There are spots in Wyoming’s Teton Range that are dizzyingly beautiful, where your heart aches from the sheer wonder of the place. It’s no surprise that visitors often return, though it’s a rare traveler who can find a specific spot and say, “Yes, this is it: This is where we camped 60 years ago and Dad took the photographs.” Randy Miller can. The photos taken by his father, Ardean, from the period 1956 to 1976 are some of the most iconic Airstream images ever. (See “The Man Who Defined Airstream Photography,” Airstream Life, Winter 2007.) Today, Randy is bringing the skills he learned from his father full circle and capturing on film the essence of Airstream travel.

Ardean Miller worked with Eastman Kodak starting in the 1930s. Norma, Randy’s mom, was a model for Eastman. After a stint as a military photographer during WW II, Ardean went on to become a successful freelance commercial photographer — working for the likes of Pan Am, Coca Cola, and Smirnoff as well as agencies like J. Walter Thompson and Young and Rubican — before he hooked up with Airstream’s founder, Wally Byam.

By Tom Bentley
was something we grew up with. I think at one point I wanted to be an architect, but I got out of that. Photography was in our blood.”

Brad and Bruce made names for themselves in automotive photography. Randy became a lifestyle photographer, at one point working out of his Atlanta studio for Coca Cola, and then getting into still-life shooting. His client list includes names like Levis, Ritz-Carlton, Disney World, Chris-Craft, John Deere, and more. He paid attention to Airstream, of course (he’s owned four trailers), but for him, the company’s advertising in the ’90s and early 2000s fell flat.

“The thing that bothered me is that the images were not up to what my dad had done — that was the general consensus. People loved his images, but with a different corporation taking over, they weren’t connected with Dad at all,” Randy says.

Things changed when Bob Wheeler took the helm. Randy made two trips to Jackson Center to talk with Bob about how Wally and Ardean had worked, and in 2007 “Bob took a chance and hired us, my brothers and myself,” Randy says. “We shot a beautiful campaign for him.”

Because his father’s body of work with Airstream was so strong, Randy wanted to approach his own Airstream work with the same care and attention. “Commercial work is very, very disciplined,” he says. With Airstream, the first challenge is the setting. “There has to be a beautiful location, so that when someone looks at it, they say, ‘I want to go there. When I open the door on my Airstream, that’s what I want to see’.”

Finding these special places is a challenge, but it is also only the beginning. Creating an image that evokes the uniqueness of the location and the spirit of the Airstream takes special skill as well. “My dad was a master at that,” says Randy. “He could find places and he would then compose and set up a photo that looked believable, that didn’t look contrived.”
Randy has worked hard to capture once again the feeling of adventure and the promise of the open road and the good life that Airstream has carried through its history. But he also sees that the Airstream world has some fresh perspectives.

“You have these young families loading up an Airstream and living in them. Mom and Dad are able to make a living because of the Internet. These young kids are all dreaming of getting an Airstream,” says Randy.

“It’s like a rebirth, and Airstream is capitalizing on that. It used to be generally an older crowd, something you did when you retired. Now it’s becoming a way of life way before retirement,” says Randy.

Randy is discussing some new projects with Airstream involving trailer innovations, but he’s foxy on the details. “They have a couple of things they’re working on. Typical innovative Airstream, stuff that Wally would be very proud of. There are a couple of things I can’t talk about, but I can say that if Bob decides he wants me, I’ll be there.”

One thing he can talk about is his recent work on the Pendleton limited edition trailer recognizing 100 years of the National Park Service. It was designed in collaboration with Pendleton Woolen Mills, famed for its rugged woolen clothing and blankets. (See Airstream Life, Spring 2016.)

Randy knew exactly where that photo shoot should take place: “I have always wanted to get Airstream back out to the Teton and the Jackson Hole, Wyoming area, because those were some of the strongest images my dad ever did for Airstream. This year they had enough confidence to say ‘all right, let’s see what you can do out there,’ and they sent me out there without an art director and just gave me free reign,” he says.

And it worked. “The general manager in charge of the trailer division said, ‘Finally we’ve gotten images that are strong enough to evoke what your dad did,’ says Miller. There isn’t much higher praise.
For Randy Miller, shooting images for Airstream in the very place where he camped with his family more than 60 years ago — where his father took timeless images that still evoke deep feeling — was much more than a photographic assignment.

"On the final day of the shoot, I set up two chairs. One empty chair for my mom and one empty chair for my dad, right where I was shooting," he says. "I got a shot of that in the background with the Airstream because they were there. I really felt that."

"I’m going to say it was the pinnacle of my career, being able to finally get an Airstream back out to an area that my mom and dad loved so much and Airstream loves so much. That was great."

Life can seem both long and short, but sometimes it curves back in on itself to make a circle, with an Airstream right in the middle.

See some of Randy Miller’s work at www.randymillerphoto.com

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