

Is Your Rig Road-Ready?

Trailer maintenance may help prevent the need for repair.

Story & photos by **Troy Smith**



► **Above:** With 25 years of professional experience in maintaining and repairing virtually all makes of trailers, Vern Oatman recommends careful attention to the basics, including brakes, wheel bearings, tire pressure and lights.

► **Right:** Frequent dirt-road and off-road use means more grit gets inside to increase wear and tear on trailer brakes. Under such conditions, brake magnets may require frequent replacement to keep brakes in good working order.



For more than 25 years, Vern Oatman has been putting the pieces back together for hapless haulers of horses and cattle. At V-Bar Sales and Service, Broken Bow, Neb., Oatman deals in new and not-so-new livestock trailers. His crew fabricates and fixes all manner of livestock handling equipment, but 85% of their shop work involves trailer repair. They've seen just about everything that can go wrong, and they have found ways to make it right.

"One of the worst I can remember was a 16-foot, bumper-hitch trailer that came in on one axle. The floor was bad, and the wiring was shot. The trailer's top had broken loose and was tied down with rope," Oatman recalls. "The owner wanted to trade it in, so we struck a deal, and I sent him home with a new model. Then we fixed up the old one and sold it to a rancher who pulled it around the hills for several more years."

While most rolling wrecks can be made road-ready again, Oatman advises trailer owners to practice preventive maintenance to avoid the need for extensive repairs. It's less expensive in the long run and safer.

Too often, customers bring Oatman trailers that are long overdue for the replacement of rotting or missing floorboards. Floor replacement might cost \$300 or so, but that's cheap compared to having a valuable animal killed or crippled. While a variety of flooring material is available, Oatman still prefers wood.

"Rubber flooring lasts a long time, but it's more expensive, and it can be slick to stand on. Rubber can be really expensive to install in older trailers that have fewer cross-members. We usually have to add cross-members because rubber flooring requires that they be only one foot apart. That adds cost," he explains.

"I still recommend pressure-treated, Southern yellow pine for floors. The treated wood should last 10 years with a little care," Oatman continues. "You just have to clean the trailer often and give the floor a chance to dry. Rubber mats add cushion for a better ride, but you have to pull them out periodically to allow the flooring underneath to dry."

Common problems

Oatman says the most common trailer problems are electrical, involving lights and brakes. Faulty lights and failed brakes were particularly troublesome on older trailers when electrical wiring was stapled to the underside of the flooring. Exposed to mud, ice and the abrasions of off-road use, the wiring often pulled loose and broke.

"There is less trouble with most trailers

manufactured during the last 10 years or so, because manufacturers run wiring through conduit and use rubber mountings,” Oatman says. “But lights and brakes should be checked every time a trailer is hitched.”

Oatman adds that several trailer manufacturers now offer sealed wheel bearings as an option for new models. Lubricated and sealed at the factory, these bearings are the same type that has become standard equipment on most late-model trucks. They are virtually maintenance-free and come with a five-year warranty.

Traditional wheel bearings require ample, clean grease, so Oatman recommends repacking the bearings at least once each year. That’s a good time to examine the working parts of brakes to make sure all are in good condition and adjusted properly. Trailer brakes require frequent adjustment.

Oatman says torsion axles have become a standard feature for many trailer makes, eliminating the traditional tandem-axle equalizers. The equalizers wear out and need to be replaced, but torsion axles are long-lasting and provide a smoother ride. Torsion axles also allow for wheel alignment, with adjustment for both toe and camber.

“Wheel alignment eases wear on tires, but torsion axle trailers do need to be level when loaded,” Oatman warns. “For example, if the hitch on a gooseneck trailer is set so the front end is too high, there will be more wear on the rear tires. If the hitch is set too low, the trailer’s front tires will wear faster.”

Perhaps the biggest factor affecting tire wear is failure to maintain proper inflation. Oatman favors radial tires for a better ride, but he fears many people run them with the pressure too low. This causes more rapid wear along the outside portion of the tread face. Overinflation causes the center of the tread face to wear faster. Maintaining air pressure according to manufacturers’ specifications will make them wear more evenly and last longer.

All-aluminum vs. steel

During recent years, all-aluminum trailers have become increasingly popular. They are easy to clean, they won’t rust, and there is no paint to fade or chip. And there is no wood floor to maintain.

“Aluminum trailers offer some advantages. They’re great to pull down the highway. They do cost almost twice as much as a steel trailer, and they still require a little maintenance. Aluminum doesn’t have the same ‘memory’ as steel. The metal doesn’t flex and return to its original shape quite as well,” Oatman says. “After time and miles, and especially after repeated use in rough pastures, some of the welds can break. It’s

A family business

Vern Oatman knows trailers. From building his own open-topped, single-horse trailer during the 1950s, to selling and repairing models by the major manufacturers, he has gained plenty of experience.

Raised in the Nebraska Sandhills, Oatman worked on ranches near his hometown of Johnstown. With a roping horse in tow, he followed the amateur rodeo circuit and later hauled horses to his children’s 4-H activities. More recently, Oatman and his wife, Velma, support their grandchildren’s interests in horse events, including high school and college rodeo.

Oatman founded V-Bar Sales and Service in 1977 and has welcomed a son, Kem, and a daughter, Tammy (Flynn), into the family business, which currently offers multiple lines of livestock and cargo trailers. V-Bar markets about 150 new trailers per year, and trailer repairs keep three full-time shop employees busy.

“I’m trying to work into retirement, so I’ve turned a lot of responsibility for the business over to Kem and Tammy,” Oatman says. “But I wouldn’t want them to think they could get along without me.”

Oatman recommends that livestock haulers never think about loading up without following a routine trailer-towing checklist, including examination of:

- ▶ the hitch lock and safety chain;
- ▶ the electrical connections;
- ▶ the running lights, brake lights and turn signals;
- ▶ the brakes; and
- ▶ the tire pressure and tread wear.

And, of course, never neglect the tow vehicle. Check engine fluids, battery cables, radiator and power belts, as well as truck tires, including spares.

something to watch for, particularly around the end- or divider-gates, and to fix before you have a real problem.”

Of course, metal trailer floors are slick, so using an appropriate bedding such as wood shavings is recommended. Even with wood floors and rubber mats, Oatman believes long hauls call for bedding.

“If you want to know what your trailer’s ride is like, just put a steel folding chair in it

and sit there while someone pulls it down the road. You’ll find that bedding really helps,” Oatman says, grinning. “That experience might make a better driver of you, too — one who is mindful of what he’s pulling behind him. The best advice I can offer to anyone pulling a trailer is to drive defensively.”

