

# CARAVAN RV MAINTENANCE SUPPORT MANUAL

By

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## INTRODUCTION

So you are going on a Caravan; **great**. A Caravan usually means; new friends, new experiences and a new family for a month or so. But what should you do about the possibility of having a service problem on the Caravan? What should you check before leaving? What spare parts should you bring? What special tools do you need? What lubricants do you need to have?

The last thing you need is to break-down or get stuck on a Caravan and miss out on some of the fun or in the worst case get left behind for a repair. Unfortunately this happens all too often on our Caravans. Even when you are well prepared and have a good set of spares you still might have a problem that will affect your fun on the Caravan.

The purpose of this Manual is to help you be prepared with spare parts, special tools and the knowledge to minimize the unhappy experiences on your next Caravan. Even if you are a klutz and have no ability to do any repairs you can usually find several helpers who will be happy to assist you. However, you are responsible for having the spare parts and unusual supplies that are necessary for your RV. A little education can go a long way to minimizing repair costs and providing extra funds to buy that new gadget.

Think of the great feeling when you have the part that saves one of your new extended family members from having a bad experience on the Caravan. This Manual represents many of my RV experiences over the past 50 years. This started with a tent then pop-up camper and progressed through several trailers, a 1986 Airstream Motor Home and finally my current RV, a 1990 Classic Motor Home.

I will address both Trailers and Motor Homes which overlap in many of our most important appliances. I will also examine some of the unique aspects of these two RV types. Motor Home problems can be quite severe since you can always drive your car home and leave the trailer at the repair shop. Of course, if you are towing a car you also have an easy way home.

It's called Preventive Maintenance and it works. If you always wait until something fails before you repair it you are doomed to breakdowns, usually at the most inopportune times. **If it ain't broke don't fix it.** The Service Shops just love these people. Try fixing things before they break for a change. If wheel bearings last 100,000 miles than lets change them at 95,000 miles. I am reminded of a Caravan where one of the tow vehicles lost an entire wheel while traveling on a side trip. The bearing just fell apart. The Airstreamer could not understand how this could have happened since he had faithfully repacked the bearings at the recommended intervals for the last 125,000 miles. I tried to explain that this did not insure that the bearing would last forever. Wheel bearings have a constant wear on them and will eventually just die. I strongly suggested that he have both of the front bearings changed but he was from the "if it ain't broke don't fix it" school. I hope I am not around when the other wheel falls off.

Manufacturers know when things are going to wear out and when routine maintenance is required. Much of this information is in that manual we never get around to reading. Try it you might save yourself a serious problem. The Internet can provide fantastic information on when components might die. Learn how to use the Google Internet search engine.

I will cover several tow vehicle areas which directly interact with your RV. This will include batteries, charging, hitch platforms etc. The manufacturer has done an excellent job on your auto. Just read the manual.

So let's get started.

## **ELECTRICAL**

I started with this area because 3 out of 5 problems are usually due to electrical connections. I cannot overemphasize this. Check the connections first for almost any type of malfunction. For the past two years my Motor Home has been getting more and more difficult to start after it has warmed up. Recently I checked the chassis grounding strap. You guessed it, corrosion, rust and loose mounting bolt. Clean, scrape the area, replace the worn eyelet, new lock washers and it starts like new hot or cold. Remember Our RV's are in water, rain, dirt, corrosive atmosphere and regularly get a good shake up. They often sit for months at a time which only exacerbates the corrosion problem. Only a protected and physically strong joint can survive the rigors our RV's are subjected too. The only environment that is much more severe is a boat operated in salt water. So guess what? The best hardware, the best batteries, the best chargers, the best lubricants are available in the boating world. If you cannot find the right switch that can handle large current loads check the local boat store. Probably the finest lubricant you can purchase for use all over your RV and tow vehicle is **Silicon Dielectric**. Boat stores, quality Auto supply stores all carry this excellent product. This grease type of lubricant can be used for all electrical joints. It water proofs the joint and insures good electrical contact. Put a thin coating over all your Battery terminals and they will never corrode. In fact, coat all of your high current junction points. One of the most important connections is to your Trailer Brake magnet coils. The proper way to do this is as follows:

1. Strip the wire ends (using a proper wire stripping device for your size wire).
2. Clean the wire ends and trim to proper length for a butt crimp connector.
3. Put a small piece of silicon dielectric in each end before crimping to protect against corrosion.
4. Before crimping slip a piece of shrinkable tubing over one of the wires.
5. Crimp the connector using the proper size tool.
6. Using a heat gun melt the tubing so it shrinks around the connector and makes a waterproof connection.

Proper connections require wire strippers and crimping tools that are designed for both the wire and connector size you are using. These are inexpensive and mandatory for a good connection. When changing a terminal use the same procedure as above, strip proper length of wire, spot of silicon dielectric, proper crimp, shrink tubing to waterproof connection. Purchase a supply of different terminal types, butt connectors and shrink tubing. Harbor freight has a good selection for this stuff including a

two speed heat gun for \$10. If the connection is rusted or corroded then change it. This will become one of your most valuable repair tools. Let's review:

### **Wire Connection Needs**

- Box of different size and type terminals and butt connectors
- Tube of Silicon Dielectric
- Wire stripper tool to handle several popular wire sizes
- Special connector crimping tool
- Various size heat-shrink tubing
- Heat gun or careful application of matches

Depending on the size of the Silicon Dielectric tube this should cost about \$9 and provide enough material for many repairs as well as battery and other electrical connections.

Using wire nut connections for your electric brakes is a recipe for disaster unless you regularly check them. As a minimum they should have rubber locking covers and be wrapped with friction tape.

About 4 years ago I went out to hook up my RV to electric to get everything charged up and ready for my weekend rally. No 110 VAC in the rig. OK at the house wall socket, OK at the extension output, OK at the wire box into the Motor Home, but no voltage at the input to the electric panel. I decided to check the connections inside the main AC power input box. This is where the 30 amp input line is connected to the inside electric lines. I turned the wire nut to see if it was tight. It turned round and round. The wire nut would not get tight. It turns out that that all three input lines had the wrong size wire nuts. It was one size too big. I changed to proper size and the problem was solved. This was done when the unit was manufactured and it took 7 years of operation before the problem showed up. Wire nuts are fine in your home but all the shaking, vibration and corrosion make them high failure rate items.

Grounds, grounds, grounds look for the ground connections. Most wiring failures are due to poor ground connections. Rusted, corroded or just loose ground connections are always a problem. This is particularly true for the RV appliances that are mounted with the electronics exposed to the outside elements. Always check your 12 volt ground lead to any appliance first. If the terminal is rusty put on a new one with your new terminal kit. Clean and scrape the ground area, including any paint, to insure a good ground. Use a wire brush and a scotch pad to clean the area. For larger areas with heavy rust a small file may be needed.

If the self tapping screw you removed from the terminal cannot be tightened throw it away. Put in the next largest self tapping screw and a little dab of Silicon Dielectric before you tighten it. If this does not work drill a new hole for the ground and clean the paint away. Just be careful you don't drill into anything important. If it is a screw and nut combination make sure there is a lock washer. The proper procedure is: a toothed washer between the connector and the ground on the screw head side and a lock washer under the nut. If the connector is under the nut than a toothed washer in contact with the ground area followed by the connector then a regular washer, lock washer and the nut. A connection without the proper washers is a future problem.

Much of the 110 volt A/C wiring in the coach will use wire nuts. They should either have a special rubber cover that locks the nut on so they will not shake loose or be wrapped with electrical friction tape. The best joints are the one's that have been properly soldered.

Running lights that do not work are usually caused by corroded sockets which should be cleaned and then spread with our famous Silicon stuff.

I recently ran into the best connectors I have ever seen. They are available from NAPA and provide both a crimp and soldered connection. There is a low temperature solder inside the connector. After the crimp you apply a small butane torch to the metal and the solder flows and gives you an unbeatable connection. All of the terminals are covered with heat shrinkable tubing so the heat gun provides the final weather proof connection. They are expensive at about \$1 each but these would be great for your Electric Brake connections. You cannot beat a solder joint as long as it is not in an area where it will be subject to severe vibration. Remember the heat shrinkable tubing provides mechanical rigidity to the connection since the usual failure mode is breakage of the wires where they enter the connector.

On a recent Caravan one of the electric Jacks on my buddy's trailer refused to operate. I checked it and found out that the switch that had been installed was rated at 10 amps and had just burned out. We visited the local Radio Shack store and purchased a 20 amp switch. Upon trying to install the new switch we found that the 110 watt soldering gun I had was too small to melt the solder. We put out a call to the Caravan to see if anyone had a 250 watt gun. No luck, but then I had an idea. Several of the campers had 110 watt guns and two guns equals 220 watts. So two pairs of hands and two guns easily melted the solder and allowed us to install the new switch.

Obtain a set of various size fuses that are used in your RV, towed or tow vehicle. Just check your manuals and be sure to get several of each size. There are dozens of different types so be sure you get the correct ones. Don't forget the extra electronics you have added to the vehicles.

Led replacements are now available, at reasonable costs, for your interior lighting needs. These are particularly efficient for replacing incandescent lights. Super Bright Leds (Reference 14) also provides a complete series of automotive replacement leds which have the standard auto bulb bases for easily converting running lights, tail lights, turn signals etc.

### ***Hinges, Bearings, Steps***

Every year I recommend cleaning all the external compartment hinges on the RV and then lubricating them. Use WD-40 for the cleaner and then dry the hinge with paper towel. Then use a small amount of Silicon spray on all of the metal surfaces that move. You should include the metal bearing surfaces on all of your awnings. Check the Manufacturers recommendations on slide outs and follow them exactly. Failure to do this can easily result in troubles on the road and major expenditures. Clean, not only looks better but it also works better, for a much longer time. These surfaces should be cleaned every year as part of de-winterizing. Don't forget the awnings. All of the moving parts and bearing should be cleaned, if needed, and covered with a light coating of Silicon spray. Check the locking wheels and make sure the threads are clean and lubed.

For some bearing surfaces you should have a spray can of grease. Kwikol makes a good product for their steps. This is sprayed on every bearing and moving joint. This is particularly true for electric steps but don't neglect the mechanical steps. If there is a build up of dirt and grease than clean the joint first with WD-40, wipe off any excess, let it dry and then apply the lubricant. Corrosion Pro Lubrimatic is a water resistant spray grease that can be obtained at Auto and Marine supply stores. This is less expensive than the Kwikol spray but does the job very nicely.

You should also have a spray can of PB Blaster which is used to free up rusted Bolts. This should be used before you try to loosen a rusted bolt. Don't ruin the bolt or screw head first than try to dissolve the rust. Be patient; use the Blaster on a rusted fitting before you try to remove it. If it still won't budge you may need several applications before the fitting will get loose. See your Auto and Marine supply stores.

### ***Electronic Boards***

Another connection area that can cause all kinds of problems is the tiny molex plugs on your circuit boards. All of your gas appliances that have self lighting capability have circuit boards to control this function. Some of these are exposed to the elements and pick up dirt as well as corrosion. You cannot use WD-40 to clean these connections or the circuit boards since it will leave a film that attracts dirt and grease. You should have a spray can of Electronic Cleaner which leaves no residue after use. It can also be on the entire board to remove dirt and prevent short circuits. Most of the appliance vendors have gone to potted circuit boards when they are exposed to the elements so this is particularly important on earlier RV's. On occasion an appliance will be intermittent and just start and then stop working. Check the connections to the circuit boards. Carefully remove them, spray with contact cleaner and remake the connection. I have fixed dozens of problems with this simple procedure. Let's review:

### ***Special Lubricant Needs***

Silicon Dielectric (tube)

Silicon Spray

WD-40

Corrosion Pro Lubrimatic spray grease or Kwikol step lube

PB Blaster rust remover

Electronic Circuit Cleaner

## ***BATTERIES & CHARGERS***

Completely check out both your engine start and coach batteries before you leave for the Caravan. A battery failure on the road will not only be costly but you may have to buy an off brand with no effective future warranty. For this reason I usually recommend Wal-Mart batteries since they have stores all over the US and Canada. If your batteries are using water every week they are going bad. Do not buy a sealed lead acid battery that never requires water. These have one-way valves to release the pressure when the battery overheats so that it does not blow up. The water escapes through this valve and since the battery is sealed it cannot be replaced. Batteries must be mounted externally because the gases they give off are toxic. The only truly sealed batteries are either absorbed glass mat (AGM) or Gel Cell. These do not give off gases and can be mounted anywhere in the rig. They are excellent, long life units, however, they are quite expensive. I would recommend Lifeline AGM, which for about 90 amp hours

(size 27) cost about \$180. A high quality lead acid battery will run about \$80 which means you can completely replace the batteries with a second set for less money. Unless you are going to mount the batteries inside the rig it is always more cost efficient to stay with lead acid batteries.

One key consideration is the charger. Most of the trailers have poor chargers that do not maximize the useful life of the batteries. The best chargers are computer controlled and can handle a dead battery as well as allowing ac power to be on all the time without hurting the batteries. These usually have three charge modes including bulk, absorption and float which are automatically selected by the computer control. These chargers will insure that your batteries are well taken care of. For the Motor Home owners most of the rigs have excellent computer controlled charge systems included with the Inverter. However, you should remember that your engine start battery is not charged when you are on AC.

The best chargers and batteries are made for the Marine and Aircraft Industries. If they have a failure it usually leads to very unhappy results. You can also find the best chargers, terminals, switches, wire, etc in the Marine supply houses because they have to survive in very harsh and corrosive environments.

A load test is the only real way to properly check a battery. When you take your car in for a battery test they wheel out this 3 foot unit on a cart. An engine start battery is tested to see how many amps (200 to 400) can be pulled out to start the engine. This takes a big resistor that gets quite hot. You can usually do fine on a Caravan by monitoring the voltage level on the batteries. You need a digital voltmeter because 12.6 volts is almost fully charged, 12.0 volts is only 25% and 11.9 volts is discharged and on its way to the junk pile. These are available for about \$10 to \$25. If you have a friend with a really good meter, ask him to calibrate your inexpensive unit for you.

It is best to use distilled water, but if it is not available, use the water from your fresh water RV filters. Be sure to check all of the batteries at least once per week when on a Caravan. Keep your battery terminals clean and coated with a thin layer of Silicon Dielectric. Buy a special wire brush terminal cleaner and use it at least once per year. This will insure that you re-tighten the connections. If you develop corrosion a mixture of baking soda and water will clean it right off, but don't get any in the battery through the filler caps. Be sure and wash every thing off after you are done and then clean the terminals and apply the silicon dielectric. Also check the tightness of all of the major cable connections in particular the ground lead from the battery to the chassis. Finally spray the entire connection with one of the special battery terminal coatings to prevent corrosion.

On a recent Rally one of the caravanner drove up in a newly purchased used Land Yacht and turned off his engine. Upon trying to restart, five minutes later, it would not even turn over. He then told me he had just had the starter, generator and battery replaced within the last week. I checked the battery and it was fully charged so I suggested he check the battery ground connection. Sure enough that was the problem. He removed the wires cleaned everything up, greased everything with my silicon dielectric and retightened the bolts. Started right up like a new unit. I told him I always check the connections first before I start to throw parts at an engine. He was heading back to the repair shop after the rally to see if he could get some of his old parts back. By the way after he turned on his hot water heater it would light but then go out before the main burner lit. I checked the ground wire and it moved with my hand pressure. A little tightening and the heater worked fine. **Check the grounds first.**

You must check each of the batteries, which means taking them out of there compartments and disconnecting one of the leads so they are not in parallel. Very often one of them is bad and this will not show up if they are connected together. On a new trailer, we once found that one of batteries was not even hooked up and that explained why the RV did not last very long on battery power. Several Land Yachts have three batteries mounted behind the front hood. They were mounted all the way to one side

so that it was not possible to check the one farthest to the left without removing all of the three batteries. Guess which one always goes bad first. You can easily remount the batteries in the center with storage on each side of them. That way all of them can be easily checked each week and kept clean and watered.

Particularly for the older trailers, the Univolts cannot restore a set of batteries that have gone into a deep cycle discharge. This is true no matter how long you are plugged into A/C power. Some much older units had high current capacity chargers, however, these are the units that boiled batteries and led to premature failures. If your RV charger cannot put at least 7- 10 amps into a discharged battery then you need an auxiliary automobile type battery charger. One of the smaller units around \$45 - \$60 is fine. This will allow you to bring back your coach or engine batteries when attached to shore power. A pair of coach batteries that provide about 180 amp-hours will take about 18 hours to fully charge when using a 10 amp charger. You can use this type of charger for your engine battery just to get the vehicle started, however, you really need to put about 400 amps into it for a full charge. Starter battery chargers put out about 40 or 50 amps and are about 3 feet high on a roll around cart. However, once the vehicle is started your engine alternator will take care of the final charging after a few hours of driving, preferably during the day.

During the winter months you cannot leave uncharged batteries outside in the weather. They can freeze and crack the case. Some campers store them inside the house when the weather turns cold and they are done with the camping season. You can leave them outside as long as they are kept in a charged state. A computer controlled charge system will keep a trickle charge on the batteries and start a full charge cycle as necessary. You can also use a solar panel system with built in charger to keep the batteries from freezing. This works fine for the coach batteries but does nothing for Motor Home starter batteries which are not usually connected to the solar panels or charge circuits. I use a computerized boat charger which has multiple charge circuits (two or three) for several battery banks (one charger for the coach batteries and one for the engine starter batteries). Don't forget to check the water levels several times during the winter months if you use flooded batteries.

## **AUTO TRANSFORMERS**

I am always getting questions about whether this is needed for camping and worth the cost. What this device does is automatically increase the A/C voltage about 10% if it is below a level that could adversely affect some of your RV appliances. This increase is also turned off if the voltage rises to a safe value. Lighting, water heater, power jacks, propane furnace, electric heaters are not usually damaged by low A/C voltage. Air Conditioners and microwaves, however, can be seriously damaged by low voltage. This is particularly true for the air conditioning compressor. When the voltage is low then motors will require more current and run slow thus increasing heat build up. If you are in a Campground with poor wiring then problems can occur if you don't monitor the A/C voltage. I have only run into this once in my camping adventures and in that case we turned off the air conditioner and limited our current draw. The auto transformer will boost your voltage and allow you to draw more current to safely run your appliances. However, it will further reduce the voltage of your neighbors. Unless you regularly camp for long periods of time in poorly wired Campgrounds, especially during the summer months, I don't see the cost benefit for an auto transformer.

## **TIRES & WHEELS**

How much air should I put in my RV tires? For your tow vehicle there are a few answers depending on the number of passengers and how heavily the vehicle is loaded. Just check your manual. For the trailer or motor home however, there is no easy answer. Get it weighed when it is fully loaded with water, propane and equipment. This should be done for each wheel of the vehicle for a motor home and for each side for a trailer. Now use the manufacturers chart to determine the air pressure versus actual weight for the front single tires, the rear duals and the tag axle for your tire size and type. The air pressure should, of course, be the same on both sides for front tires as well as the rears. Just use the highest air pressure required in any individual tire. References (9) and (15) provide Michelin and Goodyear tire charts for determining the proper air pressures based upon the weight of your rig.

Check this at least once per week with a quality gauge since your lives literally depend on them being properly inflated. You can always be slightly over-inflated with no problems. As the tires heat up the pressure will increase just be sure you check them when they are cold. Tire blowouts usually cause collateral damage, especially on trailers.

Before you leave on the Caravan and several times during the trip you should torque your wheel nuts. I have seen too many vehicles lose wheels on a trip even after the Caravan Leader had continually recommended checking wheel nut torque. You should have a ½ inch socket set in your tool kit and a torque wrench. Sears has one for under \$30 which is not the one a mechanic would purchase for his use. However, for a trailer it is perfectly satisfactory. The deficiency is usually in the accuracy, however, (just as for digital voltmeters) find someone with a quality wrench and calibrate your unit at the proper torque you will be measuring. Be sure and get your neighbors to check their vehicles as well and before you know it a crowd will form and maybe everyone will be doing it. The larger Motor Homes require a torque wrench that goes into the 500 ft/lb range. This requires a special ¾" drive wrench that sells for over \$500. You can add a torque multiplier, that increases a standard ½" torque wrench by a factor of 3:1. This provides a ¾" drive output providing 450 ft/lbs for around \$250 to \$300.

On my first Viking Caravan, while driving to a new campsite, I passed several of our units parked beside the road. I stopped to see if I could help and found everyone in the Bush looking for a missing tire. Yes the entire wheel had come off. It seems it was not torqued properly and it had sheared off all of the wheel studs and disappeared into the forest. I drove to the campsite with the wife driving the three-wheel rig and leaving the owner with several helpers searching for the wheel. I checked and found all of the other wheel nuts were under torqued and in fact had been set for aluminum wheels. The trailer had steel wheels with stainless steel covers. A bad mistake by the Dealer who had done the brake job on all of the wheels. A much more severe mistake though by the RV owner who should have checked the wheels within 50 miles of the brake job and at least twice during the Caravan. The Caravan leader had reminded us on a regular basis to check wheel torque. They never found the wheel but fortunately he had a spare. Not so fortunate there where no wheel studs to be found in Newfoundland and we had to leave them at the campsite. They had to wait several days before the studs arrived in the mail.

RV tires die of old age helped along by ozone and temperature. They have a shelf life of about 5-6 years especially since they spend most of their life sitting in the driveway. The tire is protected when it is used and the waxes and emollients come to the surface. That means if the tire sits on the shelf for two years before you have purchased it you only get three years of safe life. A full set of tread with a new looking tire is meaningless. When I buy tires my dealer knows I will not accept anything more than 6 months old. I call ahead and, if none are in stock, he orders me one month old tires and sells the others to the truckers. A trucker usually runs the tires bald within a year and gets it re-treaded. How old is the tire; look for DOT followed by numbers and letters. The last group of numbers, either 3 or 4, is the date of manufacture. If it has three numbers it was made in 1999 or earlier and should be rejected immediately. For a group of four numbers the first two numbers are the week it was made and the last two are the year. For example 2305 would be the 23 week of 2005. If you are not sure how to read the date, ask the dealer to show it to you when you are buying a new tire.

On my last Caravan to Alaska one of the members had a flat tire on her B-van. I checked all of her tires and they were all 5 years or older. I recommended she purchase a complete new set and just keep the best of the old set for a spare. One of our other Caravan members, who had a Motor Home, said this was a total waste of money and she should just buy one used tire to replace the blown one. He only ran used tires on his RV as long as they had good tread and sidewalls. Fortunately the B-van owner purchased new tires and had no tire problems on the rest of the Caravan. Unfortunately, the Motor Home owner became a believer as he had three separate tire blow-outs on his way home.

## **BRAKES**

It's a good idea to keep a record of the mileage when you have your brake pads changed. This should be done for trailers as well as motor homes. You should have the pads checked at least every 15000 miles. The friction material should be a minimum of ¼ inch thick. If it is less than 1/8 of an inch then change them ASAP. Be sure and check all of the wheels including the tag axles. On most automobiles the pads can be checked without removing the wheels. For trailers and motor homes the wheels will usually have to be removed. When having a tire replaced I have asked them to check the brake pads, however, I have found that unless you are there and actually measure the pad thickness you do not get a reliable answer. After many Caravans I have concluded that if I am going across the country (Alaska, Newfoundland, South West, etc. Caravans) I will change the brake pads before the trip. Changing the pads is less than \$200 and since I will be on the road for 10,000 miles or more it is good insurance. Having to replace a rotor or caliper on a trip is usually a \$1000 job not to mention the difficulty in finding the parts. Listen for strange noises. A grinding sound may mean you have worn out your pads and are getting metal to metal contact. This usually means new rotors, calipers and pads.

For your trailer you should change the entire brake assembly including drums, magnets, springs etc. I know a number of campers that carry both right and left side spare brake assemblies for their trailers. A complete assembly costs about \$75 and can be easily replaced on a Caravan (four bolts and two wire connections). For a 2 to 3 month Caravan this is a reasonable addition to your spare parts kit. Many of our Caravans spend considerable time in the Rocky Mountains with heavy wear and dependence on our braking systems. It is always less expensive to start out with new brake pads then having to change them on the trip so check them before you leave.

If you change a trailer brake assembly make sure you solder the electric wire connections. The constant vibration and stress makes this a serious failure mode. In fact check them now and make sure they are soldered. You should have shrink wrap tubing over the connection and it should also be taped. This helps keep the connection rigid and moisture free.

## **FURNACE & WATER HEATERS**

The coach furnace rarely has problems while water heaters are always going bad. Does the water have something to do with this? Nah! The water heater is exposed to the elements since its electronics are outside while the furnace is nicely protected from the weather inside the RV. Both of these units use igniters which provide a spark to light the propane. Igniters wear out and have to be replaced usually depending on usage. **You should have a spare igniter for each heater.** Other than cleaning the burner every year when you get the RV ready for the spring season you usually do not need to worry about the furnace.

As mentioned earlier make sure all of the water heater electrical connections are tight. If you have an older trailer your circuit board is exposed to the elements. You should **purchase a new potted circuit board** with the spare igniter so that when cleaning the old board no longer works you are ready to go. Another spare part of value is a **low temperature thermostat** which sets the water temperature. These often go bad and if they open you will have no hot water. If it fails closed the water will stop heating when the high temperature thermostat operates. This is much too hot for a human being and you are likely to get burned. By the way you can usually get good parts discounts from the vendors at the International Rally so pick up your spares before you leave on the Caravan.

A good modification is to purchase a variable (low temperature) thermostat which allows you to set the water temperature to your liking. We reduce the temperature when our grandchildren are aboard and increase it when it is just my wife and I. This is installed in place of the fixed temperature thermostat.

Keep the water heater compartment and the main burner orifice clean. Periodically clean the furnace compartment and its main burner. Learn how to adjust the main burner for the proper flame for both the water and coach heaters. The proper gap for the igniter is 1/8" between the electrode and ground. Clean the burners in alcohol and blow them dry. You can use a toothpick to clean the jets but never use a metal object since it can change the orifice opening. Contact cleaner will also work for cleaning since it leaves no residue.

When something is not working correctly the first thing to check is the wire connections, particularly the grounds. By the way, if the ground screw can no longer be made tight replace it with the next larger screw. If that does not work than find another ground point. Do not just tighten as much as you can and hope it will hold because it will fail before you reach your next stop. Sometimes you will need to carefully make a new hole for the ground connection. Be careful and don't drill a blind hole into the water tank (unfortunately I have seen this a few times).

In all my years of camping I have never found a defective pressure-temperature relief valve. However I have found many leaking valves. Often the camper is sold a new valve which results in the leak being gone and the assumption that the old valve was faulty. The valves appear to leak only when the heater is operating. Most water heaters are designed to operate with an air gap at the top of the tank which provides for expansion when the water is heated. When the valve leaks it is usually because this air gap is no longer present. To fix the problem turn off the heater and the water supply. Open a faucet in the RV and relieve the water pressure. Open the relief valve handle and keep it that way until the water stops flowing. Snap shut the valve handle and you will then have the air gap back with no more leaks.

When you are camping in cold weather the water heater cycles quite a bit since the water in the tank cools off much faster. Just before I turn off the bathroom light to go to bed I also turn off the water heater. This stops the constant cycling during the night and also saves propane. Just don't forget to turn it back on in the morning when you brush your teeth.

## **REFRIGERATOR**

The primary maintenance for your Fridge is keeping the compartment clean, cleaning the burner assembly and cleaning the flue baffle. On gas operation the spark electrode should be spaced from 1/8" to 3/16" from the burner tube. A separate thermocouple tells the gas valve that the flame is on and it is safe to keep the gas valve open. The thermocouple should be in the flame. The flame should have a clear blue color. The burner jet can be cleaned by soaking in wood alcohol and then blowing dry with compressed air. You can also use special contact cleaner (leaves no residue) and a wooden toothpick. Do not use anything metallic which could alter the size of the jet. Procedures for cleaning the flue are in your Instruction manual. You should do this maintenance procedure at least once a year.

For spare parts you should have a 3 amp and a 5 amp cartridge type fuses. The 3 amp is for the control system and is required for gas, A/C or DC operation. The 5 amp fuse is for the heater for A/C operation. If your Fridge operates only on gas then the problem is usually either the fuse or the A/C heating element. However, don't forget to check the connections first and make sure the A/C supply is getting to the Fridge circuit board. If you are operating on A/C but not on gas than check to see if the igniter is sparking and the thermostat is within the flame. If you have a three way unit that operates on DC you will also have a 35 amp fuse. Remember in DC operation you are drawing over 25 amps out of the coach batteries and you should only do this with some source of high current DC, in addition to the batteries (like the engine alternator in a Motor Home) .

The circuit board connectors are a big source of failures, especially for the older units. There are several connectors on the board that can get loose and may develop corrosion. Remove each connector separately and spray both sides with the contact cleaner. Wipe the contacts dry and put a small amount of silicon dielectric on the male pins. I have seen many Refrigerators repaired with a new circuit board when all that was required was cleaning the contacts on the circuit board connectors.

During hot weather if your unit is not cooling too well I would recommend installing a fan in the outside compartment. This should be installed as close to the top of the coach as you can reach and should be exhausting the air. The air across the fins is what takes the heat out of the Fridge compartment and provides maximum cooling. I do not like the units that come with an automatic thermostat since they do not come on soon enough. I installed a switch inside the RV and turn it on when my thermometer inside the Refrigerator tells me it is getting near 40 degrees.

A little tip: If you lose your Refrigerator on a Caravan and cannot get a fast repair remove as much of the food that does not really need to be cooled (soda, fruit, veggies, cheese, etc) and put bags of ice in your freezer compartment. Also fill your vegetable crispers with ice. This should keep the critical food cold till you can get repairs. (You can put the beer in the vegetable crispers along with the ice). I have seen people rush off to buy several coolers when they have a perfectly good temporary ice box installed in the RV. Just put the ice in plastic bags or whatever large Fridge containers you have. Large blocks of ice will last longer. If you use open containers, like the vegetable crispers, don't forget to periodically empty the water from them. If you can find dry ice get some for the freezer. This will keep the freezer food in good condition until needed.

## **AIR CONDITIONERS**

There are not too many spare parts needed for your Air Conditioner. Inside the RV you should remove and either clean or replace the air filters. You remove the knobs and then the two nuts/screws underneath to drop the shroud which has the filters installed in it. You should do this every two weeks if things are very dusty since dirty filters will severely reduce the efficiency of the AC. I would purchase permanent filters that can be washed, dried and reused. They are a lot cheaper than the replaceable type over a two or three month caravan. Some units have drain tubes, for the AC drain water, that are routed through the walls of the RV. These tend to clog up and the drain water can drip inside the coach. When you are getting gas and checking your tires blow the tubes clean on a regular basis. If you have a compressor in the RV fix up a coiled hose with the proper blow tool and you can do it yourself whenever needed. You should also keep the condenser coils clean by climbing on the roof removing the shroud and using compressed air. I am getting a little old for that so I use my water hose from the ground and give it a good washing whenever I am cleaning the rig.

If your air conditioner just blows air but the compressor is not working, first check the A/C supply and make sure you have at least 117 VAC. If that is ok, then remove the cover on the roof and check that there is 117 VAC at the air conditioner voltage input terminals. These are screw terminals and after lots of mileage on the rig they tend to loosen up and start to arc. Clean the terminals and wires and retighten the connections. I found this problem on two rigs at the 2006 International.

## **GENERATORS**

A reasonable set of spares for your generator would consist of the following:

Spark plugs and points (for gas generators)  
Oil, fuel and air filters for all types of generators  
Special oil if required.

Since these are usually unique to your generator, even if you cannot do the repairs yourself they will be available for any mechanic to use. Be sure you have the proper oil for the generator. All of them will stop running if the oil gets low which of course will occur while your wife is preparing dinner. Don't forget the generator will stop and refuse to start if the fuel level is low so you are left with enough fuel to get to the garage and fill up. I ran into a generator failure problem on a Caravan where it was quite hot and the AC was run all night on the generator and of course it stopped about 4:00 am.

One common failure mode is a loss of AC input voltage from either the Generator or the AC mains. This is usually due to the switch-over relay which is used in all RV's that have generators. The relay has three poles (three wire input circuit) which automatically change from Campground AC to Generator AC. The relay is wired to always be in the Campground AC position and changes once the Generator starts to put out AC voltage. In a 50 amp system there are two relays with three poles each. Over time the relay contacts arc and burn. A carbon build up eventually prevents good electrical contact in the relay. The fix is to clean all of the relay contacts with a scotch pad (I don't like using steel wool because of the possibility of getting metal chips in the relay). Make them nice and shiny, being sure to unplug your RV from the Campground mains and turning off the generator. At the 2006 International I fixed three rigs that had this problem after running the air conditioners for a week.

Be sure and check your Manual for recommendations on running the generator during the winter months. More failures occur by just turning it off and leaving it for several months then actively using it. It should be run up to operating temperature on a regular basis and allowed to operate under load to keep the armature clean and remove moisture. Typically the Generator should be run at least 20 to 30 minutes, under some load, at least once per month.

## **WATER SYSTEM**

A common water system problem that I have run into many times is the tank drain valve. Many trailers have the drain valve at the bottom of the tank in the center so it sticks out unprotected. Of course this breaks off when driving over a high rock, log or other road projection resulting in no more water. I remember when a caravanner had four spares and he used all of them to save his fellow campers on an Alaska Caravan. We carved a plug from a branch to save another camper. Carry at least one spare if your valve is under the tank. You should also purchase a brass plug, with the correct threads, as a back-up solution. The plug will allow you to at least use the tank on the Caravan. A better solution is to

move the drain valve to a better location that is protected. You should do this anyway to make it easier to drain your tank. I believe it is a good idea to drain all of the water tanks after every rally or caravan.

This results in cleaner tanks that do not have to be dosed with Clorox so often. I had three drain valves in my Motor Home which required me to remove the bedding and unscrew several plywood panels. I installed a new drain valve underneath the RV which could be easily reached from outside. I then permanently opened all of the hidden valves so that the external valve was all that was needed. I also installed a drain valve in my hot water heater in place of the fixed drain plug. Now I open two valves, easily reached from the outside of the RV, to drain all of the water. We are lazy creatures by nature so we should make it easy to do the important maintenance items.

Filtering our drinking and cooking water on a Caravan is of major importance. Most of the rigs have filters on a special kitchen sink fixture. A lot of these use very expensive cartridges that do an excellent job. I replaced mine with a simpler unit where the cartridge remains and you simply replace an internal filter. I get carbon filters which remove chlorine, odors etc. for about \$6 or \$7. These last over six months and are so inexpensive that you don't mind replacing them every year. I use these with my special kitchen sink faucet. I have also added an external RV cartridge filter holder which hangs on my bumper. I use a sediment filter here before the water enters my RV or the water tank. There is another filter between my water tank and the water pump which is built into the RV. Don't forget to clean this filter several times during the year.

I mounted the external filter on a wooden board which also has a separate water faucet available for washing the RV or any other external water needs. I used quick release fittings for easy and fast hook-up. So part of my RV set-up is hooking up my external water supply system along with leveling and electric supply hook-up. I like to be completely hooked up, sitting in my lawn chair and sipping some refreshment as fast as possible. You easily add a second filter holder and have both sediment and charcoal filters on the water supply to your RV. Make sure you get the filter holders that use the inexpensive standard cartridges available at Lowes, Home Depot or Sears.

If you live in the cold north and are planning on a Caravan to the warmer climates then you should become an expert on fast and sure winterizing for your return trip.

Winterizing is not only important but a necessity. If you are in an area that freezes you will almost certainly blow up a water pipe and/or a fixture if you don't do this properly. If you are really unlucky you might even have a pipe blow that is under the belly skin which will require drilling rivets to remove large sections of the aluminum skin at great expense. I have used two methods as follows:

1. Using a special valve and hose input, pump non-toxic antifreeze through your water pump to all outlets in the RV. You turn on the pump and open each individual faucet one at a time till pure antifreeze is coming out. This includes the toilet valve, its spray hose and the kitchen spray hose. You must do this for both the cold and hot water outlets. Then some antifreeze should be poured into each drain and the toilet to keep them from freezing. Open the hot water heater drain and fresh water tank valves and leave them open during the winter storage. Also leave all the faucet valves open. To be most affective you should have a hot water bypass kit installed so that you can bypass the tank. Otherwise you will need 6 or 7 gallons of antifreeze to fill the tank so you can fill the hot water lines. With a tank bypass you will only need about one gallon of antifreeze. In the summer just run clean water through everything and you are ready to go.

2. You can also use an air compressor to blow the water out of all the lines. I use about 50 or 60 psi and a clamp on air fitting. You can obtain a male water hose connector to air valve hook up. Hook up the air hose and open at least one faucet before you turn on the compressor. Just make sure that there is always one open faucet. I usually start with the hot water heater and after it is blown out I shut off the compressor and turn on the heater bypass valve. I then open the bathroom hot water outlet and turn on the compressor. Make sure you open each individual outlet, including the spray hoses and water filter outlets, and allow them to completely drain. You should also blow out your external filter system and all of the hoses that have been used. Throw out your old water filters and add antifreeze to each sink, shower and toilet drain to protect them. This approach is the fastest and if done correctly, will completely protect your water lines, fixtures and appliances. Be sure you have removed all of the water from the water pump. I use this technique because I camp in the winter and may have to re-winterize several times during the year.

Air stream uses both of the above procedures, blowing out the lines and then pumping antifreeze through all parts of the system, to insure a complete winterizing. This is the safest approach but somewhat of an overkill if you have a Trailer. However, if you have a Motor Home with an Aqua-hot heater, fridge with ice maker, washer/dryer, dish washer etc. you need to pump antifreeze to insure that all of these units are thoroughly winterized.

## **HITCHES & TOWBARS**

If your hitch is installed properly than your major concern on a caravan is a **loose ball mount**. This should be checked at least once per week. You need a very large set of channel lock pliers or a pipe wrench and an adjustable spanner wrench or deep socket. This set could cost in the \$50 to \$70 range. Hopefully someone in the caravan has brought a set of tools that everyone can use.

You should have a ½ inch socket set with an additional 1 ½ foot handle to check all of the hitch platform and sway control bolts. If you don't want to carry or buy a full set just pick or purchase only the socket sizes you need along with the drive handles and carry those. Sears provides all individual sizes and drive handles.

You would be surprised how many hitch platforms are installed incorrectly. During our MAU units annual maintenance rally we have discovered dozens of incorrectly installed units. There are very good write-ups on this for all of the types of hitches and sway controls. If you are uncomfortable with this find someone in your unit that knows or visit your local dealer. Learn the proper method for setting your brake controller and checking for correct operation. These concerns also apply to Motor Home owners who tow cars. An excellent summary with good instructions for both types of towing is included in Reference 7, "RV Repair & Maintenance Manual".

## **SEWER SYSTEM**

The worst thing you can put in your black or grey water tanks is formaldehyde or any type of chemical. This can cause solids to build up, require constant cleaning of the tank and results in your being banned from using some dump stations. You need an active Bacteria product which will decompose solids and paper to produce liquefied slurry that is easily dumped. One of the best products I have found is eco-save, which in the powdered form, costs about 50 cents per treatment. This product also lubricates the valve seals and cleans the tank sensors. You cannot use any chemicals with this product since it kills the Bacteria. You must completely clean both of your tanks before you can use a Bacteria product.

The first step is to thoroughly clean both tanks to get rid of any chemicals or solids left over from the previous use. Put about two gallons of water into each tank, a ¼ cup of dishwasher fluid (Joy or Dawn) and a bunch of ice cubes. Drive to your next rally (at least an hour or more) with this in the tanks and they will be well scrubbed. Thoroughly rinse the tanks with water and you should be ready for your first Bacteria treatment. Put a quart of water in the tanks and the recommend amount of Bacteria powder and you should be ready to go. Put a small amount of powder in the gray tank to eliminate the rotten egg odor you can get when you cannot dump for several days.

The only barrier to keeping odors out of your RV is water. Each sink and the shower have a trap which holds water and prevents odors from the grey water tank from coming into the RV. The only thing keeping black water odors out of the RV is the water in the toilet. On a recent rally a fellow camper asked me how they could get rid of the terrible odor that seemed to permeate the trailer during the night. When I went to check I found that the water had leaked out of the toilet bowl. You must keep several inches of water in the bowl at all times since this is your odor barrier. Of course the toilet seal had a slow leak. Remember to put antifreeze in the bowl when you winterize. Sometimes as the seal ages it will get hard over the winter and then leak. One trick I have found that usually works is to let the water out and put about a ¼ inch of vegetable oil in the bowl. Press the valve several times to work the oil over the seal and then put another ¼ inch of oil in the bowl and let it stand till you are ready to use the RV for your first trip. This has worked for me for the last 16 years. However, I still carry a new spare seal just in case the oil treatment does not work. I don't want to be on a Caravan with a bad toilet seal and an upset wife.

Every Caravan I have been on has scheduled dumps when you leave the camping area. This is backwards. Always try to dump after you have driven several hours so that your Bacteria have had a chance to decompose the contents of the Black tank. Dump on your way into the new camp area and thoroughly clean the tank. If a hose is available just stick it in the tank through the toilet valve and give it a good flush. If a hose is not available, after you dump, fill the toilet to the top and flush the tank. Do this twice. The proper procedure is to dump the black tank and then the grey tank. Your tanks should be about ¾ full for the best flush. You don't have to dump at every campsite. Let the tanks fill at least to the ½ level and plan your dumps based upon the Caravan manual. Always keep some grey water in the tank so you can rinse the dump hose. It is very difficult to completely empty your black water tank after you have spent 2 to 3 days in a campsite. After you drive several hours you will have decomposed the solids and paper and, when possible, should dump when entering the next camping area.

On occasion I have solved the mystery of RV odor when the toilet seal was OK, the tank was clean and a good product was used in the tank. The air vent tube had slipped down and was below the tank water level or in one case had actually pulled out of the tank. This tube should be in the tank and above the water level so that it can exhaust the gases at the top of the RV. If everything else is OK be sure to check the exhaust tube.

To summarize the main spares for this system is a toilet seal, Bacteria product and of course hoses and fittings.

Many years ago WSSC, our local sanitation commission, supported a number of dump sites within several miles of my residence. Over time they closed all of these leaving the only available dump site on route 95 between Baltimore and Washington. This was located several miles from me, with terrible traffic and not easy to use. My solution was to create my own dump site using a Macerator Pump. I set up a "T" connection into my sewer system available through a basement window. This was about 40 feet from my Motor Home parking spot. The Macerator attaches to my regular Valterra hose outlet and uses a flat 50 foot 1" hose to pump out the tanks. You also attach a water hose to thoroughly rinse the tanks and hoses. Once hooked up it takes about 10 minutes to completely dump and clean all of the parts. The hose, being flat, stores nicely with the pump kit. Now I have my own dump station. Since it is portable I can handle virtually any sewer dump situation I might run into on a Caravan. At the 2006 International I was parked near a dump station but could not easily hook up to it without buying 40 more feet of the 4" dump hose. I hooked up my portable Macerator Pump System and easily dumped my rig and several of the campers around me.

## **CB RADIO**

On a Caravan, communications among the participants and also with the leader is extremely important. You can learn where the best price is for gas or diesel, the location of a good eatery or some great attraction. More important is changes in routing or time of arrival, traffic problems and communicating your desired changes to the leader. You should be traveling and coordinating in small groups of two, three or four between stops. Once you arrive at a destination there will always be new information to be disseminated. The principle method of communications will always be the CB. Yes! This means you should have a radio in both the tow vehicle and your trailer. A hand held for the trailer will also be useful when you are on Parker Duty. Learn how to properly use the CB and test it before you start on the Caravan.

You don't need a fancy radio with 6 or 7 knobs and switches for good communications. Actually the most important part of the radio is the antenna. Usually the largest antenna provides the best performance. Half of your antenna is provided by the vehicle (the ground-plane) it is attached too. The larger the ground-plane the better your radio will perform. Usually the best spot for a magnetic mount is the center of your automobile roof. After installing the antenna it should be trimmed in size for minimum VSWR at channel 16. Campers use channel 14 for communications and truckers use 19 so this will optimize the system for your use. Tuning the antenna is done by changing its physical length. There is usually a set-screw provided to do the tuning. Find a Ham Radio or CB Operator (lots of them in WBCCI) and they can help you with a VSWR meter and the expertise you will need. Or better still,

have your local unit do a tune-up exercise at a rally. For the fiberglass Motor Homes a ground-plane antenna will not work since you do not have a nice aluminum skin. You will need a non-ground-plane antenna. Some of the early Motor Homes had the wrong type of antenna and never where able to get satisfactory CB communications. Again if you are not sure find a Ham and he can check your rig.

To set up your radio put your RF gain control to maximum, turn off your noise blanker and make sure you are in CB mode (not weather or amplifier). Set the Radio to channel 14, turn up your volume and adjust your squelch so that you hear a constant noise level. The squelch adjusts your sensitivity and thus ability to hear everyone in range. This is the only adjustment that you cannot just set and forget. Since the background noise changes constantly you should be checking this setting every 10 or 15 minutes. Just lower the squelch until you hear the noise level and then raise it slowly till the radio gets quiet. This will give you the maximum sensitivity and allow you to hear everyone.

If your vehicle or local conditions are causing a high constant noise level, then switch on the noise blanker. Be sure and turn it off when it is not needed or doing any good since it reduces sensitivity. Now you should be able to hear everyone within the range of your Radio. But, can they hear and understand you?

When you speak, key the Microphone and hold it about two inches from your mouth. You need to hold it this close to get good modulation and have others understand what you are saying. If your radio has a microphone gain control you can adjust this so you can get farther away. I don't recommend this because you should get into the habit of keeping a constant distance from the mike regardless of the radio you are using. If you get closer or have the gain control too high you can overdrive the radio and distort your signal. The best way to check this is to work with another rig and check out your signals and settings before you start the Caravan. Once everything is working right all you have to do is adjust the volume and the squelch.

Get into the habit of saying 'over' when you are done speaking and be sure and listen first before you start talking. Talk to you down the road.

## **CONCLUSION**

This document is a work in progress and is being donated to the WBCCI Caravan Group in appreciation for providing me and my wife with so much fun over the years. Comments and inputs may be sent to:

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