

## 20 The Summer of '64

*In this blog, we will cover one of the two “big” events in Blawenburg in the summer of 1964, the encampment of the Wally Byam Caravan Club. In our next blog, we will cover the opening of the Dairy Queen that served the village ice cream and sweet memories for more than two decades.*

A lot was happening in the world in 1964, and in the village of Blawenburg, it was a summer to remember.

- On July 2, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act into law, ending the segregation practices known as Jim Crow that had been in place since the Civil War.
- Two destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin were struck by Vietnamese forces, escalating the war that cost the lives of over 50,000 Americans.
- Mariner IV sent back the first pictures of Mars.
- You could buy a car for \$3,500 and only pay \$.25 per gallon for gas.
- In New York, the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, the world’s longest suspension bridge at the time, was completed, connected Staten Island to Brooklyn.
- The World’s Fair came to Flushing Meadows–Corona Park in Queens.

### **Big Event North of Blawenburg**

1964 also brought the 7th International Rally of the Wally Byam Caravan Club to property just north of Blawenburg on land once farmed by James Van Zandt. Montgomery High School is located on this property today. At the time, the land was owned by the State of New Jersey and was part of the Neuropsychiatric Institute, the former State Village for Epileptics. Governor Richard Hughes invited the club to hold its rally in Montgomery Township as part of the state’s tercentenary celebration. The club referred to the event as the Princeton Rally.

The club, which still exists today, is comprised of Airstream trailer owners and aficionados from around the world. It was created by its namesake, Wally Byam, who started the Airstream trailer factory in California in 1931, making trailers from aircraft aluminum. The Wally Byam Caravan Club members have a common love of travel and education. To join the club, all you needed was an Airstream trailer, some time to travel, and, of course, money to pay for your expenses.



*The Wally Byam Caravan parade. While this picture, which was on the cover of Life magazine, is of another caravan, the arrival of the caravan in 1964 would have looked similar.*

On June 22, 1964, gleaming aluminum trailers pulled into the large field off Belle Mead-Blawenburg Road (Route 601) and set up, almost overnight, what came to be called "Aluminum City." Blawenburg hadn't seen so much traffic since the Van Zandts had 8,000 people attend their Soil Conservation and Machinery Field Day in 1950. (See blog 11.)

The Princeton Town Topics (June 24, 1964) described the memorable encampment. "Over the gentle hills and curves of the Great Road, just beyond the four corners of Blawenburg is a scene which few Princetonians may ever see again. And...will not forget."



*An aerial view of the Wally Byam Caravan Club Aluminum City in 1964*

Ginny Doremus, who lived on Grandview Road at the time, recalls that memorable scene. “I could see the brilliant reflection of the sun hitting those trailers from my house several miles away.”

### **No Small Operation**

The caravan was no small operation. The trailers had to be organized efficiently to fit in the space available, and a concentric circle pattern was chosen for this site. Of course, there was a lot of work that took place before the 5,000+ people arrived for the two-week visit. Electricity, telephone, water, and sewer sources had to be installed.

Arrangements had to be made with the State Police, who served Montgomery Township at the time. Larry May, who lived nearby, recalls that “water and electric lines were laid in the field in concentric circles to provide hookups to each of the campers.” When the caravanners began to arrive, it took some careful directing to get all the trailers to fit into the spaces.

The Hopewell telephone company, which was used to serving 2100 customers, suddenly had many additional customers. They had to install new lines for long distance calls in 10 payphone stations.





*Left – Caravan members use the pay phones to call home. Right – Caravans came with propane and battery power. Some even had TVs!*

While most trailers were self-contained, additional food and entertainment were provided. May remembers that “the fire company as well as other organizations had set up food tents in the center of their camp. There was also a ‘teen’ tent where the kids hung out and listened to music.”

While caravanners brought food with them, they still needed bread, milk, and other food during the encampment. Eric Perkins recalls, “I worked at Mussleman’s Store (The store was just one-half mile from Aluminum City.), and we couldn’t keep the shelves stocked. It was like Sisyphus pushing that large rock up a hill. We no sooner filled the shelves and they were empty again.”

With that volume of people living in an area for two weeks, the event managers had to prepare for the possibility of medical problems. The New York Times reported on June 22, 1964 that a staff of 27 physicians was on call in case of an emergency. We presume that some of them were members of the Caravan Club.

## **New York World’s Fair Was a Draw**



*The Unisphere at the New York World's Fair in 1964*

One of the reasons for holding the encampment in New Jersey was the proximity to the New York World's Fair. According to a NJ Bell report, 3700 caravanners took a bus excursion to Flushing Meadows on June 30 to celebrate Wally Byam Day at the World's Fair. It likely required 75 buses to get them there. Traffic must have been gridlocked in Blawenburg! There were also sightseeing trips to Philadelphia and other places of interest.





It wasn't hard to tell who the caravanners were since they wore a "uniform," which consisted of white shirts and dark slacks for men and dresses for women. Both men and women wore the official blue berets. *Blue Beret* is the name of the official publication of the Wally Byam Caravan Club today.

The Wally Byam Caravan Club International, known today by the acronym WBCCI, is still going strong with annual rallies and some shorter caravans. The 62nd International Rally will be held in Doswell, VA from July 20-27, 2019. Airstream trailers are still being manufactured and you can often see their signature gleaming trailers on highways as you travel.

For many, the WBCCI is more than a vacation. It's a way of life that provides members with new friends and experiences. I'm sure that Wally Byam, who passed away just two years before the 1964 rally, would be amazed and pleased that his creation has been sustained for so many years. That 7th Rally just north of Blawenburg is still an experience to be remembered and shared 55 years later.



*A view of the trailers from the Van Zandt's Broad View Farm*

### **For more information**

Enjoy 32 pictures of the 1964 New York World's Fair by visiting:

<https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2014/06/1964-the-new-york-worlds-fair/100749/>

Learn about the WBCCI at: [www.wbcci.org](http://www.wbcci.org)

## **Blawenburg Fact**



Wally Byam

July 4, 1896 – July 22, 1962

Wally Byam, was a bit of a philosopher as well as an ardent traveler. Two of his quotes show his belief in remaining active:

1. "Adventure is where you find it, any place, every place, except at home in the rocking chair."
2. Regarding people from other cultures caravanners might meet in their travels, he said, "Remember that although they may speak a different language, they are still the same kind of people as the folks you know at home, have the same mental processes, are just as kindly and just as friendly. Remember that, quit talking, and start over again - in pantomime."

## **Forward Look**

### **Blog 21 - DQ Memories**

The arrival of Bill Wellemeyer's Dairy Queen on the corner of Routes 518 and 601 was an exciting addition to Blawenburg and all of Montgomery Township. It was a place to go for a burger or ice cream. It created many memories for people in the community as well as those passing through to destinations unknown. We will explore the tale of the Dairy

Queen next month. If you have pictures or memories of the Dairy Queen to share, please send them to [blawenburgtales@gmail.com](mailto:blawenburgtales@gmail.com).

## **Sources**

Willis, Candy. "A Glimpse of the Past: The Aluminum City," Skillman, NJ, *The Montgomery News*, April 28, 2019.

"The Aluminum City," New Jersey Bell. Volume 37, Number 9, September, 1964, page 10.

"This is Princeton," *Town Topics*. Princeton, NJ, June 25, 1964.

"5,000 Vacationers with Trailers Meet in Princeton Area," New York Times archives, June 22, 1964.

Wally Byam, [AZquotes.com](http://AZquotes.com)

## **Images/Photos**

Aerial view of Aluminum City – old postcard shared by Eric Perkins

Caravan site from Broad View Farm – Richard Van Zandt

Telephone station and trailers – NJ Bell article

Wally Byam logo and beret – [Wallybyam.org](http://Wallybyam.org)

Wally Byam picture – [AZquotes.com](http://AZquotes.com)

Unisphere – Creative Commons via [SAFlickr](https://www.flickr.com/photos/saflickr/) user PLCjr