

6 Feb 82

The Cortez National  
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Dear Jan and Tony:

Well, the only Cortez in Maine has done come home to Texas and left Maine without. We'll get back there in the Summers and our offer of a parking spot on the ocean is still good, so will look forward to a Cortezzer or two coming by someday.

I get a kick out of all I hear about tire and wheel hassles, such as having to jettison 17.5 wheels in favor of others. I jettisoned the original 7.50-16's the first year and put on my own 10x16.5's--had to have the centers cut out of the front wheels and re-welded outboard a couple of inches to handle the turning clearance. But they did a terrific job and I've had not the slightest tire or wheel trouble since then--1967 or so. Wish that were true of the rest of the beast.

To add to my warning about U-joint fixes, here's a beauty that happened to me on my three-week sojourn from Maine to Texas last October. There may be something in it that will alert owners to an incipient problem in older coaches that could save them some real trouble.

As we all know, to our sorrow, the right front wheel takes a terrific beating from edge-of-the-road pot-holes, particularly in concrete country, like New York and Pennsylvania. They are awful, and getting worse as budgets for road fixing go down. Laws are being passed in those states now to allow people to sue the states for not only personal injuries resulting from pot-hole accidents, but for the damage to the car itself. Well, I really bought it.

Leaving my folks' place in up-state New York onto IH 81 South to Tennessee, I was forced onto the shoulder by warning arrows for surfacing work. No warnings at all to slow down or of rough pavement or caution--just blinking arrow on a trailer. None of the stream of traffic in front of me slowed down, but I took my foot off the accelerator as I went onto the macadam shoulder.

Well, as I decelerated to below 50, my right front wheel hit a shallow pot-hole. All hell broke loose. Something broke with a shattering crash, the whole right front dropped down and began dragging me off the pavement. I wrestled her back on and hit another pot-hole, but held her to a stop on a ramp exit out of the way.

I was down so far, scraping along on the tie-rod end, that I couldn't even get a jack under her. The right front wheel was tilted inward at a crazy angle, and my fear was that some unique part was broken, or more than one, that could not be replaced--and my trip would end right there--in an upstate New York junk yard.

Got a wrecker--no thanks to CB, not even Channel 9--by hiking and hitchhiking towards town. He turned out to be a fine truck repair shop guy who handles, with his entire family working, all the Syracuse and vicinity town heavy equipment. He set me up on blocks behind his garage, and there I sat for 11 days.

It turned out to be a broken-in-two upper control or suspension casting. Nothing else got broke, Thank God, but that was bad enough. Call to Lafayette, and he had exactly one, not even carried on his inventory sheets, but he was able to scrounge up one arm, assemble it (welding of inside torque tube) and send it off to me UPS.

That was a mistake, so my advice to anyone is: never try to save money by avoiding an expensive air shipment. It is false economy since it costs you so much in additional days lost that you will spend many bucks over the air freight in extra living expenses waiting for ground freight--not to mention a week of idle time. Luckily, I was 15 miles from the folks, so I had a car and a sack, but still spent much money waiting for the part.

It came in, but disassembling the old parts from the mounting pads to keep from ruining the rubber bushings (no replacement pads in Louisiana so had to salvage the old ones) turned out to be a nightmare for our mechanics. They broke an \$80 tool on the press on one of them, finally had to send it to a machine shop for a special collar to be made to work it in the arbor press better. Took 26 tons of force to push the old torque tube stubs out of the pads--very tricky, time-consuming, and expensive of labor.

Well, they got it done finally--took eleven days. Cost? Well, as you know, the parts boys have us by the throats and we with no recourse. For the part--\$425.00 for one miserable suspension arm. New tire--\$135.00. Labor, mostly disassembly, \$294.00. Add that up, plus the cost of living those eleven days.

We found that the reason the suspension arm broke was that it had been cracked in two places for some long time, from the many, many horrible shocks it had taken on pot-holes, railroad tracks, other assorted bumps over the years. The cracks were right at the webs on front and rear sides of the long portion of the arm where it joins at right angles the mounting portion with the torque tube bushings. Those cracks were rusty inside, not shiny new breaks, as the catastrophic breaks showed.

The other wheels seldom get the wallops the right front one does, so there is little reason to fear failure of other than that one. But, if Lafayette only had one arm left, what do they have now? And they had no mounting pads with bushings. What do they have now or will have? So avoiding this massive damage is a must for all of us.

Here are my recommendations:

1. Everyone, take off those front wheels and inspect, meticulously, every blinking square centimeter of those upper arms, right and left to ferret out any possible tiny crack. They really ought to be magnafluxed, but this is a lot to expect, so it probably is useless to suggest it--though I went to a lot of trouble to magnaflux my wheel spindles.

2. They should be cleaned thoroughly for this inspection. If any indication of a crack anywhere is found, they should be removed and replaced, if possible, or welded up heavily, if not. Mine broke not only where the rusted small web cracks showed up but also out on the arm halfway to the upper ball joint--not all the way through there, but a two-inch crack anyway.

3. Turn up the torque nuts and get as much tension on the torsion bars as possible. Old vehicles probably need it anyway due to age sagging. Mine are now as far as they will go, and just makes the ground clearance recommended.

4. When driving cross-country, avoid pot-holes like they were rattlesnakes in the bedroom. Watch especially bridges on concrete turnpikes, like the NY Thruway, or IH 81 in New York and Pennsylvania. Once you're in the South, smooth macadam takes over and good maintenance (Oh, how nice it was to be able to relax in Virginia and Tennessee after that awful concrete!). Watch the lane joints where the right lane slab joins the left lane slab. Breaks appear there to catch your left wheels, and those concrete pot-holes are like shell-holes, with a very deep and sharp leading edge drop-off--much more dangerous than macadam.

5. Slow down, way down, for every unknown railroad track. Never, never hit a railroad crossing at highway speed. Let the people behind you slow down and cuss--the hell with them. Railroad tracks have been some of the worst suspension bangers for me. No more; I'm now very, very leery of them.

So there you have my usual disastrous Cortez cross-country. After the recovery, and the shock of the expense, the rest of the trip was beautiful--Fall colors very rich all the way to Arkansas. Oh, there were other glitches, but all free--like a right front brake shoe return spring that somehow came loose and gave me a hot wheel--really sweated that one thinking of internal damage from the pot-hole disaster. Driver's windshield wiper blade broke off in heavy rain and was lost--replaced with passenger side wiper, still haven't gotten it completely repaired. Clutch slipped on a steep hill in New York, almost burned it. Had to abandon the climb, jettison my canoe trailer into the ditch, back Cortez down one-mile farm lane to camp in a farmer's yard. Clutch recovered OK, but obviously hasn't enough to pull the Clark and a light canoe trailer up a really steep hill. That was close, but free.

Sewer hose housing end cover and latch simply came off in flight and dropped the housing onto the interstate--scared the devil out of me with the awful noise. Hammered and wired it up. Hadn't been touched in years--so why it departed is a mystery.

Other than these little jewels, it was a normal Cortez trip. Cost me exactly \$9.64 for one overnight campsite in Tennessee to shower and dump the tank and spruce up. Otherwise, it cost me over \$1200.00 to Cortez from Maine to Texas, about normal. Is there anyone who can claim, with a straight face, that a motor home is cost effective? I'd sure like to shake his hand.

Best to you,

*Frank Lewis*  
Frank Lewis