



Owner-Operator's Business
Association of Canada

Association professionnelle des
routiers autonomes du Canada

...from the
director's chair

A cautionary tale down Mexico way

In 1992 the governments of Canada, the US and Mexico signed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), creating one of the largest trading blocs in the world. Two years later, when the agreement came into force, the CEO of the first carrier to haul freight from Canada into Mexico, hailed that country as the "the next land of opportunity."

Fast-forward a couple of decades and we find precious few drivers willing to take advantage of that opportunity. With more than 10,000 trucks hijacked last year on Mexico's roadways, and an average of 47 people murdered there every day in 2011, crossing the Rio Grande is a scary prospect.

And yet, hundreds of Canadian and American truck drivers travel regularly in and out of the Mexico/US border zone to grab a share of surface transportation trade between the three countries that's reached a record monthly value of \$86 billion.

Most of these drivers are seasoned veterans who are well aware of the dangers, and keep their wits about them to protect themselves and their loads. They're especially on guard against become unwitting mules for drug dealers.

Less well known is the risk unsuspecting truckers face in being caught up in the crime of human smuggling.

They're certainly aware of the enormous problem of illegal migrants crossing the Mexico/US border. Horrifying stories of "illegals" found concealed in vehicles make sensational headlines, often because of the appalling conditions in which they're discovered.

What makes headlines far less often are stories where the driver of the vehicle is a victim as well; completely unaware that he or she has a stowaway on-board. After a Manitoba-based OBAC member became one such victim last month, I asked Canada Calling listeners if they'd ever heard of such a thing. My phone hasn't stopped ringing.

Along the southern border, it's not unusual for drivers to find they have cargo on-board

they weren't counting on.

Most often, the stowaways are discovered at a truck stop, hidden under tarps, inside trailers, and tucked into places you wouldn't think a body or three could fit.

By the time they hop a northbound truck, these desperate people have already crossed the porous Mexican border, usually with the help of a facilitator or "coyote," and need safe transportation past some 22,000 US Border Patrol agents who, backed up by drug-sniffing dogs and a plethora of other enforcement folks, are authorized to check vehicles within 100 miles of the border.

Discovering stowaways is disturbing, but if they're found by the drivers themselves before they reach a checkpoint, that's usually the end of it.

Not so for our Manitoba driver. After loading near Edinburg, Texas, he stopped at the Flying J, went inside to grab his scale ticket, then headed out. At the checkpoint a few miles down the road he was greeted by a Border Patrol agent and a very excited dog. When the BP folks climbed up the side of his truck, his first thought was that someone had stashed drugs in his sleeper.

He watched in amazement as two terrified Mexican teenagers – a boy and a girl who had been tucked into the space on top of his sleeper, behind his roof faring – scrambled down. He was even more amazed at what happened next.

His truck and trailer were seized, he was stripped of his belongings, fingerprinted, and tossed in a cell where he was questioned for the next two hours.

The most frustrating thing, he told me, was that he was completely in the dark about what was happening to him. Could he make a call to his carrier? Absolutely not. Was he being arrested? No, he was being "processed." Was he being charged? He's "under investigation."

Armed only with a piece of paper he



Joanne
Ritchie:
OBAC
executive
director

signed acknowledging that his truck and trailer had been returned to him, it was a nerve-racking trip home for our driver. And it didn't get any better at the Canadian border. After checking his paperwork and scanning his passport, the CBSA agent asked a curious question: "Did you have any problems on this trip?" He told his story, hoping the Canadian agent might shed some light on his ordeal. Not our department. Have a nice day.

Back in Canada, our driver called the US Customs and Border Protection folks at his usual border crossing in North Dakota, trying to determine his status in the computer system, and if he might experience any difficulty gaining entry or travelling in the US? Maybe, maybe not, they tell him. It's an open investigation – a Homeland Security issue, and Homeland Security doesn't answer any questions.

We're also having trouble finding Canadian officials who even believe this is happening. While they're a bit more sympathetic than their US counterparts, they're certainly not very helpful.

The reaction of companies these drivers work for is also interesting. Some would really rather not know about it, and they really don't want the Border Patrol to know about it. Other carriers take immediate steps to protect their drivers, by blocking any possible access points on the truck and continually reminding them to be aware, and to be vigilant, when they're travelling in the Mexico/US border zone.

Awareness and vigilance – good advice is you find yourself down that way. Hopefully, our Manitoba driver will soon get the answers he needs to make sure he's not an "illegal" himself.