

# Dukes of hazard

**Mattresses, recliners, tires, tubs ... members of the Tarrant County Sheriff's courtesy patrol have seen it all, usually lying in the middle of the road**

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Take a drive on local highways and look at what's scattered along the side of the road. You might spot enough abandoned furniture to furnish a small apartment: Recliners upended on the asphalt. Kitchen chairs scattered across the median. A dust-covered twin-size mattress, lying limp and pitiful on the narrow left shoulder.

So what's going on? People don't know how to tie down their furniture, that's what. Unsecured mattresses, chairs and TV sets bounce off the backs of trucks and land in the middle of the highway, creating a mess (and a road hazard) for the rest of us.

We wanted to know what happens to all these love seats and box springs when they fly off a truck and pop out onto the road. When a kitchen table lands in the middle of I-35, who picks it up? How on earth do you move a couch to the side of the highway without getting killed? And where does all this debris go when it has been collected?

We tried the Department of Public Safety. Then we tried the Texas Department of Transportation. Eventually, we found our way to Lynn Self at the Tarrant County Sheriff's Office.

Self is the program director of the sheriff's department courtesy patrol, the team that usually gets to the furniture first. He was able to take us part of the way through this Journey of the Lost Mattress. Here's what we learned.

## **What sort of stuff ends up on the highway?**

It depends on the time of year. In December and early January, you're likely to see Christmas trees. In the summer, it's more likely to be an assortment of grills and patio furniture.

Tire blowouts are more common when it's hot. Landscaping trucks are all over town when it's summer, and, well, people move a lot this time of year. And they don't secure their stuff.

Mattresses are common year-round, because even people with a Honda Civic and one piece of old rope think they can tote a queen-size mattress, no problem. And sometimes they're wrong.

What else? "I've seen bathtubs," says Ronnie Sanders, a shift supervisor for the courtesy patrol. "Unoccupied, of course."

More common are refrigerators, because drivers will leave a 200-pound fridge standing upright in the back of a truck, then secure the towering mass with a single frayed bungee cord. "People stand them up straight rather than lay them down, and the wind catches them," Sanders says. Even over the phone, you can tell he's shaking his head.

Wheelbarrows are frequently lost from trailers or trucks. So are lumber and landscaping tools.

Ladders are especially dangerous: They'll fly off a truck, and often they'll break into large metal pieces that scatter across the road. A box of roofing nails can bounce out of a truck, land on the highway and give everybody a flat tire until traffic is completely stopped and the highway is swept clean.

Kitchen chairs and bar stools are common road debris, mainly because they're lightweight and notoriously hard to tie down.

And clothing. Yes, clothing. If you lug around a basket of laundry, just don't put it in the back of your truck. When you speed up, a whole week's worth of T-shirts may start flying. Sanders has seen this more than once.

### **So what happens to all that stuff?**

Well, first it scares a lot of people. Most furniture flies off of a vehicle and lands in a lane of traffic. (Sometimes the driver realizes he has lost a load and pulls over, gets out and tries to retrieve what he has lost. Not a good idea. Repeat: Not a good idea.)

Then, if it doesn't cause an accident, one of those drivers might report it as a road hazard.

That's when it becomes the responsibility of the courtesy patrol.

The courtesy patrol is a group of yellow-suited heroes on white horses (well, white Ford F-250s) who ride to the rescue when someone is stranded on the highways of Tarrant County. From 6 a.m. to 10 p.m., several patrol teams travel the highways, helping motorists and generally doing good in the world.

They help an average of 1,300 motorists in Tarrant County each month. They also are the ones who show up when there's a mattress or a love seat clogging up the left-hand lane.

### **How does road debris -- a ripped-up plaid recliner on I-30, for instance -- get picked up?**

It's a two-part process, Self says, and a tag-team effort. Team 1 is the courtesy patrol, which is responsible for moving the debris to the side of the road, out of the way of traffic. They move an average of 160 pieces of debris off the road each month. That number goes up in the summer --

last August [2009], it was 248, which is eight pieces of life-endangering junk every day.

When someone reports that there's a recliner in the road, a stream of activity begins.

"If somebody loses a dining room table," he says, "and a semi should hit it and blow it into pieces, it'll be small fragments of wood. It's not going to impede a motorist if it's a small piece of wood."

So one 18-wheeler can potentially take care of things like wooden chairs. But anything metal gets picked up posthaste. A metal object is never a good thing to hit, Self says, whether you're in a Chevy Cobalt or a Mack truck.

### **How common is this, anyway?**

Pretty common. On every eight-hour shift, the courtesy patrol gets three or four calls involving road debris. This time of year, most of that debris comes in the form of blown-out tires. Enormous truck tires lose their tread and become a 6-foot piece of flopping rubber and rough wire in the road, with cars swerving to dodge it and -- when that fails -- rolling right over it. (Picking that stuff up can be tricky. "We call them gators," Sanders says, "because it's kind of like wrestling a gator.")

This is not just a side project for the courtesy patrol. Debris calls take priority over everything else, even accidents, because debris in the road is an immediate hazard for everyone on that stretch of highway.

We rode along with the courtesy patrol on an August afternoon. Our two-person team -- Ronnie Sanders and Sean Southern -- handled all matter of tire debris along I-30 and Loop 820 on a day so hot that melted tar was sticking to their shoes.

When they receive a call about road debris, they rush to the spot and park the patrol truck on the shoulder of the road. They turn on the flashing arrow lights that will maybe, if they are lucky, guide traffic away from the debris-strewn lane. And then they put on hard hats and step out into speeding traffic, waving orange flags so that drivers will notice them and move over into another lane.

The flags seem very small in the face of an 18-wheeler moving 60 mph.

Finally, once traffic has slowed to a crawl and drivers are moving over into another lane, one of them will dart into the road, pull the debris out of the way and drop it on the shoulder of the highway.

This all looks about as dangerous as it sounds.

"It's probably, by far, the most dangerous thing we do," Sanders says.

Sometimes they will use cones to close off a lane of traffic completely. If it's a big piece of

debris -- say, a couch that has to be pushed slowly to the shoulder -- sometimes the police will arrive to help divert traffic.

Often, Sanders says, the courtesy patrol team arrives to find the debris creating chaos in the road.

"We get there," he says, "and we're working the traffic to try to get it under control to remove the debris. And we'll see it [get] hit and thrown into other vehicles -- 'Oh, that was a leg off a coffee table.'"

Ouch.

### **What happens to that debris once it's out of the way of traffic?**

The courtesy patrol is responsible only for moving the debris to the side of the highway. It gets picked up and hauled away later by a private contractor, the Wichita Falls-based Wilson Contracting.

Chad Wilson is the owner of Wilson Contracting. His company is responsible for gathering up debris of all kinds -- "anything bigger than a cigarette pack" -- from the highway's shoulder and a 5-foot swath beyond it on either side, in the median or the grass.

In high debris season, from April to October, Wilson's company will make a sweep of Tarrant County highways twice a week, with seven debris trucks and 11 "shadow" trucks running every day.

Debris trucks are pickups with a wire-walled receptacle in the bed that can be piled high with all sorts of junk from the road. Shadow trucks, meanwhile, are the crash-cushion trucks that follow behind; they have flashing lights and guiding arrows, but they're ready to cushion the blow if a driver doesn't react in time.

Once it's collected, the debris goes to a holding yard off I-35 in south Fort Worth, where it is sorted and disposed of. Tires are pulled out of the mess; metal is saved for scrap.

"The biggest portion of it is trash," Wilson says, and that gets stored in big containers and then taken to the dump. Wilson's company hauls away 70 or 80 cubic yards of compacted trash every week.

Most of the stuff his crews pick up is litter and tire rubber, Wilson says.

He thinks for a minute.

"We do get several mattresses a week."

Those go straight into the trash, so don't count on claiming your lost Sealy Posturepedic. In fact, don't count on claiming much of anything you lose along the highway.

"If it's a piece of debris that may be considered valuable, then we'll notify TXDOT and let them know what it is," says Self.

But by the time Wilson's trucks swing through to pick it up, it's usually in pieces on the side of the road. On the rare occasion that it's still in one nice piece, it doesn't get toted to the dump right away.

"If it's usable furniture," Wilson says, "I let my guys take it."

That's right: It gets taken home by the ones who pick it up. That only seems fair.

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