

# Wally Byam's GOLD TRAILER

BY FRED COLDWELL

**A**irstream's founder, Wally Byam, was the best guinea pig the company ever had. He tested new ideas where the rubber met the road, out on Caravans among his loyal customers. Wally would have new product ideas and designs built into personal trailers he would tow as test trailers in the field. He was also the lightning rod for problems Caravanners were having with regular production trailers. If things didn't work on the road, Wally heard about it firsthand. And when Wally heard about problems, the California and Ohio factories quickly heard from Wally, who frequently mailed small voice discs recorded on his portable Dictaphone.

Wally's most famous personal trailer was also his last one, a tandem axle 22' trailer sheathed in gold anodized aluminum. It was built in Spring 1957 at the Ohio factory especially for Wally's use on the African Caravan. It also was an early test trailer for the International self-containment package then under development. The trailer had all systems except a wash water holding tank. Drinking water was stored in an extra large galvanized steel cylinder tank and delivered via air pressure provided by a 12 volt DC compressor. A Bowen water heater warmed dish and bath water. The dual voltage (120 volt AC and 12 volt DC) electrical system provided interior lights and fan power whether

in a campground or the wilderness.

The floor plan, designed by Wally's wife Stella during the 1956 European Caravan, was laid out to maximize living and storage space for two. One davenport sits across the front while a single bed fits along the rear curbside wall. Wally's favorite outdoor furniture, a drop leaf table and two chairs, rests along the street side wall by the forward windows. A tall tubular Day and Night Panelray propane heater sits just inside the door, with a propane refrigerator next along that wall. Opposite, the kitchen galley features a double basin sink and three burner stove with oven.

The most striking feature of Wally's

**Wally's most famous personal trailer was also his last one, a tandem axle 22' trailer sheathed in gold anodized aluminum.**



**Previous page 29:** An early photo of Wally Byam and his Gold Trailer, with his 1957 Ford station wagon used on the 1958 Mexico and Pan American Caravans. Wally wears his typical globe-trotting garb: France on top, Texas on bottom, and Middle America in between. This photo predates the trailer's International trim level globe emblems, added later. "Wally Byam's Caravan" placards are mounted on each side of the front window. The single tall mushroom cap vent on the roof is for the Panelray interior heater just aft of the entry door. Fore and aft rope hooks even with the top of the door are used for lifting the trailer on and off ships. Two more rope hooks are mounted in identical positions on the street side.

**Above:** A later photo of Wally and his Gold Trailer, both freshly outfitted for high adventure in Africa and beyond. 1958 Ohio license plate on truck. On the truck's utility bed, the three areas to be visited are "Africa - Bibleland - Europe," indicating this is an early photo of the International Travelette. On the trailer, an International trim level globe emblem now appears below the front marker light. The Panelray mushroom cap roof vent has been lowered and a second mushroom cap roof vent for the Valiant propane water heater has been added at the rear. The tandem axle wheel well top edge is now peaked instead of flat, making it slightly easier to change tires.



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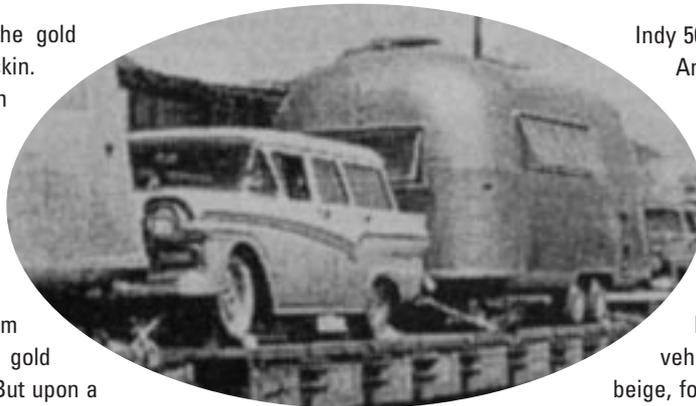
## The most striking feature of Wally's Gold Trailer was and remains the gold anodized Reynolds aluminum skin. Anodizing is a process by which aluminum or other metals are coated with a protective film by chemical or electrolytic means.

Gold Trailer was and remains the gold anodized Reynolds aluminum skin. Anodizing is a process by which aluminum or other metals are coated with a protective film by chemical or electrolytic means. Wally dreamed of Easter Egg colored trailers to complement the bright pastel color American cars of the mid to late 1950s. From twenty or more feet away, the gold color on his trailer looked good. But upon a closer inspection each panel had a slightly different hue. This difference increased over time as panels weathered at varying rates and to different colors. Soft aluminum anodizes well. But heat-treated structural alloy aluminum used in aircraft and on Airstreams doesn't accept anodizing consistently, so each panel ends up a different hue and the trailer appears splotchy. Given the unsatisfactory results, Wally quickly dropped the Easter Egg colored trailer idea.

The most practical, but perhaps least appreciated feature at the time, was the tandem axles underneath a relatively short and light weight 22' trailer. This concept was first used in Wally Byam's 22' tandem axle Holiday trailer built during 1955-56, but this was the first installation of tandem axles under a short Airstream. While the tandem axles under the 22' Holiday Tandem were suspended by leaf springs, the tandem axles under the Gold Trailer were early Henschen Dura-Torque rubber filled axles being field tested by Wally four years before they were adopted for the entire line in 1961.

Wally first caravanned with the Gold Trailer in Spring 1957, when he drove it from Jackson Center, Ohio to Louisville, Kentucky, where he and his entourage met up with others coming in from all points. The largest contingent arrived from California on the 1957 All-American Caravan, the first Wally Byam Caravan to tour the USA instead of a foreign country. Their collective objective was the Kentucky Derby, held on the first Saturday of May.

Wally's "Solid Gold Trailer" was the hit



Indy 500 on Memorial Day. The first All-American Caravan ended a week later in Michigan.

After the 1957 All-American Caravan, Wally and Stella took the Gold Trailer on the 1958 Mexican and Central American Caravans along the unfinished and mostly unpaved Pan American Highway. His tow vehicle was a two-tone white-over-beige, four door 1957 Ford station wagon. The Caravan traveled 7,890 miles. It departed from Nogales, Arizona on January 20, 1958, heading through Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica, then back to Brownsville, Texas. (For more, see *Airstream Life*, Winter 2005.) None of the various accounts of this Caravan mention any problems with the Gold Trailer, although Wally's Ford station wagon did break down a few times and had to be towed to a repair shop, not unusual for a Byam

of the parade through downtown Louisville because it was towed by his gold Cadillac and, to the amusement of all, was positioned immediately behind the Fort Knox float. After watching the "Race for the Roses" and celebrating the weekend with Mint Juleps, the All-American Caravanners toured the middle Eastern states and Washington DC before descending on Indianapolis to watch the



Top: Riding high at Arriaga, Chiapas during the 1958 Mexico Caravan. Above: Stella exhibits the Caravan's open door policy while Wally fits his pith helmet on a Pigmy. "Wally & Stella Byam" is now painted on trailer's curb side front corner. Wally's famous roof hatch is flipped open. By now "NEAR EAST" has replaced the more provocative "BIBLELAND" on the truck's utility bed. This photograph was taken in the Ituri Forest outside Beni, The Belgian Congo, Africa, on or about October 9, 1959.



Left: Travelette's gold paint complements the Gold Trailer at a 1958 Midwest Rally. Right: Gold Trailer as modernized in the 1980s.

Caravan traveling along a typical "Byam Boulevard" (a very rough road).

All this was a warm-up for the Gold Trailer's participation in the 1959-60 Cape Town to Cairo Caravan through Africa, followed by the 1960 European Caravan. With its unusual Dura-Torque rubber torsion tandem axles, the Gold Trailer fared much better than its brethren outfitted with leaf springs, which frequently broke. Through certain parts of Africa, the Gold Trailer was placed in the middle of the Caravan and given additional armed guards, to discourage bandits from attacking it as a probable carriage of great wealth.

Four-wheel drive tow vehicles were required for the African Caravan. The most popular brand of 4X4 was International Harvester, whose pickup trucks and

Travelalls outnumbered all other brands, including Ford, Dodge, GMC and Land Rover. Wally's tow vehicle was nearly as rare as his Gold Trailer. He chose an International A-120 4X4 Travelette, one of only seventeen of these so-named 3/4 ton factory crew cabs built during the 1957 to 1959 model run. The Travelette is an industry first for a light-weight truck that was not matched until Dodge offered a factory built crew cab truck in 1963. Wally's Travelette had a 7000 pound GVW, a 2800 pound capacity front axle and a 4500 pound capacity full floating rear axle. The standard engine and transmission was a Black Diamond 240 cubic inch straight 6 with column shift 3-speed tranny and 2-speed transfer case. Its 129 inch wheelbase capably handled the 7-foot long enclosed utility bed as well as the 22' Gold Trailer. The model

designation "A" was for Anniversary series of trucks introduced in March 1957, the 50th Golden Anniversary of International Harvester truck manufacturing.

After arriving at Cairo, the Gold Trailer continued on to Europe with the 1960 European Caravan, after which it returned to the USA. In 1969, Airstream's President, Art Costello, sold the Gold Trailer to Dale "Pee Wee" Schwamborn, Helen's young son and long time Caravanner who was a scout on the Cape Town to Cairo Caravan. The trailer was in the same condition as he remembered it in Africa. Dale owned and preserved the trailer for three years, attending many Rallies and taking one vacation with it, before selling it in 1972 to Bob and Irene Watson, fellow WBCCI members then living in California.



Wally's scooter leads the way in this nighttime African Caravan photograph. The trailer's street side rope hooks and International emblem are visible here. 1959 Ohio license plate on truck.

## Tandem Axles, for Better or Worse

In 1961, Airstream answered a customer's question about the advantages and disadvantages of tandem axles on an Airstream travel trailer, summarized as follows:

Advantages include four wheels and tires providing weight distribution over four points instead of two, resulting in better floatation and easier towing over and out of mushy or sandy ground than two tires. Tandem axles provide smoother going over rough terrain, marginally better tracking down the highway, and greater braking on road and when parked off road. A flat tire doesn't immediately disable the trailer and could be easily be changed without a jack by driving the good tire on that side up onto some blocks to raise the flat off the ground for changing.

Disadvantages are greater towed weight for a given length, additional extra cost for factory installation on a short trailer, higher bridge and road tolls, and more flats, as all tires wear a bit faster on a tandem axle and the front tandem tires tend to throw debris into the rear tires. A single axle trailer is easier to manhandle when detached from the tow vehicle and slightly easier to tow than a tandem axle having greater friction. A single axle provides more interior floor level storage space, as its wheel well is half the length of one over a tandem axle.



*Restored trailer wheel wells have flat tops again. New gold anodizing has weathered since 1996.*

Over the next decade, the Watsons kept Wally's adventures alive by taking the Gold Trailer on Caravans to Eastern Canada, Eastern Mexico, Baja and Western Mexico, Central America and the Canada Artic Northwest Territories. In a misguided effort to keep up with the times, Bob modernized the trailer with new round-cornered exterior hatches and windows, a tall multicolor stripe around the body, a vista view window in the upper door, new large script lettering and contemporary emblems, aluminum wheels, a permanent mounted awning, a roof top air conditioner, and so forth. The overall effect was a mild case of pimp-my-trailer. Sadly, while its place in Airstream history was being celebrated its integrity was being violated. The Gold Trailer fell into mild disrepair over the next ten years and needed some attention. It deserved a better fate, soon to arrive.

Airstream purchased the trailer in 1992 and brought it back to Jackson Center, OH. Two long time employees, Bob Kauffman and Carl Ludwig, disassembled and rebuilt the Gold Trailer. The dented, damaged and altered exterior gold skin was removed and the rotted plywood floor was replaced. New stress-formed front and rear 7 segment end cap panels were formed in Indiana, then along with sheet aluminum, rivets and Hehr standard window frames, were sent to

Cleveland for gold anodizing before installation, trimming and fitting. However, the difficulties of anodizing hard structural aluminum had not been conquered over the years, so the Gold Trailer today shows great variance in color and hue among its weathered exterior panels.

A new black water tank was made identical to the original, and expensive copper valves – same as original – were fitted to the plumbing. New floor tiles were installed, and new birch cabinetry and furniture was made using the original as templates. Bob and Carl worked hard on the trailer for three to four months, then the project was suspended due to cost. The trailer sat nearly finished for a few years, until the Service Department completed the restoration in 1996. A few small



*Top: Restored interior looking towards the rear, single bed at left. Bottom: Restored interior looking forward. Wally's roof hatch is a signature feature.*

exterior details aside – lettering and numbering, International emblems, antennas, marker lights, wheel profile, etc. – the Gold Trailer again appears as it did during its tenure of high adventure and yeoman service to Wally and Stella Byam.

Wally's freshly restored Gold Trailer was shown at the 1996 WBCCI International Rally in Rapid City, North Dakota, to the applause of all. Now kept at the factory in Jackson Center, the Gold Trailer is displayed during certain local events, such as the 2005 Homecoming Rally, and is often exhibited at the annual WBCCI International Rally. When not on display it can quickly be spotted relaxing outdoors with all the other vintage Airstreams in the factory's chain link Rest Home for Old Aluminum Trailers.

For the past ten years, Wally's Gold Trailer has again served as the icon of the Golden Age of Airstream Caravanning, when seat-of-the-pants innovation was born and tested on the hot and dusty roads of world travel instead of between the controlled lines of a computer screen. • • •

## Vintage Tandem Axle Trailers

A regular aluminum-colored production version of Wally's 22' tandem axle trailer, named the World Traveler, was offered by Airstream in 1958 and 1959. Four units sold in 1958 and only three units sold in 1959 before that model was quietly dropped. Why was it a market flop? Perhaps because very few people needed the benefits of a tandem axle on a short 22' Airstream at an extra cost of \$200 or so above the price of a single axle 22' Airstream. Few buyers from that period were going to tackle the Nubian Desert.

After the World Traveler was discontinued in 1959, Airstream did not offer another 22' or shorter tandem axle trailer for thirty-three years, until 1992 when the 21' tandem axle Sovereign (1992-1996) was produced. Two 22' World Travelers have surfaced during the past five years, a 1958 model undergoing a complete shell-on refurbishment and a 1959 model that was used for occasional camping but was not particularly prized.

Over the decades, as standard trailer base weight crept upward, Airstream responded by making tandem axles standard equipment under increasingly shorter trailers: the 26' Overlander in 1961, the 24' Trade Wind in 1965, and the 23' Safari in 1977. Tandem axles were also available as extra cost optional equipment on the longest trailer having a single axle as standard equipment: the 26' Overlander from 1955 to 1960, the 24' Trade Wind from 1959 to the early 1960s, and the 23' Safari from 1971 to 1976.