

said federal police appear to have abandoned a program of random highway inspections that was inaugurated with much fanfare last fall.

—Almost all Mexican long-haul drivers are forced to work dangerously long hours.

Marquez was a skillful driver, with lightning reflexes honed by road conditions that would make U.S. highways seem like cruise-control paradise. But he was often steering through a thick fog of exhaustion.

In Mexico, no logbooks—required in the United States to keep track of hours and itinerary—are kept.

"We're just like American truckers, I'm sure," Marquez said with a grin. "We're neither saints nor devils. But we're good drivers, that's for sure, or we'd all be dead."

Although no reliable statistics exist for the Bay Area's trade with Mexico, it is estimated that the region's exports and imports with Mexico total \$6 billion annually. About 90 percent of that amount moves by truck, in tens of thousands of round trips to and from the border.

Under the decades-old border restrictions, long-haul trucks from either side must transfer their loads to short-haul "drayage" truckers, who cross the border and transfer the cargo again to long-haul domestic trucks. The complicated arrangement is costly and time-consuming, making imported goods more expensive for U.S. consumers.

Industry analysts say that after the ban is lifted, most of the two nations' trade will be done by Mexican drivers, who come much cheaper than American truckers because they earn only about one-third the salary and typically drive about 20 hours per day.

Although Mexican truckers would have to obey the U.S. legal limit of 10 hours consecutive driving when in the United States, safety experts worry that northbound drivers will be so sleep-deprived by the time they cross the border that the American limit will be meaningless. Mexican drivers would not, however, be bound by U.S. labor laws, such as the minimum wage.

"Are you going to be able to stay awake?" Marcos Munoz, vice president of Transportes Castores jokingly asked a Chronicle reporter before the trip. "Do you want some pingas?"

The word is slang for uppers the stimulant pills that are commonly used by Mexican truckers. Marquez, however, needed only a few cups of coffee to stay awake through three straight 21-hour days at the wheel.

Talking with his passengers, chatting on the CB radio with friends, and listening to tapes of 1950s and 1960s ranchera and bolero music, he showed few outward signs of fatigue.

But the 46-year-old Marquez, who has been a trucker for 25 years, admitted that the burden occasionally is too much.

"Don't kid yourself," he said late the third night. "Sometimes, you get so tired, so worn, your head just falls."

U.S. highway safety groups predict an increase in accidents after the border is opened.

"Even now, there aren't enough safety inspectors available for all crossing points," said David Golden, a top official of the National Association of Independent Insurers, the main insurance-industry lobby.

"So we need to make sure that when you're going down Interstate 5 with an 80,000-pound Mexican truck in your rearview mirror and you have to jam on your brakes, that truck doesn't come through your window."

Golden said the Bush administration should delay the opening to Mexican trucks until border facilities are upgraded.

California highway safety advocates concur, saying the California Highway Patrol—

which carries out the state's truck inspections—needs to be given more inspectors and larger facilities to check incoming trucks' brakes, lights and other safety functions.

Marquez's trip started at his company's freight yard in Tlalneapantla, an industrial suburb of Mexico City. There, his truck was loaded with a typical variety of cargo—electronic components and handicrafts bound for Los Angeles, and chemicals, printing equipment and industrial parts for Tijuana.

At the compound's gateway was a shrine with statues of the Virgin Mary and Jesus. As he drove past, Marquez crossed himself, then crossed himself again before the small Virgin on his dashboard.

"Just in case, you know," he said. "The devil is always on the loose on these roads."

In fact, Mexican truckers have to brave a wide variety of dangers.

As he drove through the high plateaus of central Mexico, Marquez pointed out where he was hijacked a year ago—held up at gunpoint by robbers who pulled alongside him in another truck. His trailer full of canned tuna—easy to fence, he said—was stolen, along with all his personal belongings.

What's worse, some thieves wear uniforms. On this trip, the truck had to pass 14 roadblocks, at which police and army soldiers searched the cargo for narcotics. Each time, Marquez stood on tiptoes to watch over their shoulders. He said, "You have to have quick eyes, or they'll take things out of the packages."

Twice, police inspectors asked for bribes—"something for the coffee," they said. Each time, he refused and got away with it.

"You're good luck for me," he told a Chronicle reporter. "They ask for money but then see an American and back off. Normally, I have to pay a lot."

Although the Mexican government has pushed hard to end the border restrictions, the Mexican trucking industry is far from united behind that position. Large trucking companies such as Transportes Castores back the border opening, while small and medium-size ones oppose it.

"We're ready for the United States, and we'll be driving to Los Angeles and San Francisco," said Munoz, the company's vice president.

"Our trucks are modern and can pass the U.S. inspections. Only about 10 companies here could meet the U.S. standards."

The border opening has been roundly opposed by CANACAR, the Mexican national trucking industry association, which says it will result in U.S. firms taking over Mexico's trucking industry.

"The opening will allow giant U.S. truck firms to buy large Mexican firms and crush smaller ones," said Miguel Quintanilla, CANACAR's president. "We're at a disadvantage, and those who benefit will be the multinationals."

Quintanilla said U.S. firms will lower their current costs by replacing their American drivers with Mexicans, yet will use the huge American advantages—superior warehouse and inventory-tracking technology, superior warehouse and inventory-tracking technology, superior access to financing and huge economies of scale—to drive Mexican companies out of business.

Already, some U.S. trucking giants such as M.S. Carriers, Yellow Corp. and Consolidated Freightways Corp. have invested heavily in Mexico.

"The opening of the border will bring about the consolidation of much of the trucking industry on both sides of the border," said the leading U.S. academic expert on NAFTA trucking issues, James Giermanski, a professor at Belmont Abbey College in Raleigh, N.C.

The largest U.S. firms will pair with large Mexican firms and will dominate U.S.-Mexico traffic, he said.

But Giermanski added that the increase in long-haul cross-border traffic will be slower than either critics or advocates expect, because of language difficulties, Mexico's inadequate insurance coverage and Mexico's time-consuming system of customs brokers.

"All the scare stories you've heard are just ridiculous," he said. "The process will take a long time."

In California, many truckers fear for their jobs. However, Teamsters union officials say they are trying to persuade their members that Marquez and his comrades are not the enemy.

"There will be a very vehement reaction by our members if the border is opened," said Chuck Mack, president of Teamsters Joint Council 7, which has 55,000 members in the Bay Area.

"But we're trying to diminish the animosity that by focusing on the overall problem—how (the opening) will help multinational corporations to exploit drivers on both sides of the border."

Mexican drivers, however, are likely to welcome the multinationals' increased efficiency, which will enable them to earn more by wasting less time waiting for loading and paperwork.

For example, in Mexico City, Marquez had to wait more than four hours for stevedores to load his truck and for clerks to prepare the load's documents—a task that would take perhaps an hour for most U.S. trucking firms.

For drivers, time is money, Marquez's firm pays drivers a percentage of gross freight charges, minus some expenses. His three-day trip would net him about \$300. His average monthly income is about \$1,400—decent money in Mexico, but by no means middle class.

Most Mexican truckers are represented by a union, but it is nearly always ineffectual—what Transportes Castores executives candidly described as a "company union." A few days before this trip, Transportes Castores fired 20 drivers when they protested delays in reimbursement of fuel costs.

But Marquez didn't much like talking about his problems. He preferred to discuss his only child, a 22-year-old daughter who is in her first year of undergraduate medical school in Mexico City.

Along with paternal pride was sadness.

"Don't congratulate me," he said. "My wife is the one who raised her. I'm gone most of the time. You have to have a very strong marriage, because this job is hell on a wife."

"The money is OK, and I really like being out on the open road, but the loneliness . . ." He left the thought unfinished, and turned up the volume on his cassette deck.

It was playing Pedro Infante, the famous bolero balladeer, and Marquez began to sing.

"The moon of my nights has hidden itself."

"Oh little heavenly virgin, I am your son."

"Give me your consolation."

"Today, when I'm suffering out in the world."

Despite the melancholy tone, Marquez soon became jovial and energetic. He smiled widely and encouraged his passengers to sing along. Forgoing his normal caution, he accelerated aggressively on the curves.

His voice rose, filling the cabin, drowning out the hiss of the pavement below and the rush of the wind that was blowing him inexorably toward the border.

HOW NAFTA ENDED THE BAN ON MEXICO'S TRUCKS

The North American Free Trade Agreement, which went into effect in January 1994, stipulated that the longtime U.S. restrictions on Mexican trucks be lifted.

Under NAFTA, by December 1995, Mexican trucks would be allowed to deliver loads all