

# Marshal South & Wally Byam

PARALLEL ROADS, DIFFERENT DESTINATIONS

“The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man.”

— George Bernard Shaw,  
*Maxims for Revolutionists*

**Y**ears ago, when I lived on the outskirts of Las Vegas, I used to go for rambling drives on winding back roads through the surrounding desert. There were few manmade sights to break the sere landscape of rough brush and scorched hill, but occasionally I'd see a weathered old home, the walls often decorated with nailed-up animal bones and dirty hubcaps, with usually a bashed-up pickup truck somewhere to complete the picture. No other homes in sight, not a store within 30 miles, just the rabbits for company. Who lived out there; what were they thinking?

Maybe something along these lines:

“In this sunlit desolation of rock and thorn, where the sun beats down through an unending march of days and desert silence ... we can spread freely the net of our minds to gather those priceless, fundamental stirrings of the infinite which are most easily come by when one is close to nature. Our thoughts are our own, to weigh, digest to evaluate ... we are spared the constant effort of thrusting aside a stream of ready-made thought.”

The writer of those words, Marshal South, gained a small measure of fame living as a sort of desert hermit from 1930 to 1947 on top of Ghost Mountain, a small peak in what is now Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, in the dry eastern side of California's San Diego County. High on his sun-scored hilltop, South forged a life of deliberate elusiveness and continued redefinition; he was a will-o'-the-wisp in his retreat from society, yet curiously interested in that same society recognizing and acknowledging the validity of his estrangement.

South was born Feb 24, 1889 near Adelaide, south Australia, to a fairly well-to-do ranching family. His birth name was Roy Bennett Richards, but even in his adolescence he began to play with his identity—a stratagem he would employ for years to come. He used pseudonyms even for his first

published (at age 15) newspaper stories and articles, and that dodge was later employed by his entire family, who all changed names and dates—ostensibly to hide their tracks from a pursuing father—on most of the official documents signed when Richard's mother took him and the family to the United States, finally settling in Southern California.

Later, after a number of pen names, Richards settled on Marshal South, an appropriately Western name that suited the young man's self-image, a kind of cowboy artist constantly reinventing himself. It was probably a combination of South's temperament, the bleak prospects of the Depression and perhaps his reading of other natural living and lifestyle movements in the US, but South conceived that he would take himself and his young wife Tanya and homestead on the Bureau of Land Management property that later became Anza-Borrego, land without structure or sustenance, land with no water in sight.

And South never wanted it easy there: no settling in the flats near any roads; no electricity; no, he had to be on the top of Ghost Mountain, up a hard, boulder-strewn, one-mile trek that climbs 1,200 feet above the nearest road. As he wrote in a *Saturday Evening Post* article in 1939, he and his family were “... temperamental misfits and innate barbarians ... not equal to the job of coping with modern high power civilization.”

Over a period of years, South built an adobe home and a series of outbuildings and water catchments on top of his empire. He dubbed his home “Yaquitepec,” which means “hill of the Yaqui” after the fierce Indians of Sonora, Mexico. From 1939 to 1947, he wrote a series of monthly essays—102 articles in all—for *Desert Magazine*, a popular Southern California publication. His pieces chronicled observations on the lives of ants, coyotes and lizards, how to cook tortillas on an iron roof, the discovery of archeological sites, artifacts and petroglyphs, the firing of pottery from dug clay, the search for water, fuel and food, and perhaps most interesting, his reflections on family life, for during his long sojourn on the mountain, he and his wife raised three children, home-schooling them, and even making their clothing from desert scavengings.

That is, when anyone wore any clothing. South was an enthusiastic

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nudist and his children followed suit, though his wife never became comfortable with the constant state of undress. In Diana Lindsay's *Marshal South and the Ghost Mountain Chronicles*, which also contains all of the *Desert Magazine* articles and poems South wrote, there are many photographs of the children at play, and attending to their schooling or chores, all unencumbered by clothes or many “modern”



**ABOVE PHOTO:** The South homesite can be visited today in Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, but little remains except metal scraps, a cistern and eroded adobe walls. Still, the remoteness and ruggedness of the site gives a sense of the hard life the South family endured while living atop Ghost Mountain.

goods. Indeed, one of South's sons, Rider, reminisced about a radio they temporarily had: “As a rule, Father did not want us corrupted by a lot of things that were from the outside world, but once we did have a battery-powered radio.”

For the Airstream enthusiast, those articles are where things get more interesting. In the March, 1941 edition of *Desert Magazine*, a young man named Wallace M. Byam wrote in a letter to the editor, worried that South might not do more writing:

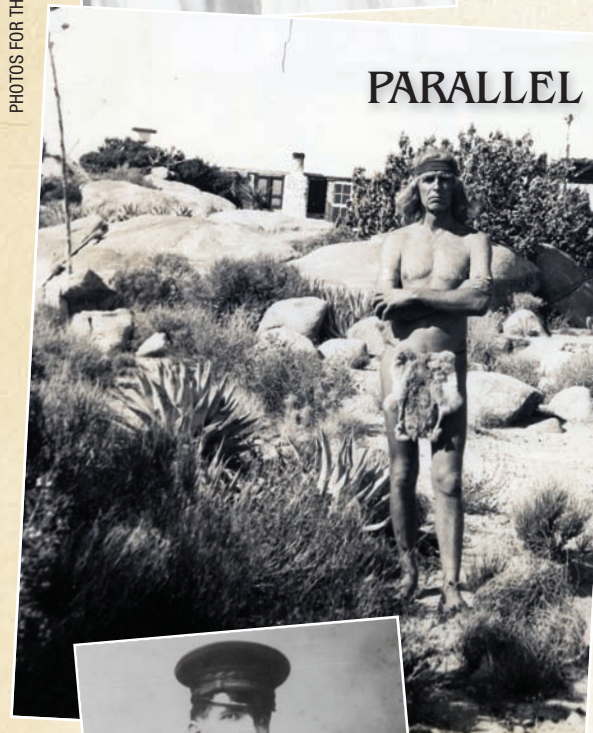
“More people than I believe you realize will be missing Marshal South's article. It seems that we all ought to get together and do something to get him back.”

“You see, Marshal South is the ‘escape’ of a lot of people running on a tread mill, racing in squirrel cages, slaves to businesses, jobs, possessions and conventions. Lots of us know full well that our striving is futile and the more we get the heavier the load, but convention and modern life has so cast its spell upon us that we can't pull away from it. So we escape through Marshal South. He does the things we would like to do ... he lives our dream life for us ... and boy we are going to miss him terribly. Do try to get him back.”

“Of course, I sometimes wonder if Marshal South really is a person, and if he actually does live up there on his unpronounceable mountain ... But whether fictional or real, for heaven's sake keep him going. We are going to be plumb lost without him.”

Byam, of course, had founded Airstream and been producing the silver bullets for a number of years at that point, and he had developed a pretty strong sense of himself and his own place in the world. However, materials shortages during World War II would soon force him to close down Airstream and work in the mushrooming California aircraft industry. Byam was never comfortable working for others, and his return to the helm of Airstream after war's end must have been of considerable relief.

What's notable about Byam's praise of South (besides the fact that the tone and language of their writings have some parallels) is that there were a number of strong correlations in their histories and their personalities. Byam was born seven years later than South, in Baker, Oregon. (Fittingly, for the designer of an American icon, Byam was born on the fourth of July.) Even as a youth, Byam was a



**FROM TOP TO BOTTOM:** An adobe stove was the centerpiece of Yaquitepec in 1938; Marshal South in 1930 at the beginning of his 17 years of subsistence living; In his most iconic dress during the years at Yaquitepec; and (BOTTOM) as a young man in 1914. One of Marshal's talents was for re-inventing himself.





The South tribe: Marshal, Rudyard, Victoria, Tanya and Rider.

“For the first time in the history of the American trailercoach, you are offered a vacation of incomparable magnetism. Approximately three months of unexcelled adventure and romance, in Mexico and Central American countries noted in fact and fiction for their exotic charm and tropical splendor.”

But there was a strong vein of practicality married to sociability in Byam’s makeup, and perhaps it was that that kept him from South’s fate. Here’s from a trailer ad that Byam wrote:

“Imagination is a great thing ... but it takes a lot more than dreaming to build a trailer that will meet all the rigorous tests of actual travel.” Byam guaranteed that Airstream buyers “... will get the greatest value for your money. Take my word for it. This is my way of life—and there is little more important to me than a happy trailer traveler.”

Those words, however much buttressed by the need to market a product, underscore some of the differences between South and Byam. Both men were visionaries, but while one of Byam’s feet was in the clouds, another was firmly on the ground. Both men were advocates of leaving society and seeking a simpler life, but besides wanting to sell a quality product to aid in getting away from it all, Byam was truly interested in his customers, in a personal, practical way.

South’s “customers,” the avid consumers of his tales about his isolated life atop a forlorn mountain, were kept at a distance from the man himself, as he wanted it. And certainly kept a distance from the troubles of South’s “Great Experiment,” as he had dubbed it.

For all of South’s declarations about the harmony of his desert dream, the picturesque descriptions of making roasted mescal-plant cakes, the forays into the desert scrub with his fascinated children, he never wrote of the deterioration of his relationship with his wife, who longed to return to the city, and educate the children in proper schools.

Tanya left Ghost Mountain in 1946; Ghost Mountain was deeded to her as part of the divorce settlement. South continued to write sporadic articles about desert life for the magazine, though Ghost

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Mountain was not the central story. The divorce and separation from his children was said to have dramatically affected him, and he died of a heart condition in October of 1948. Tanya lived nearly 50 years longer, dying in 1997. Her few public declarations about the life on Ghost Mountain were very bitter, and she destroyed a manuscript she wrote about the experience after her daughter told her to soften its harshness.

After South’s death, Randall Henderson, the editor of *Desert Magazine* wrote:

“He was a dreamer—an impractical visionary according to the standards of our time, but what a drab world it would be without the dreamers. Marshal’s tragedy was that he tried too hard to fulfill his dream. He would not compromise. And that is fatal in a civilization where life is a never-ending new struggle.”

While Airstreams became one of the most recognizable products in the world, South’s writings and handiworks went out of print, or were destroyed, some deliberately, some by accidental fire. South said he went to the desert “... to break the mould. ... not only freeing myself from the shackles of a system of existence which is drugged and paralyzed with error and convention, but to give opportunity to several other souls to grown up in an atmosphere and environment in which they would not be afraid to think for themselves.” Indeed, much of his time on the mountain was a rich experience, and indeed he achieved many of his goals of self-subsistence and communion with the wilder side of life. But many of his dreams were unfulfilled, or actualized only within the very narrow sphere of his remote life.

Two uncommon men, whose times and thoughts overlapped in significant ways. Byam’s dreams had a public scale, and as Airstream itself says of him in their website bio, “Wally Byam’s meticulous attention to quality would prove crucial.” South’s artistry was expressed in hand-hewn pottery, paintings and poetic language that he released in little drifts on prevailing winds—he probably abandoned more dreams than he shared. Byam’s artistry was expressed in design excellence and direct exchanges—and

exhilarating journeys—with the customers of that design excellence. For lovers of the Airstream, Wally Byam’s ability to deliver what his customers wanted has made all the difference.

#### Resources

*Marshal South and the Ghost Mountain Chronicles — An Experiment in Primitive Living*  
Diana Lindsay, Sunbelt Publications, 2005

Anza-Borrego Desert State Park  
[http://www.parks.ca.gov/?page\\_id=638](http://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=638)

Ghost Mountain Trail Directions  
*From I-8 east take Hwy. 79 through Cuyamaca State Park to Julian. Turn east on Hwy. 78 and proceed to the junction of Hwy. 78 and S2 (Scissors Crossing) and turn south (right) on S2. Go about 6 miles to the signed entrance to Blair Valley on the east side of the road. Follow the dirt road around the east side of Blair Valley for 2.7 miles. Turn right at the fork leading to the base of Ghost Mountain (Marshal South Cabin Trail).*

Dale (Pee Wee) Schwamborn’s Accounts of Wally Byam and the early days  
<http://sierranevadaairstreams.org/memories/history/peewee/>

Vintage Airstream Podcast “interviews” Wally Byam  
<http://www.thevap.com/> Episode 8; Dec 22, 2005  
In Byam’s words, “All you have to do to join a caravan is to have an itchy foot.” ♦♦♦

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