

Ten million in heroin seized

Computer detects dope truck

Associated Press
HIDALGO, Tex. — A Wisconsin family has been arrested and \$10 million in heroin has been seized — one of the biggest dope hauls in Texas history — during routine use of a sophisticated computer system at the International Bridge. Officers said without the computer system the couple ordinarily might have escaped detection.

The arrests came Sunday afternoon when a pickup truck rolled to a stop at the bridge checkpoint. The couple inside, accompanied by a small child, appeared to be a family on a normal Sunday outing, officers said.

Routinely, a checkpoint employee punched the numbers from the license plate into a computerized system called "Treasury Enforcement Communications" or "TEC machine."

Sometime before Sunday agents from the Federal Drug Enforcement Agency had fed information into the computer indicating that the occupants of the vehicle were the subjects of a drug smuggling investigation. Moments after the employee punched the numbers into the computer, a response came from San Diego, Calif., more than 1,200 miles away, indicating that the vehicle deserved special attention. An employee directed the pickup truck to a secondary inspection area.

A search of the truck revealed that about 28 pounds of "Mexican brown" heroin was concealed inside the door panels, authorities said.

Officers arrested Manuel Nunez of Marshall, Wis., and his wife on charges of attempting to smuggle heroin from Mexico into the United States.

U.S. Magistrate Cruz Tijerina arraigned the couple and set bond at \$750,000 each. The pair was ordered

held in the Cameron County jail at Brownsville in lieu of bond.

The child was released to the care of relatives.

Because of the computerized system, 28 pounds of heroin, estimated to be worth at least \$10 million on the underworld market, was confiscated.

The "Mexican connection" had been derailed by electronic equipment.

"It sure looks like they would have been passed through here if it hadn't been for the TEC machine," U.S. Customs Port Director Wayne Smith said.

"They just appeared to be out for a Sunday drive, a man, his wife and small child. We see thousands of cars like that every day," Smith said.

The computerized system has been used for several years although most motorists are not aware their license plate numbers are being checked as they drive up to the border crossing.

The system can be used to check for stolen cars and for persons wanted by city, state or federal officers in any part of the country.

The spokesman cited an example of a case where the machine might indicate that the driver of a particular vehicle was wanted on an outstanding warrant issued by police in Chicago.

In that case, a federal officer would temporarily detain the vehicle while a telephone call is made to Chicago to determine if the person is still wanted.

The driver could then be detained by local officers if Chicago officers still wanted him or her arrested.

The computer system at San Diego is linked to all border check stations in the United States and carries information from the National Crime Information Center, the National Law Enforcement Telecommunications network, the National Auto Theft network and Interpol, the international police organization.

"This communications network is so effective that persons trying to avoid apprehension often think there's been a tip off," M.R. Blackwell, director of Customs at the Roma, Tex., international port of entry, said.

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