

Vintage Trailer Safety Checklist for Travel

Vintage travel trailers, manufactured decades ago, are gaining popularity among avid campers, collectors, and restorers alike and it's easy to see why. The stylish lines and design elements represent classic Americana, and these quaint looking trailers of yesteryear bring back memories of simpler times and the basics of camping.

The idea of finding and resurrecting a long-ago abandoned trailer is exciting, but there are precautions that need to be taken before you attempt to transport your new vintage trailer project from the field to the garage.

This checklist is designed to bring awareness to safety issues you might encounter with your new project trailer, and to assist you in preparing the trailer for transport back home. This checklist is not all-inclusive so feel free to add to the list as you see fit.

It's important you keep in mind the vintage trailer project you are purchasing was probably manufactured over a half-century ago, and has probably been sitting in the same exact spot for many years.

Here are some important items to check before attempting to take your new prize home:

- **Tools and Equipment:** Let's start with some basic tools and equipment you should take along with you on the day you pick up your new vintage trailer project. Ultimately I recommend taking everything on this list, but I understand that is not always feasible so take what you can. First, if you are not very familiar with travel trailers, or you are not mechanically inclined, I recommend taking somebody with you who is. A knowledgeable person can be a big asset when it comes to inspecting and preparing the trailer for the trip home.
 - 1) Take a hydraulic jack with a weight rating that exceeds the trailer weight and take one or two jack stands similarly rated.
 - 2) Take a 4-way lug wrench, or a breaker bar with several common size sockets for lug nuts.
 - 3) Take some blocks of wood (2X8 or 2X10) or other type of blocking that can be used to chock the trailer wheels, to use under the trailer tongue jack, or to help support and stabilize the jack stands if you need to use them.
 - 4) It's quite possible you will need to change or replace a tire. Take a good tire inflation gauge and an air tank that can be used to inflate trailer tires. If you have a small air compressor and access to electricity where the trailer is parked take the air compressor with you. Make sure you have an air chuck that can inflate the tires.
 - 5) It's a good idea to take some common hand tools to make small repairs to items like the lights.

- 6) Take the proper hitch components necessary to safely transport the trailer. I will talk more about this later in the checklist, but you should have different size hitch balls and ball mounts with a drop or rise to attain the proper height.
 - 7) Take a test light and if you know how to use a multi-meter take one along to help troubleshoot and repair any electrical problems.
 - 8) A small electrical repair kit equipped with connectors, wire nuts, wire strippers and electrical tape is helpful.
 - 9) Take several sheets of various grit sandpaper, a can of WD 40, some wire ties and a roll of duct tape.
- **Tires:** The tires on a vintage travel trailer are a top safety concern. In many situations travel trailers are not towed enough (even old ones) to show significant tread wear. This can be very misleading because tire age can result in tire failure. The tread might look fine on the outside, but internal damage you cannot see causes the tire to fail when you are towing it home. One tell-tale sign of tire age and damage caused by exposure to the elements is cracking or checking on the tire sidewall. If you see small hairline cracks in the tire's sidewall the tire should not be trusted to transport the trailer. It is much safer to replace the tires if there is any doubt about the tire's age or condition. A tire blowout can be difficult to handle and can do lots of damage to the trailer.
 - **Suspension and Axle(s):** I mentioned a moment ago that some trailers do not get towed that much, but on the other end of the spectrum some get towed a lot. It's a good idea to inspect the trailer's suspension and axle(s). On trailers that sat for long periods of time excessive rust can be an issue, and on trailers that were towed all over the place loose or broken bolts and welds can be an issue. Older trailers are equipped with leaf spring suspension systems. You should inspect the hardware that mounts the springs to the axle. Look for loose mounting hardware, broken or missing bolts and any broken or cracked welds. If the trailer is located in an area where rust is common inspect the suspension and axle(s) for rust damage that might compromise safety. Some items are an easy fix, like replacing a nut and bolt, but other issues like excessive rust might require reconsidering purchasing and transporting the trailer.
 - **Trailer A-Frame & Coupler:** Just like the suspension system you need to inspect the trailer's A-frame and coupler for excessive rust and broken or cracked welds. Something a lot of people are not aware of is there are three different size hitch balls (1 7/8" 2" and 2 5/16") used to tow trailers. The trailer's weight determines the size hitch ball required, and the trailer coupler is where you will find this information. The hitch ball size is stamped into the top of the trailer coupler. The problem is the stamping is usually covered by several layers of paint or rust on these older trailers. You can use sandpaper to remove the paint to see what size hitch ball is required. It's a good idea to spray the coupler latch mechanism (top & underside) with WD 40 or a similar lubricant and work

the latch back and forth making sure it operates properly. **Tip:** One way to check the correct size hitch ball for the coupler is to secure the trailer coupler to the hitch ball on the tow vehicle and raise the trailer tongue jack. You should notice the back of the tow vehicle starting to rise as you raise the tongue jack. If the coupler does not fit over the hitch ball or if it does not stay attached to the hitch ball when you raise the tongue jack it is the wrong size ball.

- **Proper Hitch Work:** There are lightweight trailers, heavy trailers, single axle trailers and tandem axle trailers. The size, weight and configuration are all factors in determining the required hitch components to safely tow the trailer. Larger, heavier trailers have more tongue weight and require additional weight distributing hitch and sway control components to safely tow the trailer. Smaller, lighter single axle trailers don't always require weight distributing hitch components, but they can be prone to trailer sway and should have some type of trailer sway control mechanism. These hitch components should be installed by a qualified RV service facility. In addition to having the correct size hitch ball you want the trailer to sit as level as possible when the trailer is attached to the tow vehicle. This is why it's important to have a ball mount with the correct rise or drop to level the trailer and tow vehicle as much as possible. On larger, heavier trailers if you connect the trailer to the tow vehicle and the lowest point is where the trailer couples to the truck you need additional weight distributing hitch components, and you should not transport the trailer without these components. Trailer sway is another concern you should be aware of, improper tongue weight, hitch components, crosswinds, passing vehicles and more all contribute to trailer sway. There is always the risk of trailer sway when transporting a trailer.
- **Trailer Brakes:** Depending on the age and size of your vintage trailer project it may or may not be equipped with trailer brakes. If it is a small, lightweight trailer that never had brakes it is not an issue so long as the vehicle you are towing it with is properly sized for the trailer, and you have the necessary hitch components to safely tow it. On the other hand if it is a larger, heavier trailer that did come equipped with trailer brakes you should see if the brakes are operating properly. This of course requires a tow vehicle that is equipped with a trailer brake controller and the proper wiring for electric trailer brakes. The first concern is if the plug on the trailer light cord mates with the trailer plug receptacle on the tow vehicle. With the trailer hitched to the tow vehicle and the trailer light cord plugged in to the tow vehicle receptacle slowly move forward and tap the vehicle brakes. You should feel the trailer brakes engage. It might be necessary to adjust the power setting on the brake controller. If you do not feel the brakes engage there is either a problem with the wiring or the trailer brakes do not work. Transporting a trailer without trailer brakes can be extremely dangerous. Keep in mind your vehicle brakes were designed to stop the weight of the vehicle, not an additional one or more tons behind the vehicle.

- **Wheel Bearings:** One item on the trailer you cannot inspect, unless you have the necessary tools and equipment to remove the hubs, is the wheel bearings. If the trailer has been sitting for a period of time the grease in the bearings and hubs can get hard and lose its lubricating qualities. When you tow a trailer in this condition the metal on metal contact, with little or no lubrication, causes friction and heat resulting in severe damage to the hub, axle flange and other components. If it gets too hot it can result in a fire. Ideally you should remove the wheel and hub and inspect the wheel bearings. If this is not feasible you should at a minimum jack one tire up at a time and spin the tire to see if it turns freely. **Caution:** If you are not familiar with how or where to jack the trailer up, do not attempt to do it. This should only be done on a flat level surface, with the tires on one side chocked and using the proper equipment and location for raising the trailer.
- **Trailer Lights:** It's important that the trailer lights are operational to alert drivers behind the trailer of your intentions. The problem is when a trailer sits for long periods of time some or all of the trailer lights do not work. Another problem is the trailer plug receptacle on the tow vehicle may not be compatible with the light cord plug on the trailer. You can purchase adapters that go from a 4-way to a 7-way plug, but keep in mind if the trailer has brakes and you use a 4 way plug the brakes will not operate. If you plug the light cord in and none of the lights work there is a problem with the wiring. It might be the age of the wiring, or its possible mice and other rodents chewed and damaged the wiring. If you plug the light cord in and some of the lights work there is a good chance the inoperable lights just need some basic maintenance. Quite often it is a bulb that went bad or a poor connection between the bulb and the socket. Another possibility is the ground at the light itself gets corroded or rusty. Sandpaper and a test light or multi-meter can solve lots of lighting issues. If all else fails there are trailer light sets that can be purchased. You can mount the lights on the back of the trailer and route the wiring harness up to the receptacle on the tow vehicle.
- **Tow Vehicle:** Whenever you tow any trailer it is important the tow vehicle is properly matched to the trailer. What this means is the tow vehicle is rated to safely tow the fully loaded weight of the trailer. Some vintage trailers are small and lightweight, but other 30-plus foot models can easily weigh 6,000 pounds or more. Don't ever attempt to tow a 6,000 pound trailer with a vehicle rated to tow 3,500 or 5,000 pounds. If you know the name and brand of trailer you are purchasing lots of information can be found online. Do a search and try to locate weight information about the trailer. A simple towing rule I use is, the tow rating of the vehicle should be equal to or more than the Gross Vehicle Weight Rating (GVWR) of the trailer you are towing. This way, even if the trailer is loaded to capacity, the tow vehicle is still rated to safely tow the weight.

- **Other Safety Concerns:** There are other concerns about transporting a vintage trailer that hasn't moved in years. Is the structure safe? If for example there is a lot of water damage to the roof and walls it's possible the trailer could literally fall apart when subjected to the rigors of towing. This checklist is not intended to inform you what to look for prior to purchasing a trailer, but from a "safe to travel standpoint" it's important that you inspect the structure of the trailer. Look at the areas where the roof meets the sidewalls and the front and back of the trailer. Are there signs of water intrusion or soft spots? Inspect the floor of the trailer. Are there soft spots in the floor? It can be difficult to detect water damage so look closely inside and outside for signs of water intrusion. Lots of vintage trailer are constructed of wood with nails holding the wood together. When there is excessive water damage the wood is rotted to the point that the only thing holding the trailer together is the aluminum siding. When you start driving down the road the vibration and jolting can cause what is left to come apart.
- **Mobile Technician Service:** If you are not comfortable making these checks one suggestion I have is to try and locate a mobile RV technician in the area who can come where the trailer is located and inspect it for you. For a modest fee they can help prepare the trailer for transport. Look online or call some local RV dealerships and ask if they can refer you to a mobile tech service.

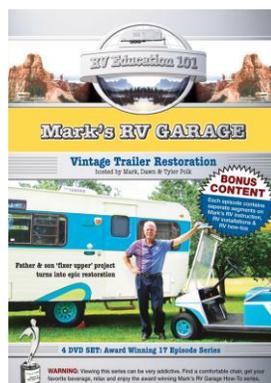
I know this all seems a bit overwhelming. I don't want to ruin anyone's dream of purchasing and restoring a vintage trailer, but getting it, and you, home safely is the first step in the process. Vintage trailers are lots of fun to own, work on and camp in. Take the time to research the trailer, inspect it before you buy it, and properly prepare it for transport and you are on your way to a fun and fulfilling project.

Happy Camping,

Mark J. Polk

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Mark also offers a [4-DVD set titled Mark's RV Garage](#) capturing a 7 month-long educational and entertaining trailer restoration project on a 1967 Yellowstone trailer.