

Airstreams roll in to create silver city

Recreation | The iconic trailers and motor homes fill the fairgrounds to celebrate travel and friendships

By **DAVID AUSTIN**
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SALEM — When he was an elementary school principal, Darrell Waters says, his Airstream trailer made him act like some of his students anticipating summer break.

“I used to count the days,” said Waters, a resident of East Alton, Ill., who retired in 2000. “I loved my job, don’t get me wrong. But when you only had so many days until you were able to spend two months in your camper, what else could you do?”

Waters, 65, and his wife, Sharon, 64, have hauled their Airstream around the world for more than 30 years as part of the Wally Byam Caravan Club International.

The club’s 49th annual rally is at the Oregon State Fairgrounds. Through Tuesday, more than 1,100 gleaming, silver-bullet travel trailers are parked for meetings, workshops, dinners and other festivities — all geared toward the Airstream camping elite, said Leonard Sullivan, head of rally promotions.

“We’ve built our own little city and it’s quite a sight,” Sullivan said.

The Airstream is the brainchild of the late Wally Byam, who took his experience with aluminum fabrication and invented the silver, hot-dog looking recreational ve-



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Peter Vergella (from left) of Wickenburg, Ariz.; Sharon Waters of East Alton, Ill.; Marvin Lane of Lacey, Wash.; and Darrell Waters meet up Friday at the Wally Byam Caravan Club International 49th annual rally.

hicles. The trailers — known for their space-age look and sleek design — came of age in the 1950s.

The club was founded in 1955 in Nova Scotia with 80 members. It’s grown to more than 8,000 worldwide, broken into 142 units and 12 regions with the annual rally as the club’s premiere event.

The Waters have been to 31 consecutive rallies. They married in 1964 and have

two children. Always an outdoor family, they camped and hiked all over the country. Both of their parents had Airstreams.

In the mid-1970s, the Waters went on a trip with Sharon’s folks and stayed in their trailer. After they returned, her parents upgraded. The couple bought the old Airstream and they’ve been hooked ever since.

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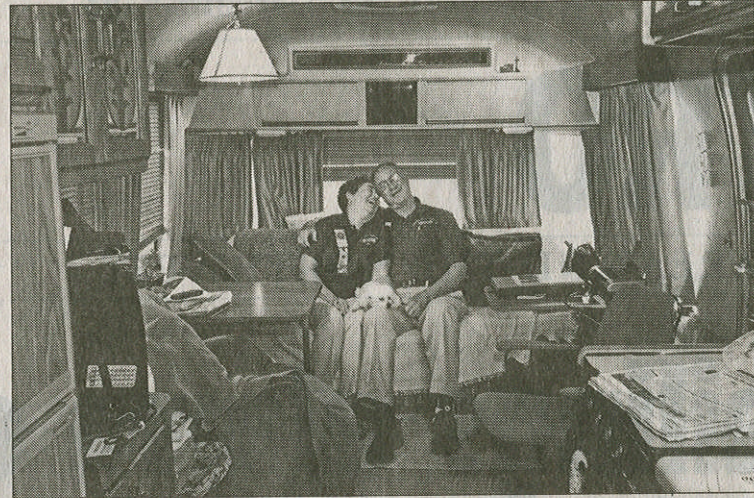
Airstream: Row upon row form instant community

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They're on their third Airstream, a 1988 Excella 1000. Three flags shoot from the front of the trailer. Stickers from past travels dot the windows. Decorations, including a yellow heart and a painted yellow and blue bird, sit in the window.

Take the two steps up into their Airstream and you see the hallmarks of their club membership. A gold plaque hanging on the kitchen wall reads: "In Appreciation of Outstanding Service." Darrell Waters was once president of the club's Greater St. Louis Region.

Sharon Waters, who wears "Past



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Sharon and Darrell Waters of Illinois grew up in Airstream families and are attending their 32nd club rally. More than 2,000 members are camped at the Oregon State Fairgrounds in Salem through Tuesday.

First Lady" on her rally badge, is quick to apologize for the cluttered camper and eager to point out family pictures lining the walls. In one, her daughter — now 29 but a past Teen Queen for the rally — stands holding Sharon and Dar-

rell's latest grandchild. "Everyone always asks about her. They all remember her as the queen and they want to know how she's doing," Sharon Waters said. Activities take place across the

fairgrounds. In the Pavilion Hall, hundreds of people mill about. Some attend the delegates' seminar to debate controversial topics, like whether non-Airstream owners should be allowed to join. In another hall, members attend seminars and workshops from disaster communication with amateur radios to scrapbooking and computer classes to photography. Worship services are as readily available as line-dancing lessons.

The fairgrounds have turned into a small city with hundreds of trailers packed in perfect rows. Many sport flags showing members' hometowns. Some are luxurious and large enough to sleep more than half a dozen people; others are so small that they look comfortable for only one.

Marvin Lane, 75, is the rally's parking chairman. He prowls the lots, making sure members are in the right place and have enough room. He starts his rounds every morning at 6:30.

"You want to see what's going

on and make sure everyone has what they need," said Lane, of Lacey, Wash. "Nobody's ever too much trouble. It's about helping people."

For Sharon and Darrell Waters, the rally represents — above all — a time to catch up with aging friends that they wouldn't otherwise see. Darrell Waters gets teary when he thinks about each rally. Over time, they've lost Airstream friends to illness or age.

"You come to these things knowing that there's certain people we'll never see again," he said.

Ask what pushes them to drive across the country and Sharon Waters takes it a step further.

"You share stories. You share life," she said. "You never say goodbye. You say 'See you down the road.' Why would you want to miss this?"

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