

Squeak, Squeak, Squeak

“What is that noise Larry?” “I am not sure but it seems to be coming from the left side of the camper.” This was part of our late afternoon conversation as we pulled into the Elk City, Oklahoma KOA on our way home from the 2013 Albuquerque Balloon Fiesta. Tired and hungry, I did not give the squeak another thought until we got home.

The first order of business was to discover the cause of that annoying squeak! I figured we have almost seven thousand road miles on the rig over our five years of ownership. As I reviewed the owner’s manual, it was clear I had neglected a very important maintenance item. The inspection and repacking of wheel bearings! With a car, no one would ever think to check wheel bearings with such low mileage, but an Airstream is not a car!

After lifting the camper and placement of the jack stands, I pulled the left front tire and wheel drum off. Removal of the bearings from the wheel drum and cleaning them took about ten minutes. While there was plenty of grease packed into the inner and outer bearings it seemed as if the viscosity of the grease had thinned due to high temperatures. Then I discovered the reason for the squeak! Both bearings had heat discoloration marks on the inner side, which slides on the spindle. This discoloration is an indicator that the bearing was turning on the spindle and had got hot, which was the cause of the squeak. I continued to inspect the bearings on the other three wheel drums and was not surprised to find the same bearing damage.

For replacements I purchased Timken bearings. They are a very high quality bearing and made in the USA. I decided to replace the bearing races as well. Some mechanics might not have spent the extra time and cash to replace the races, but it has been my experience it is the smart and prudent thing to do. Removing and replacing the bearing race is the most difficult part of the job. While the outer races hammer out pretty easily, the inner races are a bit more of a challenge to remove and install. Bearing races are manufactured with very high quality hardened steel and are extremely tough. So I used one of the old races as a cushion to hammer the new race into position inside the wheel drum.

There are a few different approaches to repacking the bearings. I still like the old way, putting grease in the palm of my hand and tap the bearing into the grease until I am sure they are packed well. Installing the inner and outer bearings back in the wheel drum is a very quick and easy process. One last step is to install a new grease seal on the back of the wheel drum.

Before reinstalling the wheel drums on the axels, I inspected the brakes carefully. I found they were grease free and still had a good amount of lining, so I have left them until next year’s inspection. We then torqued our aluminum wheels’ lug bolts to specifications. After a quick drive, no more squeaks!