

A Tire Option

I was driving south on Interstate 5 towards Salem, OR, on my way to central Oregon for a weekend campout. I was going about 65 miles an hour with my 30' Classic in tow. I heard a loud bang and pulled over right away. The driver's side rear tire on the trailer had blown. The flap on the tire hadn't separated completely from the tire and so there was a 3/4" thick reinforced rubber flap about 3' long that had damaged the trailer. The flap took out the belly wiring in the vicinity, took off the ends of the black and grey water valves and pushed the side of the trailer out 1-1/2" in the vicinity of the damage.

I took the trailer to an RV Dealer in Eugene, Oregon, and they estimated the damage at \$10,000. Yes, \$10,000.

Three months later, they had completed the repair and I went to pick up the trailer. Meanwhile I had been reading on the Airstream Forum about this kind of problem. I wasn't the first Airstreamer to experience this kind of event. I did a lot of research about tires and found that the Michelin LTX/85R 16E M/S2 tire when fully inflated was 30.4" outside diameter. The tire was narrow enough to fit inside the wheel well and small enough around to have adequate clearance. I had to go to 16" wheels though because there isn't a tire that is rated LT that is 15". LT tires are what I have on the tow vehicle so in my engineering mind I thought that is what I should have on the towed vehicle also. The wheels are available in steel and aluminum. I know that there can be issues with torquing the lug nuts on aluminum wheels and that someone, according to the manual, has to be diligent over time in checking the torque with a torque wrench to insure safe traveling. I chose steel because with a steel lug, steel wheel, and steel nut I didn't have the difference of expansion that I would experience with the aluminum wheel. The wheels are available coated to a silver color that really goes well with the Airstream exterior. They are also available in a variety of patterns (spoke wheels, mod wheels, etc.). I found out that I needed zero offset wheels for my Airstream trailer. Then it was simply matching the bolt pattern (6 holes on 5.5" bolt centers) and buying the wheels (16" x 6" mod wheel, 0 offset).

I bought the wheels independently and tires from Les Schwab and had them mounted at Les Schwab. I took a few little steps to insure a better finished product. I added stainless steel valve stems from Les Schwab. I added solid lug nuts from Les Schwab. (The old nuts were a two-piece nut). I didn't know at the time about using nitrogen in tires so they were filled with air. Later I found out that nitrogen is less likely to migrate through tire rubber than is oxygen, which means that your tire pressures will remain more stable over the long term. I also found out that tires filled with nitrogen rather than air also exhibit less pressure change with temperature swings. The tires were inflated to the tire manufacturer's specification of 80 psi.

Interestingly enough, I had read in the Airstream Forum that some who had done this type of job experienced "smoother" trailering. I didn't tell my wife about that. We took the new tires and wheels to Sutton and had them put on before we pulled out of the shop. About a half hour out and on the way to the coast for the scenery and camping before we went home my wife commented "It seems smoother!"

Well folks, our trailering has been smoother ever since. We did 14,000 miles on those tires and wheels in 2014.