

CHECK YOUR HITCH RECEIVER!

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My usual trip to “Quartzfest” (a ham radio/RV event just south of Quartzsite, AZ.) every year starts out as a day and a half trip to my brother’s home in Yuba City, CA for an ‘overnighter’ where he throws out an extension cord for this weary traveler, then a day’s drive to my sister’s home in Visalia, CA. All went well for the first leg of my journey, but on the way to Visalia, something happened that would prove to be the realization of most every RV’ers nightmare.

I drive my 1983 Airstream 310 motor home and flat-tow my Jeep Grand Cherokee as I have done many, many times. I have a little monitor that gives me a nice color picture of how my jeep is doing under tow via a nice rear-mounted camera. My usual route between Yuba City to Visalia is CA99 Southbound due to the fact that my sister’s home is only about 3 miles off of CA99 in Visalia. I travel in the far right lanes most of the time unless there is heavy merging traffic, then the center lane is best. As I was entering North Fresno, CA, I glanced over to my rear camera monitor and noticed ...THERE WAS NO JEEP IN THE MONITOR!!!!!! Yes, you read that correctly. My Jeep had come off the motor home somewhere, somehow. I immediately pulled over to the shoulder on the right, jumped out of the motor home and ran to the back. My jeep was GONE. Not only was my jeep gone, but the hitch receiver was missing too. I made the ‘911’ call and spoke to the CHP dispatch. I told them what happened and the route I took. They called back and told me that nothing had been reported. My mind was blown. I jumped back into my motor home and took the next exit (Ashlan Rd. In Fresno), crossed back over the freeway and headed northbound in hopes of locating my jeep. As I started northbound, I realized that I could not see any southbound traffic at all due to all the oleander bushes in the center median. I could have driven right past it and not known. You wouldn’t believe all the possible scenarios going around and around in my head during this drive....Things like: Did my jeep cause an accident? Were people hurt? Did someone steal it? Etc, etc. Then....over 25 miles back, the oleanders went away exposing just the ‘jersey rail’ in the center median....and up ahead was my Jeep Grand Cherokee just sitting there next to the ‘jersey rail’ as if someone just parked it and walked away. Well, I had to drive a bit further up the freeway to find the nearest exit which turned out to be near the south part of Chowchilla, CA. I crossed back over the freeway and was once again headed southbound to where my jeep was sitting. It was sitting in the center median just after the freeway interchange where CA152 (from Los Banos/Gilroy) met up with CA99. I pulled over, got out, waited for traffic, and ran across to the jeep. All of the tow bar assembly, plus the hitch receiver was severely bent and underneath the jeep. I did notice two places on the ‘jersey rail’ where the jeep hit it and bounced off coming to rest about 24” from the edge. I knew that all of the tow apparatus had to come off, so I waited for traffic, then



2017 The RussBus and jeep at the SNU Eagle Lake rally

ran back across the southbound lanes of traffic back to the motor home to get a big hammer and my 1/2" socket extension bar to beat the tow pins off of the jeep's tow connection point. I ran back to the jeep, and after about 15 minutes, had both tow pins removed and dragged the tow bar assembly out from under the jeep. Both tow bars were bent around 45° but were intact and still connected to the hitch as were the safety cables, electrical cable and break-away cable. Upon inspecting the motor home's hitch receiver that was under the jeep, I noticed that both weld points had failed, no doubt due to metal fatigue.

During this time, I had called the CHP dispatch to where the CHP officer showed up, called a tow truck with the flat bed. The jeep's tranny had locked up, so the jeep had to be dragged onto the flatbed of the tow truck. It was taken to the Jeep dealer in Madera, CA., about 10 miles away. I called my sister and told her of my 'accident' and she drove to Madera from her home which is a good hours' drive. I unloaded the jeep which always serves as my "storage area" into my sister's SUV and took it back to Visalia.

While in Visalia, I contacted an RV hitch specialist that not only welded my hitch receiver back on, but added a LOT of extra flat iron and angle iron to it so that I will never have to again experience a hitch failure. He was very kind to me and kept the price of the hitch fix under \$450. The replacement tow bar parts came to just a little over \$1,000. I can say that all the tow parts held up quite well, so I highly endorse the Roadmaster Inc. Falcon tow hitch! Oh, and did I mention that they had all of the replacement tow parts shipped to Visalia within 3 days with NO shipping charges? A big 'high five' to them.

I did have to leave the jeep at the Gill Auto Group in Madera for over 3 weeks for all the repairs which included some body and paint, a new tranny, plus a new 2m/70cm ham radio antenna! I did make it to Quartzfest in Arizona, then my week after that in Tucson before returning back to Visalia.

Was that all you might ask? Oh no. My Isuzu turbo diesel started smoking badly. When I say badly, I mean, it is like an aerobatic airplane with "Smoke ON" on the ground bad, until I get up to freeway speeds of course. After a bit of research, I have determined that the turbocharger's seals have failed, as verified by the Isuzu mechanic in Tucson. So, a new or rebuilt turbo is in store for the future. I did not want to pay the \$5,700 for a new turbo from Isuzu, so I will be learning all about removing and installing them myself. The only other thing is my Turbo 475 transmission that started slipping real bad, but I will put that on the shelf for a later date.

Bottom line for all of you that tow, which I suspect is almost all of you, is to inspect your hitches. Be sure all of the welds are strong and not cracked, and that you have sufficient bracing for the side mounting plates that bolt into the frame of your tow vehicle.

After towing my jeep to Arizona at least 4 times from WA.; and twice to Sun Valley, Idaho; plus numerous trips into the northeastern parts of Washington, I thought all was well with the towing bits. Wrong. Inspect, inspect, inspect.

Addendum to the article with pictures

The RussBus is powered by an Isuzu Turbo Diesel. Back in the 1980's, Airstream ordered P30 Chevy Chassis' from which they built their motor homes on. All of them came with the Chevrolet 454 cu.in. big block V8 'gassers'. Airstream shipped out a certain amount of those chassis' and replaced them with the Industrial grade Isuzu Inline 6 Turbo Diesel engines (the 6BD1A's). All of those engines were married up with the Turbo 475 transmissions.

Here are some photos with a brief description of each...



This is how I found my Jeep when I traveled back over 25 miles. It's as if someone parked it there on purpose. Notice that all of the tow bits are under the jeep which punctured the tranny pan and messed up the internal parts that eventually required a complete new tranny to be installed.



What really made me cry was my nice Diamond dual band ham radio antenna broke!!!



The entire tow bar assembly was still connected to the hitch receiver that ended up under the jeep that most likely happened when the jeep hit the 'jersey rail' in the center median. That's when a lot of the damage happened to the underside requiring a replacement of the dented oil pan and an entire new transmission.



Here is a photo of the RoadMaster towbar assembly. Those hardened stainless steel bars are suppose to be straight to articulate in and out smoothly. You can also see the underside of the hitch receiver which should be welded on to the back of the motor home.



Here is a photo of one side of the hitch receiver mount where the hitch receiver cross member was supposed to be welded to it. It had ripped away.



This is the other side of the hitch mounting rail. The bent parts were cut out and two pieces of 3" x 1/4" flat steel were going to be welded both on top and on bottom of the length of the mounting rail to provide a heavier, and much added support of the hitch receiver.



Angle gussets were also added to provide more support of the hitch receiver. The goal was to over build the hitch so I would never again have to go through this experience!!

Now, the cost of all this? Just let me say that if it were not for having good insurance, the pain would be much deeper.

Jeep repairs.....\$10,300+. Insurance paid all but \$850 which was my deductible/pro rate on parts

Hitch repair\$ 450. This was out-of pocket. I was pleased because I thought it would have been more.

Tow Bar replacement...\$ 1,000+. Insurance covered this.

Next for fixing and/or replacement is repairing/replacing the turbocharger on the Isuzu Diesel engine, and a rebuilt tranny.

Time to go look for a place to plant my money trees