

June 15, 2011

Dear Bob Wheeler and Larry Huttle:

At the end of 2007, I purchased a new 20' Safari SE. I bought a new Airstream because I believed it was built to last and had a reputation for outstanding quality. I did not want a project and I did not want to frequent shops for service. For the additional expense of a brand new trailer, I felt like I was investing in a product that would give me very little trouble for years to come. I did not consider Airstream in league with the other brands. To me, an Airstream trailer was an American icon of quality, a symbol of freedom – one that has inspired generations to not only travel, but to live passionately, with spirit and style. I loved my Airstream, and I wanted no other brand...but now that I have had my trailer for three and a half years, my experience with it has raised some major concerns that seriously make me question whether new Airstream trailers are indeed built to last. I am wondering why some Airstreamers (even full-timers) have trailers that rarely have a problem, and why mine has had a regular stream of problems since the day I picked it up, most notably the current and alarming issue of a rotted floor.

Before I go into more detail with my concerns, however, I'd like to be sure you understand that I (and most people that I have encountered in my travels) love the Airstream ideal. I believe the aerodynamic design is unparalleled and it's a dream to tow. I love the integration of large windows that open wide and allow the outside in. I love the interior design of the Safari/Flying Cloud line and the floor plan of my 20' model. I'm in a very unique and fortunate position in my younger life that allows me to travel while working. From the very beginning, I have been keeping an online travel log of my travels and experiences (www.thesilversnail.com) and have been gaining an audience that not only enjoys the Airstream adventure, but is also captured by the story that a single, modern woman can maintain a career while "living the life" traveling in a beautiful iconic Airstream. It is an honor to be able to inspire people in this way. In fact, as you probably know, small footprint living and traveling full-time is becoming more popular to younger professionals like myself. The very nature of my life on the road promotes and advocates the Airstream brand widely.

When I'm in the Airstream community (rallies, Airstream-only parks), I learn much about the loyalty and experience other Airstream owners have had through the ages. I love that Airstream has a loyal, solid community that has been growing and building for 80 years. But there does seem to be a popular belief within the older Airstream community that the new models do not live up to the standards of old. After hearing the experiences of many of the old-timers, I'm sadly wondering if Airstream might be cutting too many corners and is not building the quality trailers they used to (and not offering the same stellar service as it used to as well) ...but instead might just be riding the coattails of their reputation from an era gone by. I'd like to believe this is not true and that any significant problems or failures are isolated experiences that Airstream agrees are unacceptable and rectifies it accordingly. So I think it is important for you to hear my experiences and concerns.

A few weeks ago, on May 10, when I was in New Orleans and planning my route west, I noticed a soft spot under the dinette table. I ripped up the linoleum to discover a rotten hole in the middle of the floorboard. My plan was to head to Alaska this summer, but after finding this major problem, I have had to make another major detour back to Jackson Center to have this taken care of. I have an appointment with the Service Center for the week of June 20.

Since I purchased my trailer, I have been a regular visitor to the service center. Except in a few rare circumstances where distance was an issue, I have always come to Jackson Center for my repairs and maintenance and I have relied on their expertise to advise me on necessary issues. Most recently, I have taken note of the less-than-stellar level of service, but I have never voiced any concerns. After finding the rotten floor, I feel it's time that I speak up now.

1- My front panorama window miter joints are not welded. They are caulked. In July of 2010, I drove through a rainstorm and this caused a major leak that drenched the floor. B.S. at the service center re-caulked the windows. It cost me \$300 and was determined to be a maintenance issue. I asked B.S. and every serviceman I could find to look at the soaking wet floor and tell me what I should do to avoid rot. They all assured me that I did not have to worry about the floor, that it was designed to dry out, and that I should NOT rip up all of the linoleum in the living area even though it was evident that it was wet underneath (the linoleum was stained). This is where the rot has occurred.

Airstream's newer models have corrected the flaw in the window design and now weld these miter joints, which makes me question whether it was indeed a maintenance issue after all. I would like to know what it would take to correct this inferior design on my trailer and weld these window joints. I should also note that almost immediately after I picked up my trailer from the dealer (when I first bought it), I noticed a slight leak from the pano window after driving through rain. Airstream told me that there would always be some kind of leak from driving through rain with a trailer that rolls and bounces on the road. I thought this strange, but being new to the rv world, I naively accepted that as normal and not something to worry about, as Airstream advised me. I did not press it further, and I should have.

2 – Last summer (2010), I had another leak that had caused the belly pan to flood with gray water. On that same visit to Jackson Center, it took B. S. four hours to find the source, and only found it because I asked about a water line under the stove. At first, he was sure that water line was not related, but when he took a second look, that is indeed where the problem was. The hose connection to the gray tank needed to be sealed. By that time, he had spent four hours taking the furniture out to track and learn about the water system of my particular model. I believe he should have known where the water lines were and looked under the easy-to-access stove within the first half hour. It should not have taken four hours and my assistance for him to find the source under the stove. I paid \$400 for this service. It should have cost me closer to \$50.

I was very surprised to learn that there wasn't a reference book of trailer models and schematics to point the service technicians in the right direction. I understand that there are many different models on the road that land in the service center, and therefore many different floor plans and schematics. My model is only 3.5 years old. The technicians should have reference material available to them. This is why we go to the Airstream service center - because we believe they have the best in-depth knowledge of the structure and systems. This is why we make the journey and put our beloved trailers in their hands. But if they don't in fact have this information available, what then? It seems they are no more qualified than a backyard do-it-yourselfer. I was billed for four hours, and I paid for it, even though I didn't think it was right. Why didn't I say something at the time? Because I had become friends with B. S. and I knew he had a family to support and I did not want to put his work performance in jeopardy. I realize now that it was not his fault. The service center should have a reference system in place to assist the technicians in understanding the different years and models of trailers. Four hours for this repair job is unacceptable.

3 – On the same visit, I also had a shower leak that needed repair. I expressed my concern to B. S. that there was another leak beyond that gray tank problem. He was certain we had found it. I decided, then, to troubleshoot it myself. I did indeed find the leak at the place where my shower hose is attached to the wall. This time, a different technician repaired it and the front of my shower was removed. When the work was finished, I noticed that there was no caulking around the shower doorframe. I asked him about it, and he said he had done it...but it was not there and I had to point it out to him. If I hadn't known what to check, I would have driven off with no caulking around my shower, causing another leak. It should not have been my responsibility to quality check this. I would have found it later, after I had driven off, and wasted more time and gas returning to Jackson Center to finish the job.

4 – Another time, the black tank flush valve failed and caused a flood of water to empty from the belly pan. Jackson Center repaired that as well. All of these leaks caused the belly pan to flood and the floor to get wet and every single time I was very concerned with rot. So every single time, I would consult with the Airstream service department. Many service technicians and the foreman told me repeatedly that the floorboard is made of marine-grade wood and could handle a swim, as long as it dried out. I was told that as long as there wasn't a continuous leak somewhere that would cause the wood to sit in water continuously, the floor would be just fine. Well, this rotten hole is in a place where there is not any plumbing and there is not a continuous leak. The wood around it and at the edge of the trailer is dry.

I have always used dehumidifiers, fans, air conditioning and heat to dry things out when something gets wet. On a regular basis, I keep dehumidifiers in the storage spaces and in the bathroom. I regularly check the floor and perimeter of the floorboard for leaks - after rainstorms, and just randomly every now and then. I am constantly monitoring for water issues and following the advice of Airstream, and still the floor rotted out.

5 - If Airstream uses marine-grade wood, why not go a step further and actually put a few coats of yacht varnish or something similar on it? I know there is an application of water-resistant material along the perimeter, but why not, if still using wood as a floorboard, why not take more measures to prevent water damage and rot? Why not do some real-life testing in addition to the factory testing? And further, why not use a composite material that cannot rot? Airstream is the leader in travel trailer technology. I'd like to see that reflected in the materials being used for the floorboard.

6 - I know that many people with trailers from the model year 2007 have had floor rot issues. I know that much of this is a result of water being trapped between the foil bubble wrap that was used as insulation and the floorboard. My trailer uses this same insulation, and I know that Airstream has since changed the insulation material used under the floor. Since there is no direct source of plumbing under the floor area that has rotted, it seems that this is the reason for my floor rotting out as well – poor choice of material and design.

7 – A more minor issue, but still important: When I asked the service technicians to please use a cover cloth inside my trailer to keep the interior clean, they used very dirty cover cloths that brought in more dirt and junk onto my bed and upholstery than if they hadn't used them at all. Please be aware of this. We love our trailers. They become our homes. We'd like the people who work on them to care about them as much as we do.

8 – Another minor issue, but important nonetheless. Last summer, I spent \$90 in Jackson Center on premium LED lights. I bought them because they were supposed to last much longer than the regular bulbs. Within a few months they burned out and were garbage. ...and these were in light fixtures that I rarely even use.

In the 3.5 years that I have owned my trailer, much has failed. Right from the start, there was that water leak and a broken water heater. I had to drive six hours out of my way to a dealer to have the water heater repaired. A few months later the furnace died and a stabilizing jack fell off. I drove another six hours to get to an Airstream dealer to fix this, only to get terrible service from them. Later, the converter also failed – at a most inopportune time. I have had problems with the stove and inside rivets falling out. The water pump was faulty from the very beginning (pumped water into the fresh water tank), and needed to be replaced. The end piece of one of the awning arms cracked and broke out of the blue, without any impact or pressure to cause it. I chalked it up to wear and tear and was very glad that most of it happened within the 2-year warranty period, so I did not make much noise about it. Now that the floor has rotted out, I am taking a serious look back on all the problems and detours I have had to take to have them repaired and wonder if 1) I got a lemon or 2) Airstream's build quality is just not what they say it is and their interest in customer satisfaction is completely absent.

I am not blaming any particular people about the problems I have experienced with my Airstream. What I am very concerned with is the level of attention that is given in the design/engineering department, on the factory floor, in the service department and in real-world field testing. As an Airstream owner who would prefer no other brand, I would like to know that Airstream takes it's reputation seriously, that they stand behind their product, and have systems in place that ensure top notch craftsmanship and service.

My immediate reaction, when I had discovered the hole in my floor was to find someplace other than Jackson Center to repair it. Because of my disappointment with my last visit to the service center, I wanted to go someplace that might assure me stellar, quality service. I realized, though, that this was exactly something that needed to be communicated with Airstream and brought to your attention. Please understand that I am writing this letter to you directly because I had some communication with Randy McNeeley in customer service, which left me feeling like Airstream did not value or take an interest in its loyal customer base.

On Friday, May 13, I spoke with him on the phone and voiced all of the concerns you have read here. He listened and expressed his understanding. I told him I would rather find a dealer west of the Mississippi since I was bound for the Pacific Northwest. He said no problem, send him photos of the floor and he'd see what he could find out and get back to me by the beginning of the next week. I let the whole week go by and did not hear from him. During that time I had decided it would be best for the Jackson Center service center to be responsible for the work and on the next Tuesday, May 24, I sent him an email. You can see the transcript of our emails below. I still wanted to discuss the matter further and get some idea of what was involved before committing to the drive. He replied back with a short "...it will be necessary to examine before commenting." Essentially stonewalling me.

I am familiar and accustomed to sending photos and getting repair estimates from service centers BEFORE committing to a location for the service. The response from Randy was most unhelpful – even rude. When I expressed my disappointment, he apologized and suggested I speak with someone in the service center but did nothing to connect me to the proper person. Basically, he did nothing.

I love my Airstream because it's beautiful and was supposed to be designed to last. Had I known that it was built with a floorboard that would rot out in 3.5 years, I would never have purchased it, especially considering the premium price I paid. I enjoy keeping a narrative of my travels online and promoting Airstream in the stories and pictures. It's fun to share and touch the lives of many people dreaming or preparing to do the same. It's this yearning for comfortable travel and adventure that Wally Byam tapped into when he started the company, and it is what Airstream's business and reputation relies on. I'd like to believe that Airstream not only values the legacy of Wally Byam, but also puts a premium value on every one of its customers – especially since we are your best advertising.

I'd like to continue what I am doing - with an Airstream. I want no other brand, but I want one that I can trust was built solidly, to last. Now that my floor has rotted out, I have lost confidence in the quality of my trailer. My branded website, The Silver Snail (www.thesilversnail.com), was designed around an Airstream trailer and is dependent on it. I just attended my first WBCCI rally, which also happened to be the first Cleveland rally, and it was great fun. The camaraderie of the Airstream community is indeed very special, and is another reason to love the Airstream brand. It was especially nice because it was in my hometown of Cleveland and with the WBCCI unit that I am a member of. I trust that you will hear what I have said and take measures to show me that Airstream really does stand behind its reputation and is accountable for the product they build and that I purchased.

As you know, Thor's Business Ethics Policy has a heading entitled "Fair Dealing". Here is what it says:

"We are committed to maintaining the highest levels of integrity and fairness within our Company. You must not take unfair advantage of anyone (customers, employees, contractors and even competitors) through manipulation, concealment, abuse of privileged information, misrepresentation of material facts, fraud or any other unfair-dealing practice."

As I mentioned earlier, I am on the service schedule for this coming Monday, June 20. I would very much like a personal meeting with you to discuss my trailer and these issues. I would also welcome a member from the service department to participate with records of work that's been done on my trailer since I took ownership.

In closing, I'd like you to consider how you might feel and what would you do if you found yourself in my exact situation.

Thank you for your attention and interest in reading this lengthy letter. I look forward to your reply.

Sincerely,
Sharon Pieniak
www.TheSilverSnail.com

EMAIL TRANSCRIPT:

Sharon,

I am sorry. These are all questions that should be answered through our service center as they are the people that have done and will do the work on your trailer. I will forward this to Chris Burch, our service writer who will respond to you with your June 20th week request.

Sincerely,

Randy McNeeley
Airstream Customer Relations

-----Original Message-----

From: Sharon Pieniak [mailto:sharon@bluecatmedia.com]
Sent: Wednesday, June 01, 2011 6:35 AM
To: rmcneeley@airstream.com
Subject: Re: rotten floor

Hi Randy - Please change my service appointment to the week of June 20, if possible. And also, please send an email confirming that this has been done. I'm disappointed that you and the Jackson Center service center cannot, or do not care to be, of more assistance to me with this issue before I get there. I have many questions, and it seems I must search elsewhere for the answers, which is very very unfortunate. It has made me feel like Airstream does not value it's very loyal customers and made me doubt the quality and integrity of the brand.

Thank you,
Sharon Pieniak

On 5/24/11 2:30 PM, Randy McNeeley wrote:

Sharon,

I have contacted our service center and they have scheduled you in for June 13th. As to your other requests, it will be necessary to examine before commenting.

Randy

Airstream Customer Relations

> >

> > -----Original Message-----

> > From: Sharon Pieniak [mailto:sharon@bluecatmedia.com]

> > Sent: Tuesday, May 24, 2011 1:22 PM

> > To: rmcneeley@airstream.com

> > Subject: Re: rotten floor

Hi Randy - I've been thinking about where to have this repair done and have decided it would be best for Airstream to do the work, particularly because I believe Airstream should take responsibility and be accountable for their product. Please put me on the service schedule for the week of June 13 and also advise me of any information you may have regarding the cause of this problem, the repair work involved, and timeframe needed to finish the repair.

Thanks,
Sharon

> > On 5/24/11 1:13 PM, Randy McNeeley wrote:

Sharon,

I am sorry that you have not had a call returned. As I believe I told you I would be speaking to our National Service Manager for a recommended dealer. I have done this, however he has been out of the office for the last few days. He is due back tomorrow and either he or I will be contacting you at the number you had provided

Randy

>> >> -----Original Message-----

>> >> From: Sharon Pieniak [mailto:sharon@bluecatmedia.com]

>> >> Sent: Tuesday, May 24, 2011 11:27 AM

>> >> To: rmcneeley@airstream.com

>> >> Subject: rotten floor

Hi Randy - Just checking in. You said you'd get back to me a week ago and I haven't heard anything. Did you receive my photos? Is there someone else I should be speaking with?

Thanks,

Sharon