



Written by [Dennis Behreandt](#) on October 7, 2019

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Wally Byam and the Airstream

As the 19th century drew to a close and the first years of the 20th century rolled by, the still-young United States of America stood upon the precipice of a sea-change in the ways and means of living. Much of what had gone before was not terribly different than the way life had been lived for hundreds of years. Building and construction, agriculture, travel, and much else besides depended upon manual labor, with horses and oxen and other beasts of burden acting as the primary means by which human civilization supplemented its own natural physical strength.



After the great upheaval of the Civil War, however, it was beginning to be apparent to those who may have been able to step back and observe developments that change was in the offing. Steam power was rapidly transforming industry and transportation, the first discoveries in electromagnetism were translated into practical means of long-distance communication, and, similarly, the great electrical innovators Edison and Tesla soon brought electrification, artificial illumination, and other new wonders to the United States and the world. Clearly, the civilization was on the cusp of an accelerating transformation of life.

Born into this boundary between the old and new on July 4, 1896 was a boy who, based on the circumstances of his family, seemed destined for a life of mundane, everyday labor. This was Wally Byam. Born to disadvantage, abandoned by his father as a boy, his mother and stepfather both dying shortly after he finished high school, he was determined, nonetheless, to succeed — at something.

In her biographical sketch of Byam, author Tara Cox noted that after high school, as a young man looking out at an uncertain future, Wally Byam compiled a set of goals, including: “Cease this easy-go-lucky stuff”; “Get enjoyment out of little things”; and, foreshadowing things to come, “Don’t live for past or future. Make history.”

Wally Byam would go on to become a successful businessman, unofficial citizen ambassador, adventurer, and inventor. With a passion for freedom and a knack for invention, he would, in fact, go on to make history, creating a legacy in the form of the Airstream travel trailer. Not only did his shiny aluminum trailer become a beloved bit of American art and design that millions of Americans continue to use on a daily basis to embrace personal freedom through travel and adventure, Byam’s tireless promotion of the wonders of trailer travel were instrumental in building up the success of the entire recreational vehicle industry. Now an industry worth over \$20 billion annually, it — and the freedom of Americans to travel as they wish around the country and the world, something Byam cherished — faces an uncertain future as progressive dogmas threaten to bring the age of the internal combustion engine to an end.



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From Covered Wagons to Silver Airstreams

Tara Cox, author of *Airstream: The Silver RV*, noted that by the time Wally Byam was 12 years old, he had been given the job of taking care of a flock of sheep. "Alone with the animals in the outdoors, he lived in a canvas-topped two-wheeled vehicle pulled by a donkey," she writes. "The tailboard came down, and behind it was a sleeping mat, a small stove and some space for food, water, a wash pail and some books. Though it couldn't take him far or fast, this was Byam's first experience with a moveable home." No doubt, this would be a foundational experience for the young boy who would go on to become the leading advocate for and designer of travel trailers, and the world-famous designer of the iconic silver RV, the Airstream.

After working his way through college at Stanford University, Wally landed several jobs in advertising. Eventually, he owned and operated seven magazines, becoming a successful publisher by the late 1920s. At this time, too, he introduced his first wife, Marion, to camping, with some lack of success. Recounting this early history, the Airstream company notes that though "they went camping regularly ... Marion never loved sleeping on the ground in a tent." That may be putting it mildly. Cox notes, "As legend has it, she stated she would not go camping without her kitchen ... so Byam complied by developing and perfecting a travel trailer."

The invention of what became the Airstream, and, in fact, the invention of an entirely new industry, came about through the convergence of both challenges and opportunities. As Byam was facing the personal challenge of devising a method of camping that would suit his wife, he was also noting the opportunity presented by a rising interest in camping in general.

After the First World War, Byam recounted that he noticed Americans were taking to the road to explore camping. "It was a common sight to see the beloved Model T chugging along the highway under a mountain of camping equipment strapped to the roof and the front and back bumpers, canvas covers flapping in the breeze," he recalled in 1960 in his book *Trailer Travel: Here and Abroad*. Eventually, among all the Model Ts he saw a trailer for hauling camping gear that also had a collapsible tent and then one with a contraption that featured "a box which literally rested upon the axle and contained a bed you could crawl up into, protected from the elements." This sort of thing became Wally Byam's first home-built travel trailer, though he added some accoutrements. "It was engineering of the first order when I installed a shelf to hold a water bottle, flashlight and a few other woodland necessities," he recalled.

Byam was still a publisher at this time, but he was finding that his passion was in developing a better travel trailer. "I was so excited about it that I wrote a story on how to build a trailer for *Popular Mechanics*," he recounted. That article generated a surprising amount of interest, with readers writing in for more information. "I got so much mail asking questions and requesting more detailed data that I published a little booklet giving precise directions," he said.

The booklet sold well, Byam recalled. How well? According to Tara Cox, they sold "for \$1 a piece and proceeded to make \$15,000" for Byam, a princely sum on the verge of the Great Depression. Others asked Byam to build the campers for them, "so I hired a fellow to help me rig up a few, and sold them on order," he wrote.

The Depression presented the next challenge and opportunity. "Wally's magazines went under, and he



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needed a new venture,” the Airstream company notes in its biography of the company founder. In his own description of the time, Byam wrote: “In those days ... a well-built trailer was its own best salesman. Before I knew it I was head over heels in orders, and in 1930 I closed out of the publishing business and went into the trailer business. It was a decision I’ve never had reason to regret,” he wrote.

Over the next several decades, Byam iterated and tinkered with the design of the Airstream. Eventually, he landed on the combination that remains in use today: a light steel frame on which is mounted an aircraft-grade aluminum body, all tied together with lightweight, arched aluminum ribs. The self-contained units came to include, by the 1950s and ’60s, 12-volt lighting as well as “shore-power” 120-volt systems, integrated plumbing with hot water heaters and onboard water filtration, full-sewage capabilities, and built-in heating, along with a kitchen, lounge and sleeping quarters, and closet and storage space. Today’s Airstreams remain remarkably similar in design, differing primarily in having updated heating and air conditioning systems along with support for such niceties as electronics connectivity and even solar power for long-term self-contained camping, known among those who do it as “boondocking.”

There is, without doubt, something unique about Byam’s creation. When you have one in your front yard, people slow down as they drive by and stare. If you are towing one, when you stop along the way you are likely to have people walk up and ask you about it or tell you how much they’ve always admired and wanted one. The shiny silver Airstream, whether it be a humble 16-foot “Bambi” trailer or a more imposing 31-foot “Land Yacht Sovereign of the Road,” is an American icon of design with its aircraft-inspired, streamlined fuselage having come to symbolize the dream of freedom on America’s scenic highways and byways. There are few things as iconic as the sight of an Airstream gleaming in the sun of the American Southwest, poised in front of the towering Rocky Mountains, or parked under a palm tree on a Florida beach silhouetted by the setting sun.

On the Caravan Trail

The development of the Airstream is one of the great success stories of early 20th-century free enterprise. Like Henry Ford, Wally Byam discerned a need in the market, developed a solution, and offered it for sale. When the market responded, he continued building more and bigger and better Airstreams. As a result, the company he founded built on that success, and is thriving still today.

But today’s socialists, echoing former President Obama, would say he “didn’t build that.” Specifically, on the campaign trail a few years ago Obama said: “Somebody invested in roads and bridges. If you’ve got a business — you didn’t build that. Somebody else made that happen.” The implication being that government investment made the roads and bridges happen, providing the necessary foundation entrepreneurs such as Byam and others need.

That’s partially true, of course, but it overlooks some long-forgotten parts of the American “roads and bridges” story. In fact, long before European colonists arrived there was already a network of paths and trails in wide use by Native Americans. Many times, parts of these grew into more formalized roads as traffic increased post-colonization. In eastern North America, stretching down the coast, was a network that has come to be known as the Great Indian Warrior Trading Path that is today commemorated by several historical markers located along portions of the route. It became the most heavily traveled road in Colonial-era America.



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In addition to pre-Colonial pathways and trails that grew, with usage, into many of the roads still in use today, as settlers moved west they created their own roads and trails that have gone on, again through increased usage over time, to be codified into parts of the nation's transportation infrastructure. Timber companies, as one example, often contributed to road building. In far northern Wisconsin, for instance, there remains a little-known network of remote roads linking far-flung communities that were built in the early 20th century by a lumber company. Today they serve primarily as Jeep trails and snowmobile routes in the winter. In many other cases, roads started by private enterprise for one reason or another transitioned into public access roads over time.

As technology improved, so did the nation's roads, in a symbiosis of private innovation spurring public-sector road development. Until the development of bicycles, early roads remained built of dirt and gravel and were used primarily for horse-drawn traffic. Bicycles, and then cars, once introduced, brought demand for better road surfaces. Journalist Carlton Reid summarized the impetus for the improvement of early dirt roads in his book *Roads Were Not Built for Cars*. As Reid notes, "Cyclists were the first and staunchest evangelisers of motoring because they had been the first to awaken to the possibilities afforded by self-determined mobility — free from fodder, free from timetables, free from rails. And, as they were intimately aware of the benefits that came from the provision of smoother surfaces upon which to glide, pushy Victorian cyclists agitated for highway reforms. In America cyclists formed the hugely influential Good Roads movement. In Britain there was the trail-blazing Roads Improvement Association, a campaigning body founded by cyclists ten years before it was legally possible to drive a motor car on British roads."

In other words, government didn't necessarily build the roads first, thereby enabling transportation entrepreneurs to take advantage of the situation. Instead, innovation in transportation forced government to improve road surfaces.

That improvements in roads and other infrastructure continued to be spurred by technological advances in the private sector is demonstrated by Wally Byam's penchant for taking early Airstream trailers on wild, even seemingly inconceivable, journeys.

The first of these expeditions, which he dubbed "Caravans," occurred in 1951 when he had an outrageous idea: take a group of trailers on an expedition to Panama.

There was just one problem: There was no highway that reached Panama. Byam recounted seeing "a story in the papers about an adventurer who had gone all the way down to Panama in a Jeep on the new Pan American Highway," he recounted in *Trailer Travel*. "We knew from that story that the road wasn't finished all the way, but we thought we'd like to try it and see how far we could go." It turned out that this audacious idea was attractive to others, and soon enough 50 trailers were signed up to make the attempt.

The trip south went reasonably well, all the way through Mexico, as Byam recounted it in *Trailer Travel*. But further south, the journey started to present challenges. The group "traveled at a snail's pace on the dirt-and-boulder road Guatemalans call a highway — a rocky and rutted trail through dense forests and underbrush," Byam recounted. Still, the group had a motto, "Managua or Bust," indicating that the Caravan would at least make it to the Nicaraguan capital. Getting there required much use of a winch, fording of streams, and gunning of engines through gullies, Byam recalled. At one point, getting a trailer up a hill meant a Nicaraguan farmer using a team of oxen was enlisted to help with the effort.



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When, at last, the Caravan reached Managua, Byam recalled, “The United States Ambassador ... gave a party for us, as did many prominent Nicaraguans.”

The arrival of the Caravan induced efforts to improve infrastructure in Managua, Byam recounted. At the campsite chosen for the Caravan, he recalled in his book, “we were overwhelmed to find that they had run in special electric and water lines.” Small matter though this may seem, it demonstrates how increased private activity can and does catalyze improvements in municipal infrastructure. Lest this be seen as “exploitive” by the Byam Caravanners, it’s worth keeping in mind that these dozens of trailers were nothing less than a traveling village that, in later Caravans comprised of as many as 500 trailers, could amount to over 1,000 people. The Caravanners would live for days or weeks in local areas, purchasing goods and services from local businesses. Their arrival meant a significant financial windfall for those living in and around the towns the Caravans visited. It’s no wonder Wally Byam Caravans, as they began to be known formally, were received with joyous welcome everywhere they went.

And they went everywhere. Under Byam and his second wife, Stella, they made repeated visits to Mexico along with a second trip to Central America. Caravans went to Canada, to Europe, and, most incredible of all, Africa, where Byam led a group of Airstreams from Cape Town in South Africa to Cairo.

In Africa, this meant that the Caravanners would build their own road. “We gradually began to understand what everyone from Capetown to Nairobi had been trying to tell us,” Byam recounted, “*there was no road to Addis Ababa!* The line on the map represented nothing more than a camel trail which a few World War II jeeps had crossed. To drive to Addis Ababa we would have to build our own road inch by painful inch for 900 miles!” Incredibly, this is what the group of Caravanners towing their Airstreams did.

“The Caravan began to separate into three groups, strung out as much as ten or twelve miles,” Byam wrote of the adventure. “The advance ‘road builders’ — the toughest, sturdiest men and teen-agers — worked tirelessly shearing down ruts, filling in mudholes or removing big boulders. The middle group, the main body of the Caravan, helped each other whenever necessary. Finally came the cripples, ‘The Broken Spring and Axle Club.’ Before we reached Negelli, nearly two weeks out of Nairobi and a bare 300 miles from the Kenya border, we had broken seven truck axles, numberless springs, and torn out three transmissions.” In addition to mechanical power, the Caravan found that muscle power could be decisive. “When our combined mechanical efforts were not enough, we resorted to muscle power and found that sixteen men, ten women, and nine children on a one-inch nylon rope could deliver more power than a winch and a 160-horsepower engine,” Byam wrote.

The entire trip sounds ludicrous, perhaps even impossible. It is tempting to think that it didn’t happen in the real world but was confined to the fertile imagination inside Wally Byam’s head. But there are photos. In one, there is an Airstream being towed by an International Harvester truck, just about to enter a mud hole that might as well have been a small pond. In another photo, the men and women of the Caravan are seen at work building the road to Addis Ababa. And they succeeded, eventually meeting with the country’s ruler, the Emperor Haile Selassie, whom Byam described as “a slender man of medium build, with a short beard and mustache and solemn dark eyes, gracious and soft spoken.”

The Caravan ended in what may be one of the most surreal of mid-20th-century photographs. Twenty-nine Airstream trailers drawn up in wagon-wheel formation in the desert of Egypt at the foot of the



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Great Pyramid at Giza.

Freedom and Independence

Freedom in an Airstream, or another travel trailer or motorhome, is really all about the freedom to associate with others as one may desire. This leads naturally to the right to travel freely and stems from the basic natural rights inherent in every person. Writing in his famous *Commentaries*, the great jurist William Blackstone explained: "This natural liberty consists properly in a power of acting as one thinks fit, without any restraint or control, *unless by the law of nature.*"

Acting as one thinks fit necessarily encompasses the idea that one should be free to move physically from place to place as desired, as long as that movement doesn't infringe the rights of someone else by, for instance, trespassing on someone else's property.

Thus could Wally Byam describe one of the "secondary uses" of Airstreams and other travel trailers.

Discussing the lives of one couple who participated in his Caravan tours, Byam noted that when they were not on a Caravan journey they parked their Airstream on the beach near Los Angeles and had a weekend beach home "for a few dollars a month." Byam pointed out that this allowed the couple, or others with travel trailers, to modify their living arrangements when desired, essentially exercising their inherent right of freedom to associate.

"Think of all the people who build houses in places which later become overdeveloped and crowded but who can't move because of their property investment," he wrote. "If they used a trailer as a second home they could simply hitch up and haul their house off to a new, less populated site." Or, if they "get tired of the beach they can look for a new spot in the desert or the mountains and still use their mobile 'second home' on trips to Canada, Mexico or Europe."

Byam was passionate about opposing regulations that interfered with this freedom of mobility. "We think traveling by trailer is cheaper, more educational and more fun," he wrote in his book *Trailer Travel*. "To do this expediently we need to be free of regulations that limit the quality of the trailers we prefer to travel in [and] the speeds at which we can drive (within normal limits, of course)," and have "local administrations refrain from passing discriminatory zoning laws regarding parking for travel trailers."

Byam clearly emphasized throughout his life and in his writing personal freedom, personal responsibility, and the value of people freely choosing to associate with each other on a personal basis. Traveling by trailer, he said, was the best way to get to know others. "Average tourists really never have an opportunity to get to know a country or its people very well," he wrote. "But if you really want to understand a country, go trailering through it. You will meet people in their homes and they will meet you in yours. Instead of speeding over the country side ... catching a fleeting glimpse of fields, forests and little villages, when you travel in a trailer you can stop in all three. You can park on the outskirts of a town, meet the mayor, talk to the townspeople in cafes, and you learn what the price of bread is because you naturally stop at the *boulangerie*, too."

Still, as intriguing as he was, Byam had at least one questionable view, namely that boundaries should be eliminated in order to achieve "one world." But there seems to have been a significant difference between Byam and other globalists. The latter pursue their ideas of world government because they seek a more thorough hegemony over all mankind. Byam seems to have thought only about how



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removing national boundaries would eliminate restrictions on the rights of individuals to travel freely. Moreover, he argued that free citizens were far better diplomats than were the government bureaucrats. "Half the time we're traveling throughout our own country or somebody else's we're breaking down the walls that divide people. Even some of our diplomats have admitted to me that this was a good thing, though sometimes I think we practice what they preach better than they do."

Byam was also concerned about breaking down the stereotypes and propaganda broadcast by the press about other nations and people by encouraging people to see for themselves through personal experience via trailer travel. "It bothers me," he wrote, "to see what some people think about the Mexican people. Some cartoonists show them lying under a tree snoozing, as if their entire time were spent taking siestas. They are represented as being dirty, indolent, and sly. Anyone who has spent much time there knows this is not true, and I've traveled enough to know that the popular image of other people — and the image of Americans abroad — is just false."

Sadly, not much has changed in the way reporting and journalism is handled, and what has changed these days is usually for the worse, with an overabundance of "fake news" and propaganda. Using these tools to misinform and misdirect the people allows government manipulations and economic chicanery to force people into unnecessary poverty, a situation preyed upon by statist demagogues and their allies in the media who seek to erode freedoms and fasten a system of socialist shackles on the world.

If Byam was a globalist, that is a regrettable oversight on the part of a man who was otherwise an exemplar of American initiative and tireless industry. Still, he was nonetheless a champion of personal freedom.

"Fun is the freedom to do as you please," Byam wrote, probably not knowing he was paraphrasing Blackstone, "and doing as you please means pleasure. This is a pretty good definition of trailer travel. It's as close to complete freedom as anyone can get."

Restricting Mobility

Byam's words are about to take on greater significance in the 21st century. Bureaucrats in Europe and even in some American locales are contemplating laws, and even implementing regulations, that will outlaw internal combustion engines (ICE) in some cities. Others are advocating and implementing regulations, such as extreme fuel economy standards, that make such engines either prohibitively expensive or technically difficult to produce. These are the very technologies that made it possible for the majority of Americans and others to travel freely and inexpensively over long distances, whenever desired, for the first time in all of human history. Needless to say, these are the technologies too, starting with the Model T first used by Wally Byam to build travel trailers, that make recreational vehicle trailers possible as the ultimate tool for that purpose.

The proposed replacement for the internal combustion-powered vehicle is the battery electric vehicle (BEV). But these have limited range and take longer to recharge. As a result, they will likely serve to reduce and restrict the viability of the type of travel Americans have grown accustomed to. They will certainly impact the ability to tow an Airstream or fifth-wheel trailer, or power a motorhome.

Edmunds, a car-shopping website, tested the Tesla Model X BEV SUV towing a small, single-axle camper over a 217-mile route. As the video they posted to YouTube demonstrates, they had to stop to recharge before reaching their destination. All told, they reported that the total time to cover the



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distance towing with the Tesla was eight hours and nine minutes. Of that, actual drive time was five hours and two minutes. Meanwhile, they spent over three hours recharging the car's battery. Keep in mind, too, that this was while towing, by American standards, a very small camper — a Happier Camper HC1 with a length of only 13 feet and a dry weight of just 1,100 pounds. Most campers that you see on the roads range from 23 to 32 feet and weigh from 5,000 to 9,000 pounds. Fifth-wheel campers can be larger still. In an all electric future, these may be made entirely impractical, essentially ending the freedom to travel cherished by Wally Byam and that American families with travel trailers currently enjoy.

Of course, limiting the mobility of the American people is the goal of environmental alarmists. To save the environment, according to the progressive playbook, the right to travel must be restricted. Since it would be political suicide for policymakers to attempt to curtail such a fundamental right via legislation, the progressive establishment publishes propaganda and pushes policies aimed at demonizing travel, on the one hand, and making it technologically unappealing on the other.

On the propaganda side, you have pundits such as Jack Miles, “a Pulitzer Prize and MacArthur ‘genius’ award-winning author” lamenting in the *Washington Post* about the damage done to the planet by air travel. “Staying home” he avers, is all it takes to make “a big difference in a big hurry.... Cancel a couple long flights, and you can halve your carbon footprint.”

Stop driving all over the place in internal combustion engine cars and trucks, and you can contribute even more to saving the planet, according to progressives. In 2013 under the Obama administration, the Department of Energy published a report examining prospects for “behavioral changes” that might be encouraged that “may have the effect of reducing travel, shifting travel to more efficient modes, or improving the efficiency of existing travel.” The primary concern of that report was reduction of travel through implementation of various strategies. Replace ICE cars with BEVs and you make travel reduction a reality. BEVs still use energy, of course, but because they are inconvenient, especially when towing or hauling, people will use them less than they would use ICE-powered vehicles, reducing energy consumption and saving the planet. That’s a win, say progressives.

And the progressive wins keep coming, because even if the right to travel is not legislated out of existence, in the BEV utopia of the future it’s been restricted by its very inconvenience. And it is much easier to control a population that can’t travel than it is to control a free people who have the ability to travel the country to see what is happening “out there” for themselves.

This, of course, would be anathema to Wally Byam, who lived and worked in a different age, when anything was possible, when freedom was venerated rather than despised as it is today, and when anything could be achieved by a free people willing to work hard to reach a goal. That’s a legacy worth remembering as regulators, bureaucrats, and socialists seek to circumscribe the natural rights and freedoms of the people both through overt laws and, more commonly these days, through covert policy “nudges.”

One of those natural rights, and one that is of significant importance, is the right to freely associate, and, consequently, to travel freely as one may desire. The Airstream travel trailer, as conceived by Wally Byam, came to symbolize that freedom even as it made exercising that freedom easier and more enjoyable.

Photo credit: facebook.com/airstream



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