

HandyBob's Blog

Making off grid RV electrical systems work

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HandyBob news for FALL 2012

Just the other day somebody posted a link to my blog on a UK forum. I'm sure people don't realize that I see every one of those. What was interesting is that again, the guy said I am repetitive, but that I do appear to know what I am talking about. I repeat myself on purpose. In our world today people who repeat lies often enough are believed. The good old boy network in the RV community is still full of people like that. If you don't see that, then you should stop reading now. I figure if I tell the truth often enough then people will believe me and it is working. People all over the globe are reading this blog now, if only I were getting just \$1 a hit... I have a following in the sailing community and they use my information in places where they call our rolling houses "caravans". I hesitate to give this number out, but of the 88,000 hits the blog got in 2012, I had only 3 people argue.

One was the idiot emailing from a boat in the Mediterranean, who was "gobsmacked" that I thought you only need volts to charge batteries. I never said that, so he can't read, unless it is when looking at glossy marketing brochures for AGM batteries full of lies. I guess common sense still really ain't that common. What I do say is that voltage is more important than amps, but you do need both. And AGM batteries are more efficient than flooded, maybe 1% so. Over twice the price & worth every penny. Sarcasm, people.

I tried & tried to insert a picture of a beautiful schooner (big two masted sail boat) with solar panels on it here. You will have to use your imagination until I can find somebody to help me. I hate computers.

Then there was the owner of the RV Solar outfit who keeps defending his past mistakes on RV Forums. He is never going to change that tune because the refunds and repairs of those past things he should be doing for free would probably put him out of business. Just imagine the law suit if a thousand disgruntled customers ever got together! I think he should consider offering free labor, but have people pay for parts. As he put it to me, he is doing "better", but what about all of the work he did before he learned? His work looks great, but you still need to demand that he do it right if you really want it to work. He will sell you the wrong meter even if you ask for a Trimetric. Somebody reported to me that he is using my name to sell systems, building to "HandyBob specs". Maybe a \$200 royalty per system would be in order here? Can you see why I will still recommend nobody?

If you don't, then consider this. According to an email I received recently, the "best" dealer in Quartzsite is now selling Morningstar Tristar PWM controllers, setting them at 14.8V and he sounds just like me. This is the outfit with the lifetime warranty & money back guaranty. He wanted to know if I would recommend this dealer now. Here is what I replied: "If that guy is selling Morningstar Tristar PWM and agreeing to set it to 14.8V, the moon must be made of green cheese and hell frozen over. I wonder if he has temp sensors now (that he told me nobody wanted) and if he is still using those crappy car stereo fuses that melt down. I'll bet he is. He is the guy I tried to convince of these things for years and finally gave up. He has also turned out hundreds, if not thousands, of systems with shadows on panels and wiring that did not comply with the charge controller instructions. I called Blue Sky one day when I was really angry and reported that to them. Their response was to tell me he was one of their best dealers. What does this say about their bad dealers? It was his wife who told one of my customers they would be putting water in their batteries every other day if they set it to 14.8V. He told me that

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his dad had been doing solar for years and I didn't know what I was talking about. "There is voltage drop in every system, it doesn't matter where it is." A direct quote. Has he ever learned that the wires between the charge controller and the batteries must be as short as possible? I really doubt it." (Just my humble opinion, but the facts support me.)

If he is actually doing better, perhaps he should be contacting me. However, I would bring up that lifetime warranty of his, so I am not holding my breath. The lifetime warranty does not say that your system must charge the batteries all the way up and he still tells people to throw their hydrometer away because it would confirm for you that the system he installed for you is not really working.

I recently heard from one of his customers who was told to leave the property and never come back when he was there complaining. His system, which was installed this year, has about 15ft of wire between the controller & batteries and the controller was set at 14.4V. He was told that it is normal to run a generator for a couple of hours a day when you have solar panels. Normal for me is never buying one of the stinking things, so I know this is wrong. This dealer has refused to fix things for people after I showed them what was wrong. Wake up people. This guy told me he had been to six different installers (a new record) trying to figure out what was wrong with his system and nobody had a clue. 15 minutes over the phone and I told him how to make it work. "Fix your shadow issues, move the controller, set the voltage right & buy a meter." It can't be that simple, can it? If it was this easy, any of those six would have figured it out, right? WRONG!

Later the person who sent the email said that the price on the Tristar is \$30 more there than at any of the reputable internet retailers. Change your name dude. I think "Jack My Price Up Solar" has a nice ring to it. We used to spend a lot of time near Q. One day a couple of years ago my wife went to town for a girl's shopping day with a few friends. As they drove by the dealer one of the girls said to everybody: "Oh, look at all the future HandyBob customers." Everybody howled. I really have made a lot of their systems work by rewiring, moving controllers and installing metering. It is that simple.

The last person who argued was somebody who towed his huge brand new fifth wheel all the way across the country to find me. He supposedly wanted my help to build a system, but then he argued with everything I said, talking right over the top of me every time I tried to answer his questions. The worst of this was that he arrived with completely dead and ruined batteries after promising to check into a park & recharge before coming here. I still make mistakes. I didn't ask him enough questions before telling him where I live and then I tried to hook 8 of those batteries up to my construction power system at 24V with a set of #4 booster cables. I succeeded in setting the cables on fire and melting a terminal on one of my old Trojans! They are boat anchors now. I had to send the guy away. Anybody like this who ever comes here in the future will be escorted back to the property line and told to never return. My guarantee starts after the work is finished and I will not work for idiots.

A couple of very good things happened in 2012. First, there was the guy who contacted me out of desperation and wanted me to look at his ten year old home system with the idea of selling him enough batteries so he could live for five days. Long story short; it had never worked because the guy who sold it to him had sent electricians to install it and had never even visited after the owner complained. It had ruined two sets of batteries with constant undercharging. The poor guy had stories of sitting in the dark in front of his propane oven with his dog and trying not to freeze on nights when the batteries were too dead to run the furnace and the generator wouldn't start because it was too cold. I discovered two of the panels had never been connected, 30% of the system was not working because of bad connections and blown fuses and even if it had been, the voltage had never been set correctly, the inverter charger was not programmed right and the Trimetric meter they installed had been left at default, never programmed. The guy had never even been told what that Trimetric was for and for ten years all it said was FULL. There was also an undersized circuit breaker in the system that had been nuisance tripping once in a while for ten years. The dealer that did this mess is still in business and has a beautiful web site showing huge expensive systems. I wonder if any of them actually work.

So, what is good about any of this? This system does now work, with a beautiful set of new Trojan L16's. He rarely uses the generator and now he knows when to, so that he will never again run out of power. I traded new cables & labor for the old Interstates. I sorted through them, took four bad ones out and have been running my tools all summer on the remaining 12 of them fed from 780 watts of panels. They probably won't last long, but poor people got poor ways. Oh by the way, I use a hydrometer to check them and that is the tool used to figure out that two dead cells were draining the whole system. Throw your hydrometer away, right! OK, I am sarcastic AND repetitive.



The second good thing was what I did with all of this power. I built my shop building. The response I got from most friends when they saw this was WOW!

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Several full time RV'ers we had met while camped with them out in the desert (most I helped with making their solar work) traveled here in their RV's and volunteered to help get me started. How do you think that makes us feel? Most of this work was a one man project using muscle, chain saw fuel, tractor diesel and solar power. No generator was ever run for electricity here. We are staying in Montana now, with our rig parked inside the shop so we won't freeze. It is far from completed but we have a roof and we are out of the wind. There will be a 2000 watt array of beautiful HeliosUSA solar panels on the roof in the spring and I am experimenting with a MidNite Classic 200 charge controller after having extended conversations with Robin at MidNite. As of 2014, I would say that this was a mistake. It was released to the public without sufficient testing. It works, but it is noisy and it has computer glitches. The failure to auto equalize is the worst one I have seen, but I have heard about others.



This is a power system. 4000 watts, 120/240V.
That 100% is for 1200 amp hours at 24V.



Modern Homesteading in the great white north. Poles planed with solar electricity.

I will be running a one man consultancy (as a British guy put it) out of this shop in the spring. I will be consulting and doing home system repairs, trying to help others figure this solar life out. However, there will never be a sign out at the entrance and no uninvited visitors. This is not what anybody would call a real profit making enterprise, not a real business. I will not stock product and will not be shipping kits. I gave up on that idea. You can find the things you need very cheaply on the internet. You don't need a profit making dealer to sell to you. I am retired from every day work and too old to be doing RV installations. We want to build our home, garden, make quilts and play with the dog. Helping the occasional DIY person (my friends) with only the things they cannot do for themselves is what I have in mind. Plus, I have repaired a couple of home systems that had never worked before I came along and I helped a friend go off grid by installing 3000W of solar power on his remote place. I hope to do good enough screening of potential clients that I never see another who argues with everything I say while blowing cigarette smoke in my face. Life is too short for that. I have thought about this long & hard for months so I am going to come out and say it. If you are still smoking today you may have trouble passing the intelligence test needed before I will work on solar power for you. Common sense people. Sorry, but I am allergic and my parents both died young. My mother of lung cancer in her mid fifties, my father of heart disease, both caused by the cigarettes. My step father smoked a pipe and lung cancer got him. I have no older living relatives because of tobacco and I suffered constant headaches until I left home at 17, over 40 years ago. Then they came back when I had to work in an office with smoke in the air. Don't tell me I am making this up unless you want to be yelled at.

Something else that I need to get off my chest while I am in the mood: The next customer who tells me that he is taking the system that I repaired or helped to install (that works great now) to an RV dealer and is going to have them move it to his new rig will be told to delete my phone number from his phone book and my email address from his computer unless he is willing to pay me \$150 per hour for my time, even if it is just over the phone. I am sick to death of people having to travel halfway across the country to find me so that I can straighten out a mess done by some tech who said he would reinstall it just like it was before, even if he read my blog first. The success rate is zero. This is not an isolated incident. I am talking several, as in way more than three. It ain't rocket science, but you would think that it must be. Those guys refuse to read, they are too stupid to understand instructions or they are just stubborn. Whatever. People who had solar dealers do this have even had similar problems, so why anybody would think that an RV tech would get it right is beyond me. Then, why do people always pay for the work and drive away before checking to see if it works and then call ME instead of going back?

Negative? No, I am positive about this. Absolutely certain.

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