

VEHICULAR VERNACULAR: THE MID-CENTURY AIRSTREAM
AS A CASE STUDY IN PRESERVATION,
NOSTALGIA AND SUBCULTURE
FORMATION

by

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A THESIS

Presented to the Interdisciplinary Studies Program: Historic Preservation
and the Graduate School of the University of Oregon
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Science

March 2011

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Title: Vehicular Vernacular: The Mid-Century Airstream as a Case Study in Preservation, Nostalgia and Subculture Formation

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Degree awarded March 2011

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Interdisciplinary Studies Program: Historic Preservation

March 2011

Title: Vehicular Vernacular: The Mid-Century Airstream as a Case Study in Preservation, Nostalgia and Subculture Formation

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Airstream brand travel trailers from the 1950s and 60s have developed a subculture dedicated to their preservation and use. This subculture serves as a case study for how nostalgia, defined in a postmodern context, may promote preservation and creative communion with the past. After examining criticisms of preservation's focus on material integrity, the discussion focuses on the need to factor user-based relationships into historic preservation. A postmodern reexamination of nostalgia defines it not merely as a longing for the past but also as a form of social critique which seeks to mitigate modernity with the past. Mid-century Airstream preservation reflects a desire to revive specific, positive values of the past in order to ameliorate the future and form temporal continuity. For the mid-century Airstream subculture, nostalgia fosters both restoration and recreation, allowing for an iconic emblem of the past to function in the present rather than fade into obsolescence.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express sincere appreciation to Dr. Roth and Professor Carter for their assistance in the preparation of this manuscript. In addition, special thanks are due to Mr. Dale Schawmborn, whose exclusive information and resources contributed greatly. I also thank all subjects for their invaluable input and most of all for inviting me into their homes on wheels.

Dedicated to the spirit of wanderlust everywhere.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

My appreciation for the mid-century Airstream began on a purely aesthetic level in a high-school art class. We were given magazines from which to collage and I found a photo of three classic Airstreams too interesting not to take home.¹ I kept it on my inspiration board where I admired these retro yet futuristic cocoons until graduating. Completely ignorant of their history then, the beauty of classic Airstream that enchanted me then still does so today after having researched them for a year.

The classic Airstream, in its form and preservation, is a combination of paradoxes. Its streamlined aesthetic is organic but also machine-aged. As its form follows function, the classic Airstream's design and engineering overlap to produce a beautiful yet practical object. Airstreams are simultaneously retro and futuristic. They are so strongly associated with the past much of the general public may be unaware new Airstream models are still in production. Although they immediately conjure their era of production, the geometric and aluminum exteriors continue to feel futuristic. Finish interiors can be average, kitschy, beautiful, modern, simple or elegant, but each is a unique microenvironment of its owner. They are iconic, yet easily modified and personalized. Their function combines two disparate ideas: domesticity and rugged independence.

I went into this thesis to explore the greater significance of classic Airstreams beyond the surface impressions. Why have they attained the status of a respected, coveted

¹ Note that I will be using the terms classic and mid-century interchangeably throughout to be explained in detail in chapter two.

and iconic symbol of American design when other trailers or mobile have gained a poor reputation? Why does Airstream immediately connote vintage silver trailers when other companies produced similar models? What do they mean to the fairly diverse group of people who preserve and use them? In other words: what makes classic Airstreams so special?

I root my case study firmly in theory and scholarship from disciplines such as historic preservation, vernacular theory, philosophy of history and sociology. Theory is important to analyzing the classic Airstream's overall significance for not only its users, but the American cultural landscape. My discussion of limitations caused by preservation practice's emphasis on material integrity partially stems from personal experience. I nominated an oft vandalized/destroyed and rebuilt concrete hillside letter to the National Register of Historic Places. The object's unique meaning to the community was partially embodied through the damage and repairs or reconstructions. Despite a lack of material integrity, it represented a notable tradition in the community from 1908 through the 1950s that even trickled into the present. Although successfully listed, the nomination was a struggle due to the letter's lack of material integrity. The process led me to consider how historic preservation practice could begin to expand its scope by incorporating (sub)cultural values and traditions into its focus.

After describing my methods, I explain how an innovative, mass-produced object like the classic Airstream can be analyzed within a vernacular framework. The vernacular is not a typology, but an approach that focuses its analysis on user interactions. I then examine how historic preservation practice's emphasis on material integrity can diminish our ability to creatively commune with the past. By shifting preservation's scope to include cultural values and ideas, we can enrich not only our understanding of the past,

but our interaction with it. Performance theory examines spatial meaning through user interaction and helps bridge the gap between physical materials and cultural values.

Next I discuss how nostalgia may affect the classic Airstream user's sense of and interaction with the past. I do so by first carefully examining and reconceptualizing nostalgia within a post-modern framework. Rather than denigrate nostalgia as pure romanticization, I show how it can serve as form of cultural editing which evaluates past against present. Although nostalgia is often motivated by dissatisfaction with the present, it can look to the past for solutions rather than escapism or entertainment. Nostalgia can connect the past, present and future forming a sense of temporal continuity generally lacking in modernity. As a result, nostalgia can provide the impetus for creative communion with past. As I show, the classic Airstream's subculture partly seeks to restore lost values embodied by the object seen.

In order to examine how the mid-century Airstream's history, image and design inform the subculture today, I describe the company's history with an emphasis on developments from 1950 through 1969. This chapter's focus is not just on art-historical considerations such as craft and origins, but on the cultural values embodied by the Airstream especially those expressed by Airstream founder, Wally Byam.

In the subsequent chapters, I approach present-day classic Airstream subculture using the established theoretical and historic background to determine the object's full significance to its owners. After a broad overview of subjects and their general attitudes towards nostalgia, I turn towards specific values embodied by the classic Airstream and perpetuated through its preservation: streamlined aesthetics; craftsmanship; curiosity and adventure; escape; comfort and personalization; and community. I examine the role of nostalgia in these values and how it juxtaposes past and present in an engaging, creative

even emotional way for users. The full significance of classic Airstreams is analyzed through owners' relationship to the space.

By positing the study of the classic Airstream within a strongly theoretical background, I hope to uncover the social and psychological meaning of their continued use and preservation. I illustrate how their preservation is a positive nostalgic response to modernity as well as a means of subculture formation.

CHAPTER II

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

Research Methodology

Purpose Statement and Methodological Paradigm

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the role of nostalgia in the grassroots preservation of 1950s and 60s Airstream travel trailers. I will be using an interpretivist constructivist methodological paradigm. I posit myself within this paradigm because this thesis treats architecture as the material evidence of the subjective experiences of its users, in this case, the owners of the mid-century Airstream. I consider myself a post-modernist, meaning that I do not believe in any one singular, objective truth but multiple, subjective realities. It follows then that I do not believe there is one valid narrative that constitutes an authentic history. I highlight my focus on subjectivity because nostalgia is often posited as the opposite of objective historical inquiry and a detriment to authenticity. However, this thesis aims to reexamine nostalgia, particularly as it pertains to a postmodern understanding of history, culture and psychology. Today's 50s and 60s Airstream subculture will serve as a case study to examine the relationship between historic preservation, nostalgia, and subculture formation.

Role of the Researcher

Since I believe that reality is socially constructed, varying on the individual and group level, my research focuses on the subjective realities and perceptions of 50s and 60s Airstream owners and their interactions with the object. As a researcher who does not believe in the objective, I am highly aware that my interpretation of data will be filtered

through my own subjective reality and worldview. Rather than hypocritically claim objectivity, I strive for self-consciousness of my thought processes and subsequent inclinations and prejudices.

Most notably, I must be aware of my biases against *and* towards nostalgia. As I will detail later, no one is immune to nostalgia, including myself. I have a lifelong fascination with Americana. Both nostalgia in general and Americana in particular are notorious for glorifying the past. However, my education as a preservationist has taught me to be critical and interpret clues in the material objects in order to formulate a narrative, rather than the other way around. Previously, I have written compelling arguments against the use of nostalgia in preservation practice. In addition, I am a skeptical and analytical by nature, generally suspicious of any one-dimensional depiction (again due to my belief in *multiple* subjective realities). Hopefully, the two biases, one towards and the other against nostalgia, will even out. Subjectivity and open-mindedness are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Research Questions

My research questions partially center on the 50s and 60s Airstream as a material object and its relationship to users today. I also focus on the role of nostalgia and historicity as values inherent to the subculture's preservation practice and ethos. My main research questions are: How can we reexamine and critique nostalgia? Is nostalgia ever appropriate in forming a living connection to the past? What values does the mid-century Airstream embody and how? How does nostalgia affect this subculture? How does use and preservation of the mid-century Airstream affect users' relationship to the past?

Delimitations, Limitations and Definitions

While the delimitations and limitations of this thesis are fairly clear, the definition of terms is not. The delimitations of this thesis include the history and owners of Airstreams produced from 1950 through 1969. I have chosen this time bracket for two reasons. Firstly, although produced continuously since the 1930s, Airstreams are considered a popular icon of the 1950s and 60s. The mid-century is the zenith of Airstream production and value formation due to post-war prosperity and a visionary founder. As a result, I will be using the terms classic and mid-century interchangeably with regards to the Airstream. Secondly, this era reflects resources of the recent past either in a liminal stage of historicity. Airstreams built in the 1950s have only recently attained historicity as defined by the Secretary of Interior Standards' (fifty years or older). Airstreams built in the 1960s wait at the threshold of architectural historicity, although they are already considered vintage vehicles (twenty-five years or older). The major limitation of this thesis is its narrow scope of focus.

This thesis will employ detailed discussion of specialized terminology from the fields of architecture, vehicles, cultural theory and historic preservation. As a result, the thesis will require a definition of terms for readers to guide them through this highly interdisciplinary discussion. In addition, the definition of interrelated terms such as recreation vehicle, trailer, camper etc. will be explicitly explained within the appropriate sections and glossary.

Benefits of the Study

Although highly unique, this research does bear relevance to continuing work in the field of historic preservation due through a postmodern discussion of preservation of the recent past and exploration into the psychology of grassroots preservation. A primary issue on the horizon of the field includes the newly historic classification of mid-twentieth century resources, particularly those of a vernacular and/or mass-produced nature. In this case, the mid-century Airstream is both vernacular and mass-produced while also in a liminal historic state. Similarly new resources, such as “Googie” commercial structures, are often vulnerable because they are often viewed as kitsch, commonplace or too recent to preserve. Nostalgia is often negatively correlated with the kitsch; my subjectively-oriented reexamination of nostalgia will provide open discussion of a popularly pervasive yet academically eschewed phenomenon. In turn, this discussion could potentially bridge the gap between academic historical inquiry and common perception and portrayal of the past. This thesis also bears relevance through a discussion of incorporating cultural values into preservation practice as a remedy against excessive emphasis on material integrity.

Research Design

Research Approach

The qualitative research needed for this thesis will be used to explore and describe the cultural significance of classic Airstreams for the subculture formed around their preservation. Furthermore, this thesis ultimately aims to discover the relationship between the two. As is nearly always the case in historic preservation scholarship,

especially in regards to vernacular structures, this subject is highly unique and requires a specialized analysis. Not only is the material object itself unique, so are my very interdisciplinary sources. As a result, approaching this research as a case study will provide for the greatest flexibility and precision. Literature which examines case studies as a discipline demonstrates the effectiveness of the case study when used to study a subject as a unique and complex entity. Case studies similar to mine are fairly rare, however a case study of nostalgia's effect on heritage tourism along Route 66 testifies to the case study's appropriateness for my topic.

Strategy of Inquiry

The case study's flexibility and focus on individuality makes it the ideal strategy of inquiry for my highly unique and multi-faced exploration of a narrowly defined subculture. "A case study, basically, is a depiction either of a phase or the totality of relevant experience of some selected datum."² This thesis seeks to depict the "totality of... experience" relevant to 50s and 60s Airstream subculture, including subjects' responses, the material object itself and imagery. This examination allows the researcher to "catch [the full] complexity of a single case."³ The demands of every preservation effort vary so there is no one formula that always works. The argument in favor of case studies is strengthened because they allow for the "study of particularity and complexity of a single case... [in order to] understand its activity with important circumstances."⁴ For the purposes of this thesis, the "important circumstances" are actually psychological

² Paul B. Foreman "The Theory of Case Studies" *Social Forces*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (May, 1948) 408.

³ Robert E. Stake *The Art of Case Study Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications (1995) xi.

⁴ Stake, xi.

in nature, referring to the post-modern sensibility of subjects. The case study provides for the “particularity and complexity” inherent to a multi-faceted, subjectively-oriented inquiry.

A case study entitled “Heritage Tourism on Route 66: Deconstructing Nostalgia” best supports the choice of this strategy as it pertains to my own research. While its authors have a rather different purpose than my own, their study is structured very similarly to mine. They do not question the negative connotation of nostalgia, but rather question its impact on heritage tourism by conducting a case study with nine human subjects.⁵ The authors focused on the subjective experiences of these nine tourists in order to observe their interaction with the past, much as I will during my interviews. Although “the little academic research that Route 66 has fostered mainly attributes interest in the road to nostalgia,” the authors used empirical evidence to question and critique this assumption.⁶ In other words, “how well [did] nostalgia theory function ‘on the ground’?”⁷ Because a case study allows for complexity, it does not reduce human subject’s research into one-dimensional responses that provide false conclusions. For example, the Route 66 case study determined that subjects “saw themselves as participating in a legacy of travel... [but] did not seem to confuse the experiences available today with those available in the past. Rather, they saw the corridor as an evolving place” through a present-oriented focus.⁸ This effectively debunks “nostalgia theory,” but only on the basis that nostalgia is an exclusively past-oriented state marked

⁵ Kellee Caton and Carla Santos. “Heritage Tourism on Route 66: Deconstructing Nostalgia” in *Journal of Travel Research* No. 45 (2007) 371.

⁶ Ibid 374.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid 380.

by escapism of the present and lack of true historical inquiry. However, it is worth noting that unlike Canton and Santos, I seek to critique and reevaluate the academic perception and definition of nostalgia through my case study.

Overview of Research Design

This case study examines the interplay of material object, nostalgia and grassroots preservation. This thesis is unique within the department of historic preservation in that it is not site specific nor defined by region. Airstreams were both mass-produced and portable, never intended to belong exclusively to any single location. Accordingly, the “sites” of this study are the 50s and 60s Airstreams themselves. This thesis will focus significantly on human subjects research, using about ten interviews. I met subjects either through the internet, at an Airstream Rally or by networking. I visited and photographed four mid-century Airstreams within Oregon’s I-5 corridor. (The location reflects personal convenience only.) There are no risks nor ethical dilemmas anticipated for participants other than those normally experience through the course of daily life.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Overview

In essence, theory and literature review are the supportive backbone of this thesis, but human subjects research is the heart which animates the entire study. Early on in the research process, individuals were encouraged to participate via webmaster approved threads on internet forums. Some subjects were met in person or through networking and recruited through e-mail. Subjects were chosen based on their ownership of a 1950s or 1960s Airstream and interviews took place either in person or via email. One interview was an important archival source, that with Dale Schwamborn, former

Airstream, Inc. employee and nephew of it's founder. He was recruited via internet and interviewed by telephone regarding his uncle as well as Airstream history and culture.

Procedures

Data collection instruments included cover sheets for interviews, document research, archival research and site visits. These instruments were organized by a growing list of codes including: travel-trailers; nostalgia; historic preservation theory; Airstream history; Airstream design; Airstream craft; and values.

Data Collection and Disposition Figures

The first step in research was document analysis. This method included collecting data from literature in the field, but not those documents of a historic nature. Scholarly sources focused on historic preservation and nostalgia was of utmost importance, especially David Lowenthal's The Past Is a Foreign Country. A simultaneous step in the sequence was archival analysis examining historic data from published scholarship, period documents and images and my interview with Schwamborn. Airstream's founder, Wally Byam's 1960 book Trailer Travel: Here and Abroad was an important primary source.

Existing Data

Existing data used includes scholarship on Airstreams, auto-camping history, historic preservation and nostalgia. In addition, I use historic information regarding Airstream design, craftsmanship and history from published sources. Personal observation of the subjects' four mid-century Airstreams provided significant archival research as well.

Strategies for Validating Findings

The primary method used to validate findings will be the implementation of member-checks in when the preliminary draft of the thesis is ready. These member-checks ensured that any persons interviewed feel represented in an appropriate and truthful manner. As a result, any misleading interpretation or misunderstanding of human subjects data on my part was subject to the scrutiny of the participants.

Conclusion

My thesis uses theory, historic research, interviews and personal observation to form a case study of the classic Airstream and the subculture formed through its preservation.

CHAPTER III

EXTENDING THE SCOPE OF THE VERNACULAR AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

Classic Airstream travel trailers have become an icon of mid-century American design as well as of the nation's love affair with the road. The classic mid-century Airstream is unique amongst trailers and mobile dwellings in that it has formed a subculture devoted to its preservation. As a case study, this subculture can provide valuable insight into how performance theory can enrich historic preservation of the vernacular. Theorist David Lowenthal argues that preservation's preference for material integrity has actually reduced creative communion with the past. Nostalgia is often cited as a negative component of preservation contributing to its perception as "a brake on progress."⁹ However, this thesis explores how nostalgia may have positively contributed to the strength of grassroots mid-century Airstream by incorporating principles of performance theory.

In this chapter I seek to reveal gaps in standard approaches to historic preservation that may be remedied by performance theory. I begin by briefly explaining what a vernacular approach to the mid-century Airstream entails. I will then describe problems with the existing object-oriented approach to historic preservation. The discussion then turns to performance theory and how it can contribute to a culturally-oriented approach to historic preservation. The rest of the thesis will examine the role and

⁹ David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 69.

implications of nostalgia on historic preservation in general and on mid-century Airstream preservation specifically.

The Airstream as a Vernacular Object

As a mass-produced, relatively expensive, technologically and aesthetically innovative object, the mid-century Airstream expands the boundaries of what is usually considered vernacular architecture. However, scholarship over recent decades, most notably that of Dell Upton, has reevaluated the mission of vernacular studies not to create typologies or definitions but to form a new “inclusive approach to the study of all architecture that will [eventually] eliminate the need for... an exclusive label.”¹⁰ Upton describes several “avenues of inquiry” through which can take this vernacular approach, but the two of most importance to this chapter are the object and culturally oriented approaches. Vernacular is not a definition or typology, but a method in which significance and symbolism are derived from user interaction.

An object oriented study’s overall aim is to examine “architecture to understand its makers and users, rather than making assumptions about people in order to understand their artifacts.” In other words, this is an approach to history which lets facts extend from the object in order to complete a story, rather than placing conjectural reports onto the object. The object-oriented lens is the “longest-lived strain of vernacular studies” and bears relevance to an analysis of mid-century Airstreams. These vehicular dwellings can still be “valued... for their visual appeal and as relics of the lives and ideals” of their original era as well as of contemporary users. (Note that for Lowenthal any revered historic object is a relic, including buildings and objects.) Essentially, this lens distills

¹⁰ Dell Upton. “The Power of things: recent studies in American vernacular architecture,” *American quarterly* 35, no. 3 (1983), 264.

the significance of the classic Airstream as an architectural product of its time. As a quasi art-historical mode of inquiry, this lens assumes that “a true knowledge of [the Airstream’s] sources depend[s] upon precise antiquarian knowledge.” As a result, this “avenue of inquiry” concerns itself with “origins” as well as documents (such as photos and drawings) which detail technical or aesthetic elements of the mid-century Airstream.¹¹ Within this mode of inquiry as well as vernacular studies in general, there has been a focus on domestic structures, as is the case with the Airstream.¹²

Issues Stemming from an Object-Oriented Approach:

Emphasis on Material Integrity

Much of preservation practice in the United States has focused on material integrity. Although the Secretary of the Interior Standards for preservation list seven distinct qualities of integrity¹³, material integrity usually dominates National Register nominations. Although the application of these criteria can adapt to changes to buildings Within my own experience nominating an oft-destroyed and rebuilt local landmark, convincing the State Historic Preservation Office of the object’s significance due to its integrity of association and feeling was challenging, even though the nominated object’s historic function was marked by vandalism and reconstruction. Travel trailers, as well as several emerging types of historic resources such as automobiles and aircraft, defy expectations of integrity regarding materials, setting or location. The Airstream’s function precludes any site specificity since it was intended as a *travel* trailer. The

¹¹ Ibid 264-267.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ They are: materials; design; workmanship; feeling; association; setting; and location.

continued use of an Airstream or mobile unit also demonstrates the limitations of preservation practice emphasized on material integrity. If used, the trailer will undoubtedly need parts replaced. However, my stance against the prejudice for material integrity goes beyond the specifics of portable dwellings. As David Lowenthal argues, preservation's focus on material integrity, when not balanced with cultural considerations, can actually diminishes creative communion with the past. It is worth nothing here that Lowenthal is British and writing now thirty years ago. The American National Register nomination process does allow for a degree of intellectual creativity and flexibility when dealing with the seven standards, my personal experience has led me to believe material and site integrity still take precedence.

By treating historic relics as immutable, untouchable objects, we run the risk of mummifying the past and preventing it from forming a continuum into the present and future. Despite new information and technology that provide historic insights, we are increasingly "deprived... of many modes of communion with the past that once were common." Modernity's rapid rate of obsolesce and focus on supersession has resulted in a past that seems foreign and impractical. The resulting "breach with the past... maroons us amidst a valued but ever less familiar legacy," leading to the popularity of preservation. "Bereft of creative connection with the past, we zealously save its relics."¹⁴ Preservation, then, can actually alienate us from tradition and creative communion with history. The historic objects themselves, rather than the values and ideas they contain and convey, become of the utmost importance.

¹⁴ Ibid 363-364.

Relics, when placed on metaphorical pedestal, lurk above us, praised but no longer accessible. Without incorporating the “legacy of the past into our own creative acts,” we focus on saving its vestiges, but never truly make them a part of our lives.¹⁵ “Unable to use the past creatively, we further isolate what we preserve,” seldom extending the “living virtues” of relics into everyday experience. We are not saving “ideas or culture”, but only the “property and artifacts” that belong to the past.¹⁶ Despite its problems, preservation is a vital component of the cultural landscape and heritage conservation. Rather than get rid of preservation, we need to rethink its parameters and purpose.

Creative Communion with the Past

I borrow Lowenthal’s language and theory to use the phrase “creative communion with the past”. Lowenthal himself never explicitly uses this phrase nor describes it. I define creative communion with the past to describe an interaction with historic resources in which we make the past a part of ourselves and vice versa. Creative communion uses the past as a source of inspiration and renewal for the present and/or future rather than just for entertainment or information. This creative element unites past, present and future to form a temporal continuum rather than isolate different eras from each other.

In order to creatively commune with the past, we need to reexamine the concept of tradition and the mission of preservation. Often erroneously thought of as the antithesis of progress, tradition denotes “not total or unswerving stability but the value of particular precedents.” Lowenthal cites English common law as a prime example. Although specific

¹⁵ Ibid 384.

¹⁶ Ibid 406.

laws and penalties may change regularly to meet societal needs, English common law remains a tradition because it maintains specific core values throughout time. When preservation efforts identify and propagate significant ideas, not just materials, it will allow for creative communion with the past. This includes criteria such as feeling, association and design, to preserve or to create anew. We will be “more at home with our past... when we put our stamp on it” and become a part of it as well as own it. As I will explain next, creative communion with history requires incorporating the element of performance into preservation. Both the relics themselves and the ideas they represent must be considered to create a well-rounded, non-alienating preservation practice. “Attitudes and beliefs can only be conjured from relics” but relics alone can’t express their full significance.¹⁷ Historic sites and artifacts need human interaction in order to remain viable, living links with the past rather than static, dead entities. A “living antiquity”, not separate from but a part of the commonplace, validates the present by invoking the sense of continuance of tradition.¹⁸

Performance Theory

Although an object oriented approach is crucial to understanding today’s mid-century Airstream subculture, it does not fully explain the symbolic significance of the structure nor its endurance amongst users and as a reoccurring image within American pop culture. Most importantly, an exclusively object-oriented approach can not explain why mid-century Airstreams are “considered a family heirloom while most trailers are

¹⁷ Ibid 369, 331 and 243, .

¹⁸ Ibid 405 and 40.

unlikely to yield “credit on a dealer trade” arrangement.¹⁹ Whereas the Airstream stands as a beloved, albeit arguably kitschy, icon of mid-century Americana, trailers generally often have negative stereotype (not shared by the author). Research and analysis of the subculture can be situated against the theoretical framework of Upton’s culturally oriented studies. Garfinkel’s explication of performance theory further builds upon this framework in order to help guide the questions and organization of my scholarship.

Performance theory describes the relationship between form and use so that ultimately the symbolic meaning of an object to its subculture may be understood. Defined as the “creation of meaning through use,” “the concept of performance in architecture... directly unites people with their inanimate spaces.” Meaning extends from the interactions, relationships and activities that occur between users and space. Performance “implies the intensification or completion of form” because it posits the significance of human actions onto physical form. In other words, today’s enthusiasts intensify and complete the Airstream’s form through interaction and continued use. When analyzed as an aesthetic and functional object, the mid-century Airstream conveys partial meaning, but its ultimate significance and symbolism (particularly as an object with a cult following) stems from the relationship it has to its users. How members of the subculture utilize, modify and maintain their trailer demonstrate deeper cultural values regarding aesthetics, craftsmanship, curiosity and personalization. These enthusiasts have intensified and imbued with meaning the prefabricated aluminum trailers through their relationship with the object rather than art-historical analysis.

¹⁹ Bryan Burkhart and David Hunt *Airstream: the History of the Land Yacht* San Francisco: Chronicle Books (2000), 39.

These interactions, as I will illustrate, reflect larger subcultural values embodied by the classic Airstream. The vernacular “region” in this instance is actually a “community of which the architectural structure is [made] a part” through product loyalty and adherence to a lifestyle rather than an actual physical location.²⁰ The “community begins with shared values...[not] a piece of real estate.”²¹ I will identify these “shared values” in my final two chapters through historic inquiry as well as interviews and direct observations geared towards understanding the “intentions” which performance “giv[es] physical shape.” Mid-century Airstreams in use are proof that “competence does not cease its functions once a building is finally built, nor are builders the only competent users of buildings.”²² The mid-century Airstream’s many layers of meaning and significance weren’t created exclusively on the drawing board or in the factory, but on the road and in the yards of users today. While the classic Airstream speaks volumes about its original era, an analysis of its grassroots preservation yields valuable lessons for the practice of historic preservation.

Conclusion

As vernacular studies has expanded its reach beyond the rustic barns and regional traditions with which it has long been associated, it has come to represent not a type of structure but an approach to material culture. An idiosyncratic structure, such as the classic Airstream, therefore, is best understood through a vernacular approach which finds significance and symbolism through the human interaction with physical space.

²⁰ Susan Garfinkel “Recovering Performance for Vernacular Architecture Studies” *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* Vol. 13, No. 2 (2006/2007) 106, 110 and 109.

²¹ Burkhart 141.

²² Garfinkel 110.

While direct research with members of this subculture is of utmost importance, both Upton and Garfinkel's theories provide the conceptual framework which elucidates this unique relationship between the mid-century Airstream and its modern day user cum preservationist. As I explore next, nostalgia can form the impetus for creative communion with the past. The rest of the thesis examines how the preservation of mid-century Airstreams can link past and present through the continuation of values.

CHAPTER IV

THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY: CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF NOSTALGIA

The mid-century Airstream draws much of its symbolism and popularity from nostalgia. In order to understand how nostalgia operates within the classic Airstream subculture, I first present a detailed discussion of nostalgia in this chapter, immediately followed by a chapter on Airstream history. In this chapter I will demonstrate how nostalgia can serve as an impetus for involving performance in preservation. I aim to reconceptualize nostalgia. First, I will describe the existing intellectual framework which posits nostalgia against progress and historic insight. I begin by briefly describing past conceptions of nostalgia before delving into its accepted definition and connotations, within the twentieth-century. Then I deconstruct this nostalgic framework. A new, post-modern analysis of nostalgia reveals a more nuanced concept in which nostalgia serves as critical mode of experiencing history. This re-imagined nostalgic framework can avoid forming a mummified past in lieu of a temporal continuum in which the past informs the present and future. Nostalgia, then, serves to motivate performance within preservation through its focus on subjective experience.

A Brief History of Nostalgia

The term nostalgia is etymologically derived from Greek *nostos*, to return home, and *algia*, a painful condition.²³ “Nostalgia, then, is literally the suffering due to

²³ Fred Davis *Yearning For Yesterday: a Sociology of Nostalgia*. New York: The Free Press (1979) 1.

relentless yearning for the homeland.”²⁴ Johannes Hofner, a 17th century Swiss doctor, coined the term to describe a disease caused by homesickness marked by “symptoms ranging from melancholia and weeping to anorexia and suicide.”²⁵ Although the word nostalgia wasn’t derived until the 1600s, it was “inadvertently inspired by... [a] romantic declaration” by Homer’s Odysseus.²⁶ After over a decade away from his native island, Odysseus was offered immortality by his lover Calypso, a beautiful, ageless nymph. Despite the tempting proposition, Odysseus replies: “I long for my home and to see the day of returning.”²⁷ This longing for home formed the original understanding of nostalgia to mean a “medical disease” brought on by great homesickness.²⁸

In the twentieth-century, nostalgia came to signify a psychological ailment not caused by spatial but temporal concern.²⁹ In the early 1900s, nostalgia was seen as a psychiatric disorder marked by sadness and insomnia. Towards the middle part of the century, nostalgia was “labeled... a repressive compulsive disorder” but soon “downgraded to a variant of depression, marked by loss and grief.” What remains consistent throughout nostalgia’s conceptual development was its equation with homesickness marked by a sense of loss.³⁰ However, by the end of the 20th century, the

²⁴ Constantine Sedikides, Tim Wildschut, Jamie Arndt, and Clay Routledge “Nostalgia: Past, Present, and Future” in *Current Directions in Psychological Science* Vol. 17, No. 5 (2008) 304.

²⁵ Michael Pickering and Emily Keightley “The Modalities of Nostalgia” in *Current Sociology* No. 54 (2006) 921.

²⁶ Sedikides et al 304.

²⁷ Homer *The Odyssey* translated by E. Vieuille. London: G. Bell and Sons (1921) Book V, pp. 78-79 as found in Sedikides et al.

²⁸ Sedikides et al 304.

²⁹ Pickering and Keightley 922.

³⁰ Sedikides et al 304.

loss was no longer associated with a place, but a time period. Nostalgia's "metaphorical application, associated with a sort of homesickness for a lost past, [has] become its dominant meaning in ordinary parlance. This involved a shift from spatial dislocation to temporal dislocation."³¹ The New Oxford American Dictionary defines nostalgia as a "sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past, typically for a period or place with happy personal associations."³² The lost past can be specific to one's own life or general to humankind, particularly within one's own nation or society. While the two types of nostalgia can be related, this thesis deals only with the latter. As we stand today, "nostalgia has been used in many fields of study as a critical tool to interrogate the articulation of the past in the present, and in particular, to investigate sentimentally inflected mediated representation of the past" especially when commercial interest is present.³³

Before I go on to explore how we can re-examine nostalgia in the 21st century, particularly in light of postmodernism, I'd like to present the prevailing academic stance against nostalgia and its application to historic preservation (please see glossary for distinction of modern and postmodern).

Why Do We Keep Looking Back?

The term nostalgia has developed and changed somewhat significantly since it was first coined. However, sentimental longings for the past are found throughout Western culture. The Roman poet Virgil composed nostalgic evocations of a lost past.

³¹ Pickering and Keightley 922.

³² New Oxford American Dictionary software.

³³ Pickering and Keightley 922.

Centuries later, the medieval poet Petrarch was nostalgic for Virgil's era.³⁴ On a less grand scale, Petrarch's contemporary, Dante, was nostalgic not for the values of Roman times, but those espoused during his great-grandfather's life.³⁵ What motivates nostalgia and why has it become so pervasive in recent decades?

Nostalgia is not a product of the past, but a response to the present. "What occasions us to feel nostalgic must ... reside in the present... [T]o regard [a time period] as the reason... is surely to confuse consequence with cause.... Whatever in our present evokes it, nostalgia uses the past—falsely [or] accurately... but it is not the product thereof."³⁶ The past is not the stimulus which triggers nostalgia, only its subject matter. Instead, nostalgia is thought to be fueled by "prevailing disaffection with the present and pessimism about the future." As "modernity ... [loses] its charm," the past seems more compelling.³⁷ Davis also notes how simply being of the past does not confer nostalgia. Instead nostalgia only results from a "past imbued with special qualities which... acquires its significance from... [how] we juxtapose it to certain features of the... present."³⁸ Nostalgia looks to the past, but through the lens of the present.

The major factor in the rise of nostalgia has been the ever-increasing pace of technological development. Rapid changes have made people long for familiarity amidst a constantly transforming cultural and geographic landscape. Perhaps nostalgia's shift in meaning and prevalence are due to the "dislodge[ment] [of] man's deep psychological attachment to a specific house" as a result of "constant movement in socio-geographic

³⁴ Lowenthal 8.

³⁵ Dante Alighieri, *Divine Comedy:Paradise Canto* 18.28-48

³⁶ Davis 9-11.

³⁷ Lowenthal 396 and 12.

³⁸ Davis 13.

space.”³⁹ A connection to a single location no longer becomes the focus of a highly mobile society. Instead, the desire to revisit a lost time grows in popularity as we lose a sense of temporal stability. “Nostalgia is a ... reaction to the velocity and vertigo of modern temporality,” in particular “its ... positive valuation of the temporary and transient.”⁴⁰ Technologies are continually replaced and subsequently forgotten with remarkable frequency. This valuation of the ephemeral has resulted in what postmodernism scholarship deems a “memory crisis” or social amnesia.⁴¹ Nostalgia seeks to slow down the “acceleration of historical time” in order to feel that the present “dialogue[s] with the past” through continuity.⁴² In other words, nostalgia locates the present moment along a ceaseless historical continuum back into time. By doing so, it makes the present seem more familiar and less “disposable,” a discussion to which I will return later.

Nostalgia is also partially a response to obsolescence. As the rates of innovation, obsolescence, development and longevity increase, our familiarity with our surroundings decreases, propagating our desire for stability. We live longer life spans, but there appear to be more and more distinct strata of time. Lowenthal notes how for many generations, people lived under rather similar circumstances to their forebears. Until the industrial revolution, technology certainly moved at a slower pace. At the same time, “obsolescence confers instant bygone status” almost on a wide range of material culture, including

³⁹ Ibid 6.

⁴⁰ Pickering and Keightley 922-923.

⁴¹ Paul Grainge *Monochrome Memories: Nostalgia and Style in Retro America*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers (2002) 4.

⁴² Pickering and Keightley 923.

architecture, design, technology and consumer goods.⁴³ This obsolescence has threatened a great many historic buildings and structures as they appear to be outperformed by state-of-the-art facilities. Rapid changes which render once familiar cultural landscapes unrecognizable form the impetus for nostalgia. As we will explore further, this nostalgia can itself spur the desire to preserve.

Another major factor in the rise of nostalgia was actually a shift in the understanding of history's fabric. Beginning in the late 1700s, early 1800s, people stopped seeing history as destiny unfolding, but as an "organic, multifaceted" phenomenon with unique, unrepeatable epochs. The unique and irreplaceable nature of these epochs makes relics crucial to understanding the past. It is no coincidence that this shift in the accepted view of history and its relics took place shortly after the industrial revolution. Industrialization and innovation in prefabricated technology increases the rate of obsolescence as new goods regularly enter the consumer marketplace. Items produced a decade, or even a generation ago may now seem like curios (at best) rather than useful objects. As a result, preservation of outdated but esteemed objects becomes one of the few viable alternatives to total replacement. Unable to be used, relics are instead "zealously save[d]".⁴⁴ Throughout the twentieth century, nostalgia has often informed or been used to promote preservation, usually to a great degree of criticism.

The Dangers of Nostalgic Interpretation and Preservation

Nostalgia is often seen as the antithesis of progress. If progress is marked by change, then "its orientation [is] to the future." Nostalgia's esteem of the past has caused

⁴³ Lowenthal 396, 389 and 6.

⁴⁴ Ibid 394-5, 384, 391 and 364.

its association with “progress’s conceptual opposite” and “a defeatist attitude to present and future.” It suggests that development may have failed after a preferable epoch, especially since the past is irretrievable. Nostalgic impulses may be “conservative reactions to modern times,” a way to reject change and dismiss today.⁴⁵ “The past offers an alternative to an unacceptable present. In yesterday we find what we miss today.” Nostalgic impulse can make the past a way to avoid today and tomorrow.

Historic preservation faces several perils when motivated by commercialized nostalgia. The primary peril is that a project reflects not a credible view of the past, but a modern interpretation that serves commercial, rather than educational, interest. In his preface, Lowenthal describes the past as “a foreign country whose features are shaped by today’s predilections, its strangeness domesticated by our preservation of its vestiges.” Both nostalgia and preservation afford a form of interaction and familiarity with the past, but this interaction occurs on today’s terms. The motives behind a preservation project, on any scale, will directly and indirectly “shape” the past physically and/or conceptually, resulting in “relic transformation.”⁴⁶

Nostalgia’s potential for escapism can result in one-dimensional, deceptively attractive image of history created to entertain a modern audience. As a result, within the academy, nostalgia is perceived as opposed to true historic inquiry, particularly in light of its tendency to exploit consumerism. “Perhaps the first and most obvious thing [about nostalgia]... is that it is very big business.”⁴⁷ Nostalgia is used across the board to market a variety of goods, services and experiences including heritage tourism and historic

⁴⁵Pickering and Keightley 919- 920.

⁴⁶ Lowenthal 49, xvii 264.

⁴⁷ Davis 118.

preservation. The result is an exaggeratedly “vivid” portrait of history focused on its greatest and basest features.⁴⁸ A glorified, glossy portrait of the past lacks the multiple subjective contexts within history. This type of alteration conflates the past, reducing the “diversity of previous experience either to a few themes within a narrow time span to generalized uniformity.”⁴⁹ This segmentation of the past “intensifies a superficial sense of history” ideal for nostalgic marketing strategies.⁵⁰ “If the past is a foreign country, nostalgia has made it ‘the foreign country with the healthiest tourist trade of all.’”⁵¹ The discussion now turns to two private late 20th-century preservation projects in order to illustrate the potential damages to history caused by this “tourist trade.” Both commercial districts, Gaslight and Times Squares represent romanticized, nostalgic approaches to urban renewal.

The failure of Gaslight Square, in St. Louis, MO, reveals how “nostalgic marketing formulas”⁵² in historical marketplaces must provide an escape from modern anxieties in order to succeed. Patronage dwindles when the historical marketplace is affected by prevailing social problems. For St. Louisians in the early 1960’s, racial upheaval and changing urban demographics made “the past a crucial haven”⁵³ where “nostalgia reaffirm[ed] identities bruised by recent turmoil when ‘fundamental, taken-for-

⁴⁸ Lowenthal 348.

⁴⁹ Lowenthal

⁵⁰ Grainge 28.

⁵¹ Lowenthal 4.

⁵² Alison Isenberg, *Downtown America: A History of the Place and the People Who Made It*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press (2004) 272.

⁵³ Lowenthal 11.

granted convictions... , laws, [and] society [were] challenged.”⁵⁴ Originally a countercultural hotspot located in a racially “mixed urban zone,” Gaslight Square quickly attracted the attention of white middle-class suburbanites who began to patronize the neighborhood. The original investors built “on the neighborhood’s intriguing artistic yet edgy heritage and the warm associations they personally held with the cast-off historical artifacts from local demolitions.” Turn of the century gas lamps were the “design element lending coherence”⁵⁵ and providing the “continuous soft glow of warmth and nostalgia”⁵⁶ in the loosely “Gay Nineties” themed Square. Unfortunately, even the “gimmicky historical themes” employed by later investors could not keep white middle class apprehensions at bay. “By 1968 the urban violence that had seized so many cities” caused rumors of impending unrest in the racially and economically mixed neighborhood. “The violence never came, but these rumors seemed to end any hopes for the district’s success.”⁵⁷ For the suburbanites and tourists who brought money into Gaslight Square, nostalgia was a form of escapism allowing them to forget mid-century social turbulence. When nostalgia failed to exclude these modern anxieties from Gaslight Square, patronage plummeted because the escape into Victoriana was marred by contemporary concerns. Note, however, that I will later demonstrate how a postmodern concept of nostalgia does not use the past to deny contemporary concerns but to solve them.

The comparatively more successful Times Square in New York City demonstrates the consumer’s demand for the sanitizing effects of nostalgia. The result is a “historicized

⁵⁴ Fred Davis quoted by Lowenthal 13.

⁵⁵ Isenberg 273, 277 and 279.

⁵⁶ Newspaper quoted by Isenberg 280.

⁵⁷ Isenberg 280, 281 and 283.

urban theme park” divorced from its past. Because in modernist terms, “nostalgia is memory with the pain removed,”⁵⁸ sites such as Times Square edit out significant but unattractive aspects of their history in order to appeal to middle class values. By the 1980’s, Times Square was a theater district notorious for pornography, prostitution and the associated crime. Obviously, such an environment will not draw crowds of families eager to spend money on entertainment and merchandise. As a result, “developers . . . attempted to replicate the nostalgic image of the Great White Way before it became associated with vice and update it for modern tourists. In doing so, they took the historic fabric of Times Square, sanitized it through restoration and new construction, and presented it to the public as if they were able to recapture what was lost when the theater district went into decline.” The history of Times Square has been reimagined for the sake of consumerism. No longer resembling itself socially or architecturally, the new Times Square is yet another “historicized stage set” onto which tourists can project their fantasies while buying happy meals and tickets to “Legally Blonde the Musical.” Meanwhile, New Yorkers feel alienated from Times Square as they “find in it little of what defines their city and more the corporate monoculture that one finds at manufactured destinations.”⁵⁹

When narrowly defined as a state of mind which privileges the past over the present, nostalgia provides entertainment rather than education. As a conservative reaction to a changing present, nostalgia can lead to escapism and even fantasy as seen in Gaslight and Times Square. However, a postmodern perspective of nostalgia allows for

⁵⁸ Lowenthal 7.

⁵⁹ Michael Kelleher, “Images of the Past: Historical Authenticity and Inauthenticity from Disney to Times Square,” *CRM Journal* Vol. 1, No. 2 (Summer 2004) 14-19.

greater flexibility of meaning and interaction. This postmodern interpretation can allow nostalgia to aid with some of the issues regarding historic preservation described in chapter two. As I examine in chapter five, it is this postmodern conceptualization of nostalgia that impacts the mid-century Airstream subculture.

Changing Views of Nostalgia and Potential for Creative Communion with the Past

In the second chapter, I described the often-negative consequences of preservation's excessive focus on material integrity. I then concluded that a culturally-oriented approach which incorporates performance theory allows for greater understanding of the significance of historic resources. Now I will examine how a post-modern view of nostalgia can may facilitate performance. These observations are critical to my analysis of the mid-century Airstream grassroots preservationist. First, I will begin by introducing recent, postmodern reevaluations of nostalgia and its psychological purposes and potential. This reevaluation presents a far more nuanced view of nostalgia as a means of using the past to improve the present and/or future. This discussion posits user-based experience, i.e. performance, with relics from the past. In my concluding chapter, I will present my case study of mid-century Airstream subculture within this postmodern nostalgic framework.

Twenty-first-Century Reevaluations of Nostalgia

Recent scholarship on nostalgia suggests it can function in ways beneficial to linking the present with the past. In the twentieth-century, “a dogmatic belief in progress” marked by “an ardent longing for the future” resulted in nostalgia’s stigma as progress’s “paired inversion [which] entailed only an ardent longing for the past.” However, to

“condemn nostalgia solely to this position leaves unattended not only more general feelings of regret for what time has brought, but also more general questions for how the past may actively engage with the present and future.” Positing nostalgia as merely an opposition to progress fails to examine individuals’ specific responses to the present and its perceived deficiencies. The polarity of nostalgia and progress makes it impossible for the past to function positively in the present. “The greatest temporal value in modernity is on... [the] temporary, and this disorientation from any sense of continuity or durability... [cuts] away the grounds for active dialogue between past and present. All that is left is the negativity of nostalgia.... This suggests that we need... to reconfigure the concept of nostalgia.” The modernist factors which gave rise to increased nostalgia, primarily rapid obsolescence, also condemn it as an obstacle to the future. If progress can only benefit from the next and the new, there is no need for the past nor for tradition. Those seeking active engagement or interaction with the past, therefore, are deemed escapists or anti-progress. But what if nostalgia’s focus is not merely an idealized, unattainable past but a present and future grounded in continuity of shared values?

A postmodern reevaluation of nostalgia identifies two distinct but interrelating and often co-existing nostalgic modes, one “melancholic” and the other “utopian.” Both modes offer insight into user-based perceptions of the present and the past. “Past-fixated melancholic reactions to the present” that characterize the first mode are essentially a response to loss. Modernity’s emphasis on “relentless supersession” “leaves no space... for dealing with the experience of loss.”⁶⁰ Within this culture of obsolescence and change, there is constant loss of cultural expressions, particularly the material. There

⁶⁰ Pickering and Keightley 920-921.

appears to be no sense of tradition or even similarity between yesterday, today and tomorrow. The melancholic mode of nostalgia illustrates a specific dissatisfaction with the present; the lack of a sense of historical continuity. “Distinct from antiquity... continuity implies a living past bound up with the present, not one exotically different or obsolete.”⁶¹ The second, “utopian” mode of nostalgia responds to this loss of continuity not through a futile attempt to return to the past, but by recognizing “aspects of the past as the basis for renewal and satisfaction in the future.... This opens up a positive dimension in nostalgia, one associated with desire for engagement with difference, with aspiration and critique, and with the identification of ways of living lacking in modernity.”⁶² Nostalgia offers users subjectively based experiences of “engagement”, “aspiration,” “critique,” and “identification” with the past. Therefore, nostalgia can provide the opportunity for performance within preservation.

Nostalgia can be reevaluated not as a longing for an idealized past but as a way for the present to interact and connect with the past. As a result, nostalgia suggests that moving forwards, i.e. progress, can benefit from looking at the past. Grainge notes that although often associated with conservatism, nostalgia is actually apolitical, often evoked by both dominant and subordinate groups to enable or disable current power structures for reasons both progressive and revolutionary.⁶³ In other words, nostalgia has often been used as a tool for social change by seeking to restore lost or subverted values, as done by Renaissance artist with regards to classical realism.⁶⁴ In this regard, nostalgia

⁶¹ Lowenthal 61.

⁶² Pickering and Keightley 921.

⁶³ Grainge 26.

⁶⁴ Lowenthal 41.

links past and future via the present. As a subjective experience, nostalgia takes different forms, including not just a “desire to return to an earlier state or idealized past” but also “the desire not to return but to recognize aspects of the past as the basis for renewal and satisfaction in the future. Nostalgia can then be seen as not only a search for ontological security in the past, but also as a means of taking one’s bearings for the road ahead in the uncertainties of the present.”⁶⁵ Nostalgia can mitigate aspects of the present that appear to be lacking by incorporating select, ameliorating aspects of the past into the future. Although it often relies on relics and sites, as in my case-study, nostalgia is often the desire “for past thoughts rather than past things.”⁶⁶ The positive values associated with the past (aesthetic, economic, material etc.) are exemplified by relics such as the mid-century Airstream as I will demonstrate in detail in chapter five.

This postmodern conceptualization of nostalgia, characterized by its dual nature, can allow for performance by illustrating how the past is not a singular, static entity, but one dynamically formed through cultural memory performance. “Rethinking nostalgia... means overcoming the opposition[s] between history and memory [and] melancholia and utopia.”⁶⁷ Overcoming the polarization between history and memory seems contradictory to historical inquiry’s ideal of objectiveness. However, Lowenthal argues that scholarly attempts against bias have made our “view of the past more self-conscious” but not less objective.⁶⁸ Within a postmodern context, true objectivity is not truly possible because all experience (past and present) is filtered through the subjective lenses of its various users.

⁶⁵ Pickering and Keightley 921.

⁶⁶ Lowenthal 8.

⁶⁷ Pickering and Keightley 937.

⁶⁸ Lowenthal 368.

To assert there is one objective historical truth is to assume only one accurate perception of the past, denying the wealth of varied subjective experiences and memories that together form history. Like commercial exploitations of nostalgia, what I call the objectivity fallacy also involves “idealization” and simplification of the past.⁶⁹ This fallacy posits “history as something that exists independent of people’s perceptions and interpretations,” while assuming there is “some authority who can legitimately declare others’ views of history as ‘accurate’” or not.⁷⁰ Although nostalgia can be used for commercial exploitation and neo-conservative politics, to regard it merely as “history’s negativized Other” denies nostalgia any possible positive function. My solution is to recognize rather than deny our biases when examining history and to openly acknowledge our subjective positions and motives.

Nostalgia fosters creative communion because it provides a means of locating the present and future along a continuum of history with a focus on subjective experience. In this sense, nostalgia can mitigate preservation’s focus on material integrity by forming a living past symbolized by functioning relics, rather than an obsolete, static past.

“Memory, history and relics offer routes to the past best traversed in combination.”⁷¹

Relics, such as the mid-century Airstream, trigger collective recollections affirmed and extended into time by history. Nostalgia illustrates how “the future doesn’t come into being through forgetting ... the past, especially when the present is judged to be in some

⁶⁹ Pickering and Keightley 934.

⁷⁰ Caton and Santos 372.

⁷¹ Lowenthal 368.

way deficient, the imperative concern is then with forward-looking uses of the past, of the past as a set of resources for the future.”⁷²

When nostalgia recognizes its own bias and uses the past for creative solutions to the present, the results are often dynamic, as seen in the artistic and architectural achievements of the Italian Renaissance. A “key function of nostalgia is that it may facilitate continuity between past and present selves” on the personal and collective level in order to “bolster a sense of continuity and meaning” for the present.⁷³ When the “reciprocal movement” between melancholic and utopian impulses “is operative, nostalgia becomes an action rather than an attitude.” Based on “its applications,” nostalgia becomes a reflexive way to understand how the past and present operate on each other in order to find solutions.⁷⁴ This potential forms nostalgia’s ability to “spark inspiration and foster creativity.”⁷⁵ “The acknowledgement of what is involved in creating and sustaining a relationship between past and present makes it possible for us to conceptual nostalgia as a critical tool and distinguish between positive, productive, active uses of the past and those which are sterile [and] impotent.”⁷⁶ Through specific analysis of nostalgic uses of the past, we can decode the full symbolism and relevance of preserved relics.

⁷² Pickering and Keightley 937.

⁷³ Sedikides et al 306.

⁷⁴ Pickering and Keightley 937.

⁷⁵ Sedikides et al 306.

⁷⁶ Pickering and Keightley 938.

Practical Application and Analysis

Before examining my own case study, I will first analyze a similar case-study regarding heritage tourism along Route 66 within this postmodern framework of nostalgia. Using the modernist definition of nostalgia as “a longing for [an idealized] past... evoked by discontent or anxiety over present conditions,” Canton and Santos’s case-study “Heritage Tourism on Route 66: Deconstructing Nostalgia” disproved criticism of heritage tourism as “being driven by nostalgia.” However, to re-evaluate their research and conclusions using a postmodern definition demonstrates not only the presence of nostalgia, but how it operates as a form of critique. This nostalgic framework retains the study’s view of nostalgia as “distinctive from other subjective states oriented to the past... because it is necessarily comparative and value-laden” but not the assertion that it requires “filtering” the negative. Instead, nostalgia motivated by utopian ideals “juxtapose[s] particular constructions of the past with particular constructions of the present” through performance.⁷⁷ Ultimately, this form of nostalgia seeks solutions to present and future problems, not a retreat into the past. Critique is a form of performance which engages the past and present in order to formulate values, identity, and even community. Postmodern nostalgic experiences, like those of the Route 66 study, focus on user-based perspectives of history.

The view of nostalgia espoused by the Route 66 researchers, as well as many critics, “fail[s] to recognize the agency of the audience by reducing them to an unthinking collectivity who passively absorb the meanings communicated to them..., thus denying

⁷⁷ Caton and Santos 372.

them a role in meaning-making processes.”⁷⁸ Sources used to criticize the use of nostalgia at Times Square and Gaslight Square failed to discover the specific, subjective experiences of tourists/users. Popular media portrayals of tourists in Times Square depict them as generally naïve and uneducated consumers lacking a critical eye.⁷⁹ The act of temporal juxtaposition and valuation of nostalgia can actually serve as a way to engage with the past and dispel romantic notions of the past. Canton and Santos were right to question previous critics’ assertions that “the visitor’s desire for nostalgia is fulfilled by their experiences traveling along Route 66,” perpetuating and reaffirming “the collective mythology of Route 66 as a symbol of an idealized, romanticized American past.”⁸⁰ Although rose-colored glasses tinge much of popular culture, promotional literature surrounding Route 66, and the mid-twentieth-century in general, users’ specific experiences and perceptions actually served as critiques of the past and present based on empirical observations.

While certain historical values may be appreciated, others may be deemed deserving of supersession. In this sense, nostalgia becomes a form of cultural editing and identity formation. I agree with the researchers’ conclusion that nostalgia theory’s “problems” resulted in too “narrow [a] conceptualization of... [user] experience”. Unlike the authors, however, it is my argument that we must first redefine and re-conceptualize nostalgia itself in order to derive the true significance and motivations of users of Route

⁷⁸ Pickering and Keightley 933.

⁷⁹ Note the intended irony of the popular *The Office* Episode Season 2 Episode 16 in which the buffoonish and ignorant protagonist describes the Sbarro pizza chain in Times Square as his favorite authentic New York experience. The audience would only understand the full humor of the situation if it is generally accepted that Times Square is highly commercialized and not truly reflective of New York City culture.

⁸⁰ Canton and Santos 374.

66 and other relics of mid-century Americana. Canton and Santos found that the Route 66 tourist's "experience was about connecting with history, not by romanticizing the past as a lost golden era, but by choosing to participate in an ongoing, dynamic cultural legacy, which is rooted in the past but continues to spur new encounters that become part of the participant's biographies in the present. In this case, heritage tourism, often portrayed as a past-oriented endeavor, provided the raw material for active self-making, a future-oriented pursuit."

Through interviews, researchers found that tourists along Route 66 used the experience not to revisit an idealized past, but gained historical insights through subjective, critical experience. "Participants expressed an interest in history as a motivating factor of their Route 66 travels and thought they had gained historical insight from the experience in accord with their own areas of interest... specifically, they mentioned gaining historical insight as a function of their chosen mode of transportation." However, participants' comments did not idealize the past, but used experience to interpolate what the Route 66 experience may have been like in the past. Participants noted that the heat and general driving conditions would have been extremely unpleasant for previous generations with older cars that lacked air conditioning. This direct experience led participants to "understand why, historically, many people had chosen to drive the desert stretches of Route 66 at night."⁸¹ One participant who rode 66 exclusively on her motorcycle (lacking air-conditioning) "thought she could relate in some small way to some of the challenges faced by drivers of the past" due to the discomfort of her drive. Other participants observed that although

⁸¹ Ibid 384.

today the drive, under present conditions, is overall “relaxing, enjoyable and safe for motorcyclists,” when it was a “commissioned highway” “throughout much of the 1940s, 50s and 60s, Route 66 was choked with traffic” and not nearly as pleasant for tourists. “Thus, while the participants saw themselves as participating in a legacy of travel, they did not... confuse the experiences available today with those... [of] the past. Rather, they saw the corridor as an evolving place that offers a different, and highly valuable, set of experiences for tourists today than... in the past.” Participant’s direct interaction with Route 66 juxtaposes past and present values, the hallmark of nostalgic experience. However, this juxtaposition doesn’t automatically aggrandize the past, but allows the present-day user to critically imagine subjective historic experiences.

Nostalgia along Route 66 also provides critical examinations of the present. Within nostalgia’s juxtaposition of values, this examination allows users to determine lost elements of the past that would improve the future. Tourists along the historic corridor reported that they “did not enjoy visiting Route 66’s attractions solely because they found them entertaining....” For them “the attractions also represented something that was missing in the geography and consumer alternatives of their ordinary lives and vacation experiences: uniqueness and individuality.” Through temporal juxtaposition, nostalgia experience allowed participants to identify specific values missing from the current cultural landscape. Driving along Route 66 became a way to reincorporate these missing features into the participants’ lives and identities. American participants cited the difference between the independently owned and unique businesses along the corridor and the “ubiquitous corporate presence that dominates their everyday landscapes and consumer experiences, rendering them generic and monotonous.” Driving Route 66, then, became a form of revival, bringing back the desire for “unique local businesses” that

once marked America, now replaced with big box chains.⁸² It is within this framework that we see the utopian aspects of nostalgia in action.

Conclusion

Although the details specific to tourists along Route 66 may not directly correlate to mid-century Airstream preservation, the underlying motives and concepts remain constant. As I will examine in my final chapter, mid-century Airstream preservation contains many of the utopian drives inherent to a post-modern understanding of nostalgia. In addition, mid-century Airstream preservation provides its users with critical insight into the past as well as forming a sense of temporal continuity.

⁸² Caton and Santos 376-380.

CHAPTER V

AIRSTREAM HISTORY THROUGH 1969

This chapter discusses the history of the Airstream through 1969 applying Upton's two aforementioned vernacular lenses, the object-oriented and culturally-oriented. As a material object, the Airstream is marked by its design and craftsmanship. The subsequent chapter illustrates how these art-historical considerations inform mid-century Airstream preservation today. In addition, through the 1950s, Airstream's founder, Wally Byam, accommodated and fostered a set of values centered on his travel trailer. Many of these values remain present within today's classic Airstream subculture. The 1950s and 60s the formation of values that now inform a subculture. [Something is missing in the previous sentence. Please fix or delete.] An important source to understanding these values is Byam's 1961 book, *Trailer Travel: Here and Abroad*. Although his publication was about trailer travel in general, its ideals no doubt describe the product Byam himself manufactured. The classic Airstream represents not only wanderlust but also comfort, personalization, curiosity, sociability and durability.

The Origins of Early American Auto-Camping

Before examining the Airstream itself, one must first situate the iconic trailer against the larger historic backdrop of American auto-camping. Already by the early twentieth century, the "lure of the open road" caused "urban vacationers to imitate gypsies" by traveling first in wagons then early automobiles in order to see the American countryside. Most of these tourists slept outdoors or in hotels as the motor vehicles

themselves were poor shelters.⁸³ As car ownership steadily increased from less than 500,000 in 1910 to 22,000,000 in 1935, so too did the popularity of auto-camping. In 1922, the New York Times remarked on the phenomena with its estimate that approximately 5,000,000 cars were used for camping.⁸⁴ In order to meet the growing demand, several companies during this decade were producing tent-trailers, which were collapsible tents attached to a two wheel trailer.⁸⁵ Meanwhile, house-cars, which merged the chassis of a vehicle with a rear living compartment, became more practical and popular as highways improved and more Americans spent leisure time on the road.

It was during the 1920s that the travel-trailer surfaced but it was not until the 1930s that it truly gained notice. Early trailer development had “emerged in a period of... prosperity, evolved into an industry during the depths of the Great Depression” and transcended “from a curiosity to a fad and finally a national movement.” Until the mid-1930s, about three quarters of all trailers were either do-it-yourself or custom jobs built with few regulatory restrictions.⁸⁶ Beginning in the mid-1930s however, the popularity of factory-made trailers grew so much that they comprised one of the few growth industries during the Depression.⁸⁷ In 1932, there were less than forty-eight trailer manufactures, growing to eight hundred in 1936 and back to thirty in 1940.⁸⁸ Trailer parks and

⁸³ White 3 and 11.

⁸⁴ Wallis 33-34.

⁸⁵ White 32.

⁸⁶ Wallis 38, 45, 68 and 39.

⁸⁷ White 72.

⁸⁸ Burkhart 28.

campsites developed during this time period as well due to “those seeking community and the latest in unfettered automobility.”⁸⁹

This phenomena disturbed many public health and land use officials, resulting in stigmatization of “trailerites” in certain locations. In order to associate themselves with advanced industrialization, Depression era trailer companies emphasized a “romantic fascination with technology” which was expressed through the use of streamlined, yacht, airplane and train motifs.⁹⁰ Kingston Heath noted during a lecture that, outside of the museum, modernism in America was most visible in domestic applications of industrial design, such as appliances and garages.⁹¹ The streamlined trailer, with the Airstream arguably as its epitome, literally fused streamlined industrial design with the domestic to form Corbusier’s ideal “machine for living.”⁹² If this particular machine facilitated a particular lifestyle, the patterns of that lifestyle are embedded in the design details.

Distinctions

As auto-camping developed, different forms emerged which must now be distinguished from each other. The travel trailer, such as the Airstream, is a miniature apartment towed by a vehicle. A motor home, house car or recreational vehicle differs in that the apartment and vehicle are unified. A mobile or trailer home is a portable and pre-manufactured dwelling similar to a trailer in construction, but intended to serve as a permanent residence. (They are sometimes referred to as trailers, but not in this thesis.)

⁸⁹ Warren James Belasco *Americans on the Road: From Autocamps to Motel, 1910-1945* Cambridge, MA: MIT Pres, (1979).

⁹⁰ Wallis 73 and 47-49.

⁹¹ Class Lecture by Kingston Heath, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR, 2 June 2010.

⁹² Private Conversation with Kingston Heath, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR March 2010.

Byam explicitly preferred travel trailers to the related architectural products. He described mobile homes as means of creating “submarginal housing beyond the reach of building inspectors.” He opined that any trailer greater than thirty feet in length should be considered a mobile home. Byam disparaged the motor home’s impracticality as the “entire outfit” must move together like a “miniature Greyhound bus”.⁹³

Airstream’s Origins

The Airstream developed as the “classic streamlined trailer” of the Depression era, although its prototype was not originally known as the Airstream nor Byam’s brainchild.⁹⁴ W.H. Bowlus, an aircraft engineer and pilot, saw the need for mobile housing and developed a trailer prototype which would later become the iconic Airstream Clipper.⁹⁵ His early 1930s experiment produced an ostrich egg shaped wooden frame inside a “heavy canvas ‘sock’” resulting in a unified body distinct from other trailers (see figure one). He had key advantages over his competitors: technological training, sophisticated facilities and financial backing from William Dupont. Bowlus soon pioneered the use of a frame and body made of Duraluminum, a lightweight alloy as strong as steel but with aluminum’s benefits of no shrinking, rusting or squeaking. The technological innovation and ingenuity made the futuristic fantasy of streamlined design a physical reality in the form of the Bowlus Road Chief. Despite good sales of four trailer models, Bowlus’ extravagant tastes as well as poor market considerations drove the company into bankruptcy in 1935.⁹⁶ A salesman for the Bowlus company, Wally Byam

⁹³ Byam 21, 55 and 232.

⁹⁴ Wallis 54.

⁹⁵ Burkhart 5.

⁹⁶ Ibid 66-67.

took over and continued production. It was Byam’s genius, both as a designer and marketer, that led Airstream to become an American icon.

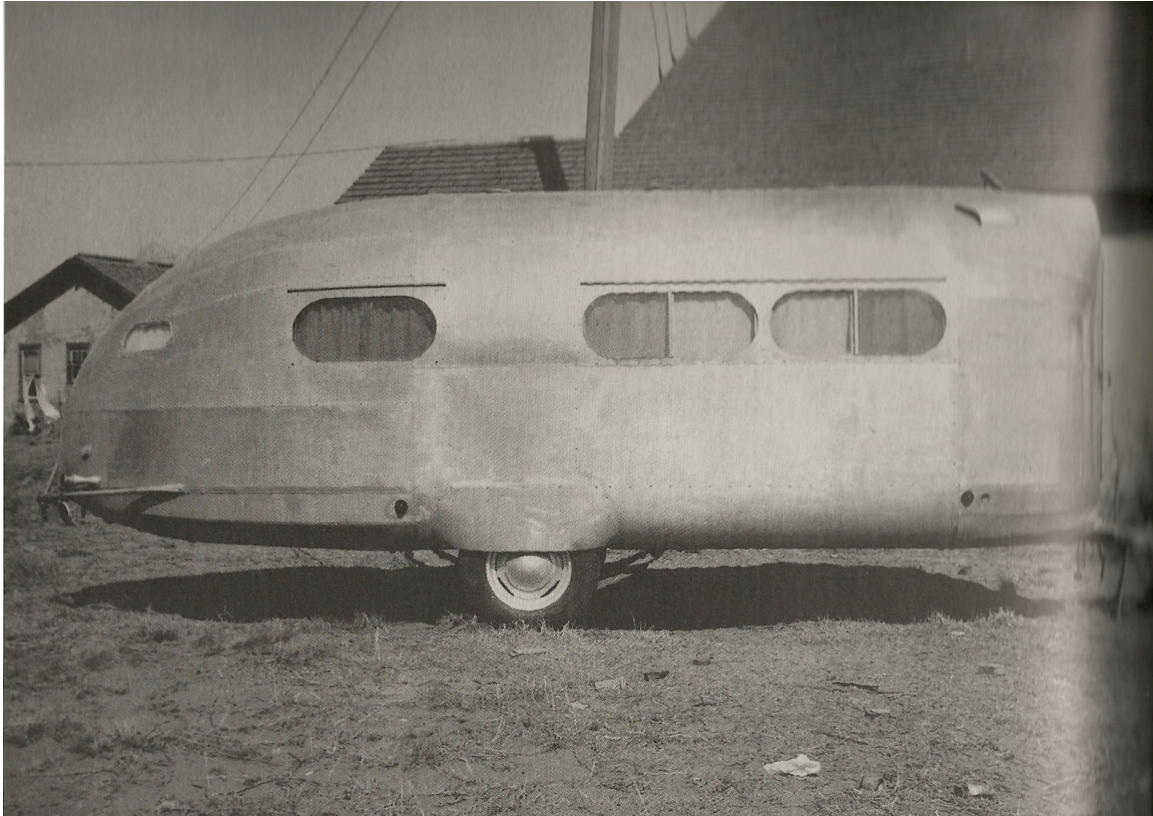


Figure 1: The Bowlus Road Chief’s engineering and design principles would later form the Airstream. from Bryan Burkhart and David Hunt *Airstream: the History of the Land Yacht*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books (2000) 64.

Enter Wally Byam

Byam’s interest in trailer manufacturing began long before his involvement with Bowlus. Before returning to the Airstream itself, we must examine Byam’s own history. His biography is vital to understanding not his design improvements, but also the culture and community which formed around the mid-century Airstream, then and now. In a sense, Wally Byam’s character formed an integral part of the classic Airstream’s character as he designed and promoted it in a deeply personal way. He was “completely hands-on” in all aspects of Airstream’s production, including delivery, customer

relations, engineering and financing.⁹⁷ Part of Airstream's iconic status is derived from its association with the larger than life Byam (see figure two).

Byam's early life is the fitting start for the entrepreneur of a legendary American travel trailer. He was born Wallace Byam on July 4th, 1896 in Baker City, Oregon. His mother and biological father divorced shortly after, and at age nine, Wally moved to the coastal town of Astoria.

Already by this young age, Byam's curiosity and wanderlust already manifested themselves. He recalls watching sailing ships and getting "terrifically itchy... to go places and see

things."⁹⁸ As I will discuss later, this sense of curiosity and desire for travel is one of the values the Airstream came to represent. Perhaps the childhood experience most influential on his later career, at twelve, Byam's uncle gave him the responsibility of herding a flock of sheep in the mountains of eastern Oregon and western Idaho.⁹⁹ It was then that he learned to independently "camp, pack a pack train... go anywhere and do anything and how to take care of [himself] outdoors."¹⁰⁰ He demonstrated his desire for travel again at fourteen when he joined a fishing fleet to Alaska, a feat he repeated the following year. By age 19, Byam had already lost his stepfather and his mother. A personal letter by Byam in 1916 revealed his goal to "make history" and cultivate a memory. Shortly after, he graduated Jefferson high school in Portland and enrolled in



Figure 2: Wally Byam from www.airforums.com accessed on February 20 2011.

⁹⁷ Interview with Dale Schwamborn , telephone, February 2, 2011.

⁹⁸ Burkart, 30-32 and 89.

⁹⁹ Dale Schwamborn.

¹⁰⁰ Private letter by Wally Byam as cited by Banham 32.

Stanford University, where he earned a bachelor's of history while also running a successful concession stand. After graduating in 1921, Byam moved to Los Angeles and after failing to launch a career in film, successfully pursued a career in publishing.¹⁰¹ It was during the 1920s that his passion for trailer travel blossomed, eventually transforming itself into the Airstream company.

Byam's vocation as a publisher and hobby as a "backyard mechanic" merged together. Byam stated that his "love for trailer travel preceded [his] interest in manufacturing trailers," with his "enthusiasm" largely outweighing his "commercial interest."¹⁰² Although his childhood had installed a great appetite for outdoor activities, Byam's first wife disliked the rigors of camping so he set out to create a self-contained trailer.¹⁰³ He began building his own simply because there were "none on the market at the time" which met his needs. He experimented with "boxes, tents and trailer bodies on Model T chassis in an effort to solve problem of mobile living," resulting in several innovations. His "milestone" achievement at the time was to drop the floor between axles in order to raise the ceiling and create enough space to install a table with an inset wash-basin, a gas-stove, a bed and even an ice-box. Although he was still a publisher, he began spending "more and more time on [his] hobby", eventually writing a d-i-y article for *Popular Mechanics*. When requests for more detailed instructions flooded his mailbox, Byam saw the opportunity to capitalize on what had hitherto been his avocation, publishing and selling a "little booklet [which gave] precise directions." When Byam began to receive orders for custom-built trailers, he hired one employee and "sold

¹⁰¹ Banham 32-34.

¹⁰² Byam 5.

¹⁰³ Burkhart 35.

[trailers] on order.” In 1930, he stopped publishing and made trailers his full-time profession (see figure three).¹⁰⁴ During this time, Byam began to work as a salesman for Bowlus. During the Bowlus-Teller company’s bankruptcy auction in 1935, Wally purchased the company, acquiring the “tooling and inventory” as well as its workforce.¹⁰⁵ Byam was about to unleash a legend into the world.



Figure 3: An early 1930s custom built Airstream. from Bryan Burkhart and David Hunt *Airstream: the History of the Land Yacht*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books (2000) 35.

¹⁰⁴ Byam 5 and 12-18.

¹⁰⁵ Banham 46.

Airstream Is Born

The very first Airstream travel trailer, the Clipper, was introduced in 1936 (see figure three). Although it inherited many design features of its predecessor, the Bowlus Road Chief, the Clipper was more livable. Byam's motto was "let's not make any changes—let's only make improvements."¹⁰⁶ Byam introduced a few key design elements, moving the entrance door from the front to the side of the trailer and installing Sea-Pak insulation between its previously empty walls. Since 1936, there have only been five moderate body changes to the Clipper. Influenced by "forward-looking, streamlined aesthetics" of art deco and modernism space and automobile design, Byam set out to "pragmatically create something light, sturdy and aerodynamic" .

Like the Road Chief, the Clipper was "aerodynamically curved, all aluminum" with a "riveted body on a frame of welded tubes" and "asymmetrical ends" (see figure four). The Clipper was considered very "modern" despite lacking a toilet. Inside could sleep four, thanks to a "steel framed dinette that converted to a



Figure 4: A 1936 Airstream Clipper. from Bryan Burkhart and David Hunt Airstream: the History of the Land Yacht. San Francisco: Chronicle Books (2000) 71.

bed" and also featured its own water supply, an enclosed galley, electric lights and advanced ventilation as well as air-conditioning. Popularly known today as the 'Rolls Royce of trailers', the Airstream was and remains a relatively expensive brand, with the Clipper costing \$1,200 in 1936. Nonetheless, it was an "instant sensation" even

¹⁰⁶ Burkhart 40.

purchased by President Cardenas of Mexico within its first year of production. Other customers ranged from “workmen to professionals.” The first Airstreams were not highly standardized, so “nearly every early Airstream was a one-of-a-kind trailer.” Later that year, Airstream introduced the Silver Cloud model, which had added “livability features”.¹⁰⁷ Despite its commercial appeal and success during the great depression, the Airstream was not immune to the effects of World War II.

Although the Second World War essentially put Airstream production on hold, it gave Byam the experience and connections from which he would later benefit. In 1941, aluminum was classified as a rationed substance to be used for military purposes only. Although this hurt Airstream production, Byam never considered substituting Duraluminum with another material. Although the U.S. Medical Corps purchased fifteen Airstreams for use as mobile hospital units, the company’s production basically came to a halt.¹⁰⁸ Forced to seek income elsewhere, Byam, as well as many of his former employees, worked in California’s “sprawling aviation industrial complex,” eventually landing a job as a certified manufacturing engineer and production supervisor at Curtiss-Wright.¹⁰⁹

After the war ended, Byam used his relationship with Curtiss-Wright to gain the resources necessary to push Airstream from a “regional upstart to a national powerhouse.”¹¹⁰ In 1945, he persuaded the company to allow him to use one of their idle Los Angeles plants to manufacture Airstream Clippers. By 1947, however, Byam and

¹⁰⁷ Banham 41-47.

¹⁰⁸ Burkhart 75 and 32.

¹⁰⁹ Banham 52-53.

¹¹⁰ Burkhart 76.

Curtiss-Wright parted ways on bad terms due to a contract dispute. Byam formed the Wallace Manufacturing company which produced the Airstream Liner. (Curtiss-Wright maintained the rights to the Clipper until selling it to Silver Streak in 1949, a company which went out of business in 1974.)¹¹¹ Byam made excellent use of the engineering knowledge he gained while still employed by the aviation industry. He pioneered the use of two nested aluminum shells filled with aerocore fiberglass insulation, a material impervious to flame, water, pests or settling.¹¹² The Airstream Liner was lighter than the Clipper as well as cheaper to make because its “identical, curved aluminum ends in [the] front and rear” greatly simplified production.¹¹³ In 1948, Byam acquired a factory in Van Nuys, California and formed Airstream Trailers, Incorporated which bought out the assets of Wallace Manufacturing.¹¹⁴ The post-war era saw a boom in the demand for trailers as well as of Airstream innovation and popularity (see figure five).

Airstream Development and Innovation Through the 1950s

During the 1950s, the Airstream was essentially reborn and transformed into the American icon admired and collected today. Byam was able to outpace competitors with design innovations largely influenced by aircraft.¹¹⁵ The design changes to the Airstream Liner were significant but subtle. Byam introduced the use of hydraulic brakes instead of electric; a copper and bronze waste-holding tank; galvanized steel showers; interior cabinetry made of mass-produced wood veneers; and a 120 volt electric system. The

¹¹¹ Banham 53-54.

¹¹² Burkhart 75.

¹¹³ Banham 54.

¹¹⁴ Burkhart 78 and Banham 54.

¹¹⁵ Burkhart 78.

1951 Airstream Flying cloud was the first in the trailer industry to use a ladder frame instead of a weaker center-pole frame. The Flying Cloud also featured an A-shaped tongue hitch and flatter ends resulting in more space and headroom.¹¹⁶ In 1952, Byam acquired a new factory located in Ohio to meet the increased demand, particularly on the east coast.¹¹⁷ By 1955, Airstream's profits more than doubled to \$620,000,000 from \$146,000,000 a decade prior.



Figure 5: Wally Byam and his wife Stella in the early 1950s outside the Airstream plant in California. from www.airforums.com accessed on February 20 2011.

Improvements to Airstream design in the 1950s focused on increased performance and livability. Innovations included the creation of a completely flat underbelly, greatly reducing wind-resistance, and the inclusion of an eighteen-by-forty inch escape window in the trailer's rear in case the side door was jammed.¹¹⁸ Byam greatly increased the

¹¹⁶ Banham 71.

¹¹⁷ Burkhardt 78.

¹¹⁸ Banham 84 and 71.

Airstream's durability by welding the bumper directly to the chassis, reducing its chances of breaking off when towed uphill.¹¹⁹ The introduction of a pressurized water system with the International model in 1957 made Airstream the first fully self-contained travel trailer, meaning there was no dependence on any external hookups.¹²⁰ The decade saw the production of seven different Airstream Liners, each named after a type of wind and available with a variety of interior color palettes.¹²¹ Although Airstream's form always followed function, Byam was well-aware of the need to create a beautiful object in addition to a well-engineered one. In 1953, Byam attended Copenhagen's International Trailer Rally and described his desire to incorporate the "refinements" of French trailer interiors which he likened to "Dior or Schiaparelli creation[s]."¹²² Much of the success of the Airstream was and is due to its distinct appearance which allowed Byam to capitalize on visual character.¹²³ It is this elegant relationship between aesthetics and performance which has captivated today's classic Airstream subculture.

¹¹⁹ Burkhart 80.

¹²⁰ Banham 71.

¹²¹ Banham 54.

¹²² Personal letter by Wally Byam as quoted in Banham 79.

¹²³ Burkhart 69.

Byam Begins a Subculture: Traveling by Airstream as a Way of Life

International Caravans

Byam's unique genius as an entrepreneur truly manifested itself in his ability to promote the Airstream as more than an object, but a means towards a new lifestyle. In particular, Byam's leadership of Airstream caravans¹²⁴ from 1951 through 1960 helped gain visibility, publicity and even technological advancement. In his personal life, Byam had divorced his first wife by 1951 and a year later remarried Estella "Stella" Hall, a "fun-loving and free-spirited" woman who "shared his love of the outdoors". After touring Europe by Airstream in 1948, Byam was convinced that his trailer could go anywhere.¹²⁵ In order to inspire his customers to make the most of his trailer, Byam organized a group of sixty-four trailers, mainly Airstreams, for a trip through Mexico and Latin America via the Pan American Highway. The travelers represented nearly all "walks of life" including army and navy personnel, doctors, teachers, farmers, businessmen and bankers. The trip was so arduous that only fourteen of the group completed the entire three-month route. However, less than a year later, Byam led his second caravan in which he formulated the best "techniques" for governing these trailer journeys such as "democratic" meetings with votes on important decisions.¹²⁶ These

¹²⁴ A caravan is a group of trailers traveling together single-file along an agreed route.

¹²⁵ Banham 80 and 57.

¹²⁶ Byam 27-28 and 48-49.

meetings became known as “bull sessions” and provided Byam with the direct customer feedback which allowed him to determine, anticipate and solve manufacturing problems.

The caravans were not merely vacations for Byam, but an opportunity to better his business through publicity, visibility and “field test[s]”.¹²⁷ In fact, a real vacation away from it all for Wally was to tent camp in the high sierras with his two burros.¹²⁸

The caravans “invite[d] people into a lifestyle” which required a product purchase. Byam continued to lead international caravans through every continent except Antarctica until shortly before his death in 1962 (see figure



Figure 6: The Airstream caravan from Capetown to Cairo led from 1959 to 1960. from www.airforums.com accessed on February 20 2011.

seven). His 1955 caravan through Central America was covered by *National Geographic*, the same year in which the Wally Byam Caravan Club was formed.¹²⁹ Trailer magazines had already given great attention to these caravans.¹³⁰ In 1962, the addition of Canadian chapters required the name changed to Wally Byam Caravan Club International (WBCCI) an organization which remains in operation today.¹³¹

Byam fulfilled a lifelong dream when led his most famous caravan in 1959 from Capetown, South Africa to Cairo, Egypt (see figure six).¹³² While in Ethiopia, the

¹²⁷ Banham 57 and 65.

¹²⁸ Dale Schwamborn.

¹²⁹ Banham 65 and 79.

¹³⁰ Byam 49.

¹³¹ Banham 82.

¹³² Ibid 65.

caravan stayed at the private grounds of leader Haile Sallassie who himself toured an Airstream (see figure seven). He not only met with the trailerites, he toured the Airstreams.¹³³ In Egypt, the group received permission from the department of antiquities to park at the foot of the great pyramids. There, caravanners were greeted by a view of the pyramids just by opening the front door.¹³⁴ Through the international caravans, Byam “tapped into something more than basic human wanderlust... he had created a cultural phenomenon” which associated Airstream with unique and unparalleled adventure.¹³⁵

¹³³ Dale Schwamborn.

¹³⁴ Dale Schwamborn.

¹³⁵ Banham 81-84.



Figure 7: Emperor of Ethiopia Haile Selassie tours an Airstream in 1959. from www.airforums.com accessed on February 20 2011.

Trailer Travel in the United States

Although it was the international caravans of the 1950s that helped Airstream to become mainstream, Byam envisioned his trailers as an vital means of exploring the United States. Byam devoted the majority of his book to describing the international caravans, but noted that those journeys were best for experienced caravanners while for “99%” of American families, trips abroad were not affordable or feasible. As a result, the most likely use of an Airstream trailer would be to tour the United States. “Trailer should begin at home” in the states since it was not only cheaper and more convenient, but “necessary to our education” as citizens of the United States. Perhaps because he held a bachelor’s in history, Byam stressed the importance of viewing not only America’s natural treasures, but its historic ones as well (see figure eight). “There is just no limit to the number of fascinating trips that [could] be taken by trailer without leaving... the United States” due to an abundance of “historical sites, spectacular scenic views and interesting cultures” bound to “please everyone.” Touring by trailer, then, provided more than relaxation, but also education from the ground up. The Airstream allowed for the “most valuable experience for children today—and maybe for their parents” by forming “a deep familiarity with the history and natural wonders of their own vast native land.”¹³⁶ For Byam, trailer travel formulated a new way of understanding and interacting with one’s own country and the entire world.

¹³⁶ Byam 196 and 197.



Figure 8: A late 1960s ad depicts the freedom and comfort of traveling the United States by Airstream. from www.airstreamlife.com accessed on February 20, 2011.

As Byam was so personally involved and invested in the Airstream company and product, he outlined the basic subculture embodied by his product. He described trailer travel as not just a “hobby—it is very nearly a way of life” for those “who have the means, the leisure and the desire to discover the world in a new way—and in doing so, often discover themselves.”¹³⁷ Byam readily acknowledged that traveling by Airstream would never be available to everyone, but the “avocation of a comparative few,” in part because it necessitates at least “some little means.” However, participating in this “way

¹³⁷ Ibid vii.

of life” also demanded a certain personality, one “full of curiosity” and the desire to “see and experience more of the world in the most comfortable and independent way possible”. In order to best enjoy traveling by Airstream, “you must have the urge to get out into the world and see things and this old-time spirit of adventure seems to be diminishing.”¹³⁸ Curiosity and desire to explore were the foremost traits Byam saw in his product’s users. For Byam and his customers “adventure is where you find it—any place, every place, except at home in the rocking chair.”¹³⁹

The Four Freedoms

The major values embodied by the Airstream were best illustrated through Byam’s description of four freedoms. The first of these entailed “freedom from arrangements.” Trailer travel was “qualitatively different” than travel by plane, train or even car because there is no need to make reservations or adhere to set schedules. While Byam confessed to traveling by plane for business trips when he was “in a hurry,” it was unsuitable for vacationing. This first freedom, then, allowed for temporal and spatial flexibility. One could make or cope with spontaneous changes because the trailer was both mobile and domestic. The second freedom was the “freedom from the problems of age.” Byam notes that although lifespans were increasing, “precious little” was done to make “these extra years happier and more fruitful.” For those “still young in spirit,” trailer travel allowed for a change in scenery without sacrificing familiar comforts.

While the first and second freedoms pertained to the practical benefits of trailer travel, the subsequent two freedoms related to more personal values. The third freedom was the “freedom to know” due to the “increased opportunity to discover the world” the

¹³⁸ Byam 5-6.

¹³⁹ Byam quoted by Burkhart 17.

Airstream provided. This freedom echoed the curiosity and sense of adventure Byam saw as prerequisites for enjoying trailer travel. Byam believed that “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.” Trailer travel permitted this freedom because it allowed one to stop anywhere therefore increasing exposure to diverse landscapes and people. However, Byam did not mean that trailerites “live as the natives do... considering all the modern convenience”, but that they “get a lot closer to the country and to people than the average hotel tourist.” The first three freedoms together formed the fourth and most important, which was the “freedom for fun.” Fun was, after all, the “real reason” for choosing trailer travel in order to “relax” and “lose yourself mentally” (see figure nine). Not only was it “impossible to get bored... in a trailer” but “fun is the freedom to do as



Figure 9: An early 1960s Airstream ad illustrates the trailer’s capacity for adventure and independence. from www.airstreamlife.com accessed on February 20, 2011.

you please... this is a pretty good definition of trailer travel.” Travel trailer, as Byam saw it, was “as close to complete freedom as anyone can get” and this was “not mere empty freedom... but freedom to experience, learn and have fun”.¹⁴⁰ As my subsequent chapter will demonstrate, the spirit of these four freedoms continues to influence and motivate mid-century Airstream preservationists today. Byam also described other values his trailer embodied.

Values

Craftsmanship

Byam’s credo that “it’s better to wear out than rust out” applied to both his attitude towards living life as well as manufacturing trailers. When describing the early trailer manufacturing industry of the 1930s, Byam stated that “in those days, as today [the early 1960s], a well-built trailer was its own best salesman.”¹⁴¹ In his book, Byam stresses the importance of selecting a trailer based on excellent craftsmanship, detailing elements which were integral features to the classic Airstream design. Most important of these features was “unitized construction” in which the “body frame and shell are integrally designed and constructed so that stresses are evenly distributed throughout the entire unit.” With its monocoque design, the Airstream fit those parameters. Byam also stated that a well-built trailer be built of “load-bearing, heat-treatable [aluminum] alloy” as used in aircraft.¹⁴² Possibly justifying the relatively expensive price of the Airstream, Byam explained that higher quality trailers generally cost more than their poorly built

¹⁴⁰ Byam 6-13.

¹⁴¹ Ibid 18.

¹⁴² Ibid 64-64.

counterparts.¹⁴³ Byam was so attentive to the material quality of his product that by his death, every contingency was factored into Airstream design, so that “every square inch had a functional purpose.”¹⁴⁴ As I will discuss in the following chapter, the quality and durability of mid-century Airstream are amongst the leading factors in its survival amongst the subculture.

Personalization

In his discussion of ideal trailer floor plans, Byam expressed the need for personalization and individuality that continues to motivate mid-century Airstream preservationists today. Although Airstreams, and other trailers, came with fairly standard basic floor plans, these were intended to be easily modified “to suit individual tastes and requirements.” There were, of course, “engineering considerations” which took priority, such as placement of windows and doors so as not to weaken the structure. In addition, the weight of a trailer must be distributed evenly in order to tow well, hence why bathrooms were generally located in the rear while heavier equipment was in the front. Besides those basic engineering considerations, an Airstream was “a home” so the layout should reflect “those activities” practiced regularly while at home. As a result, there was “no such thing as ... a perfect floor plan,” but a series of different floor plans to meet different tastes and needs based on users’ “daily routines” and “habits.” Byam described several different possible layouts, each one based around an owner’s basic habits and needs. For example, a family which regularly enjoyed “sumptuous meals” needed a bigger galley to accommodate cooking complex dishes.¹⁴⁵ As I discuss in chapter five,

¹⁴³ Ibid 5.

¹⁴⁴ Burkhart 80.

¹⁴⁵ Byam 56-69.

some of today's classic Airstream enthusiasts greatly customize their trailers. The Airstream's flexibility to meet individual needs and routines was reflective of the object's overall goal of providing domestic comfort.

Comfort and Independence

Airstreams promised total domestic comfort, even community, in all surroundings and situations. Byam "wanted to expunge people's fears of travel by promising all the creature comforts of home. Airstream ads, therefore, "promised functional, efficient and safe living that would allow families ... and opportunity to discover America" and possibly beyond.¹⁴⁶ After all, the travel trailer developed in order to provide the domesticity which tent trailers could not. Byam describes the ideal trailer as one which felt "stepping into your own home" on a smaller scale. The trailer's convenience, through amenities, mobility, and eventually total self-containment, allowed for the greatest sense of comfort and freedom. With the Airstream, you could enjoy nearly all the amenities "standard in homes" while camping "in the middle of the forest."¹⁴⁷ In addition to comfort, Airstreams and trailers in general could allow for a sense of community while on the road. Caravans allowed for travel with existing friends as well as making new ones. Trailer parks, meanwhile, permitted longer stays than hotels, also making it possible to form temporary community.¹⁴⁸ Both the desire for comfort and community continue to motivate many contemporary owners and rehabilitators of mid-century Airstreams.

¹⁴⁶ Little and Brown 18.

¹⁴⁷ Byam 25-26.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid 9.

Airstream in the 1960s

Byam's Tradition Continues

The 1960s saw both Byam's death as well as the continuation of his legacy and spirit in the production of Airstreams. Prior to his death, Byam saw the creation the first small, self-contained trailer towable by a compact car, the 1961 Bambi. He died of brain cancer shortly after in 1962. Ownership of Airstream Inc. went to his wife, Stella, and a board of directors including Art Costello, plant manager of Airstream's California factory. In 1963, Costello was made the new president.¹⁴⁹ Costello's appointment was significant to maintaining the company's identity and mission as he had been hand-picked and groomed by Byam. One of Byam's strengths was his ability to choose employees he could not only trust, but who could do the job that he wanted. Costello began as Byam's stock boy in 1946 before rising through the ranks. He fully understood the trailer industry as well as Wally's love for and strong belief in Airstream. As a result, he was the ideal successor to keep on Byam's dream in the years of transition after his death.¹⁵⁰

Like Byam, Costello had experience in trailer engineering, design and mechanics. He also participated in caravans due to their "business importance." Costello's engineering background and understanding of Byam's dream resulted in innovation with only minor modifications. Byam's motto had been "let us not make any changes, only improvements" and Costello followed through with that vision. He improved certain engineering features, but not the "fundamental design" for which Airstream had already

¹⁴⁹ Banham 79 and 92.

¹⁵⁰ Dale Schwamborn.

become iconic. Some of Costello's engineering changes included converting to a uni-volt electric system which unified separate power sources and also recharged the trailer's batteries, eliminating the need for external power.¹⁵¹ Of primary importance was the introduction of "dura-torque axle" running gear which eliminated 148 extraneous parts, a feature Byam learned through his aircraft manufacturing experience. This new axle system also added seven additional inches of ground-clearance.¹⁵²

By 1969, Airstream was already a national icon, but its association with Byam had diminished. It had been featured in Life and Time magazines, as well as used by



Figure 10: A 1969 ad depicts the glamour and adventure of Airstream ownership as well as the new fully rounded design. from Bryan Burkhart and David Hunt *Airstream: the History of the Land Yacht*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books (2000)

¹⁵¹ Banham 97.

¹⁵² Burkhart and Hunt 78.

President John F. Kennedy. Arguably Airstream's most publicized association was with NASA (a relationship which continues to the present). In 1966, an Airstream was converted into a medical facility for astronauts. In 1969, a hermetically sealed Airstream was used to quarantine astronauts returning from the moon. Not only could its monocoque design survive lifting in and out of the transport plane, its "ultramodern design suited the event thematically."

Despite its rising visibility and profits, by 1967 Airstream did not have the capital necessary for expansion and was purchased by Beatrice Companies, a food conglomerate. Airstream continued to run under the same management as a division of Beatrice who invested in higher quality materials and sophisticated engineering. In 1969, Airstream underwent its most serious redesign since the introduction of the clipper, not by Costello but Jack Oakley, a longtime associate and head of production. The new exterior was rounder and more streamlined due to the "use of stretch-formed compound curves [which] perfected the classic 'bullet' shape" (see figure ten).¹⁵³

Airstream Moves On

As Airstream entered the 1970s, Costello retired and the company no longer retained Byam's vision as it expanded into new models and materials. Although the company is still in business, one of the most common questions asked about Airstreams is "they still make those?," cementing the product's association with the mid-twentieth-century.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ Banham 86 and 109-132.

¹⁵⁴ Dale Schwamborn.

Conclusion

Airstream developed as one man's passion for self-contained trailer travel. From herding sheep in rural Oregon to touring Africa, Byam fulfilled his goal of "making history" by creating an icon. He combined aircraft technology with human comfort and sentiment to form a legacy that continues today through the mid-century subculture.

CHAPTER VI

THE CLASSIC AIRSTREAM IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: PRESERVATION AND SUBCULTURE

In this chapter I examine how the mid-century Airstream operates in relationship to its users today. I discuss how nostalgia, as I defined it in chapter four, motivates the preservation of these vintage model Airstreams over newer travel trailers and those of other brands. After briefly discussing the vintage Airstream's iconic status, I provide a general overview of my sources, especially my interview subjects. I then focus on thematic categories based on cultural values perpetuated by mid-century Airstream users. These values are nostalgic in that they are a form of cultural editing juxtaposing past and present and dealing with loss. The act of cultural editing allows for creative communion with a historic object rather than zealously guarding its material integrity. These values include durability, craftsmanship, streamlined aesthetics, self-containment, wanderlust and personalization. Byam described many of these values so their perpetuation indicates a continuing tradition.

Iconic Status

Today, mid-century Airstreams are highly iconic and “recognizable pieces of Americana.”¹⁵⁵ As “maybe the ultimate consumer society”, American culture can be examined through its products.¹⁵⁶ Considering how quickly most products of the

¹⁵⁵ Littlefield and Brown 11.

¹⁵⁶ Richard Sexton *American Style: Classic Product Design from Airstreams to Zippo* San Francisco: Chronicle Books (1987) 11.

twentieth century become obsolescent, the continued functionality of older Airstreams is also remarkable. Of the approximately 115,000 Airstreams built, an estimated 80,000 are still on the road.¹⁵⁷ Airstream, Inc. itself states that “nearly 70% of all Airstream trailers ever produced are still” in use.¹⁵⁸ Due to their combination of built-in mobility and historic association, mid-century Airstreams can serve as “portable emblems of the past [which] can lend continuity to new” surroundings.¹⁵⁹ As much as the American landscape and its roadways are drastically changing, a classic Airstream immediately connotes the post-war era. Although spatially mobile, they are temporally grounded in the past at the same time as they function creatively in the present.

The subculture’s members are preservationists not only through their actions but also their language. The Vintage Airstream Club describes itself as “a group of Vintage Airstream enthusiasts” dedicated to the “preservation, restoration and enjoyment of vintage Airstream[s]”.¹⁶⁰ The majority of subjects have expended notable time, cost and research into their project. According to various sources on airforums.com, there are three conditions for classic Airstreams: as is, restored and renovated.¹⁶¹ The latter two correspond to Secretary of Interior Standards labels restored (to period condition) and rehabilitated (brought to contemporary living conditions). The terms renovate and rehabilitated will be used interchangeably from this point. Much of the subculture may

¹⁵⁷ Littlefield and Brown 23.

¹⁵⁸ Airstream, Inc. Website “Silver is Green” <http://www.airstream.com/silver-green.html> Internet accessed on February 9, 2011.

¹⁵⁹ Lowenthal 42.

¹⁶⁰ Vintage Airstream Club, <http://www.vintageairstreamclub.com> Internet accessed Feb 9 2011.

¹⁶¹ Interview with Brie Lindsey, Jan 29 2011.

modernize their classic Airstreams, but tradition need not mean the eschewal of new ideas or thoughts, but the embracement of virtues of the past.¹⁶²

Description of Sources

My most important resources are seven in-person interviews with classic Airstream owners and preservationists. In addition, I will be using information gathered through personal interviews with vintage Airstream owners via email as well as published sources by other authors. Online subjects were recruited through airforums.com, the premiere resource for new and vintage Airstream enthusiasts. All interview subjects used this resource to assist with research and problem-solving of their Airstream restorations. The in-person interview subjects consisted of three couples and one single man all located within Oregon's I-5 corridor. All three of my online interviews subjects were male. Note that although of various ages and in diverse stages of life, all the subjects interviewed were married and enjoyed use of the Airstream with their partners. Byam himself had stated that "the ideal number for long-range trailering is two."¹⁶³ Published sources include profiles of notable vintage Airstream owners from *Airstream Living* by Bruce Littlefield and Simon Brown.

The first couple interviewed were Brad and Susan who own three vintage Airstreams, a 1953 Flying Cloud, and 1959 and 1965 Overlanders (see figure eleven). I interviewed them at their suburban property after meeting at an Airstream rally in May of 2010. Items in their home, as well as their vehicles, belied an affinity for mid-century American manufacturing. In 2010, they enjoyed sixteen outings with their Airstreams, up

¹⁶² Lowenthal 321.

¹⁶³ Byam 57.

from nine in 2009 and six in 2008. They anticipate in 2011 their Airstreams will be equally as busy.



Figure 11: The Taylors' 1953 Flying Cloud, photographed by the author.

After the Taylors, I interviewed Ric, whose 1964 Tradewind Land Yacht is kept in a parking lot set back from a popular Portland street. He bought and restored his Airstream after retiring in 2003, but has had an interest in silver trailers since childhood. The Land Yacht is generally used in its parked position but goes on the road one week per year, the most he can get away (see figure twelve).

Next I interviewed two professionals named Mona and Doug who only recently completed their three year rehabilitation of a 1969 Land Yacht Tradewind found devastated after surviving a flood. Between August and December of 2010, they already spent three weeks in the Airstream and look forwards to more. Through them, I met the

youngest of my subjects, Tristan and Brie, both scientists. Their 1959 Tradewind, nicknamed Bessie the bouncing bullet, is still under restoration but very near completion. The couple expects to use it for outings as well as a temporary home during an upcoming relocation.



Figure 12: Ric's 1964 Tradewind Land Yacht photographed by the author.

All online subjects were recruited through airforums.com. Mark, an architect from California, is restoring a 1951 Flying Cloud and 1960 Tradewind (see figure thirteen). William has owned his 1964 Safari for eight years and restored it to excellent condition after find it in a “semi-abandoned state.”¹⁶⁴ Dar has owned his 1964 Ambassador International Land Yacht for six years, and is half finished with its restoration.

I will also examine various users' data from the book *Airstream Living*. Architect Paul Welschmeyer redesigned the interior of a 1958 Traveler to create a trailer which functions both for travel and as a portable office on job sites. Kristiana Spaulding uses her 1967 Tradewind as a mobile art-studio open one week a year to the public as part of San Francisco's Open Studios Tour.¹⁶⁵ Well-known and respected fashion and interiors designer Cynthia Rowley uses her 1969 Land Yacht as a guesthouse at her home in

¹⁶⁴ Interview with William G. Campbell, email, Nov 17, 2010.

¹⁶⁵ Littlefield and Brown 48-56.



Figure 13: Mark Roberts' 1960 Tradewind courtesy of the owner.

Montauk, Long Island. Actors Aiden Quinn and Elizabeth Bracco also use their Airstream, a 1961 Bambi, as a guesthouse and occasionally a craft-services wagon.¹⁶⁶ The mid-century Airstream owners examined overall represent a fairly diverse group of individuals throughout the United States.

My research, particularly my own interview questions, focused on determining how, if at all, nostalgia functioned as a cultural editing agent. Although subjects displayed different attitudes towards both nostalgia and the mid-century, I regularly observed specific values associated with the Airstream, predominantly craftsmanship,

¹⁶⁶ Ibid. 130 and 32. Craft services are the catering arrangements made for film productions.

streamlined aesthetics and self-containment. These values were cultivated by Byam, but now take on new significance within this subculture.

Attitudes about Nostalgia and the Past

Before examining how nostalgia acts a cultural editing agent, I will illustrate the subjects' general attitudes about nostalgia and the mid-century. Certain members of the subculture are openly nostalgic about America in the 1950s and 60s, while others have more conflicted views. Additionally, interviewees of the appropriate age express personal memories of how this era shaped their childhoods.

Ric grew up in the 50s and 60s, and recalls a childhood fascination with trailers. Although he can have nostalgic tendencies and an affinity for mid-century design, Ric doesn't "make it more than it really was." In particular he notes being "a kid" when engineered foods like "hamburger helper" which he doesn't "want to eat now" became mainstream. He also added greatly enjoying "the electronic improvements that we've seen over the last ten or twenty years". Here nostalgia juxtaposes past against present without portraying a lost golden past. One element of the past was exceptional and worth saving while another is deemed deficient. An Airstream can convey mid-century streamlined aesthetics while containing an "I-phone" or other modern conveniences.¹⁶⁷ Ric even expressed a desire for a new Airstream model, although less well-built, because it contained more modern amenities.

Doug and Mona more literally expressed their interest in combining modern conveniences with mid-century aesthetics. Since they found their 1969 Land Yacht Tradewind highly distressed condition, they were able to fully remodel the interior to

¹⁶⁷Interview with Ric Seaberg, December 2, 2010. Note that Ric worked as an artisanal baker, perhaps why he recalls the food of the era so vividly.

their personal needs without compromising integrity—only the aluminum and metal parts survived the water damage of the Vernonia flood. The amenities inside are very modern but the couple would not prefer to own a newer model Airstream (see figure fourteen). When asked about the 1950s and 60s, they did seem nostalgic for not just the era’s design, but its “innocence” and when “families were very happy.” Mona described it as a time of “change [and] transition.” They thought of those times as “simple” in a way, despite also noting the fight for equal rights. Doug thought of the subversive elements’ of the era such as “rebels” and rock ‘n’ roll.¹⁶⁸ Although the most propagated images of the 50s and 60s, these also represent change.



Figure 14: Mona and Doug’s 1969 Land Yacht photographed by the author.

¹⁶⁸ Interview with Doug and Mona Heath, Hillsboro, OR, December 12, 2010

Tristan and Brie became Airstream owners just under a year ago when they stumbled up a 1959 Tradewind in fairly good condition (see figure fifteen). The purchase was primarily for practical purposes, but acknowledged its interesting and iconic aesthetic. They did not have a profound interest in the 50s or 60s, but associated it with pop-cultural references like *Mad Men* and suburban imagery. Their historic Airstream ownership causes their interest in mid-century travel-trailer history. Owning an “actually vintage” Airstream, they do not compare newer models favorably. As I will demonstrate, the Tradewind’s engineering and craftsmanship inform the couple’s nostalgia and historic inquiry rather than the other way around. William followed the opposite path. After researching various trailers and Airstreams in particular, he became “attracted to the vintage years and the early history of travel trailers.”¹⁶⁹

Brad and Susan are the most historically inquisitive of owners interviewed. Although nostalgic in many ways, they are also aware of its potential pitfalls. In addition to their three



Figure 15: Tristan and Brie’s 1959 Tradewind photographed by the author.

Airstreams, they own a 1966 Ford Truck and 1957 Mercury. A self-described “history buff” and lover knowledge, Brad associated mid-century products like the Airstream as

¹⁶⁹ William G. Campbell.

indicative of the era's "prosperity".¹⁷⁰ At the same time, he notes that growing up in Hawaii during the 60s, he was largely ignorant of "segregation" but now notes that the era's "racial issues" and America's polarization are "certainly present as an

Images like Airstream ads, which depict carefree families comfortably enjoying natural surroundings, provide an idealized image of values now gone. Note, however, that such imagery was rosy even for its time. Dar is similar in that he remembers the 1960s as "a great decade to grow up." He expressed a general interest in "timeless design" and "strange antiques." His nostalgia for objects which stand out, either due to rarity or distinctness, reflects a desire for uniqueness increasing decreasingly, much like the nostalgia of Route 66 visitors. For him, using the Airstream reminds him of a "simpler, less stressful past" which "provides a respite from the everyday."¹⁷¹

Values Restored and/or Embodied through Airstream Preservation

Streamlined Aesthetics

One of the most pervasive qualities amongst collectors from all sources was a deep appreciation for the streamlined and iconic aesthetic of the mid-century Airstream. Although aesthetics are often seen as superficial, here the nostalgic component adds significance. Again, as the landscape becomes increasingly generic with the proliferation of identical chains and developments, there grows a backlash towards the generic in favor the unique and distinct. An iconic object, like the Airstream, represents timeless but high-visible design. Preservation of this aesthetic is a reaction against both cultural

¹⁷⁰ Brad Taylor.

¹⁷¹ Interview with Dar Dane, email, November 23, 2010.

obsolescence and generic design. At its formulation, streamlined aesthetics represented a departure from traditional, ornate design, instead allowing form to follow function. Now the mid-century Airstream paradoxically contains both the futuristic elements intended by its creators as well as the distinctly retro look accrued through the passage of fifty plus years. These objects are “at once shiny, streamlined, womblike and useful... still modern and powerfully evocative.”¹⁷² Although often associated with the past, Airstreams are instantly recognizable” so much so that the brand name now denotes not only the product itself but has almost “become a generic classification.”¹⁷³ Often other vintage silver trailers are mistakenly referred to as Airstreams, such as the Silver Streak owned by the authors of *Airstream Living* prior to their historic inquiry.¹⁷⁴

For some owners, the Airstream’s iconic nature does not go unnoticed, but is not a primary focus. Brad and Susan had knowledge of both vintage silver trailers in general and well as Airstream (see figure sixteen). They describe early silver trailers as “incredibly iconic.” When they decided to get a trailer, they knew it “needed to be as silver trailer.”¹⁷⁵ Although they owned Airstreams, the Taylors liked all vintage silver trailers and did not necessarily prefer Airstreams above other brands. As I will discuss later, for them the real nostalgia lie in its machine-age craftsmanship. Tristan and Brie are also more attracted to the craftsmanship and self-containment of the Airstream than its image, but also noted its iconic status. If purchasing another trailer, they were open to any “vintage” models. However, they noticed many other brands as unappealing for “mostly

¹⁷² Banham 27.

¹⁷³ Littlefield and Brown 11.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid. 112.

¹⁷⁵ Brad Taylor.

aesthetic” reasons.¹⁷⁶ They listed style third on their list of rehabilitation guidelines, after utility and budget. They had not previously considered a trailer, but the Airstream caught their eye as it pulled into a parking lot. Again, it’s visibility served as a point of curiosity. Brie disparaged the majority of modern travel trailers as too “cookie-cutter.”¹⁷⁷ The noteworthy exterior and object’s historic scarcity make the 1959 Tradewind truly unique. Because it “looks cool on the outside”, the Airstream’s striking aesthetic earns positive attention not necessarily reserved for all trailers. “It feels special” remarked Brie, alluding to the iconic and unique Airstream image.



Figure 16: The interior of the Taylors’ Flying Cloud photographed by the author.

¹⁷⁶ Tristan Peery.

¹⁷⁷ Brie Lindsey.

For other owners, the aesthetic takes on greater significance. Aiden Quinn and Elizabeth Bracco describe the classic Airstream as “the greatest sculpture ever made”. Artist Krisitiana Spaulding has been enamored by its aesthetic quality since childhood (see figure seventeen). She even used one in the installation of her master’s thesis in sculpture.¹⁷⁸ Like other personal interviewees, Ric was open to other vintage silver trailers of architectural note. He contrasted his appreciation for boat interiors with his disdain for the majority of trailers, with the exception of Airstream. He described the rehabilitation of the interior as “an art project.”¹⁷⁹ For Mona and Doug, the Airstream was “iconic” and reflected a design aesthetic that was both retro and “non-traditional” in its departure from previous models.¹⁸⁰ For Doug, it directly ties to his respects for the architects of the era.¹⁸¹ William prefers the mid-century Airstream over other trailers because its “style is vintage and also timeless.” He credits the mid-century Airstream’s viability to its “very practical and no nonsense [design] approach.” The streamlined aesthetic “simplicity” make “using and maintaining [it products] easier.”¹⁸² For William, the aesthetic directly impacts his use of the object. In 2000, Chris Deam presented a 1954 Bambi with a completely redone interior at the International Contemporary Furniture Fair. He chose to work within this space due to the exteriors durability and “familial yet futuristic attitude”.¹⁸³ For Deam, the aesthetics’ emotional pull serves as inspiration for

¹⁷⁸ Littlefield and Brown 32 and 48-50.

¹⁷⁹ Ric Seaberg.

¹⁸⁰ Mona Heath.

¹⁸¹ Doug Heath.

¹⁸² William G. Campbell.

¹⁸³ Banham 158.

his own work. Although distinctive, the design is user-based (form following function) so it invites creative communion.



Figure 17: Artist Kristiana Spaulding and her 1967 Tradewind.

Craftsmanship

The generally most important feature of the mid-century Airstream was its craftsmanship and engineering. Brian Burkhart describes the Airstream as so “well designed that it competes not with other products with other lifestyles.”¹⁸⁴ Due to its streamlined aesthetic, in which form follows function, much of the Airstream’s craft and design are interrelated. Here I focus on how the design functions on an engineering, rather than visual, level. Wally Byam championed durable, functional engineering and craft. He himself began as a backyard mechanic without formal training. His product has set an example for many owners to develop d-i-y skills like those that originally pioneered the trailer industry. The majority of subjects completed the majority of the

¹⁸⁴ Brian Burkhart 21.

rehabilitations themselves, thereby becoming intimately familiar with the Airstream's construction.

Although he has worked professionally with computers and “relies on digital world for current economic survival” Brad prefers the analogue nature of the classic Airstream to modern day circuitry.¹⁸⁵ Brad describes how his 1953 Flying cloud will still be present in 2053. The aluminum components and frame will not deteriorate even if most of the interior does. He prefers the wood veneers used in the 1950s and 60s over the particle board and laminates used now. He feels that the mid-century Airstream “speaks to the era in America when things were built right... when there was all this affluence and mobility.”¹⁸⁶ Here the nostalgia deals with loss in two ways. On the one hand there is a sense of loss for the post-war mobility and affluence during an economic recession. Secondly, there is a loss for quality American manufacturing and dissatisfaction with obsolescence. Preserving the Airstream, and proving its continued functionality, demonstrates the potential of trailer craft and design.

Tristan and Brie chose a vintage Airstream out of practicality and frugality, but perhaps due to their scientific backgrounds, came to admire the trailer's design and construction. Combined with their research, the mid-century craft formed a sense of nostalgia. They note how America's post-war prosperity would have resulted in the mid-century Tradewind's general quality and use of materials like mahogany. Newer Airstream interiors, although sleeker, also use “more plastic” and “materials [that] feel cheaper.” This is not to denigrate the Airstream corporation today, but speaks to the lost sense of prosperity and abundance mid-century American manufactured goods convey.

¹⁸⁵ Brad Taylor.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid..

The act of renovating the trailer helped the couple gain this sense of nostalgia. By “taking everything apart” Brie learned firsthand how “cleverly and economically” the 59 Tradewind was constructed. She felt that the preservation “experience, rather than the ownership” made her connect with the past. She considered the design and craft thoughtful. Even the trailer’s idiosyncrasies due to hand-crafted (rather than factory-produced) details made the couple appreciate the sense of care put into the Airstream’s construction. The “hand-on touch” makes Brie feel “nostalgic for a time [she] never knew”.¹⁸⁷ Her nostalgia was also a response to obsolescence and loss of quality manufacturing.

Ric similarly gained an appreciation for the Airstream’s craftsmanship through hands-on experience. Although always generally “handy,” Ric directly credits his Airstream rehabilitation as his inspiration to operate a part-time handyman service in his retirement. He describes learning “woodwork” and other skills as the “unseen value” of owning his Land Yacht. In refurbishing the Airstream which he found in fairly poor condition, Ric didn’t aim to be “true to its original conditional” just to make it comfortable.¹⁸⁸ However, he replaced the wooden components in kind and kept the few salvageable original pieces. Rehabilitating the Airstream may not be consciously nostalgic for Ric, but it represents an act of creative communion with an object of the past.

The mid-century Airstream’s durability encourages creative communion with the past through the tradition of craftsmanship. For Doug and Mona, the drastic renovation of

¹⁸⁷ Brie Lindsey

¹⁸⁸ Ric Seaberg.

their 1969 Land Yacht's interior was a collaborative effort between themselves, friends and professional craftsmen.¹⁸⁹ They had wanted a trailer in poor condition in order to create a vision within an already blank space rather than one with historic material. Without the aluminum exterior's durability, it was able to survive in condition appropriate to a quality restoration of this kind. William said how many classic Airstreams, such as his, are found abandoned and in disrepair. However, these trailers' ability to be "brought back into service" is a "tribute to the brand" that produced them.¹⁹⁰ The respect for durable craftsmanship is a reaction against modernity's rapid obsolescence and focus on temporality. This evaluation of past and present is a form of nostalgic editing. Preservation of the mid-century Airstream restores the lost value of quality craft.

Self-Containment and Independence

Byam propagated the idea of self-containment and total independence as the means to total freedom when traveling. That value remains at the root of many subjects' interest in Airstream. Byam not only wrote of the concept, but materialized it through Airstream technology and international caravans. The former was and remains a physical testament to a self-contained travel trailer. As a quality miniature home, it provides comfortable shelter, cooked food and personal amenities in any environment at any time. The caravans proved that the Airstream can provide independence and comfort regardless of the surroundings.

Tristan and Brie are particularly focused on self-reliance in their decision to purchase the Tradewind. This quality is important and practical to both immediate plans

¹⁸⁹ Doug and Mona Heath.

¹⁹⁰ William G. Campbell.

and potential future ambitions. Tristan and Brie first noticed the Airstream after they decided they needed a better “base camp for surfing” than their covered pick-up truck. They “need a way to be comfortable and warm” while waiting for ideal surfing conditions on the turbulent coast. Tristan noted the scarcity and restrictiveness of accommodations on the Oregon coast and how the Airstream remedies the situation. The trailer gives them the freedom from not having to sacrifice neither comfort nor spontaneity. The couple wants to go on longer trips to destinations like “the desert” or “Yosemite” as well. Even more so, they’ve decided to use it as a temporary, transitional home when they move and settle in a new state. Since the previous owner had been living in the Tradewind for a decade, Tristan and Brie were convinced that it was “functional and livable.”

Both are drawn in by the “really romantic” “notion of self-reliance and sufficiency” of their Airstream. Using batteries and a solar panel, the Airstream only needs water and propane for Tristan and Brie to “get off the grid” and “unplug.” The couple wants to use the travel trailer’s self-containment to live comfortably without other resources. Within today’s context of green consciousness, the self-reliance the Airstream provides, through its design and quality, takes on new meaning. It is a reactionary response to increased levels of consumption partly fueled by rapid obsolescence. Tristan greatly appreciates that the Tradewind is “so self-sufficient” despite its small size.¹⁹¹ Brie noted the overall effect of how “so little space... forces you to calculate what you need and what you use.” It’s worth noting here that the travel trailer industry, Airstream in particular, boomed during the great depression when conscious consumption was a

¹⁹¹ Tristan Peery and Brie Lindsey

general concern. The couple's addition of the solar panels as well as black and gray tanks indicates how the Airstream's underlying value of self-sufficiency can be maintained through the use of new technologies which address modern problems. Their adapted 1959 Tradewind is a physical example of creatively using the past to negotiate present and future problems.

Although less extreme in their desire for total independence and self-containment than Tristan and Brie, other subjects expressed admiration for this quality of the classic Airstream. The Airstream's self-containment is so complete it creates a "womblike" aspect.¹⁹² Also updating his model with black and gray systems, Dar eloquently describes he and his wife's interest in the trailers stemming from a curiosity about "the microenvironments they offered."¹⁹³ Similarly, Cynthia Rowley praised her own mid-century Airstream as "the perfect self-contained environment."¹⁹⁴ William described one of the values of the subculture as respect for "resourcefulness to travel overland" free from reservations and plans.¹⁹⁵ Mona and Doug did not directly state a desire for self-reliance, but their rehabilitation efforts implied such an interest. "By eliminating the hot water tanks and gasoline" the couple had only "to worry about [the] fuse boxes and electrical."¹⁹⁶ Since they partly use it outdoors in lieu of tent-camping, self-reliance would be a significant concern. This spatial quality combined with mid-century nostalgia can lend itself to escapism.

¹⁹² Banham 27.

¹⁹³ Dar Dane.

¹⁹⁴ Littlefield and Brown 130.

¹⁹⁵ William G Campbell.

¹⁹⁶ Mona Heath.

Escape

For some, the classic Airstream allows a form of mild escapism. A mid-century modern stands apart on the modern landscape. As a result, stepping into what is almost a mid-century cocoon provides a tempting point of fantasy. This element of nostalgia may be criticized of romanticization. At the same time, historically Airstream has marketed itself with a certain level of idealization and fantasy. Moreover, during the 50s and 60s, the travel-trailer in general was depicted in nostalgic and romantic terms. In his history chapter, Byam clarified that the travel trailer's "real progenitor is not the covered wagon, as the copy writer so romantically proclaim, but the trunk and luggage rack of the old Model T."¹⁹⁷ A history major, he must have understood the importance of historic inquiry and accuracy. At the same time, he was a brilliant marketer, and part of creating an appealing image for a relatively expensive travel-trailer required a sense of getting-away.

Both then and now, alternative uses¹⁹⁸ for the Airstream invite a certain level of escapism. Byam described potential applications of the Airstream as a playhouse, a summer home, a poker den, a guest house, a studio, and an office.¹⁹⁹ A studio or an office may not obviously invite a form of escapism, but their intended uses require tuning out distractions and "escaping" into a project. Guest houses, whether portable or parked in backyards, invite the user to relax and enjoy a private space detached from the everyday. Cynthia Rowley uses her 1969 Land Yacht as a guesthouse at her home in Montauk, a

¹⁹⁷ Byam 15.

¹⁹⁸ Alternative uses refers to those other than travel.

¹⁹⁹ Byam 229.

getaway destination itself. Her interior design concept was to make the guest “let go of work”.²⁰⁰ Decorated with surfboards and cocktail imagery, her interior renovation relates to Airstream’s own mid-century advertising. Also owner of a 1969 Land Yacht, Mona said she enjoys being able to use the Airstream, both outdoors and as a portable guesthouse, so that she can “disconnect from work”.²⁰¹ This sense of escapism reflects the classic Airstream’s intended recreational and travel functions. Very much in the tradition of the American auto-camping tradition from which the travel-trailer developed, Byam developed the Airstream in order to provide domesticity anywhere, a phenomenon known as “glamping” or “glamour camping”.²⁰² The glamour element has always involved a certain level of romanticism and escapism.

Comfort and Personalization

As described in chapter five, the mid-century Airstream was designed with personalized comfort in mind. Part of that mission included making it durable like a well-built house with user habits and idiosyncrasies in mind. A significant factor was the encouragement to modify the Airstream to meet individual needs also described in chapter five. As a result, modifying the interior seems acceptable instead of sacrilegious. Even “purists” aren’t “wed to the Airstream’s” original interiors.²⁰³ The exterior is literally and metaphorically a mid-century shell containing the domestic requirements of the user. As a result, the mid-century Airstream is not a mummified relic zealously preserved (to paraphrase Lowenthal) but a historic object with which the user creatively

²⁰⁰ Littlefield and Brown 130.

²⁰¹ Mona Heath.

²⁰² Brad Taylor.

²⁰³ Littlefield and Brown 21.

communes. The creative element is due to the imaginative element rehabilitation requires as well as the craftsmanship used by both rehabilitation and restoration. The cultural editing component of nostalgia blends past and presents to find user-specific solutions within these small spaces.

Since nostalgia serves as a form of cultural editing, it helps spark this type of creativity, particularly of rehabilitation. Nostalgia invites the user to compare and contrast the past with the present. As I illustrated in chapter four, this juxtaposition can favor certain elements of the present while wishing to restore certain elements of the past. Since the mid-century Airstream's machine-age aesthetic and craft represent lost values, those elements of the trailer are preserved. However, each generation and each individual lives different. Users today view certain elements of modern domesticity beneficial, such as computers and cell-phones. Some may even foster self-containment. Byam always intended for the Airstream to help ease users' transitions into unfamiliar surroundings by providing the latest amenities. Fifty years later, members of the mid-century Airstream subculture personalize interiors with modifications or additions of new conveniences. The result is a space the combines past with present, a "portable emblem" of the 1950s and 60s that is still inhabitable into the 21st century.²⁰⁴ Interior malleability combined with exterior durability make the mid-century Airstream an admired but usable icon.

Mona and Doug have the most drastically personalized interior customized to meet their specific domestic habits. Their aesthetic is thoroughly modern, but reflects the streamlined principles of the exterior. They "wanted to keep an aesthetic that was of the

²⁰⁴ Lowenthal

era, but more reflective of us.”²⁰⁵ As at home, they have modern electronics and 50s inspired furnishings. Other changes reflect larger patterns of use. The couple chose this particular Airstream because it was in such poor condition that they could “customize it from the ground up.”²⁰⁶ The average Airstream floor-plan features a dinette table up front then a small kitchen and a fold out bed in the galley and full bathroom in rear. Doug and Mona’s Land Yacht has a couch up front, a galley comprised of a long counter and kitchen and a porta-john with the rear entirely comprised of a bed-pod. The couple realized they didn’t want to make the bed every day and could find other ways to shower while traveling. The dinette removal reflects their regular habit of “eat[ing] at the counter”.²⁰⁷ Their Land Yacht conveys two worlds, an exterior world of 1969 and an interior world of a modern couple (see figure eighteen).

Tristan and Brie describe their Airstream project as in between restoration and renovation. They’ve retained as much of the original as possible, largely to conserve finances, but also partly because of vintage pride gained through research. They have or will make changes reflective of their own needs, especially since they plan to spend extended time in the Airstream. They removed facing twin beds over with a fold-out double bed of their own design. In addition, after full renovation, the trailer will contain two convertible desks to accommodate both of them working simultaneously. As with Mona and Doug, the two have made the interior’s form follow the functions of daily life.

²⁰⁵ Mona Heath.

²⁰⁶ Doug Heath.

²⁰⁷ Mona Heath.



Figure 18: The interior of the Heaths' Airstream photographed by the author.

Lowenthal notes an inherent human desire to “become a part of [the past] as well as own it.”²⁰⁸ Although very different, both couples' Airstreams are a mixture of modern, practical considerations and preservation of mid-century craft and aesthetic. Despite their drastic interior changes, the two pairs have a knowledge and respect for the history of their own trailers as well as the Airstream company. The combination of research and customization makes Airstream “ownership” an “experience.”²⁰⁹ This experience of creatively mitigating one's own vision within an obviously mid-century space transforms the relic's relationship to its users. They become a part of the space without changing historic function, associations or exterior materials. The Airstream and its user may preserve the past, but aren't stuck there.

²⁰⁸ Lowenthal 331.

²⁰⁹ Brie Lindsey.

Other subjects have made less drastic modifications to their Airstream floor-plans, but each preservation project reflects the blending of historic fabric and present need. Brad and Susan are “not purists as such”. They do maintain as much “original [material] as possible, but ” do not “restore to absolute” period condition. Instead, they “update” and “modernize” they feel are necessary to their comfort.²¹⁰ For example, in their 1953 Flying Cloud, they raised the level of the bed to create more room for storage. They also plan to install gray and black water tanks in their 1959 Overlander currently undergoing renovation. The tanks are hidden to view, so unobtrusively modernize the space without comprising the mid-century elements or values the couple hold so strongly. Craft, aesthetic, function and association remain intact.

Similarly, William has “total[ly] restored” his 1964 Safari “to vintage style” while also updating its “water heater, furnace and refrigerator.”²¹¹ Dar has also “update[d] the livability” of his Airstream by installing modern technological components similar to those in his home without changing the exterior.²¹² Mark Roberts, too, aimed for an “overall feeling/look to be accurate to the era” combined with modifications to modernize “performance/use”.²¹³ Perhaps most concerned with livability versus historic inquiry, Ric very casually explained that his goal was to “refurbish” his Airstream rather than “return it back to its original.”²¹⁴ Because the mid-century Airstream can adapt so easily while retaining its character defining characteristic exterior shell, it has the flexibility to survive as living and livable icon.

²¹⁰ Brad and Susan Taylor.

²¹¹ William G. Campbell.

²¹² Dar Dane.

²¹³ Mark Roberts.

²¹⁴ Ric Seaberg.

Curiosity and Adventure

One of the more ephemeral values represented by the classic Airstream is a sense of curiosity, desire for adventure and wanderlust. Byam described these traits as integral to the temperament best suited to caravanning. His third and fourth freedoms, the freedoms to know and have fun, posit the Airstream as a means of discovery. A travel trailer is meant to move and expose the user to new environments. Its associations with aircraft, space travel and boats furthers this sense of exploration. The legacy of the international caravans have illustrated the Airstream's potential for adventure and as a means to see new things. William said that while researching "vintage trailer restoration" he found that "the company and the WBCCI... romanc[ed] traveling by trailer with many vintage photos and stories of far away travels."²¹⁵ Although most owners of classic Airstreams today do not use the travel abroad, the caravans have created an image of wanderlust associated with the Airstream.

Today's user can also gain or fulfill another kind of curiosity resembling historic inquiry. This is partly a practical response in order to do repairs. Many subjects, however, have or develop an interest in history. As quoted in chapter five, Byam himself advocated using the Airstream to learn of America's historic treasures. Now the mid-century Airstream is becoming one of those treasures itself. This is another form of creative communion with the past that the mid-century Airstream offers. Spatial or temporally based, both kinds of curiosity can offer forms of inquiry and discovery.

Brad expressed both types of curiosity. He called himself a "history buff" who "loves knowledge." Having grown up on an island, the idea of unknown roads and even

²¹⁵ William G. Campbell.

trailers seemed exotic and exciting when he moved to the mainland as an adult. His interest in vintage trailers “has to do with the imagery” of postwar mobility and “getting out and getting away.” Now that he owns multiple vintage Airstreams, he not only travels, but also researches, looking for period brochures, trailer magazines and other documentation. He “constantly searches the internet” to look at pictures and layouts of Airstreams of the same make and model of his own.²¹⁶

As briefly mentioned before, Tristan and Brie developed an interest in history through the renovation of their Airstream. They also associated it with wanderlust. The couple didn’t describe themselves as particularly interested in history, but owning the Tradewind made them curious enough to do research. As they learned of the relative scarcity of late 50s Tradewinds, the more they became dedicated to preserving the historic features of their own.²¹⁷ Airforums.com was a huge resource for both, but especially Tristan. Now that they are Airstream owners nearing completed rehabilitation, they look forward to the ability to “explore in general” and travel.²¹⁸ Both describe having a sense of “wanderlust” they see potentially fulfilled by the travel-trailer.²¹⁹

William and Dar also expressed the sense of adventure and curiosity the classic Airstream represents. William enjoys how it allows him to “wing it” when traveling “never know[ing] just where the road will take” him.²²⁰ He finds it a great way to “spend time in remote areas.”²²¹ Dar was more direct, describing “an ongoing sense of adventure

²¹⁶ Brad Taylor.

²¹⁷ Tristan Peery.

²¹⁸ Brie Lindsey.

²¹⁹ Ibid..

²²⁰ William G. Campbell.

²²¹ Ibid..

and curiosity” as a value represented by his relationship to his 1964 Land Yacht.²²² For all these subjects, Airstreams are a physical of an emotional and ephemeral value.

Community

Another tradition established by the caravans was a sense of community shared by Airstream owners, particularly those in the WBCCI. This continues to varying degrees amongst subjects. There appear to be two forms of community now, one similar to the Airstream community of the 50s and 60s centered on clubs and caravans and a new online community centered on sharing information. Both types illustrate that community can “[begin] with shared values rather than a piece of real estate.”²²³ The camaraderie of both also stems “sometimes out of practical necessity” in order to share “lists of resources for parts and knowledge.”²²⁴ All subjects interviewed, whether in person or online, use airforums.com as a resource although not all participate in the WBCCI. Multiple subjects described the general membership of the WBCCI as skewing older and more conservative. The majority of independent users, such as Tristan and Brie, do not belong to organizations.

Social gatherings such rallies or caravans are important to Mona, Doug, Susan and Brad as forms of community building. Doug and Mona first attended vintage rallies with their 1962 Shasta and always enjoyed them. Despite not liking the set-up required of tent-camping, Mona always appreciated the “social” aspect of camping which rallies and caravans encourage.²²⁵ The couple has also found rallies a way to showcase the unique

²²² Dar Dane.

²²³ Burkhardt and Hunt 141.

²²⁴ Interview with Mark Roberts November 28, 2010.

²²⁵ Mona Heath.

potentials of classic Airstream interior renovation. Brad and Susan belong to the WBCCI, Rolling Oldies and Tin Can Tourists (the latter two are vintage trailer clubs). For them these clubs don't perpetuate values as much as "social groups of people with common interests" based on trailer ownership. Many share the Taylors' interest in "the retro style" and "glamping".²²⁶

The internet, airforums.com in particular, has formed its own loose mid-century Airstream community based largely on information sharing. This is not a formal community in terms of social gatherings, but forms a base of shared knowledge and resources. The importance of this site to subjects for research was demonstrated in the previous section. Byam used the community of the caravans to problem-solve. Now sites like airforums.com create community partly through problem-solving. People share not only knowledge and resources, but opinions as well. Tristan and Brie were admonished by several "purists" for painting over the original natural wood in their trailer.²²⁷ They, along with Doug and Mona, also get a sense of pride from sharing their achievements with others online. All users found research from the site helpful to their preservation efforts. The shared values and communication illustrate the extent to which mid-century Airstream preservation forms a subculture.

Conclusion

The mid-century Airstream subculture has formed around the preservation of an object and its associated values. These values were outlined by Byam himself, although they have changed in the fifty years since his death. The aesthetic, craftsmanship,

²²⁶ Brad Taylor.

²²⁷ Brie Lindsey.

wanderlust and community embodied by the Airstream are revived by users as a part of nostalgia's cultural editing.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

Classic Airstreams are a unique and newly emerging historic resource that expand the scope of historic preservation. By using a vernacular approach based on user interaction, I examined the full significance of these iconic yet practical travel-trailers. I examined the potential role of nostalgia as a factor in their preservation as well as their history and current use. They are preserved for their use in a time of rapid obsolescence and represent the era of post-war prosperity in which trailer-travel first became mainstream. The mid-century Airstream's combination of streamlined aesthetics, craftsmanship and personalization make it an enduring and visible emblem of the 1950s and 60s. The curiosity, freedom and comfort they represent has appealed to a niche market then and now. The context of the classic Airstream's use and image may have changed so that now nostalgia adds to its emotional attraction.

APPENDIX A

GLOSSARY

Creative Communion (with the Past): I borrow Lowenthal's language and theory to use the phrase "creative communion with the past". Lowenthal himself never explicitly uses this phrase nor describes. I define creative communion with the past to describe an interaction with historic resources in which we make the past a part of ourselves and vice versa. Creative communion uses the past as a source of inspiration and renewal for the present and/or future rather than just for entertainment or information.

Cultural Editing: Evaluating elements of the past against the present in order to find solutions for the present or future.

Mobile Home: a portable and pre-manufactured dwelling similar to a trailer in construction, but intended to serve as a permanent residence. Often referred to as trailers, or trailer homes.

Modernism: a movement in the arts and culture breaking away from traditional or historic forms and models.

Motor Home: differs from a trailer in that the apartment and vehicle are unified (also called a house car)

Performance: Performance theory describes the relationship between form and use so that ultimately the symbolic meaning of an object to its subculture may be understood. Defined by Susan Garfinkel as the "creation of meaning through use," "the concept of performance in architecture... directly unites people with their inanimate spaces." Meaning extends from the interactions, relationships and activities that occur between users and space. Performance "implies the intensification or completion of form" because it posits the significance of human actions onto physical form.

Postmodernism: A late 20th and early 21st century movement in the art and academia essentially a backlash against modernism. It focuses on subjectivity as a primary factor of reality.

Travel Trailer: a miniature apartment towed by a vehicle

Recreational Vehicle: see motor home

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEWS

Campbell, William G.. E-mail, Nov 17, 2010.

Dane, Dar. E-mail, November 23, 2010

Heath, Doug. Hillsboro, OR December 12, 2010

Heath, Mona. Hillsboro, OR December 12, 2010

Lindsey, Brie. Corvallis, OR January 29, 2011.

Peery, Tristan. Corvallis, OR January 29, 2011.

Roberts, Mark. E-mail, November 28, 2010

Seaberg, Ric. Portland, OR. December 2, 2010

Schwamborn, Dale. Telephone, February 2, 2011

Taylor, Brad. Salem, OR. November 29, 2010.

Taylor, Brad. Salem, OR. November 29, 2010.

APPENDIX C

ADDITIONAL IMAGES

All photographs within this appendice have been taken by the author.



The Taylors' 1969 Overlander.



The Taylors' 1969 Overlander.



The interior of the Taylors' unfinished 1969 Overlander.



Another view of the interior of the Taylors' 1969 Overlander.



The exterior of the Taylors' 1959 Overlander.



The exterior of the Taylors' 1959 Overlander.



The counters inside the Heaths' 1969 Land Yacht.



The front end of the Heaths' 1969 Land Yacht.



Ric's Airstream as located within the courtyard.



The interior of Ric's Airstream.



The unfinished interior of Tristan and Brie's 1959 Tradewind looking towards the rear.



The pull-out double bed engineered by Tristan and Brie.



The front interior of “Bessie the Bouncing Bullet.”

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