

# The Boundary Commission Trail

## The Oldest Highway in the West

The Boundary Commission trail was the route taken by the Boundary Commission in 1873 & 74 as they surveyed the Canada – US Border. They bridged creeks, established crossings, and cleared bush as necessary; but the general route they followed spans centuries, crosses cultural lines, and involves a multitude of goals and purposes.

Although one short period of its life at the dawn of European settlement gave the trail its name, it was well travelled long before that time.

Parts of it began as a First Nations travel and trading route, which the fur traders of the 18th Century naturally used when they began penetrating the interior of Rupert's Land as the region was then called. Not too long afterwards, the Red River carts of the Métis wore grooves into the prairie sod of the trail in their pursuit of the bison as the large animals retreated ever westward.



*The Boundary Commission Trail in western Manitoba.  
(Vantage Points Collection – TMSPHA)*

Many of the pioneers of European origin who came to take up homesteads in the southwestern corner of Manitoba in the 1880's came from Ontario. One popular route was via boat to Duluth on Lake Superior, then by rail to a point on the Red River directly south of Winnipeg, where they might have a choice between a riverboat or a train to Emerson on the Manitoba - Dakota Territory border. Before the CPR began regular service west from Winnipeg in late 1881, most made their way westward along the Boundary Commission Trail, often in wagons drawn by oxen or horses, with whatever belongings and supplies they owned. It was a long, slow, journey, but the trail first blazed by the Boundary Commission in 1873 was well travelled, and several "Stopping Houses", pioneer versions of the roadside motel, had

been established in farm houses along the trail. If the weather cooperated, and the wagon didn't lose a wheel or break an axle, it might well have been almost an enjoyable trip.

River crossing could be tricky, depending on the time of year and the water levels. Fortunately, the Boundary Commission, following the lead of Aboriginal hunters and Metis traders, selected advantageous locations for crossing streams.

As technology marched on, new routes were drawn, first for trains, then for cars, and while the Boundary Trail was still useful for local travel for a time, the increased use of cars meant that even local and regional transportation shifted onto to those conveniently provided road allowances that bordered each section of land. Evidence of the old trail faded except in a few places where the ruts were deeply etched into a hillside or valley wall.

## A Memory...

*We set out across the frozen prairie on the Boundary Commission Trail to walk 125 miles west into the wilderness to find a homestead. Mother carried the baby in her arms. Uncle George managed to walk. I carried a big old gun which had been used in the Civil War. Father carried a big stick and pushed hard on the wagon box, saying "You'd been a good many miles behind if I hadn't kept shoving on the tailboard". Robert Blackwell*

## Contents

1. Clearwater - Former Bridge Site. N49.13306, W99.03069



2. Badger Creek. - Bridge Site and former ford: N49.10368 W99.32316

3. Wakopa: Former ford and bridge sites. 49.06359. W 99.86393

## The Boundary Commission Trail: Clearwater

N49.13306, W99.03069

The first settlers in the region along the southern, border of Manitoba quite logically chose to create communities close to the trail. Clearwater, Cartwright, Wakopa, Deloraine, Sourisford and Butterfield are examples. With the arrival of the railway, Cartwright, Deloraine and Wakopa retained their name but moved to the new line. Sourisford was eclipsed by Melita and Butterfield by Pierson.

The settlement of Clearwater however, stayed right where it was. Both the Manitoba and Southwestern Railway and the Boundary Commission chose the same spot to cross Crystal Creek. So Clearwater has a special connection with the story of the Boundary Commission Trail.



The story is prominently displayed on a public building in the Village.



Today a modern highway crosses Cypress Creek near the village.



The Creek was once crossed by an attractive concrete bowstring arch bridge, constructed between 1919 and 1920. The bridge was closed to vehicular traffic in 2016 and demolished in the spring of 2018.



Another bridge was built to the north. (49.14055, W99.03664)



With the help of public donations, The abandoned railway bridge is now a scenic walkway.

In 1884, farmers' teams drew material from Manitou to build a railroad bridge. Mules were used to draw scrapers to build the grade. In 1885, the CPR line was completed through Clearwater.

The Boundary Commission Trail: **Beach's Bridge**, Badger Creek  
N49.10368 W99.32316

Badger Creek Park is located about 3/4 mile north of Cartwright.



A monument marks the point where at the Boundary Commission crossed Badger Creek in 1873, near present-day Cartwright. The spot was also the site of Cartwright from 1881 to 1885, before it was moved a bit to the south when the railway arrived.

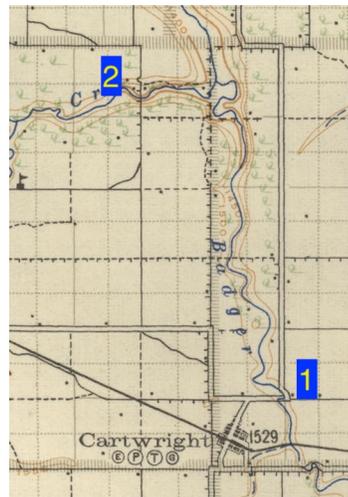
*From a NWMP diary....*

*July 15, 1874, started at 6 a.m.; stopped at noon in a lovely valley by a spring-fed creek where the horses were watered and the men bathed. Proceeding, crossed Badger Creek and camped some miles beyond White Mud Creek (locally known as Long River). A few antelope were seen...*

In the winter of 1882-83, Jack McKibbin and James Stirton built a bridge across Badger Creek. The lumber was hauled from Vaughn's mill near Rock Lake. It replaced the ferry that they had previously built. It was near the Beach farm and would always be called Beach's Bridge.



The previous photo would be the re-built or second bridge. The first bridge would more likely have looked something like this one that used to cross Whitemud Creek, north west of Cartwright.



#1: The bridge over Whitemud Creek  
#2: Beach's Bridge near the "Old" Cartwright site.

### **Pioneer's remember...**

*The flood waters in the flat on this side of Beach's bridge were very high and the horses were swept off their feet, upsetting the wagon and throwing the occupants into the raging stream. The Gemmills had great difficulty in saving themselves, but by clinging to tree branches they steadily worked their way out. The horses were drowned and the contents of the wagon lost. (Memories Along the Badger p144)*

*I was always apprehensive crossing the bridge over the Badger River, because there was a gap at each end of the bridge between the railings and the river bank. ) J.W. Pickersgill, Memories Along the Badger)*

## The Boundary Commission Trail: Wakopa - Long River

N49.06359. W 99.86393

The Wakopa Crossing over the Long River was used by fur traders and Aboriginal hunters long before the Boundary Commission came along in 1873.



*This photo from the Archives of Manitoba shows the Boundary Commission leaving the Long River Depot.*

As you can see from the Google Earth image, evidence of the crossing is hard to spot. All evidence of the trail is gone. Local resident Charlie Baldock, another one of those very helpful people who know more than me, was able to take me to the spot.

1. Site of the crossing of Long River at Wakopa by the Boundary Commission
2. Site of bridge located just north of the ford.

The bridge was used until the 1950's.  
49.06633 99.86305

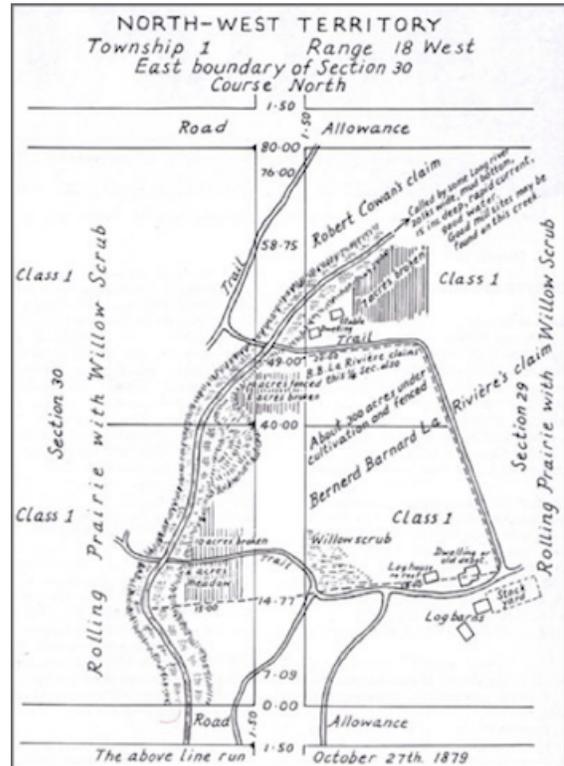


At different times there were three bridges crossed Long River. The remains of the "Middle Bridge" are shown here in 2025.



It's hard to image it but this was a well-travelled road, on a school bus route. Nature tends to reclaim habitat over time. Cultivation obliterates both roads and rail lines.

There is no record of a ferry at the crossing. Except in the early spring, crossing was relatively easy.



The survey map from 1879 shows the property of Bernard LaRiviere, which became the village of Wakopa.

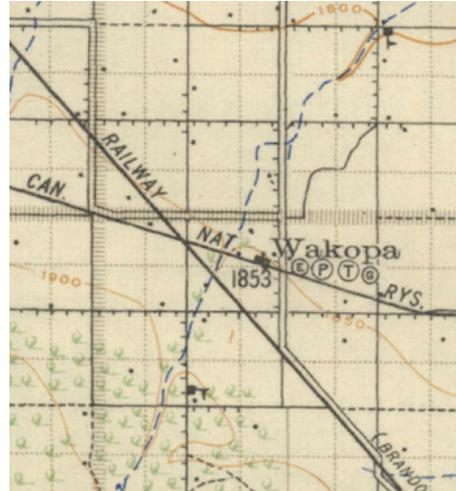
The site was a crossroads in one age and a different sort of crossroads in the next.



*Fur trade era trails.*

In pre-contact times, Nakota and Dakota people were in regular contact with other groups as far south as the Mandan Villages near where Bismarck is now. There were also trails for regular East-West travel. One set of trails crossed at the future Wakopa site.

1905 the original village of Wakopa was re-established a bit to the north on the CNR Branch Line. A station, store and elevator were the heart of the village and it was never destined to be a large commercial centre. By that time nearby Boissevain and Killarney were well established service centres. There was employment in railway work however and when the Brandon Saskatchewan and Hudson's Bay Railway crossed nearby that enhanced the importance of the village.



*The region in 1920.*

*The BS&HB closed in 1936 and the CN served the village until 1961. The store closed a few years later and today Wakopa, though still on the map, has no residents. There is however public access to the site of the first real village in the Turtle Mountain Region.*

*An Interpretive Sign Display is located right where the store used to be.*

**\*\*The full story of Wakopa is available as a book and online. A search for "Wakopa History" will lead you there.**