



Season 6, Episode 4: Airstream Caravan

Tukufu Zuberi: Our next story investigates the exotic travels of this vintage piece of Americana. In the years following World War II, Americans took to the open road in unprecedented numbers. A pioneering entrepreneur named Wally Byam seized on this wanderlust. He believed his aluminium-skinned Airstream trailers could be vehicles for change, transporting Americans to far away destinations, and to a new understanding of their place in the world. In 1959, he dreamt up an outlandish scheme: to ship 41 Airstreams half way around the globe for a 14,000-mile caravan from Cape Town to the pyramids of Egypt. Nearly 50 years later, Doug and Suzy Carr of Long Beach, California, think these fading numbers and decal may mean their vintage Airstream was part of this modern day wagon train.

Suzy: We're hoping that it's one of forty-one Airstreams that went on a safari in 1959 and was photographed in front of the pyramids.

Tukufu: I'm Tukufu Zuberi, and I've come to Long Beach to find out just how mobile this home once was.

Doug: Hi, how ya doing?

Tukufu: I'm fine. How are you? I'm Tukufu Zuberi.

Doug: All right. I'm Doug Carr. This is my wife Suzy.

Suzy: Hey, great to meet you. Welcome to Grover Beach.

Tukufu: How you doing? You know, this is a real funky cool pad.

Suzy: It's about as funky as it can be.

Tukufu: What do you have for me?

Suzy: Well, it all started with a neighbor, and he called over and said, "I believe you have a really famous trailer." He believed that ours was one of a very few that in 1959 had gone on a safari with Wally Byam.

Tukufu: Suzy explains they went online and found a picture of Airstream trailers from the safari, and that their trailer looks identical. Do you have any other information that is pertinent to this Airstream?

Suzy: We noticed that underneath the trailer is very bumpy. Like it's gone over some really rough terrain.



Tukufu: Is that the address of your house up there?

Doug: No. That's not our address. But, those are four numbers on the back of the Airstream that, they're fading away and we're hoping that you might be able to figure out what that means before they're gone completely.

Tukufu: I can make out 3-6-8-4, and a faded logo – Wally Byam Caravan Club.

Doug: There are several other markings on the Airstream inside, and I have the current registration that might help us out.

Tukufu: When the Carrs bought their mobile home five years ago from a neighbor in the trailer park, it came with the vehicle identification number, or VIN. But right away I spot a possible red flag. The document says the Airstream had first been sold in 1960. The African Safari began in the summer of 1959. Here's another potential clue.

Doug: It says Howard something...Riverside, I think.

Tukufu: Howard and Agnes Riverside, California.

Tukufu: I'm not sure if this Airstream could have been on the African caravan – but if it was, were these the owners at that time? What would you like me to find out for you?

Doug: We're wondering whether this is really one of the Airstreams that went on the caravan in 1959.

Tukufu: I'll do my best to find out for you and get back to with an answer.

Doug: All right. Thank you.

Tukufu: Thank you. It's going to be an interesting story. It doesn't seem to me like a trailer like this could make a trip, a caravan of any sort, in Africa in 1959. I want to learn a little more about this extraordinary trip...and the man who inspired it. My first stop is the Petersen Automotive Museum in Los Angeles to meet curator Leslie Kendall.

Leslie: Wally Byam started out, actually, as a shepherd up in Oregon. And, while tending his flocks he would sleep in a little ox cart that was equipped with very basic necessities. Apparently, that never left him, because when he had the chance to do it, he designed his own trailer.



Tukufu: Leslie explains Wally's Airstream invention captured both the spirit and the needs of a nation entering the modern age of leisure travel. In the early days of motoring, amenities and accommodations were few and far between. In 1932, Wally answered the call of the road with a revolutionary innovation – a mobile shelter to sleep and feed the whole family.

Leslie: During the mid-30s there were about 300 trailers on the market and today only Airstream survives from that period.

Tukufu: In the years following World War II, the open road became a destination itself, with themed motels and quirky attractions, drive-ins and drive-thrus.

Leslie: When you think of post-war America, you can't help but think how optimistic we were as a nation. And with that optimism came a great deal of new products. Products that people never thought could be built. We had cars with fins, chrome everywhere. And because of America's improving network of roads, because of our larger than average cars with big engines that could tow a lot of weight, people started taking to the roads in trailers. And here was a trailer that was probably the most advanced looking thing on the road.

Tukufu: With its aerodynamic tear-shaped design, Byam's Airstreams fit right in with this post-war tune up...Carrying families from the Grand Canyon to Plymouth Rock with all the modernity and convenience of a new G.E. kitchen.

Leslie: You didn't have to worry about accommodations once you got to your location, because you were towing them with you. You had a shower. You had a bedroom. You had a bathroom with all the facilities. And people thought, 'Why not? Let's go on the road. I want to see America.'

Tukufu: Why did Wally Byam take people on caravans?

Leslie: Wally Byam's caravans were all about getting people to explore the wilderness, getting people to explore the wide-open areas. And using Airstream trailers to do it.

Tukufu: Wally envisioned adventures far beyond the United States. But why Cape Town to Cairo? Why Africa in 1959?

Leslie: The Cape Town to Cairo caravan was one of many caravans that Wally Byam had put together during the 50s and into the early 60s. He just wanted to show people that his trailers were indeed practical. That you could hitch them up to any reliable vehicle and go almost anywhere.



Tukufu: Leslie says Wally Byam had a vision: to play some part in promoting international goodwill through person-to-person contact. All you needed to sign up was an Airstream, the spirit of adventure...and a good-sized bankroll.

Leslie: The kinds of people that went on the caravan with Wally Byam would probably be people of independent means. They had the money to take the time that it took to go on a trip like that, and also to ship the cars and their trailers over there.

Tukufu: I tell Leslie about our investigation, and a possible problem: the registration date of 1960 is *after* the African caravan began. Is it possible that a vehicle being registered in 1960 could have actually made this caravan in 1959?

Leslie: It is possible that it may not have been registered by its first retail owner until 1960 or even later.

Tukufu: Unfortunately, Leslie says a VIN number that old won't help me find the original owners – at least not in the state's DMV records.

Leslie: The DMV purges their records cause there's simply so much data to keep track of they don't have room for it all.

Tukufu: This investigation has a particular appeal for me; I've traveled to Africa many times, but had never heard of this astonishing cross-continental trek. On the one side it's an investigation of the trailer itself. Who owned it, when did they own it and how did it get into the current owner's hands? On the other hand, it's a story about a caravan across Africa. Long before air travel became an affordable option for families in the 70s and 80s, Wally Byam was urging people to explore across oceans and outside their comfort zones. His Cape Town to Cairo plan was his boldest vision yet. In 1959, the European colonial empires were on their last legs, and a generation of Africans were struggling for their freedom. In the United States, too, the long status quo of segregation was being challenged as never before. There is a certain importance to them making such a journey. It does, at least, show an openness and a curiosity about Africa that went beyond simply looking at it through the lens of national geographic. Did Howard and Agnes of Riverside, California get this historic look at a continent coming of age from inside this trailer? Since the state's DMV records don't go back far enough, maybe the manufacturer can help. Let me give the Airstream company a call. Maybe they've got better records than the DMV. Hello, I'm trying to locate a couple who may have owned a specific trailer. No I don't have their last names, I just have their first names, but I do have the VIN number. That doesn't matter?



Tukufu: Airstream says all their records vanished when the company was sold to new owners in 1980. But they want to know if I'd noticed a three or four digit number anywhere on the exterior. Well, yes, 3684. Really? Wait a minute, so the vintage Airstream club. Thank you very much. We got a lead. The vintage Airstream club was begun in the early 1990's, and boasts a membership of devoted collectors. Shari Davis is club president.

Tukufu: So you have two of these.

Shari: I do. This one's a 1964 Globe Trotter. And this one is a 1956 Safari.

Tukufu: I'm hoping you can help me.

Shari: Okay. Let's see what we can figure out. Do you want to step inside?

Tukufu: I'm doing an investigation of this particular trailer. Does that look familiar to you?

Shari: It's probably a late 50s, early 60s trailer, and...

Tukufu: How can you tell that?

Shari: You can tell that by the number of panels. And this one has seven, so that probably puts it, about '57 to '62.

Tukufu: Also there's this right above this awning this little thing here that reads, 'Wally Byam Caravan Club International'.

Shari: Right, and that's the same club that we have today.

Tukufu: Okay. And if you look closely, you'll see a number – 3684. Do you have any idea what that is all about? Shari tells me that the Wally Byam Caravan Club began in 1955 in order to promote year round caravanning in Airstreams. When people joined they were given a unique member number...like the fading 3684 on the back of Doug and Suzy's Airstream.

Tukufu: What I'm trying to do is connect Howard and Agnes and their trailer to the African caravan.

Shari: Well, the best way to do that would be to look at some of the older, membership directories. Every year the club puts out a directory.



Tukufu: Shari's directory produces an odd result.

Tukufu: 3684 J.D. and Sarah Hicks. That's not Howard and Agnes.

Shari: No.

Tukufu: Her directory only goes back a few years. Shari explains the number 3684 might have once belonged to Howard and Agnes, but if they had let their membership lapse, that number would be reassigned to someone else...such as the Hicks. Okay. What do you think should be my next step?

Shari: Well, the best thing to do would be to talk to some people that were actually on the caravan.

Tukufu: It took some digging through her files, but Shari introduces me to two club members who took that long ago safari. Toni Ruiz was only 15. It was the first time she'd been out of the United States. Dale Schwamborn, Wally Byam's second cousin, was the caravan's advance scout. How was that?

Dale: Oh, you kid? It was a trip of a life time not only from the things we saw like the elephants and the animals; you know they were right on the verge of their independence and getting away from the colonial powers. You could feel this movement building up. And we weren't just the average tourists going through; we were representing our nation.

Toni: As everything unfolded, and we started learning more about Africa, you know it became the beginning of an adventure.

Tukufu: What was your most memorable experience on this caravan?

Toni: I got to meet Haile Selassie. He came to visit us on the campground and he invited us to the palace.

Tukufu: Haile Selassie was the last emperor of Ethiopia, and four years later would be a founding member of the Organization of African Unity, which helped African nations work together following independence. And how were you received by the people?

Toni: Beautifully. Beautifully. Those that we made personal relationships with, invited us into their homes.

Tukufu: Meeting heads of state and ordinary people gave Dale and Toni an understanding of the world outside the United States. The caravan also gave many Africans their first face-to-face encounter with Americans.



Dale: Not only were we a curiosity, but we represented something that they were looking forward to their independence and of course people knew about Lincoln and Washington...it may have been a glow of hope, especially for us to be able to travel independently through all of these countries.

Tukufu: The caravan lasted an arduous 221 days. Dale says the only danger they encountered was when they received word that some bandits wanted to attack the caravan to steal Wally Byam's gold-plated Airstream. How many people went on the trip?

Dale: There were 104 people, ranging in age from six years of age to 84.

Tukufu: Do you have a record of everybody who went on the trip?

Dale: Yes we do, right here. Here's a roster that was prepared.

Tukufu: Okay, let me see if I can find our people. But the roster does not include anyone with first names of Howard and Agnes, nor an address in Riverside, California.

Dale: Never heard of them.

Tukufu: Never heard of them?

Toni: No.

Tukufu: And there's no indication of their membership number, 3684, being associated with the 1959 caravan either. But in one of Dale and Toni's other directories we make a discovery that I can take back to Doug and Suzy.

Tukufu: Oh here it is. Here's our trailer number! 3684. This has been a fun investigation.

Doug: So what was the answer to the question?

Tukufu: I found out that your Airstream didn't make Wally Byam's caravan from Cape Town to Cairo.

Doug: Okay.

Suzy: Ohhh. Oh, well.



Doug: It's too bad. Okay.

Tukufu: However, it did have a tremendous journey. Here's our trailer number. 3684. Howard Newbern. Howard and...Peggy?

Dale: He obviously changed wives somewhere along the way.

Tukufu: So they did go on a caravan but it was to the Yucatan in the winter of 1971. I tell Doug and Suzy that although I wasn't able to locate Howard and Peggy Newbern, there's little doubt that their Airstream had been part of a caravan through almost 4000 miles of Yucatan jungle. It was more than a decade after the African safari, but the wear and tear on their vehicle indicates the Mexican journey may have been just as arduous.

Suzy: It's amazing to me that we wanted it to be the Africa caravan, but it did the Mayan ruins instead. As far as I am concerned it is still a historic trailer.

Doug: Yes and we love it just as much.

Suzy: Yeah I can't thank you enough for finding all that information out for us.

Tukufu: It was my pleasure thank you very much.

Doug: Thank you.

Tukufu: When Wally Byam died at the age of 66 in 1962, America was changing fast. Leisurely stop-and-go tours of America hitched to trailers were quickly giving way to President Eisenhower's new interstate highways. In the years Wally spent traversing the globe during the golden age of trailering, he was always looking to improve his beloved Airstream. Door hinges, chemical toilets, water heaters – thousands of useful items Wally discovered were packed up and shipped stateside to his factories. It was all done to – as Wally said – “provide a more satisfying, meaningful way of travel that offers complete travel independence, wherever and whenever you choose to go or stay.”