up to other club members that did not have the time, resources, or sense of adventure to also pull their Airstream the length of Africa. This resulted in the following two caravans being formally recognized ever since:

- **Caravan 20: Africa – Holy Land 1959-60**
- **Caravan 24: Europe Summer 1960**

The proposed Africa itinerary had the caravanners arriving in Cape Town, South Africa on July 7, 1959 with departure set for July 14, though caravanners actually arrived between late-May and mid-July via a variety of ships. A few caravanners shipped their rigs by sea



Support Trucks in the Nubian Desert, Sudan

and then flew to Cape Town. The proposed itinerary had the caravanners reaching Cairo on December 7, 1959 and the port at Alexandria, Egypt on December 11, 1959. Total distance was estimated to be 11,501 miles over 85 travel days for an average of 135 miles per travel day. Hindsight shows this to have been an extremely optimistic expectation as the caravan often failed to meet their expected mileage, sometimes traveling less than 10 miles after a full day's effort, causing them to arrive in Cairo about 2 months later than planned. The proposed itinerary called for travel in or thru 11 countries on the African continent though some caravanners made side trips to neighboring countries along the way. It is astonishing that 29 of the 41 Airstreams that started in Cape Town made it to camp below the Pyramids near Cairo on February 6, 1960. Wally Byam's telegram to the USA read "Because the impossible takes a little longer, we arrived a little late, but you can tell the world that the Wally Byam Caravan from Cape Town to Cairo is history."

The African Caravan was in the right place at the right time. It could not have been run much earlier due to a lack of roads, nor much later due to political instability. The caravanners

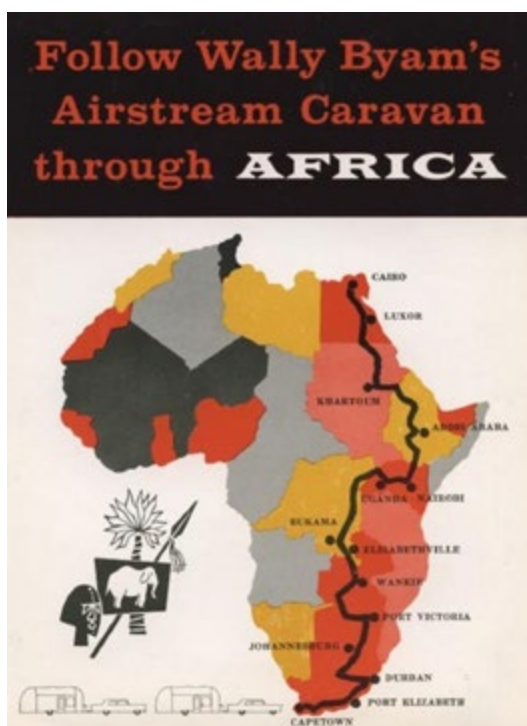


did sense a common tension in most of the countries they visited as the native peoples were edging toward independence from their European colonizers. This feeling was never more prevalent than in the Belgian Congo that was scheduled to be given its independence from Belgium in 1960 and would be the site of bloody battles and the massacre of white inhabitants less than a year after the caravan passed through. Similar tensions, though not as strong, existed in many of the African countries then under the "protection" of Great Britain. In Ethiopia and Eritrea there was some threat from roving bandits and guards traveled with the caravan for its protection, but no security incidents occurred.

The biggest challenge the caravan faced was the condition of the roads they traveled over, or in some cases the lack of any real roads at all. In many countries the roads were made up of hundreds of miles of dusty, rocky washboards. In other places they fought deep mudholes or traversed very steep, narrow, rocky mountain passes. They quickly became adept at pulling a rig out of a mudhole with ropes and muscle power and crawling under a truck or trailer on the side of the road to fix a broken spring or broken axle.

Vibration from the rough roads caused more extensive damage on some rigs. Truck and trailer frames cracked requiring welding repairs, Airstream bodies came loose from their frames, cabinets and appliances came free from the walls, and water and butane lines broke causing leaks. In Ethiopia, they had to spend days filling in mudholes and deep ruts before they could even attempt to drive over them. But through it all, when a new obstacle was to be faced almost all would vote to push on forward.

Another challenge was public opinion. Before they left the USA and from Cape Town, South Africa to Khartoum, Sudan in Africa they were repeatedly told they would not make it. Oh, they might make it thru Rhodesia, but the Congo



Replacing a spring in the Belgian Congo