

# HISTORICALLY SPEAKING

Joe Peplinski WBCCI #6768, Chairman, Historical Committee  
[history@wbcci.org](mailto:history@wbcci.org)

## A Brief History of WBCCI

Hopefully all club members know that WBCCI is named after the founder of the Airstream Company, Wally Byam. Wally is also the “father” of the trailer caravan, having led the first group of trailer travelers on a “caravan” to Central America in late 1951. After the success of that trip, Wally led caravans to more and more places each year that followed, most often to Mexico and Canada. By 1955, many people that had travelled with Wally on one or more of his caravans had been asking to form a club for the purpose of running their own caravans and to help keep in touch with each other after returning back home.

Finally in 1955, Wally gave in and allowed a club to be formed using his name. He asked his cousin Helen Byam Schwamborn to join Airstream and start the club. During the 1955 Eastern Canada Caravan, Helen worked with the caravanners to form a club. A committee was appointed in Quebec City to work on a Constitution. On July 24, 1955, the caravanners accepted the Constitution at a meeting near Halifax,



Helen Byam Schwamborn

Nova Scotia. On August 3, 1955 the first membership meeting of the Wally Byam Caravan Club (WBCC) was held in the Annapolis Valley in Nova Scotia. During this meeting, “Pop” Riley was elected acting President and Helen Byam Schwamborn the acting Secretary-Treasurer.

39 members joined the club during the Eastern Canada Caravan. More people joined after the caravan and by the end of 1955 there were 535 member families, all of which had been on at least one Wally Byam led caravan over the preceding 5 years. Soon, Airstream owners that had never been on a caravan began to join the club as well.

The new club was restricted to Airstream owners even though Wally Byam’s early caravans were open to all brands of travel trailers. As Airstream expanded its offerings to products other than rounded, riveted aluminum travel trailers in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, the club was slow to accept non-traditional looking Airstream products. Starting in 1979, the club began accepting some

non-traditional Airstream products for membership, but it was not until 1995 that membership requirements were revised to include all “fully self contained and hard sided recreational vehicles manufactured by Airstream”, thus allowing all Airstream and Argosy branded travel trailers, 5<sup>th</sup> wheels, and Class A and Class B motorhomes to qualify for WBCCI membership regardless of shape or color. In 2006 the words “fully self contained” were removed from the rules to allow the new Airstream Basecamp to qualify for membership and to recognize that some vintage Airstreams were not “fully self contained”.

Local units within WBCC started to be formed almost immediately after the club was formed with the Western Unit being the first, chartered in November 1955. The first Canadian Units were chartered in 1962 and the first Mexican Unit in 1965. Eventually over 170 units were formed. In December 1963, the club name changed to Wally Byam Caravan Club International (WBCCI) to recognize membership that extended beyond the borders of the United States. In January 1964, seven multi-state geographic Regions were created. Effective July 1967 the regions were revised and redrawn to the 12 regions we still recognize today. “Members at Large” were created in 1995 to cover WBCCI members that are not also members of a Unit. In 2013, the Australia Unit became the first overseas unit, and in 2015 the Europe Unit became the second.

While WBCC offered its own informal un-numbered caravans almost from the start, in 1972 WBCCI began offering formal numbered National and Region Caravans in the U.S. and Canada. WBCCI started issuing numbers for Unit Caravans in 1989. The first numbered



F. E. “Pop” Riley

*continued on page 26*



**1976 Louisville, KY - Largest Ever International Rally with 4493 Airstreams Attending**

WBCCI caravan to Alaska was in 1994 and the first to Mexico in 2006. WBCCI offered its first Overseas Caravan to Great Britain in 1973 where it rented local cars and trailers rather than ship Airstreams across the oceans. WBCCI Overseas Caravans typically rented local RVs and eventually they visited mainland Europe, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand among other places. WBCCI member Frank Sargent was the driving force behind a series of nine caravans that toured China in Airstream trailers between 1985 and 1988.

WBCCI began offering Rallies for its members soon after the club was formed. Unit rallies began soon after Units were formed and Region rallies soon after Regions were formed. In 1958, the first International Rally was held in Bull Shoals, Arkansas with 300 Airstreams attending. It was modeled

after the International Trailer Rallies that Wally and Stella Byam attended in Europe in the mid-1950s. The WBCCI International Rally is still held to this day and remains WBCCI's largest annual event, with the largest ever occurring at Louisville, KY in 1976 with 4493 Airstreams attending.

Soon after formation, the club began offering Special Event and National Rallies, often tied to some sort of local or national festival. Some, such as the Rose Parade, Indy 500 (last offered in 2005), Pendleton Roundup and Swiss Festival Rallies ran annually for decades. Some were one time offerings. There have been dozens of different themed Special Event and National Rallies over the years and many are still offered each year.

By the early 1960s, sub-clubs (now called "Intra Clubs") within WBCCI were being formed. One of the first was the CB (Citizens Band) Radio Club in 1962, with the Amateur Radio Club following in 1963. The Free Wheelers Club for single Airstreamers came in 1976 (although it has roots to 1965), the Gem & Mineral Club in 1979, the Teenstreamers Club for teenagers in 1984, the Personal Computer Club in 1985, the Full Timers Club in 1986, and the Genealogy Club in 1992. The Vintage Airstream Club for those with an interest in Airstreams 25-years old and older was formed in 1993 and the Classic Airstream Club for those dedicated to traditional rounded, riveted aluminum Airstreams became an Intra Club in 2002. Some of these Intra Clubs no longer exist, but the Amateur Radio, Classic Airstream, Free Wheelers, and Vintage Airstream Clubs are still running strong.

In the early days of the club, Helen Byam Schwamborn ran the club mostly



**WBCCI Office in Late 1979, at 516 N. Main St., Jackson Center, OH**



**WBCCI Headquarters Open House in August 1985 at 803 E Pike St., Jackson Center OH**

by herself, though more staff would come in the 1960s as the club was integrated into the Airstream “Way of Life” division which also included the Airstream company sponsored caravan and rally programs.

The first WBCC club headquarters was in Helen’s home at 2204 Lindora St., Bakersfield, California from August 1955 through April 1959. During this time, Helen was also head editor for The Caravanner that was published by Airstream Company as well as being the key staff person helping to coordinate Wally’s ever more exotic caravans to places like Europe, Cuba, and Africa. After Wally’s passing in 1962, she was instrumental in organizing the 1963-64 Around the World Caravan. Helen remained with Airstream and WBCCI until her retirement in 1979 at the age of 75.

In May 1959, club headquarters moved to 822 Niles St., Bakersfield, California, where it remained for almost 10 years. In about October 1968, club headquarters moved into space at the new Airstream plant at 15939 Piuma Ave., Cerritos, California, where it would remain for over 10 years.

By the late 1970s, the gas crisis and high inflation were hitting the RV industry very hard. In the latter half of the 1970s, Airstream cut their financial support to the club in increments of \$10,000 or more several times. In February 1979, WBCCI was made operationally independent of the Airstream company when the Airstream Way of Life Division was dissolved. WBCCI became financially independent on October 1, 1979, when Airstream stopped paying the wages of WBCCI staff and completely stopped making other direct payments to cover various club expenses. From the time of separation until the WBCCI fiscal year ended on June 30, 1980, Airstream provided \$100 to WBCCI for every club member that bought a new Airstream and for every non-club member that bought

a new Airstream and joined the club within 6 months.

Due to the sale of the Airstream plant in Cerritos, WBCCI had to vacate their office space at that plant effective October 1, 1979. The club made the decision to move their headquarters to Jackson Center, Ohio to stay close to Airstream’s remaining plant. Half of a duplex house at 516 N. Main Street that was owned by Airstream served as the first WBCCI office in Jackson Center, Ohio.

Only one WBCCI staff member chose to move from California to Ohio, Muriel “Bing” Rasmussen, who had served the club in several capacities over almost a decade. She helped get the new office in Ohio set up and helped train the new staff before she retired about 6 months later.

By late 1980, WBCCI headquarters had moved to a slightly larger space in the prior office of a defunct grain elevator at 301 Jackson St., Jackson Center, Ohio. This office was small with no place for visitors to sit and it was so close to the railroad tracks that work often ceased due to the noise when a train passed. A new more permanent club headquarters was needed.

WBCCI had actually been accumulating funds for the purpose of acquiring property for a club headquarters since 1972. A Site Committee was looking for potential sites as early as 1981. By May 1983, a building proposal existed and a serious search for suitable property was underway. An available parcel of land across the street from Wally Byam Memorial Park in Jackson Center, Ohio was soon located and purchased. Groundbreaking occurred on August 11, 1984 and the new WBCCI Headquarters building at 803 E. Pike St., Jackson Center, Ohio was dedicated on April 18, 1985.

The first 30 years of WBCCI’s existence were marked by several Headquarters location changes, but stability was finally reached and Club Headquarters has now remained in the same Jackson Center building for more than 31 years.

FALL  
IS  
BEAUTIFUL



**WBCCI HQ Locations over the years:**

Aug ‘55 – Apr ‘59:	2204 Lindora St., Bakersfield, CA
May ‘59 – Sep ‘68:	822 Niles St., Bakersfield, CA
Oct ‘68 – Sep ‘79:	15939 Piuma Ave., Cerritos, CA
Oct ‘79 – Late ‘80:	516 N. Main St., Jackson Center, OH
Late ‘80 – Apr ‘85:	301 Jackson St., Jackson Center, OH
Apr ‘85 – Current:	803 E. Pike St., Jackson Center, OH