

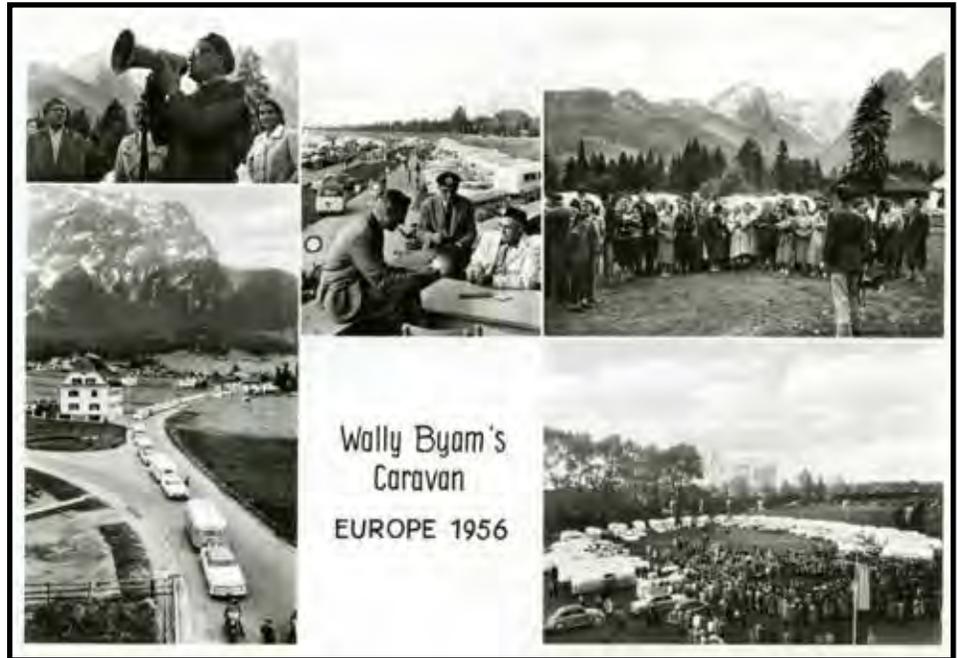
HISTORICALLY SPEAKING

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The 1956 European Caravan

Now is an appropriate time to remember that 2016 is the 60th Anniversary of the first caravan Wally Byam led overseas, the 1956 European Caravan. This was a massive undertaking that involved the unprecedented task of shipping 36 Airstreams and tow vehicles and 87 caravanners across the Atlantic Ocean. The estimated cost for the entire six month caravan, including food and fuel expenses and shipping for an Airstream, tow vehicle and two people was \$5000, maybe slightly less if they were very frugal. Actual costs came in a little higher on average, between \$5000 and \$6000. These costs did not include the purchase price of the Airstream and tow vehicle.

While Wally Byam had been thinking about a European Airstream Caravan for years, it could never have been accomplished before Wally's cousin Helen Byam Schwamborn joined Airstream in 1955 (she also formed the Wally Byam Caravan Club). It was Helen that had to complete or coordinate most of the paperwork that would be involved shipping caravanners, Airstreams and tow vehicles across the Atlantic Ocean and arrange passports, international driver licenses and "Carnets du Passage" (passports for Airstreams and tow vehicles) that allowed them to visit the many countries in Europe. Helen and her Airstream accompanied Wally for the entire 1956 European Caravan. She was hard at work



the whole time making sure everything ran smoothly.

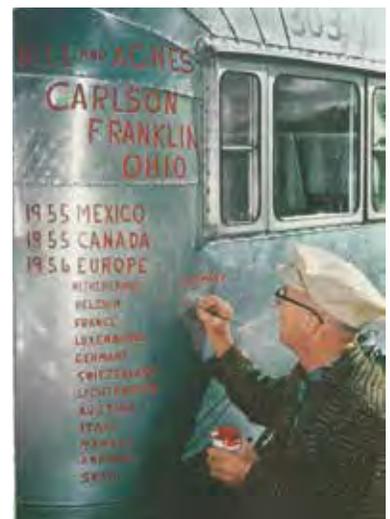
Most caravanners sailed for Europe during the last week of March 1956 on the passenger ship Nieuw Amsterdam. Their Airstreams and tow vehicles sailed on three different freighters. Their destination was Rotterdam, Holland, the largest seaport in Europe. The official Caravan began when it left Rotterdam on April 20, 1956 and disbanded in Rotterdam on September 20, 1956. In between, the caravan travelled 16,000 miles in Europe and visited the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Luxembourg, Germany, Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Austria, Italy, the Vatican State, Monaco, Andorra, Spain, Denmark, Sweden and Norway.

A few of the famous sites they saw were the Eiffel Tower in Paris, the Leaning Tower of Pisa, the canals in Venice, many castles in Germany and other countries, and an audience with the Pope in the Vatican. Some caravanners travelled as far north as the Arctic Circle

700 miles north of Oslo, Norway where they saw reindeer. The entire caravan attended the 1956 International Trailer Rally in Perpignan, France along with hundreds of other trailers from all across Europe. These European International Trailer Rallies became the inspiration for the WBCCI International Rallies that began in 1958. Some members made a



Trailer, Ahoy! Don and Leta Hill's Airstream being lowered into the hold for the 1956 trip to Europe. Photograph by Wally Byam





trip to the British Isles after the caravan disbanded before shipping back home.

The 87 caravanners ranged in age from 7 to 82 years, with seven families bringing children with them. They were a varied lot and came from 14 states and one Canadian Province. Many were experienced caravanners that had been on previous caravans with Wally, but several were first timers. One of the experienced caravanner couples was Louis & Mildred Mousley. The Mousley's #50 Airstream is often seen ahead of Wally's #1 Airstream in photos from the 1956 European Caravan because Lou served as the Wagon Boss and was thus the first to leave one camping location and head to the next, usually with Wally right behind. Lou would go on to serve the same role on the 1959-60 African Caravan. In fact, several of the 1956 European Caravanners would later go on the 1959-60 African Caravan and/or the 1963-64 Around the World Caravan.

Occupations of the caravanners were wide ranging and included a night club owner, a publisher, a tug boat captain, two trucking company executives, a former mayor, a retired doctor, a retired engineer, a retired Navy shore patrol officer and several retired school teachers. One couple on the 1956 European Caravan, John and Barbara Allen of San

Diego, California, received considerable attention throughout the trip because they brought their pet ocelot with them. Six single women on the caravan travelled in three Airstreams. Additionally, Helen Byam Schwamborn travelled alone until she was joined by her 17-year old son Dale who flew to Zurich, Switzerland in June 1956 to join the caravan after graduating from high school.

The Airstream trailers on the 1956 European Caravan ranged from 16' to 26' in length. Many brands of cars were used as tow vehicles, including ten Cadillacs. In difference to the popularity of trucks and SUVs as tow vehicles today, only a single Airstream on the 1956 European Caravan was pulled by a truck - a Ford F100 pickup. The caravan was officially restricted to Airstreams, but two VW camper vans were purchased locally in Europe and accompanied the Caravan. One was for the Caravan scout and in-

terpreter Ben Kemperman and the other was for the noted American journalist and roving Reader's Digest editor J.P. McEvoy and his wife who met the caravan in Paris and immediately bought a VW Camper and joined it. The McEvoy's then got an Airstream shortly after returning home from the European caravan.

As was often the case, Wally and Stella travelled in a unique Airstream that sported features that had not yet been put on production Airstreams. Their 26' tandem axle Airstream had several advanced features for the time:

- It was completely painted in a light cream color
- It had a unique front kitchen floor plan
- It had rounded stretch formed 7-panel end caps at a time when production Airstreams were still made with 13-panel end caps made from flat aluminum
- It was equipped with several Jalousie (louvered) windows, a feature which did not show up on production Airstreams until about 1961



Wally Byam, of course, was the leader for this caravan, but all major decisions during the caravan, such as when and where to travel next and whether to allow an American journalist to join the caravan, were made via a majority vote of the caravanners. Conditions on this early caravan were not what we expect today. They rarely stayed at organized campgrounds. Because of different voltage standards, they could not plug into the local electrical utilities. The only electricity they could use in their trailers was provided by the generator and battery in their tow vehicle. Trailer interior lighting was often provided by

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Airstream European Caravans:

Airstream offered a total of six Caravans that toured Europe, all of which involved the shipping of Airstreams and tow vehicles across the Atlantic (or Pacific) Ocean:

- Europe Six Months 1956 (Caravan 8)
- Europe Summer 1960 (Caravan 24)
- Around the World 1963-64 (Caravan 35)
- Old World Europe 1971 (Caravan 80)
- Old World Europe 1973 (Caravan 92)
- European Adventure Winter 1977 (Caravan 113)

Airstream European caravans targeted for other years including 1958 and 1964 were discussed, but those trips never came to fruition.

WBCCI started offering its own overseas caravans in 1973 and several went to Europe over the years between 1973 and 2005, but WBCCI Overseas Caravans always rented local trailers and tow vehicles or local motor homes. They never included the shipping of Airstreams over the oceans.

Checking Your Tire Air Pressure

Digital gauges tend to give a more accurate reading than stick type gauges.

There are many digital gauges on the market but one really nice one is by Craftsman. It is a programmable digital pressure gauge with an overfill bleeder. Just set the desired air pressure on the gauge and if you overinflated your tire, the gauge will automatically reduce the air pressure to your preset.



Checking Brake and Tire Temperature

It is a good idea while traveling to keep an eye on the temperature of your brakes and tires whenever you make a stop for gas. An easy way to do this is with an infrared thermometer. Just aim the laser beam at your wheel or tire and check the temperature to see if anything is out of line. If you have one tire hotter than the others, it could mean a brake dragging, under-inflated tire or you may be overloaded on that wheel.

This thermometer can be purchased through Amazon or a store such as Lowes.



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gas lamps. Water had to be carried in portable containers or pails and was added to their fresh water tanks using funnels. All drinking water had to be boiled. Wash (gray) water was simply dumped on the ground and “gopher holes” were used for the disposal of the septic tank contents. When space permitted, camping was done with the trailers organized in a wagon wheel formation. The caravan even encountered a rare June snowstorm in the Alps while crossing the Arlberg Pass from Switzerland to Austria.

Much was written at the time or shortly thereafter about this historic caravan. Among the many magazine articles that appeared, the best is a lengthy account of the European Caravan written by WBCCI member Norma Miller with 36 full color and 7 black & white photographs taken by her husband Ardean Miller. This article is titled *Through Europe by Trailer Caravan* and it appears starting



on page 769 of the June 1957 issue of the *National Geographic*. WBCCI member Etta Payne wrote a book about this caravan titled *Home Was Never Like This - A Trailer's Eye View of Europe Today*, which was also published in 1957. Wally Byam dedicated two chapters to the 1956 European Caravan in his 1960

book *Trailer Travel Here and Abroad - The New Way to Adventurous Living*.

Now that Airstream is selling trailers in Europe and WBCCI has a European Unit, maybe one day a new European Caravan will be offered. Would you go?