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## Staying connected on the open road

**Trucker uses WiFi, satellite radio and more to take comforts of home with him**

August 11, 2004

By [DOUG BEDELL](#) / The Dallas Morning News

When Tom Wiles steers his "bulldog" (Mack truck) off the "big slab" (the highway) and into the Dallas Flying J Travel Plaza, chances are it's not a great "eat-em-up" (diner) he's seeking.

No, Mr. Wiles and thousands of other cross-country truckers are increasingly dropping their CB 10-4's for the 802.11's – wireless "WiFi" Internet connections right to their truck cabs. And major truck stops have found that WiFi is becoming as vital to their clientele as diesel fuel and hot showers.

It wasn't that long ago that Mr. Wiles, an early technology adopter who spends about 25 days each month on the road, had to hunt down truck stops that had open phone jacks for his notebook computer's modem.

"That was a nightmare," says the West Fork, Ark., resident. "There were only a few with jacks, and those were pretty far between. Back in those days, a guy with a laptop got a lot of attention. Now, they're so ubiquitous, they're like cellphones; people just ignore them."



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Many long-haul truckers like the 49-year-old Mr. Wiles have outfitted their rigs with an arsenal of new electronic gadgetry. "I'm living stretches of five days in the truck, which is fine – as long as I can have all the conveniences of home right there in the cab," he says.

To that end, Mr. Wiles carries a Toshiba laptop computer equipped with a WiFi card and subscriptions for access points at Flying J truck stops across the country. Flying Js currently blanket 180 of their North American locations with WiFi signals. Hooking up costs from \$1.95 for an hour to \$200 for a yearlong subscription.

Competitor [Truckstop.net](#) has installed more than 400 WiFi hot spots at independent truck stops and has targeted about 3,000 for its \$250 annual subscription service.

### Cellular network

But that only gets a trucker online when he's fueling up or "getting horizontal" – sleeping over at a service center. For connectivity out in the sticks, Mr. Wiles has subscribed to Sprint's PCS Vision cellular nationwide network.

For \$80 a month, he gets unlimited access to a data network available just about anywhere in the country. He can simply slap his Sprint Merlin PC card into the Toshiba and hook right into the Net.

Coverage, he says, can be light in some sparsely populated Western states and in the Midwest outside of big cities. But in his primary stomping grounds in the eastern United States, Mr. Wiles says he has been pleasantly surprised by the consistency of his connections.

For phone calls, Mr. Wiles has jettisoned his home land line and now uses his cellphone for voice communication.

For on-the-road entertainment, he can burn disks on his home entertainment system's DVD recorder, then pack them up for viewing in the cab on his laptop.

For music, Mr. Wiles has subscribed to XM satellite radio (\$9.95 per month) and purchased a portable Delphi SkyFy receiver that works in his home system as well as the truck cab.

And for a hobby, Mr. Wiles has begun taking still digital pictures with his 3.2-megapixel Toshiba PDR-M71 and bursts of video with a digital camcorder.

### Keeping in touch

Trucking can be a lonely road, and being constantly online has helped Mr. Wiles stay in touch with far-flung friends and family. About a year ago, Mr. Wiles discovered his hyper-connectivity could also spawn new conversations with perfect strangers.

Mr. Wiles set up a Web site ([Truckerphoto.com](http://Truckerphoto.com)) to display some of his digital artwork and perfected a way to update it from the road. Since then, it has blossomed into a trucking blog of his daily travels, an advice center for other digi-truckers, a repository of roadhouse restaurant and motel reviews and a showcase for his humor and conservative social commentary.

"People who contact me especially like the restaurant reviews," he says. "There aren't that many independent truck stops any more. It really ruins the food. Employees in a giant chain are just there putting time in. Sometimes, as a result, the food is really, really bad."

Mr. Wiles' Web effort now receives anywhere from 100 to 1,000 visits a day and has gained modest fame as one of the few trucker-oriented personal sites that pop up in major search engines.

But, he says, he is tired of having to keep up so many subscriptions to multiple services in order to keep in touch and entertained. Some day, he says, emerging technologies like WiMax radio will enable a single provider to keep his truck cab awash in movie downloads, phone communications, television streams and high-speed Internet.

"I could have one account for everything, nationwide," he says. "And that would really make me very, very happy."

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