



The gathering of the clan at Nogales, Mexico. On this trip to Acapulco, 238 trailers rendezvoused and nearly 500 people gathered for the six-week caravan adventure

for the beginning

The

By HERB DAVIS

Wagonmaster Art Costello organizes the caravan, conducts meetings, solves problems, and supervises committees. Difference between this 20th century wagon train and those of 100 years ago is mainly horsepower



One of the big advantages to traveling in a caravan is the all-out welcome trailerists receive wherever they stop. Entertainment is good and arranged well in advance



TWO HUNDRED and thirty-eight bright aluminum Airstream trailers are drawn up in great concentric circles around a central group of 20. The location is a 50-acre area at Nogales, Mexico, leveled several years ago for new railroad yards. The 20 are the trailers of the wagonmaster, the caravan secretary and the committee chairmen. Committees handle parking, water supply, butane, mail, lost and found, doctors (there are four), entertainment, and other essential activities.

Here are gathering those trailer fans, members of the Wally Byam Caravan Clubs, who plan to travel together about 1800 miles to Acapulco via Mexico City. It will take six weeks. The eyes that saw this picture and watched every move and detail, with astonishment, were the eyes of a tenderfoot trailerist who had never before been in a caravan or hauled a trailer.

Inside the center circle are a number of tables at which lines of several hundred people are getting insurance, tourist cards, auto permits and registrations for the trip through Mexico. Later, nearly 500 people sat around this circle in chairs set several rows deep. This was the daily meeting for instructions, complaints, and explanations. In the middle stood the wagonmaster, organizing a modern, 20th century wagon train. The system is the same as it was 100 years ago; the difference is in the horsepower. There are no Indian raids to prepare for, but we are in a foreign land and must move by its rules. The weather is perfect at this 3800-ft. elevation. Small patches of snow are still on the northern slopes of the hills and it is nippy cold at night.

The date set for departure from Nogales is January 27 at 8 a.m. The caravaners have been arriving at the rendezvous for five days. We came in on the 25th and had our first experience with a

For adventure and fun, and real security

trailerist, there's nothing like caravanning

Tenderfoot Caravanner

"gopher hole"; that indispensable hole in the ground which must be dug immediately upon arrival at your place in camp. Rocks, debris, clay, or easy digging sand determines the depth you dig.

Where the digging is tough the hole is small and many ingenious ideas are used to minimize the water used. Dishwater and wash basin water is saved for flushing toilets; bathing all over is out unless you want to unhook the sewer line, catch this water in a bucket and carry it to some distant point where it can be thrown on the ground without creating a nuisance. If your "gopher hole" fills up and runs over you are in trouble with everybody. Most of us had to carry water some distance, so we were careful to keep this little chore at a minimum.

We had gone through all of the formalities at the tables; carried several buckets of water and fixed a mantle so that we could light the trailer with gas. The "gopher hole" was a 2-peso (16 cents) job, done by a nice Mexican boy who looked as though he needed the money more than I needed the exercise and experience. Night was falling so I sat down to reflect on how and why, we, the greenhorns, got here, 700 miles from San Pedro.

With the spirit of adventure stirring in our old bones, with more clothes, supplies of food and innumerable accessories, personal and otherwise, than could ever be used, we had sailed forth a few days ago in our 26' Airstream Land Yacht from the safe harbor where she had been built, headed for the rendezvous in Nogales. The skipper was the greenest of trailering tenderfeet.

I soon learned that the strange galloping sensation you get in your car is just the rough places in the road; the engine

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The "water-boys" line up at the water wagon which is provided where no hook-ups exist. Arrival of the water wagon means that digging "gopher holes" is in order.

Campfire fun is often the highlight of the day. Activities are planned by special committee and towns designated overnight stops provide their best entertainment



Tenderfoot . . .

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The 45-mile-an-hour California trailer speed limit is helpful to the new trailer driver. You get some experience in maneuvering this long tail behind you, learn to let the traffic go by without getting your blood pressure up, and enjoy being cussed at in several languages before you learn to sit patiently behind the wheel and realize that you acquired this rolling cabana to relax and travel on your own schedule—and let the rest of the world go by.

About 20 miles out we were overtaken by the bugaboo of the neophyte—is everything hooked up right? Did I hook the breakaway chain? Do the turning and stoplights work? Did I fasten the brake-set chain? Did I close the air vent under the refrigerator? Soon it gets so bad you have to stop and check. Of course, everything is O.K. It was all checked out before we started. There was no need to worry for 40 miles. Then the temptation to look inside overpowered me. I opened the door and everything in the refrigerator was on the floor. I hadn't closed it tightly. Fortunately, there were no liquids or eggs in the box

so no great damage was done. Three nights later, two in trailer parks and one on the roadside, we arrived at rendezvous, eager, a little more experienced, but somewhat scared of the voyage ahead.

On the morning of January 27 at 8 o'clock the wagonmaster fired his gun and the caravan started rolling behind him. I had estimated that it would take at least one minute per car to leave the campground, if all went well. This would have meant nearly three hours to get the last man out. What a surprise I got when I found that the organization and skill of the drivers allowed at least three cars per minute to leave and to be spaced three or four car and trailer lengths apart on the highway!

We were cautioned to remember that the highway was built and maintained for the use of the citizens of Mexico, and that we must keep far enough apart to permit normal use with a minimum of inconvenience to the other users.

I had a picture in my mind of this great train of more than 200 cars and trailers creeping along like a disjointed snake. Not so. Within 10 miles the lads were so spread out that you scarcely realized you were in a caravan. 50 miles an hour was the official speed limit, but the road was hardly a 50-mile-per-hour surface so we traveled considerably slower. We were permitted to pass each other but were not allowed to pass the

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wagonmaster in the lead car. There were many chuckholes and narrow bridges (*Puente angosto*), but considering the storms they had here this past winter the roads were in pretty fair shape and only annoyed the fellow who had to barrel along at top speed to be happy.

The last to leave the campsite was the "caboose"—the caravan chief of police and the repair truck. This arrangement gives everyone a feeling of confidence in a strange land and makes participation a delight. I have heard some criticisms and complaints from people who have been on previous caravans, but from the viewpoint of a newcomer I think it was remarkably well organized.

The camping places were spaced at four to six-hour driving distances. Arrangement for this space had been made some months in advance and the parking committee went out one day ahead so that the space was all laid out and ready for orderly handling when we arrived.

After leaving Nogales our first camp was at Hermosillo. All hands arrived without any reported casualties to man or beast. The location was a new subdivision at the north end of town. The ground had been leveled but no houses were started as yet. Water was available from several faucets installed for our use. The bucket brigade formed promptly and continued their activities day and night. How these gals can use water in a trailer! Two nights here gave us a chance to see the town.

At each of the stops the mayor, governor, and other dignitaries came out and greeted the group at camp meeting. Musicians provided us with entertainment and livened up the campfire we had each evening.

Guaymas was next along the road. The site was north of town on a vacant piece of land that had been smoothed up a bit with a blade. Rubble from construction work found its way here before we did and digging "gopher holes" was nigh onto impossible, but everyone got one that sufficed and only a few ran over. Old, fat and feeble men had to dig their own. Native peso hunters hadn't come this far out of town.

We stayed here three nights. It was a weekend and the caravan never travels on Sunday (not for the same reason New York wants to stop them). A number of men went fishing with fair luck on small seabass and Spanish mackerel. Some mammas made their gallant fishermen cook their catches outside the trailer (grrrr!).

Rumors about the safety of the water were tossed around freely and frequently. Every time two or three people got together at the water source you heard "I was told that—" "A friend of mine said—" "My doctor told me—" "Two other fellows had—" This was the

pastime of the water boys. Not a silent Gunga Din in the lot! If you did all the things to the water that these oracles told you to do, I am sure you couldn't use it. Montezuma would wreak his revenge by letting you die of thirst instead of in the usual fashion!

Monday we moved along to Navojia. A good level piece of land along the highway, across from a fine new hospital, was ready for us. No accidents so far, just a couple of flat tires (not mine, for which I am grateful) was the most that had happened to mar the fun. We had a day to take a side trip to Alamos, a

historical old mining town that is being redeveloped as a tourist attraction.

Two nights here and we were off for Culiacan. This was the longest day's run. Two hundred and thirty miles and some fun. There were no accidents but we had the finest traffic jam you ever saw! About 90 miles south of Navojia we came to the first available gas station; the next one was 90 miles farther. Many drivers turned in here for fuel and shortly the southbound traffic was held up until a hundred trailers were backed up bumper to bumper—some waiting their

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turn to get into the station and some wishing to go on. Then several foolish drivers cut out of the southbound lane and tried to pass those in front of them to go on down the road. They reckoned without the northbound Mexican traffic and the interesting Mexican driver. The first man out found himself face to face with a large dump truck heading north, then things were really fouled up. Northbound vehicles piled up behind the truck and the whole highway was blocked for a couple of miles both ways. To help things out, just at this point the road was narrow and elevated about 15 feet so there was no chance for anyone to pull off the road. I was in the gas station and able to move on but it took more than two hours to get enough people backed up in both directions to untangle the jam.

Next we were held up on a toll bridge, with temporary approaches due to wash-outs, while we paid 8 pesos and alternated with northbound traffic through one lane at the toll taker. The final fun of the day came when we reached the Rio Culiacan. Here we crossed the river on the downstream apron of a diversion dam. It is really nothing but a paved ford. When the water is too high the only way you can cross this river is over the railroad bridge which is planked for such an emergency. There was about six inches of water flowing over the apron. I don't know about the other drivers but I was getting squeals, screams and instruction from my ever lovin' all the way across.

Culiacan offered some unscheduled entertainment. The campsite was in an area across from a wonderful park and zoo. Early in the morning the most agonized squeals and screams started and many folks thought the peccaries were in a fight; others swore it was the mountain lions screaming (mountain lions don't scream), but the truth was that we were parked near a slaughterhouse where they were dispatching the day's supply of hogs against their loud and earnest protests.

Next, Mazatlan. "The Pearl of the Pacific," says the city advertising. Here, near the inner bay, camp was established for the three-night weekend stop. Many of the trailer folk availed themselves of the opportunity to send out laundry. It was duly marked and identified when it was picked up; but, when it was returned it was all mixed up. What fun the girls had in trying to identify each individual garment. They looked like the cartoons of the crush at the bargain counter and I am informed that some of the clothes were never identified or claimed. These little incidents are aggravating but amusing as you rough it on caravan.

Thirty-four states and three Canadian

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provinces are represented in the group. So far only three trailers had to drop out because of sickness and none because of mechanical difficulties.

At Mazatlan we are just halfway to Mexico City. Some will turn back from here because they have run out of time—not all participants are retired or have unlimited time at their disposal. I must turn back here. Perhaps it is just as well. This story was to be told through the eyes of a tenderfoot, so it must end here. One thousand five hundred miles of driving, towing, digging “gopher holes,” carrying water and obeying the commands of the wagonmaster, takes you out of the tenderfoot class—we have lost our amateur standing. If I went farther I might become a cynical pro.

Caravanning is fun; it is a boon to the timid who might not see Mexico in any other way; it is a perfect break-in for neophytes; and a delightful habit for the repeaters who caravan every year.

HERB DAVIS