

HISTORICALLY SPEAKING

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The Big Red Numbers

Why is it that when we join WBCCI, we are expected to proudly display our membership number in big red numbers on the front and rear of our Airstream? We'll explore the reasons in this article. We'll also touch upon how certain number ranges are assigned and when various number ranges were first used and how that might help us learn a little bit about the history of old vintage Airstreams that still display ghosts of numbers past.



The WBCCI Bylaws and Policy tells us how WBCCI numbers are assigned and even how they are to be displayed on our Airstreams, but they do not provide the rationale behind these rules. Let's start with a brief review of the current number assignment rules.

Since about 1970, the numbers 1 to 999 have been reserved for club officers and other special usages and are no longer assigned to the general membership, although a few long time members still retain membership numbers in this range if they were assigned before these rules went into practice. Numbers 1 to 100 are assigned at the discretion of Airstream and typically go to current and former Airstream employees and key people outside Airstream that the company wants to recognize in a special way. Numbers 101-199 are reserved for International Presidents and Vice Presidents and are retired when the President completes his or her term in office. The numbers 200-299 are reserved for Region Presidents and Vice Presidents. The numbers 300-699 are reserved for International Recording Secretaries and International Treasurers,

along with 300-399 also serving as overflow for Region Presidents and Region VPs if no 200 series numbers are available. The numbers 700-799 are reserved for International Standing Committee Chairmen and 800-899 are reserved for National Caravan Leaders, both of which need to meet certain service milestones before they qualify for a 3 digit number. The numbers 900-999 are reserved for future usage. Reassignment of numbers from 101 to 999 is at the discretion of the club member upon meeting the criteria to qualify for the number. If they prefer, they can keep their existing 4 or 5 digit number rather than change to a 3 digit number. Finally, numbers 1000 and above are open to any member, although recently released numbers are reserved for one year in case the last assignees make a late decision to renew their membership.

As a side note, many members may not be aware that the Bylaws and Policy also state that club members display the round Wally Byam Caravan Club decal above their numbers and optionally can display stars designating membership milestones, with one star representing each 5 years of membership. It is interesting to see some Airstreams with 8, 9, or even 10 or more stars. Use the coupon in the back of each issue of the Blue Beret to request 5 year anniversary stars when you qualify. They are free.



Since the Bylaws and Policy do not tell us why we are supposed to display our big red membership numbers on our Airstream, we must instead look



to history. The use of big red numbers on Airstreams predates the founding of the club. Wally Byam assigned numbers to each trailer that participated on his caravans starting with his first one, the 1951-52 Central America Caravan. The main reason then is likely just as valid today - it helped members find each other in a sea of silver trailers. Each caravan member got a roster of names and numbers and with that they could find each other. Perhaps just as importantly, if there was an emergency at a trailer encampment, the responders could also use that number to find the appropriate trailer. The use of big red numbers also allowed caravanners to identify other members when travelling the highways and byways of this world no matter whether the reason was to assist with a breakdown or just offer a friendly hello.

By the time of the 5th caravan, the 1955 Mexico Caravan, a rectangular "Wally Byam's Caravan" plaque was available to be displayed near the member numbers.



This plaque had a red background and was most often a foil decal with an adhesive back, but it eventually was also available as a hard etched aluminum plaque that could be riveted to the Airstream, although these are rarely seen.

These rectangular plaques appear to have been available to all club members and have been seen on late 1950s

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and early 1960s Airstreams that have no documented caravan history so, by itself, the presence or ghost outline of this plaque on a vintage Airstream does not guarantee participation on a caravan. This rectangular plaque continued to be used until about 1963 when it was phased out.

By late 1957, the familiar round Wally Byam Caravan Club decal became available and was to be positioned above the member numbers with the rectangular plaque below the numbers. Vintage photos suggest the round decal was slowly adopted with only sporadic usage until the early 1960s, but over time it completely replaced the earlier rectangular plaque. During the transition years, Airstreams often displayed both the rectangular plaque and round decal.

On Wally Byam's early caravans, trailer numbers were hand painted in red on the Airstream, typically near the curb side upper corner of the front window. These numbers were to be 6" high so that they



could be seen at a reasonable distance. By 1956, the preferred position moved to above the front and rear windows as it remains in the Bylaws today. At some point in the late 1950s, red decals of a standard size and font were implemented to eliminate the need for hand painting of membership numbers.

Prior to formation of the club, trailer numbers were reassigned anew for each caravan, always starting at 1 for Wally Byam. Since different people and trailers participated on each caravan, over time this led to duplicate number use. When the Wally Byam Caravan Club was formed in 1955, previously assigned numbers were retained for club members that had participated on one or more of the six prior caravans. The 1955 "Wally Byam's Caravanners" Directory has several cases of multiple

members with the same number; sometimes three or four different members with the same number! This shared number condition continued to exist in ever decreasing quantities through 1980, the last year that #58 was still shared by both of its original assignees! Today, the club Bylaws only allow shared numbers when an Airstream has dual ownership, although if a member owns more than one Airstream, the same big red numbers are to be used on all of them.

By 1957, club members who had not participated on a caravan were listed in the directory, but often without any assigned membership number. These members started requesting that numbers be reserved for them to display on their Airstreams. The December 1957 issue of **The Caravanner** included a story indicating that such club members could contact Helen Byam Schwamborn, who would provide the numbers and the rectangular plaque to display below the numbers at no charge. By the end of 1960, all club members who had not participated on a caravan had been assigned a membership number.

Once the club was formed, membership increased quickly and the numbers used continued to get larger and larger until 1980 when new number growth ceased at 32081 as shown in the inset table. It should be noted that certain non-continuous numbers higher than those shown in the table were occasionally issued, but typically these special numbers were not used for very long and the reasons for them are not currently understood.



Looking through the inset table, one can see the highest assigned number climbs steadily from 1955 into the mid 1970s, when the progress began to slow somewhat as membership approached its peak. The era of greatest growth was from 1962 through 1968, with each of these years showing a gain of at least 2000 members and the peak in 1967

exceeding 3000! This growth pattern makes sense, because in the 1960s and early 1970s Airstream was making lots of trailers in two factories and most new club members came from the ranks of new purchasers of new Airstreams. For these folks, the next available new number was typically assigned. When Airstream sales and club growth slowed, the need for new numbers diminished and reassignment of existing unused numbers became the norm. It should be noted, however, that the reassignment of existing unused numbers has been around almost as long as the club. The policy to allow an existing member to request a previously but not currently used number was implemented on July 1, 1959, and the 1960 Membership Directory shows several numbers that had already been reassigned. Since that time it has also been common for the purchaser of a used Airstream to request the membership number currently on their trailer or motorhome if that number was available. Today a new member can allow club staff to assign them a number or they can request any unused number 1001 or greater that has cleared the one year waiting period.

Understanding the attached table also makes it a little easier to help us determine some of the travel history of Airstreams built during that era. If a vintage Airstream displays ghosts of old big red numbers that were first issued the same year as the model year of the Airstream, or occasionally the year before or after, we can look through old Membership Directories and determine who likely originally owned that Airstream. We can also check to see if those owners participated on any caravans. I do these types of historical lookups for club members and non-club members alike. It is fun to be able to tell someone that their Airstream may have travelled on a caravan to Mexico or Canada or to even more exotic locations like Europe, Cuba, Africa or Around the World.



CLUB NEWS

Of course information obtained this way is at best an educated guess because the club does not keep records of the Airstreams owned by club members nor Airstreams used on caravans. Sometimes decals and plaques on the Airstream or documents obtained with the Airstream become the formal proof. In the absence of such elements, the probability is high that guesses based upon the big red numbers are correct at least for the first few years of Airstream ownership. As time goes on and Airstreams are sold and resold and may come to display multiple sets of ghost numbers, or if the year of the Airstream differs significantly from the year the number was first assigned, it gets harder and harder to make educated guesses, but it's still fun to try.

Club Membership Numbers

Highest continuous membership number at the end of each year:

Year	Number
1955	535
1956	706
1957	1209
1958	2290
1959	3215
1960	4359
1961	6008
1962	8024
1963	10187
1964	12257
1965	14913
1966	17426
1967	20528
1968	22930
1969	23153
1970	24041
1971	25873
1972	27802
1973	28948
1974	29956
1975	30698
1976	31316
1977	31600
1978	31713
1979	32077
1980	32081

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