

Investing in silver

Where does the Airstream trailer set put down roots - if only for a little while? In a small piece of heaven near Hillsboro, that's where

By Alyson Ward

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HILLSBORO -- When your home has wheels, you can go anywhere. And when your home is an Airstream, you're part of a special club, your smooth silver box of a home attracting attention and affection wherever you go.

Just off the interstate in Hillsboro -- about an hour south of Fort Worth on I-35 -- there's a whole neighborhood full of Airstream trailers. They're lined up on tidy lots: big ones, little ones, vintage trailers and tricked-out newer models. And the people who own them have formed a community there. They may be on the road several months of each year, but the North Texas Airstream Community is their home base: It gives them a mailing address, a small house to stay in, a group of neighbors that they know they will see again. Their homes may have wheels, but they have a piece of solid ground to return to when they wish.

The community was started in 1991. A group of Airstream owners found a 50-acre spot in Hill County, put a fence around it and divided it into lots. They combined their skills -- a retired plumber, a retired electrician, a man who knew how to use a backhoe -- and dug trenches for water and sewer lines. And soon they started attracting people from all over the country who wanted to stay for a night, for a week or for years.

"It's a group of people who enjoy trailering, Airstreaming," says Joe Gardner, who has owned Airstreams since '88 and lives here with his wife, Gypsy. "And we're a group that's very close-knit."

There are just a few requirements for moving in: Residents must be at least 45, have an Airstream and belong to the Wally Byam Caravan Club International, the overarching organization named for the Airstream's inventor. In fact, the club's president lives in Hillsboro -- as do several former international presidents.

There are about 150 properties, most of them on 40-by-80-foot lots. Those tiny lots are the perfect size for an Airstream trailer and a carport to cover it -- and for a compact little home known as a villa. Much like Airstream trailers, the villas are designed with no wasted space, full of little compartments and hideaway storage.

The community, says Jim Haddaway, the community president, "was originally for those who had Airstreams to have a lot," a place to park their trailers. "Then they got the idea to build a house, a place to sleep," he says. "Then, why not build one big enough to have washers, dryers, bedrooms?"

The steel-framed villas look a bit like storage sheds from the outside -- and for some, that's pretty much what they are. But many of the residents live in their villas and have turned them into two-story homes with 1,200 or 1,500 square feet with multiple bedrooms, full-size baths and a kitchen big enough for real cooking.

Airstream's iconic silver trailers have dotted the country's highways for more than 70 years. Its smart design and familiar rounded profile have made it a rolling aluminum symbol of American freedom and wanderlust. And though lots of people own trailers made by other companies, the Airstream has a certain mystique. Its unchanging appearance has allowed it to absorb our collective history, its unique shape and clean lines embodying a simpler time. And it even feels like a simpler time in the North Texas Airstream Community. People come and go all the time, but residents can't recall any crime since the place opened 18 years ago. There are no street lights, signs or traffic lights; when the sun sets, it gets truly dark. There's always a game of cards going on in the clubhouse. And every Tuesday evening, just about everybody in the neighborhood -- well, everyone who isn't traveling -- gathers for a potluck dinner.

Who lives here? Former teachers, retired military personnel, people who worked for oil companies. Most are retired. Many are longtime Texans. All are wanderers, full of stories about the places they've been and the places they want to go. Most folks are retired, but everyone has business cards so they can quickly share contact information with new friends they meet along the way.

Their lives are on the road. But this community is the place they call home. Here's a look at some of the folks who live -- at least occasionally -- in the North Texas Airstream Community.

Eddy and Sheila Lewis

As the sun sets behind tall trees, a warm light glows from the silver trailer parked on Lot 703 -- and from the white steel-sided villa built next to it.

Sheila and Eddy Lewis live on this lot on Avenue D when they're home. But that's only about four months out of the year. The rest of the time, they travel, eat and sleep in a 34-foot Airstream trailer.

"This is kind of our home base," Sheila says of their white, steel-sheathed two-story villa. They drop in and stay for a while, then hit the road again.

In 1974, the Lewises were living in Colorado, and one day they wandered into an Airstream showroom in Colorado Springs. A woman was using a fan and strips of ribbon to demonstrate the aerodynamic shape and good design of the Airstream trailer, and that made a lasting impression on the young couple.

"She convinced us," Eddy says. "So we started saving our pennies."

In 1997, after Eddy retired from the military, the couple finally bought their Airstream. Two years later, they sold their Copperas Cove home, put most of their stuff into storage and hit the road full time in their 34-foot Airstream Classic Excella.

The two take odd jobs here and there, temporary positions they find through word of mouth or in ads they find in RV magazines. They've worked at Yellowstone National Park, Eddy doing maintenance and Sheila registering campers. Last year they went to Des Moines, Iowa, and spent a few months at Adventureland Amusement Park. Sheila worked in the gift shops; Eddy did games ("I guessed ladies' weights," he says). They spent last summer at a campground in North Carolina, and in a few weeks they'll head to Coffeyville, Kan., where they'll pack and mail holiday orders at an Amazon.com shipping center.

Their '94-model Airstream has been repainted inside, and a few years ago they installed a wood-laminate floor. There are curtains on the window above the kitchen sink, a clock and a cross on the wall; it's small, but it looks like a real home. In fact, before they hit the road, the Lewises have to pack only clothes and food. The rest is already at their fingertips, stowed away in one of the trailer's many drawers and storage cabinets -- "you'd be surprised how much you can get in an Airstream," Sheila says.

After 23 years in the military, the Lewises were used to paring down their possessions anyway. The military sent them to live in Germany and all over the United States, and with each move they streamlined their belongings even more. Still, to prevent adding too much weight to the trailer, the Lewises follow one strict rule: "If I buy something," Sheila says, nodding toward Eddy, "I have to throw something of his out."

But limited space is a gift, Sheila says: "You find out you don't need a lot of things."

They've made friends all over the country and friends in Hillsboro who will keep an eye on their villa while they're gone. The office will forward their mail. They don't have to worry about maintaining a home while they're traveling.

"When we leave," Sheila says, "we turn everything off and just lock the door."

They'll be back in a few weeks. Or months. It doesn't matter, really. The stuff that matters is with them wherever they go.

Janie and Jim Haddaway

Jim and Janie Haddaway met twice accidentally. And they ended up marrying in 2000 after a string of coincidences that, Jim says, "could only happen to an Airstreamer."

The couple lives in one of the property's conventional homes -- houses built with an attached

carport for Airstreams. Jim is the president of the North Texas Airstream Community. He's also a former president of the Wally Byam Caravan Club International, one of several who live in the community.

Jim has been an Airstreamer since 1978, but Janie didn't buy her first Airstream until '97, after her husband died.

She and her late husband had planned to travel when they retired, and Janie still wanted to do it. Her theory: You're never alone if you travel in an Airstream. She figured she could see a lot of the country this way without all the dangers of traveling by herself. "I knew that I could travel with them and go on caravans and I wouldn't worry about things," Janie says. "If I needed help, all I'd have to do is call another Airstreamer." So she bought a 25-foot trailer and joined an Austin-area Airstream unit.

"I used to provide the entertainment for the neighborhood trying to back into the driveway," she says. But she was taken with the Airstream way of life. In June 1996, Janie went to Alaska with good friends, traveling with their Airstream group on a caravan. In North Pole, Alaska, she met Jim -- and his wife. The couple had driven their own trailer from rural Kentucky.

"Jim had on suspenders," Janie remembers. "He had a white beard and his white hair and I swear he looked like Santa Claus." But they discovered they all had something in common: Jim and his wife had a son in Austin, where Janie lived at the time.

A few months later, Janie and the same friends went to the Kentucky Derby rally. Jim and his wife were hosting that rally, so the two met again.

In September of 1999, Janie noticed in the Blue Beret -- an Airstream newsletter -- that Jim's wife had passed away, so she sent him a note of sympathy. "That was a mistake," he says, his eyes twinkling. Soon after, Jim traveled to Austin to visit his son, who was in the hospital -- and Janie surprised him at the airport, showing up to offer a ride.

"I was just trying to be nice," Janie says. But the two went to dinner that night and something changed. When Jim went home, they started talking on the phone and really getting to know each other. "We became teenagers all over again," Jim says.

They married the next spring and agreed to sell their homes. "I couldn't get her to come to Kentucky," Jim says, "and she couldn't get me to come to Texas for the longest time."

Janie won that one -- "I couldn't take Texas out of her," Jim says -- and they agreed on Hillsboro because they both have family in Texas. In the meantime, Janie's longtime friends had moved into the community, too.

Because of Jim's duties as international president, the Haddaways spent much of their first few years together on the road, going to all 50 states to attend Airstream rallies. In their living room is a curio cabinet full of mementos from their trips: a china plate given to them by a club member from England; silver dollars Jim was given at a rally in Springfield, Mo.; a wood carving made

by an Airstreamer from Wyoming.

Janie knew she wouldn't be by herself if she traveled in an Airstream. Now she never is.

Willie Mae Kennedy

Willie Mae Kennedy doesn't even own an Airstream anymore: She sold the motorhome when her husband died five years ago. But at 96, she still lives in her villa and has stayed a part of the North Texas Airstream Community. And at nearly 9 on a dark Tuesday night, she's still in the clubhouse playing the card game Push with a table of her neighbors.

Willie Mae and her husband moved to Hillsboro in 1995, but they were part of the Airstream culture for decades. She worked for Southwestern Bell for 30 years, then spent an additional 34 years traveling the country with her husband. They owned a series of Airstream trailers, then two Airstream motorhomes, and they traveled to every state at least once. "We'd be gone the whole year," she says, driving north in the summer and south in the winter.

By the mid-'90s, the Kennedys wanted to go a little minimalist, simplify their lives by moving to the Airstream community. And boy, did they downsize.

"We sold a farm in East Texas and five houses to move here," Willie Mae says. The couple sold most of what they had and gave away what they couldn't sell, then moved into a two-story villa in Hillsboro.

Of course, her villa still has four bedrooms -- it turns out you can cram a lot of villa onto a 40-by-80 foot lot. But that just makes room for her great-nieces, who come to visit her from Oklahoma and Houston and use her upstairs bedrooms as their personal bed-and-breakfast.

"Everybody here thinks I'm a miracle woman," says Kennedy, who'll be 97 in May. "I think so, too."

She lives on her own and cooks her own meals. One morning last week, she hopped in her car for a trip to Waco and was back by midafternoon. And she meets up with friends just about every day in the clubhouse.

"I go every day and play bridge or Push or something, and if I have a day when I don't play, well, I'm mad," she says, laughing. "It's a wonderful place to live."

Marnie and Bob Kaemmerer

Bob and Marnie Kaemmerer arrived at the community in mid-October and have had their 34-foot Airstream plugged in on the front parking lot ever since. Both retired teachers, the Kaemmerers sold their home outside Cincinnati nearly 10 years ago and became full-timers, living entirely on the road.

The Kaemmerers bought their first Airstream in the early '90s and took their first big trip to Alaska, where they stayed for a six-week stretch. At the final banquet, everyone had to tell the group where they were headed next.

"The full-timers were cool," Marnie Kaemmerer says. "They'd say, 'I think I'll go down to the coast, I think I'll go here, I think I'll go there.' Bob and I were going back to Cincinnati to change the screening in the storm windows. It didn't have the same panache."

So when they retired, they sold their home and claimed that same freedom, no longer anchored by property and possessions.

"We gave away as much stuff as we could," Marnie says, "and then we took off."

This year, though, they've decided they want a tiny little place to call home. The very day they arrived in Hillsboro, they put in a bid for a lot with a small villa. Their 560-square-foot space gives them a permanent mailing address and some needed storage space. They've carried around everything they own for so long, they've gotten used to the limitations ("I have three pairs of dress slacks," Marnie says), but they've accumulated a bit more over the years. Their trailer is overweight, which is dangerous for traveling, and they need to leave some things behind.

"We need to offload some stuff without throwing things in the Dumpster," Marnie says.

So they'll leave their heavy winter coats and their Christmas decorations behind the next time they take off. Their cat, Gorky, will ride with them.

The Kaemmerers often stay in a place four or five months, get involved in a local church and really get to know the place. After two weeks in Hillsboro, Bob already had joined the praise band at the First United Methodist Church. Both joined the choir.

"We've developed some really close friendships," Marnie says, even though they always move on.

Last winter the Kaemmerers spent four months in Yuma, Ariz. The year before that it was Hudson, Fla.

They worked at the fairgrounds in Tunbridge, Vt., and sold Christmas trees in San Matteo, Calif. As soon as they arrived in Hillsboro, they brought out their pot of chrysanthemums and propped it up on their Airstream's propane tank.

What's next?

"No idea," Marnie says. "This winter we'll spend the full winter [in Hillsboro]. We'll leave for a month or two, maybe, and head farther south. Maybe go to Yuma and see friends, or go to Ohio or Florida. It's up in the air."

Like everyone else in this community, their home is in Hillsboro now, but their life is on the road.

ALYSON WARD, 817-390-7988