

Jefferson Highway – the Canadian connection

Just by chance as a pedestrian, I came across the Pine To Palm Highway historical plaque on Pembina Highway in Winnipeg in the year 2010. I stopped to read it and became curious to know more about its story.

That plaque reads: “With the completion of the P.T.H. No. 75, a continuous roadway was created between Winnipeg Manitoba and New Orleans Louisiana known as the Palm To Pine Highway. Since that time two motorcades have travelled the entire route, stopping in all major cities and towns along the way to publicize the existence of the highway. The first cavalcade lead (*sic*) by Lt. Col. Ralph Webb D.S.O., M.O. and officials of the Winnipeg Tribune left Winnipeg on January 23rd 1926. The second cavalcade of volunteer Winnipeg citizens, lead (*sic*) by His Worship Mayor Stephen Juba, departed from near this spot on April 3rd, 1957. This monument which marks the northern end of the Pine To Palm Highway was erected on November 12th, 1974 by the Royal Trust Company commemorating its 75th anniversary and the City of Winnipeg Centennial.”

It did not take much investigating to learn that the names Pine To Palm Highway and Jefferson Highway were being used interchangeably. For a brief period the Jefferson Highway was a U.S.A. federally commissioned highway. But of course that didn't apply in Canada. The name Pine To Palm Highway seemed to have been used as a promotional concept for a route between Winnipeg and New Orleans that was not defined very precisely. For some reason, the governments of the Manitoba and Canada never got involved with this enterprise. Ralph Webb and Stephen Juba had both been mayors of Winnipeg. As such they had no jurisdiction for naming provincial highways.

The plaque's inscription proved to be somewhat misleading. I soon learned that Provincial Trunk Highway No. 75 was built in the early 1950s. So 2 motorcades did not travel it “since that time”. The cavalcade of 1926 must have followed some other route. And that route will have been the one used during the Jefferson Highway's heyday. So, for me, finding out what route the 1926 cavalcade used within Manitoba meant finding the real Canadian connection to the Jefferson Highway.

My curiosity and my geocaching hobby led me to travel PTH 75 south of Winnipeg as well as a number of other roads that run parallel to it. I thought I might find an old JH telephone pole sign or some reference to the Palm To Pine Highway. That was not to be. But I did spot an abandoned concrete bridge in a wide ditch just north of the town of St. Jean Baptiste. It had 1924 clearly imprinted in its concrete. I took pictures of it and captured its lat/long coordinates with my gps. Later on I plugged those coordinates into Google Earth and was surprised by what I saw. There was a light line running arrow straight through the farm fields from this bridge north to the town of Morris. Where that line crossed two creeks there appeared to be two more bridges. I made another trip to the area and found two more abandoned decrepit bridges out in the middle of farm fields with no road between them. These bridges also at 1924 imprinted in their concrete. Travelling farther south on gravel roads, I discovered a few street signs at interesections identifying the roads as Old 14 Rd.

With this information in mind I did some research at the Manitoba Archives and verified that on old provincial maps of 1930 vintage, the highway link between Winnipeg and Emerson was P.T.H. 14. The three bridges that I had seen were on the exact routing of P.T.H. 14. Apparently, when P.T.H. 75 was commissioned, P.T.H. 14 was decommissioned and the stretch of it connecting these bridges reverted to farm land. The gravel and sand from PTH 14 still discoloured the soil enough to distinguish it from the surrounding farm land in Google Earth's aerial view. It seemed clear to me that when PTH 75 was built, large parts of PTH 14 were destroyed or abandoned. Of course, the result was a much more efficient highway between Winnipeg and the USA border.

In my mind, this almost forgotten Old #14 (as I like to call it) was the real Canadian connection to the Jefferson Highway. There are still some interesting parts of Old #14 out there that are worth exploring by anyone interested in old highways. The border crossing at Emerson which linked Old #14 to the Jefferson Highway / US 75 has been closed. The only crossing now is on I29 at Pembina which makes for a somewhat complicated drive to get from US 75 to Emerson. The main streets of the towns along the way to Winnipeg were part of Old #14. That would include Letellier, St. Jean Baptiste, Morris and Ste. Agathe. Old #14 is now the gravel road leaving the town of Emerson northbound and paralleling the Red River on its west side. This stretch of road passes Fort Dufferin National Historic Site. It then connects along provincial road 201 westbound to Letellier. Then it follows the main street of Letellier northbound out of town before it gets cut off and it intersects with PTH75.

The 3 abandoned bridges are best seen from a gravel road running along the east side of the railway tracks between St. Jean Baptiste and Morris. The lat/long coordinates for those bridges are:

south bridge: N49° 16.747 W97° 20.969

middle bridge: N49° 18.052 W97° 21.272

north bridge: N49° 19.069 W97° 21.481

The nicest remnant of Old #14 is now a roadway known by two different names as it crosses municipal boundaries. Turnbull Drive within the City of Winnipeg and Red River Drive in the Municipality of Ritchot are Old #14. There is a cairn and historic plaque situated by a church along its eastern side which commemorates a number of names that this route has been called, including highway 14. This is a gently curving paved road with some nice views of the Red River. It also passes by the gates of the Red River Floodway.

As a retired air traffic controller, I am strictly an amateur writer and explorer. I am sure that what I have written falls short of any academic standard. But I hope you've enjoyed reading about my quest and that it might help you in your own explorations.