



## Airstream: an RV Industry Legend

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The history of Airstream began with a single man and a most singular dream.

The man was Wallace Merle (“Wally”) Byam; his dream: to build the perfect travel trailer. One that would move like a stream of air. One that would be light enough to be towed by a standard automobile. One that would provide first class living conditions anywhere in the world.

The first trailers were built in the backyard of Byam’s Los Angeles home. He also offered \$5 plans for do-it-yourself builders. He founded the Airstream Company in 1931, so this year marks the company’s 88<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. This makes Airstream the longest continually operating RV company on the globe.

Byam was an innovator. Early on, his most significant and long lasting improvement was to drop the floor down between the wheels, allowing the ceiling to be raised so campers could stand up straight inside the trailer. He added chemical toilets, ice boxes, gasoline stoves and water pumps.

Airstream trailers began taking on a more “aerodynamic” look as Byam incorporated aircraft construction methods to lessen wind resistance and improve the strength-to-weight ratio of his trailers.

The name “Airstream” was introduced in 1934 because Byam thought his improved trailers cruised down the road “like a stream of air.”

The “Clipper,” was introduced on Jan. 17, 1936, and an American legend was born. It was revolutionary with its monocoque, riveted aluminum body. It had more in common with aircraft of the day than other trailers. It could sleep four, thanks to its tubular steel-framed dinette, which would convert to a bed. It carried its own water supply, had an enclosed galley, and was fitted with electric lights throughout. The Clipper even offered “air conditioning,” using dry ice. At \$1,200, the Clipper was expensive for its time, especially during the Great Depression, but they could not be built fast enough to keep up with demand!

In the post-World War II period, a factory was opened in Jackson Center, Ohio, to serve the eastern market as Byam continued to improve and refine the product. The California factory was closed in the 1950s, but the Ohio plant has continued producing Airstreams for more than six decades. Today, it is undergoing significant expansion as demand for the product has never been greater.

Airstream’s long tradition of design and manufacturing excellence led *Money* magazine to declare it one of the “99 things that America makes best.” Notably, a 1960 Airstream Bambi trailer is in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art, and the specially modified, biologically sealed Airstream trailer made for NASA, called the Mobile Quarantine Facility (MQF) is on display at the Smithsonian’s Air and Space Museum. The Apollo astronauts returning from the first moon mission were placed in it upon splashdown, in the unlikely event they were returning to earth with “moon germs.”

Over 60 percent of all Airstreams ever built—including some constructed from the original \$5 plans—are still rolling down the highways.

Wally Byam died in 1962 and the company was sold to Beatrice Foods. In 1985 Airstream was acquired by Thor Industries, the nation's leading manufacturer of recreational vehicles.

Today's Airstreams are still produced at the company's headquarters in Jackson Center, Ohio. The aluminum trailers range in size from a 16-foot Bambi to a 33-foot Classic. Their models also include a lower-cost small trailer aimed at adventurous young families called "Basecamp," and a new, small, fiberglass shell trailer called "Nest." For those who prefer not to tow an RV, Airstream makes several versions of "Class B" luxury motorhomes called "Interstate" and "Atlas," built on the Mercedes/Sprinter chassis.

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