

The Historic Trans-Canada Highway



Location of the Trans-Hudson Orogen.
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BY RONALD WOLF

www.wolfthewriter.com

The Trans-Canada Highway (TCH) didn't start 50 years ago. In fact, it really started well over two billion years ago. No, The Slate Company who employs Fred Flintstone didn't start the highway.

The rocks along Lake Superior were created about two billion years ago, and are part of the Precambrian Shield also known as the Canadian Shield. The rock was scoured by the last Ice Age, leaving thousands of lakes and ponds. Some years later, Canadians got together and made use of the land and built a highway.

I can't really say most Canadians drive on this highway. Some drive on this long stretch of highway to get from point A to point B. Although it is picturesque year round, especially in the fall season, it can be quite deadly with wild-life crossing the paths of drivers.

Some drivers unfortunately fall asleep never to wake while others take for granted their driving abilities and run off the road. I should make this very important comment before you sink your eyes into this article. Don't expect your cell phones to work on this stretch of highway. Take extreme caution and always respect the roadway you travel on.

While the highway was gradually extended east from Thunder Bay, the stretch from Schreiber to Wawa was built over the 1930s, hindered by the harsh rugged terrain of Lake Superior's north shore. Similar difficulties were encountered highway 17 was extended northwards from Sault Ste Marie to Montreal River on Agawa Bay.

All that remained was a gap of 165 miles between the Agawa River, appropriately called The Big Gap. This area was so rugged it was bypassed by the Algoma Central

Railway (which connected Sault Ste Marie to northern mining towns), and was a popular dropping-off spot for the famed Group of Seven painters on the early 1900s.

The Big Gap area was rugged, inaccessible, and covered with virgin timber. Building the highway required clearing a 50 meter (150 ft) right of way before the road construction could begin.

The Big Gap had several deep gorges and large rivers that necessitated building 25 bridges, including a 173 meter (685 ft) Big Pic River bridge rising 40 meters (130 ft) just east of Marathon. The five mile stretch north of the Agawa River, required one million cubic meters of rock to be moved before road construction could begin.

The Montreal River is only 104 km long, but because it falls swiftly through granite steep-walled canyons was easily dammed and now has four hydro-electric generating plants along its short length, two of which are easily accessible from the Trans-Canada.

Beside Hibbard Bay, at Mamainse is an ancient First Nations copper mine, which may have been worked as far back as 6000 BC. Etienne Brule, the first European explorer to reach Lake Superior sent news of the copper mine to the King of France back in 1623, but mining did not commence until 1772. Another copper mine was discovered in 1889, but only had five years of mining.

Batchwana Bay, about 65 km north of Sault Ste Marie, marks the halfway point of the Trans-Canada with as many miles to the east as to the west. A Hudson's Bay fur trading post was opened up here in 1824, but was closed down in 1894. Nearby Chippewa Falls has a very scenic waterfalls/rapids right beside the TCH.

From this point southwards,

travelers enter the St. Mary's River lowlands which connect Lake Superior to Lake Huron. Since Lake Superior's water level was originally much higher, beach deposits are found even on higher hilltops making for very good agricultural land, though today that land is used for residential and recreational purposes.

The following information was gathered from author C.W. Gilchrist.

Public agitation for a national road began as early as 1910, but more than half a century elapsed before it was completed. The 7821 km Trans-Canada Hwy was formally opened at Rogers Pass on July 30, 1962.

Canadians could now drive, using ferry services on both coasts, from St John's, Nfld., to Victoria, B.C., but more than 3000 km were still unpaved. Work started in the summer of 1950 with an infusion of \$150 million of federal funds (half the estimated cost) provided for in the Trans-Canada Highway Act

Cost-sharing plans, revised twice, increased the federal contribution to \$825 million. Standards called for pavement widths of 6.7 m and 7.3 m; ample shoulder width, bridge clearances and sight distances; low gradients and curvature; elimination of railway grade crossings wherever possible; and a maximum load-bearing capacity of 9.1 ton per axle.

Construction was supervised by the provinces. The target date for completion was December 1956, but the job was more difficult and more expensive than anticipated.

For example, the route between Golden and Revelstoke, B.C., passes through Rogers Pass, where snowfall reaches 15.2 m per year and presents tremendous avalanche hazards. Snowsheds, earth mounds and other devices for avalanche control had to be provided.

In Québec, the tunnel under the St. Lawrence River at Boucherville Islands, which is part of the entranceway to Montréal, was a difficult project costing about \$75 million and covering little more than one km of the highway. Finished in 1970, the highway had cost over \$1 billion. It is the longest national highway in the world.

On a larger scale of information, the TCH (French: Route Transcanadienne) is a federal-provincial highway system that joins the 10 provinces of Canada. It is, along with the Trans-Siberian Highway and Australia's Highway 1, one of

the world's longest national highways, with the main route spanning 8,030 km (4,990 mi). The system was approved by the Trans-Canada Highway Act of 1948, construction commenced in 1950, officially opened in 1962, and was completed in 1971.

The highway system is recognizable by its distinctive white-on-green maple leaf route markers. Throughout much of Canada, there are at least two routes designated as part of the TCH. For example, in the western provinces, both the main Trans-Canada route and the Yellowhead Highway are part of the Trans-Canada system.

Canada does not have a comprehensive national highway system, as decisions about highway and freeway construction are entirely under the jurisdiction of the individual provinces. In 2000 and 2001, the government of Jean Chrétien considered funding an infrastructure project to have the full Trans-Canada system converted to freeway.

Although freeway construction funding was made available to some provinces for portions of the system, the government ultimately decided not to pursue a comprehensive highway conversion. Opposition to funding the freeway upgrade was due to low traffic levels on parts of the Trans-Canada and the policy of the British Columbia government to see most of the heavily travelled Vancouver Island segment of Highway 1 devolved into a high access commercial strip.

Other provinces preferred the money going towards improving vital trade routes (often not inter-provincial).

There have also been discussions of upgrading the

Trans-Labrador Highway (Quebec Route 389/Newfoundland and Labrador Route 500) to TCH standards (fully-paved, two lanes with shoulders, 90 km/h speed limit).

Route numbering on the TCH is also handled by the provinces. The Western provinces have coordinated their highway numbers so that the main Trans-Canada route is designated Highway 1 and the Yellowhead route is designated Highway 16 throughout; however, from the Manitoba-Ontario border eastwards, the highway numbers change at each provincial boundary. As the Trans-Canada route was composed of sections from pre-existing provincial highways, it is unlikely that the TCH will ever have a uniform designation across the whole country.

The original Trans-Canada Route was highway 11 (designated The King's Highway), which connecting North Bay and Nipigon through northern forests. That highway was started in 1923 and completed as a key war-time project to provide road access to key mining towns of northern Ontario. When Highway 17 was completed between Marathon and Montreal River in September 1960, it became the new (and much shorter) TCH.

Not too many people know this part of the highway. Consider yourself fortunate that you now know more than most people about this piece of Canada we call The TCH.

In this ever-changing, evolving country of Canada, highways are a very important of our lives. There are quick ways to get to where we want to go and can be roads of danger. Keep alert when travelling on them and may they always take you where you want to go.

Carol Hughes Column Cont'd

The Harper Conservatives are philosophically opposed to any government presence in matters it sees as purely in the realm of the market. They took the opportunity to salt the mine for future settlements that will see Canadian tax dollars handed over to foreign investors. It is important to note that this is not the only claim against Canada under review by the NAFTA tribunal. There are 28 others that total \$14 billion. If the Conservatives roll over on those as well, we will be further in debt and likely see pressure to reduce government spending on the items most Canadian hold dear. Health care budgets leap to mind immediately since we have watched them get shredded in past cash crunch scenarios.

New Democrats warned about NAFTA when the Liberals signed it. The Liberals have been on both sides of this issue as they ran in opposition to NAFTA's predecessor the original Free Trade Agreement between Canada and the United States. As always, there is plenty of blame to go around for these ridiculous capitulations and adherence to ideology that does nothing for the average Canadian. In the end the people who pay are the Canadian taxpayers and the ever-mounting line of unemployed Canadians who have been cast aside in favour of investor rights. As it stands now, we have a government that is primarily concerned with investors. Everyone else just has to pay.