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TOWING MYTHS

Towing an Airstream trailer successfully, is not as difficult as many owners may think.

In time, many stories, opinions, and myths have been generated, most of which have caused confusion, damages to the trailer and unnecessary costly heavy duty tow vehicles purchases. Airstream trailers have a large degree of aerodynamic cleanliness. They could be towed easily in excess of 100 mph with the larger cars of the past, and now with light trucks, and some SUV's.

Airstream wants you to buy their trailer.

Airstream sales people, want you to buy Airstream trailers.

And now, the problems start. Why?

You must use a load "equalizing hitch," in order to safely tow the Airstream.

What brand and why, has many choices.

Hitch manufacturers, all promote their products, "as the best."

Who says so?? Their advertising departments say so! They all make claims, that unfortunately, sound great, but cannot be backed up with facts, as to why theirs is the best.

A load equalizing hitches purpose, is to create a safe and secure marriage between the tow vehicle and the trailer. Different combinations of trailers and tow vehicles require different hitch setups, ratings, all with proper installations and adjustments.

It is these parameters, that for all too many years, have been guessed at, by the vast majority of the very people you trust.

Rarely, does the sales person have any "real" knowledge of what must be done to assure a proper, safe, hitch setup.

Rarely, does their shop have anyone that has the knowledge or experience of what is a "proper" load equalizing hitch setup.

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And, finally, not a single hitch manufacturer, can spec out “what is a safe” and secure load equalizing hitch setup, and why.

How can that be said?

There is not a single RV sales person, shop technician or hitch manufacturer, that has “ever” run a study or research program, that investigated “loss of control” accidents, specifically when towing an Airstream or Argosy travel trailer, as to “why” did it happen, and much less, prove it, and how it could have probably been avoided, that has ever been published.

Travel trailer manufacturers, load equalizing hitch manufacturers and insurance companies, simply “don’t want to get involved,” with one exception.

That sole exception, was Caravanner Insurance Company, the old insurance division of Airstream, back in 1970. I am proud to have worked for Caravanner Insurance, at that time. Over and above training dealer parts and service departments nationwide, writing the “Airstream crash book”, I also headed the “lets find out why” research program regarding loss of control accidents when towing an Airstream trailer.

At the beginning, there were many dissenters, including Airstream, all saying, “it can’t be done.”

The first step was designing a series of 12 questions. Some terminology has been updated.

- 1. Year, brand & type of tow vehicle?.....**
- 2. Brand of hitch?.....**
- 3. Model of hitch (rating)?.....**
- 4. Was hitch equipped with full sway control?.....**
- 5. Who installed the hitch?.....**
- 6. Was hitch bolted or welded?.....**
- 7. Were rear springs on tow vehicle standard or heavy duty?.....**
- 8. Type of rear shock absorbers, (standard, heavy duty, air shock, air lifts, load leveler or other.**
- 9. If air shocks or air lifts, what pressure was used?.....**
- 10. Was anything mounted on the rear of the trailer?.....**
If yes, what was attached?..... Weight of item.....
- 11. How full was black water tank?.....Gray tank?.....**
- 12. How full was water tank?.....**

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Some projections were made as to what the answers might be, based on past experience and physics.

We examined all the “notice of loss” forms in the old files, looking for anything that described, a loss of control, such as a sway, fishtail, zigzag, etc. We sent out several hundred letters, along with the questionnaire.

In a matter of a few weeks, many owners returned the completed questionnaire. The first group of about 25, had the information reduced to simple data. We continued sending the forms out for all the new “loss of control” accidents. Upon returning those forms, that data was also compiled and compared with the projections.

Interestingly enough over 75 percent of the data, matched the projections. The data was examined by 3 different people, without consulting each other. The comparison of the results from those examiners, agreed over 95 plus percent of the time.

We then revised the initial criteria to some degree, which allowed us to further increase the predicting accuracy. This information, was coupled with hundreds of in-field examinations of damaged trailers and tow vehicles, and interviews with the insured’s.

As the study continued, additional data from new losses, was consistent with previous data and information. The total data at this point exceeded 500 files. Based on that data, a number of conclusions were made, backed up with facts.

The data clearly demonstrated the cause of two thirds of all the losses, which were modifications to the tow vehicle, and/or hitches or sway controls. Some of the tow vehicle modifications were overload springs, overload spring type shocks, improper use of air lifts or air bags, and automatic leveling.

The hitch problems were numerous, some of which were improper installation and/or adjustment, no load equalizing hitch was used, improper chain adjustments as well as no sway controls.

Air shocks and other air lift systems, defeat the purpose of a load equalizing hitch, unless they are set to “minimum” pressures. Use any pressure you wish “when not towing”. Automatic leveling is an absolute no-no. You must “defeat it” when towing a travel trailer when using a load equalizing hitch, and make sure

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the pressure in the shocks is at absolute minimum, which is usually 15 to 20 PSI. Any pressure above the minimum, progressively defeats the purpose of the load equalizing bars.

Equalizer's advertising department claims their bars are best. But they lack the ability to adequately bend when hitting bumps, which is necessary to provide a soft ride for the Airstream. Instead, because of their stiffness, the road shock will punish the front of the trailer. Their claimed "sway control", offers about as much friction as a finger nail file. Friction is "NOT" a sway control, but does offer a resistance to movement. The small amount of friction offered, assuming a proper hookup, is certainly inadequate for the purpose intended. Their suggested "bar rating" to use, is excessive at best. Have they investigated "loss of control accidents?" No.

Eazlift torsion bars, depending on the rating used, offer a small amount of vertical movement. Their ball mounts for the "L" shaped bars, "MUST" be frequently lubed, to reduce wear. The bottom chain link on the end of the torsion bars, must be frequently inspected, as it does wear every time you make a turn. As the wear progresses, in time, the bottom chain link can wear enough, to snap when hitting a bump, which in itself can cause a loss of control accident. The friction type sway control from Eazlift, does not have a brain. If adjusted properly, it offers equal resistance keeping your rig in a straight line as it does if you want to make a turn. It offers that same resistance returning to a straight line. Therefore if you experience a sway, the friction sway control offers the same amount of resistance regardless of the relative position of your tow vehicle with respect to the trailer. Therefore, it can, within itself, contribute to a problem, since it may not allow you to easily return to a straight line, to regain control.

Most friction type sway control users are not aware, that when towing in inclement weather, the sway control adjustment must be backed off, or taken off. To not do so, can cause a loss of control accident in inclement weather.

The Hensley hitch is new to the RV industry. By far, it's the most expensive, bulky and very much heavier than any other load equalizing hitch. Time will tell if it will do damage to the A-frames. Since they are rated at 1000 and 1400 pounds, they certainly will transfer considerable road shock to the trailer. Adjusting a Hensley hitch, appears to be a task that most owners don't wish to tackle, yet it's performance depends on it. Do to it's size, it's security in a storage yard becomes questionable. Certainly they can be stolen in minutes as a coupler lock can be removed in seconds.

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The only reasonably priced load equalizing hitch that uses ‘torsion’ to control sway, is Reese, with their ‘dual cam’ hitch.

However, Reese’s published chart that suggests what rating bars you should use, for a given tongue weight, TOTALLY disregards tow vehicles, and makes no reference to them. Therefore that chart is of no value.

The heavier duty the tow vehicle, the lighter the hitch bar rating must be.

As an example, if the trailer has 800 pounds tongue weight, a properly equipped half ton truck should use 750 to 800 pound rating bars.

A 3/4 ton truck or vehicle, should use 550 to 600 pound bars.

A large 60’s to 70’s automobile, should use 1000 pound bars.

Using excessive hitch bar ratings and/or heavy duty tow vehicles, does nothing more than cost more money, provide a rough ride for passengers, and slowly but surely, punishes the trailer by causing hundreds if not thousands of dollars in damage to it.

Bad axles, bad shocks, and/or improper running gear balance, all cause damage to the trailer, and when coupled with excessive rated hitch bars and/or tow vehicles, the damages quickly accelerate.

Be kind to your Airstream, as you wish it to be to you.

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