

Opinion

Unregulated truckers cause highway havoc

By Bill Glovin

As deregulation of the trucking industry unfolds, concern over safety has reached an all-time high.

While insiders agree that most truck companies emphasize safe driving, not a single operator or trade-association official surveyed refutes the notion that an increasing number of unsafe trucks are being operated on the fringe, by companies with little or no overhead.

The articulate, second-generation heads of the state's largest firms say they're alarmed at how many trucks they routinely spot on the road without names, Interstate Commerce Commission numbers, or interstate licenses — and with fenders flapping in the wind. Many of these so-called gypsies have no insurance, carry excess weight, and are running with substandard equipment.

The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety warns that the proliferation of twin trailers combined with archaic brake standards is a dangerous trend. Meanwhile, there's a growing number of tired drivers, as some 10,000 new entrants have taken to the road.

Drivers who are required to rest 8 hours for every 10 they drive, often work 18- and 20-hour shifts to make enough money to meet loan or lease obligations. Others, using "uppers" to help stay awake, don't feel the need to stop and eat, because the pills reduce hunger.

Independent operators or small, struggling firms that can't afford preventive maintenance are left to react in haste when something goes wrong. Logs required to account for driving time and stops are inaccurate and difficult to verify, says Ken Pierson, director of the Office for Motor Carrier Safety, part of the federal Department of Transportation.

Meanwhile, regulation enforcement on both the state and federal levels is minimal, if not invisible, operators and association officials say.

"The idea was to get government off the back of the operator. But no one expected the ICC and the DOT to completely disappear," says Gary Bonacci, president of AAA Trucking in Trenton.

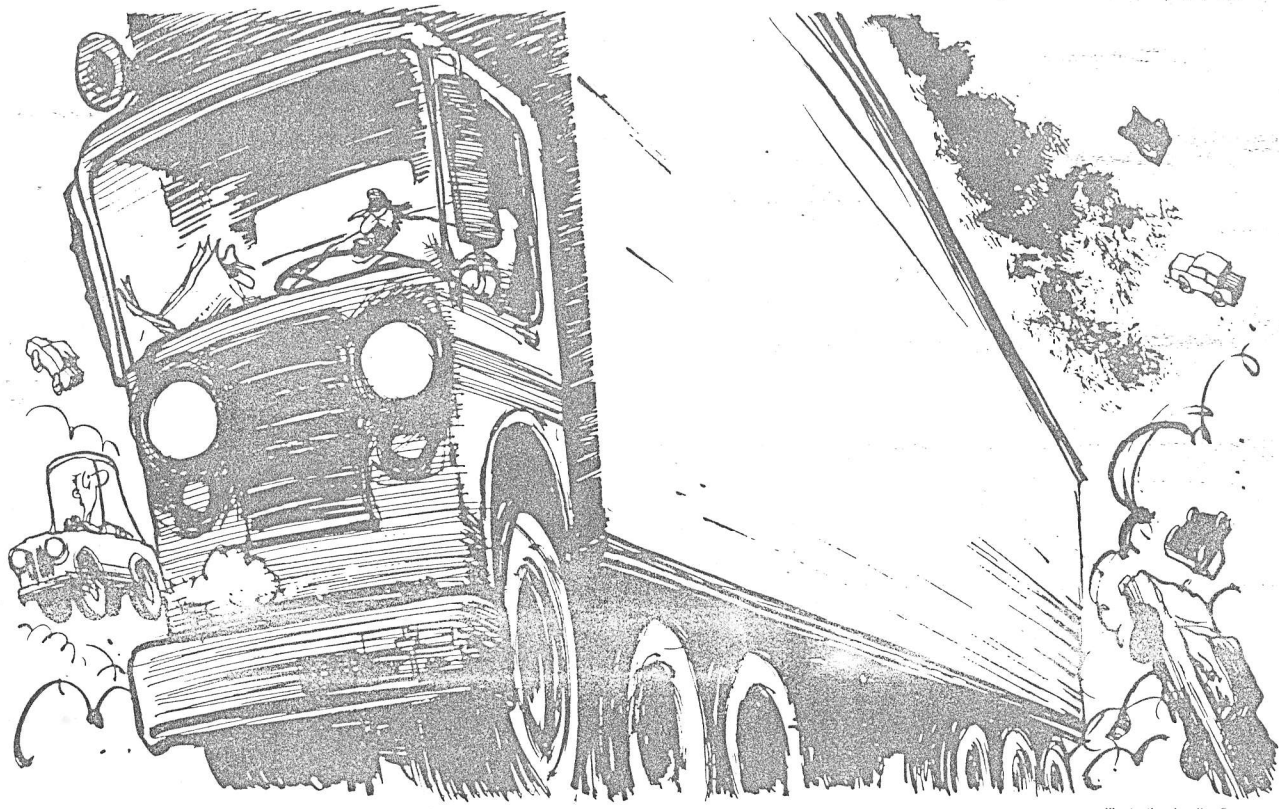


Illustration by Jim Borgman

"With so many new entrants into our business with two tractors in one place, two trailers in another, and so on, it's not realistic to think that the DOT can keep on top of things anymore," says Jerry Bisgrove, president of Red Star Express in Newark, one of the state's largest firms. "Personally, I was in favor of deregulation. But it was supposed to be implemented in steps, and it hasn't happened that way."

"As an automobile driver, I don't like to see state troopers on the side of the road, but as a trucking operator, I love them," says Gordon Nady, head of Nady Express, a small North Bergen firm. "They're the only ones who will stop the idiots in trucks who go 80 miles per hour, tailgate, and give the entire industry a bad name."

A competitive industry to start with, trucking was deregulated in 1980 to encourage new competition, eliminate rate standards, and reduce the influence of the Teamsters Union. While deregulation may have accomplished its goals, truckers say, it hasn't happened gradually as proposed. Regulators have been encouraged to maintain a hands-off policy in areas that are badly in need of strict standards.

Part of the reason for the safety problem is trucking's negative image among elected officials and the public.

"Unfortunately, the image is one of Burt Reynolds and some broad in the front seat of a tractor-trailer going 100 miles per hour being chased by a sheriff," says Russell Roem-

mele, assistant managing director of the New Jersey Motor Truck Association in East Brunswick. "The fact is that most are family men who want to come home safe with a good day's pay."

Image may also be part of the reason for the lack of an administrative office within the federal DOT such as the Federal Railroad Authority. Although trucks transport 75 percent of the nation's goods, operators all complain that trucking isn't considered a priority industry in government circles.

In 1983, a congressional committee on truck safety and hazardous-waste transport was highly critical of management in the Bureau of Motor Carrier Safety. But a close look at the bureau's resources suggests

the problem lies more with a shortage in manpower and budget.

The agency's 150 federal inspectors conducted about 25,000 random vehicle checks, examined 5,000 companies, and collected \$1 million in fines in 1983. The federal random-vehicle checks conducted in 50 states don't even account for half the trucks housed in New Jersey alone.

Despite the fact that many American trucking companies concentrate on preventive maintenance to avoid costly accidents and rising insurance premiums, the government doesn't require safety items that are mandatory on all European trucks, such as brakes on front axles, computers that maintain brake adjustment, anti-locking mechanisms for steering control, and timing devices

to improve braking speed.

The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety says that although trucks account for some 400,000 crashes a year, or 6 percent of the national total, they account for 35 percent of the highway fatalities.

Finally moved to act, Congress passed two laws — the Surface Transportation Act of 1982 and, right before winter recess, the Motor Carrier Safety Act of 1984. The 1982 law is intended to get states involved; \$150 million has been targeted for state regulation programs.

States are now conducting their own random checks, but operators say that such measures reach only a tiny percentage of the nation's 36.6 million registered trucks and 1.25 million tractor trailers.

"The way it's handled now is an inspector might stop a truck, find a small side light out, write a \$100 ticket, and that's the end of it," says Bisgrove. "We ask our drivers to make suggestions. Recently they suggested that steering wheels are too thin and that a light on the back of a trailer's rear steps would help them load and unload at night. Both were legitimate concerns. If you want to talk safety, ask the drivers."

The Motor Carrier Safety Act, which won't be in effect at least until 1987, does away with the previous method of self-inspection and requires that trucks be inspected like automobiles. States will be required to submit their safety regulations to a federal review panel, which will provide 80 percent reimbursement for funds, if federal standards are followed.

One government official predicted that in the end, standards won't change, because that would have a staggering economic impact on an industry already facing rising taxes and drastic competition. More than 350 trucking firms — including 100 in New Jersey — have gone bankrupt since deregulation.

"Through the years, I've heard all about all the new laws and regulations coming down the pike," says one skeptical operator. "All I've seen so far are more accidents."

Bill Glovin, a former member of The Record staff, is assistant editor of New Jersey Business magazine.