

The Little Saskatchewan River

The Little Saskatchewan River flows from Lake Audy in Riding Mountain National Park, south into the Assiniboine west of Brandon. For much of that distance its course winds within a deep and very scenic valley. It is a small river, excellent for paddlers, not readily navigable by larger craft. It passes through Elphinstone, the original site of Strathclair, Minnedosa, the former site of Riverdale, Rapid City, and Rivers. Its waters have been harnessed for industrial and recreational purposes through the creation of several dams.



The Remains of the Ten Mile Dam.

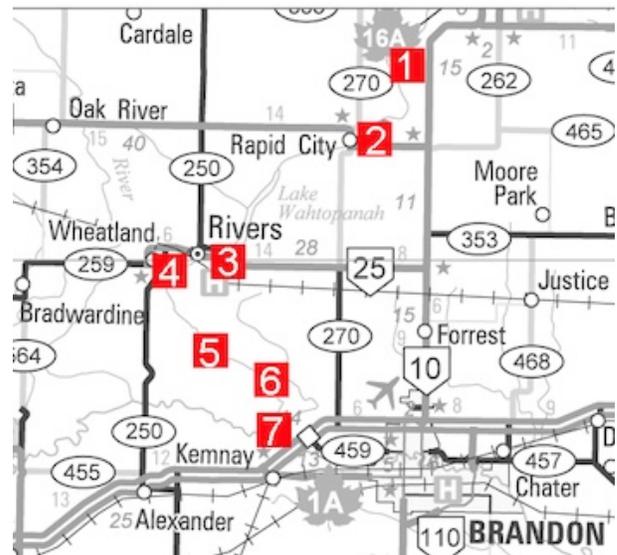
The first hydro electric plant in Manitoba was built just upstream from its confluence with the Assiniboine. They called it the Ten Mile Dam. That was in 1901.

The hydro generated there served Brandon until the 1920's. The lake that was created was a popular recreation spot for some time after that.

A dam at Minnedosa was also first erected as a power plant. An extreme flood washed it away in 1948. The resulting torrent flooded the town and washed away the Ten Mile Dam over 50 km downstream. The Minnedosa Dam was re-built for primarily recreational purposes and serves as a popular beach and campground today.



Just downstream from the dam you can see the clear outline of the Glenorky Ski Hill



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The Little Saskatchewan River: Riverdale Bridge

N50.19148, W99.97504



This four-span concrete beam bridge over the Little Saskatchewan River was built in 1918.

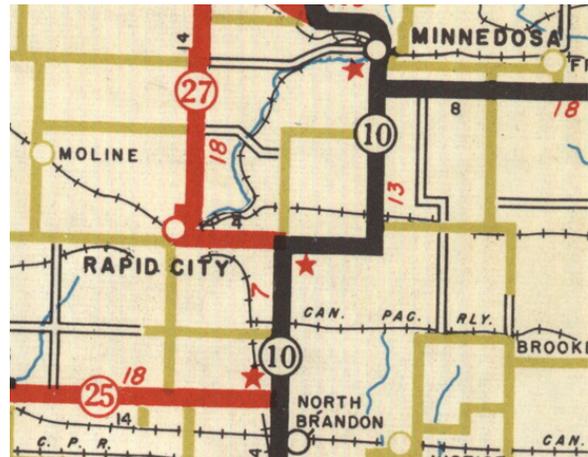
In 2001 while in a small plane following the path of the Little Saskatchewan River I noticed this bridge to nowhere while passing over the site of Riverdale, a former railway stop between Minnedosa and Rapid City. I knew there must be a story there about how transportation routes change.

Much later with the help of Google Earth and a visit to the site, I was able to take another look...



The station and elevator were to the left of the shot. You can see the faint trace of the former road coming in from the top, then turning towards the village. Today a newer bridge off to the top right allows road access.

The Rapid City History reports that a bridge was contracted in 1903. However the Manitoba North Western RR established the station in 1886 and there would likely have been some access from the west side. Every effort was made to give farmers easy access to the elevator.

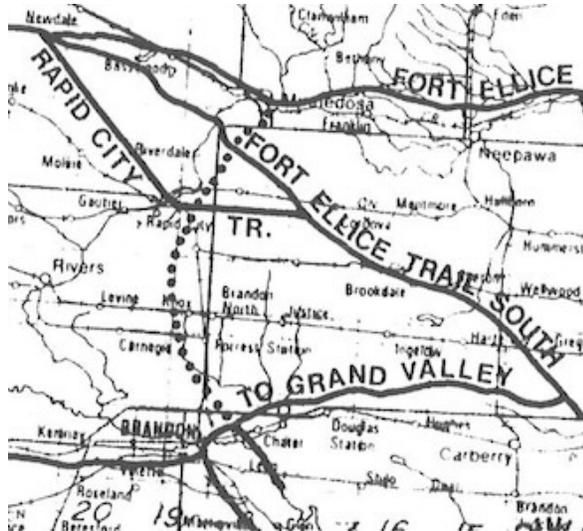


At the time of its construction, the bridge was on a road connecting Highways 27 and 10. By the time this Highway map was printed in 1950 the village didn't make the cut.

The Little Saskatchewan River: Rapid City

N50.13518, W100.01547

In the early 1800's a natural crossing of the Little Saskatchewan River near present day Rapid City was used by the Hudson Bay Company on the southern branch of the Carleton Trail. That trail ran all the way to Fort Edmonton. It was the main highway west and was well used.

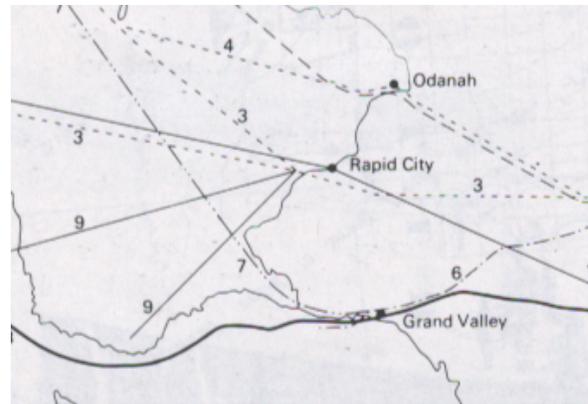


In the late 1870's surveys were started for the proposed transcontinental railway and the first divisional point west of Winnipeg was planned to be at the crossing of the rapids at that spot. The trail by then had become the route for settlers to the area. M. Turriff, an early arrival in 1878, operated a ferry there.

One traveler in 1879 described the crossing ...

"There was no bridge over the Little Saskatchewan but the river was not very big and a man pushing a small ferry with a long pole was charging 15¢ a trip to take people and goods across."

As of 1880 Rapid City was poised to be an important stop of the new transcontinental railway. The Grand Valley route was chosen at the last minute and Rapid City had to wait.



*A map showing proposed railway routes.
(Section, Township & Range, Tynman)*

The Railway

Rapid City didn't get railway service until 1886, and never did approach the aspiration to be a "City".

The first line to reach Rapid City was the Manitoba and Northwestern from Minnedosa in 1886. They offered a return trip to Minnedosa for 65¢,

The Great West Railway, which ran from Chater to Hamiota, was built in 1890 but bypassed the town, offering only a siding called Gautier.



In 1907 the Canadian Northern Railway surveyed the land to build a railway branch line from Halboro to Beulah through Rapid City and Moline. This later became the Canadian National Branch Line. To reach Rapid City it had to cross the existing line from Minnedosa and go

over the Little Saskatchewan River. The result was an interesting pair of bridges.

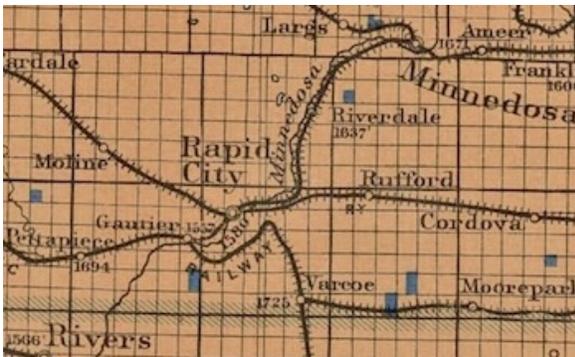
The abandoned double rail crossing however is still a site worth seeing. Easily accessed by a road eastward from Highway 24, north of the village.

From above it looks like this...



It was much promised, almost completed, and never used.

In 1910 The Grand Trunk Pacific had just completed its own transcontinental line, following a route edging northwards from Portage to a divisional point at Rivers and from there northwest, paralleling what is today the Yellowhead Highway, through Edmonton and on the coast.



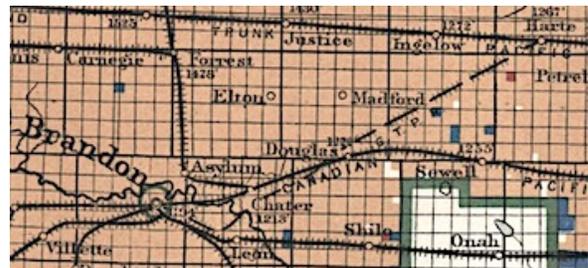
Looking at the rail lines operating in 1908. Rapid City almost resembles the hub of transportation that it once hoped to become.

The Brandon GTO Spur

Speaking of abandoned rail bridges. some decades ago I was paddling down the Assiniboine just east of Brandon, and saw this giant concrete pillar in the middle of the river. I knew what it must be, but at that time I knew little about Brandon's history. The story turned out to be stranger than I expected.

This bridge was abandoned before it was even completed.

The remains are a visual (concrete?) reminder of one the more interesting examples of the rush to expand rail service and capture that trade.



Brandon was promised that a spur would be started within six months of completion of the main line. And it was...started. Work began in 1911. A rail bed was graded from the main line at Harte for nearly 40 km, as far as the Assiniboine River, where a bridge was constructed.

But by the time it was finished, it was apparent that railway companies had overbuilt. The resulting financial woes intervened. The project was terminated in 1913 leaving only an unfinished rail bed that had never seen rails, let alone trains, and a bridge that was never crossed and had to be demolished in 1924, leaving only the massive supports.

The Little Saskatchewan River: The Rumble Bridge, Rivers N50.13518, W100.01547

In 1911, just three years after the Town of Rivers was created as a divisional point on the new Grand Trunk Pacific trans-continental railway, a bridge was built over the nearby Little Saskatchewan River on what would have been the main road south to Brandon.



The remains of the Rumble Bridge from the north.



The bridge (near centre) was upgraded in 1944 and taken down some years ago

Longtime resident Don McFadden explains the origin of the name.

“The concrete footings about 200 yards west of the present bridge on Highway 25 are the footings of the former bridge. That road was the main route to Brandon and all points to the south and east so everyone in the community crossed it often. And to get to Rivers --- and to get to school for me --- we had to cross it every day. (Except in the winter when, with a horse drawn cutter, van or sleigh we crossed on the river ice straight south of Rivers.) The deck on the

bridge was made of heavy wooden planks sitting crossways in a steel frame. But they weren't fastened in any way --- they just sat loose in the frame. So, when a vehicle crossed the bridge the planks "rumbled" quite loudly so the bridge became known as the 'Rumble Bridge' or the 'Thunder Bridge'. “

Grant's Cut & The Bell Crossing

Back in the day when the Rumble Bridge was on your route to Brandon, you also had to cross a busy railway line. The Grand Trunk Pacific took a sharp curve before heading down the valley into nearby Rivers.

Railway choices can impact other transportation. When a car approached the crossing, and oncoming eastbound train couldn't be seen.

To solve that problem, there was a post on the east side of the crossing about twelve feet high. Near the top there were cross arms similar to the cross arms seen at rail crossings today. But above the arms there was a large steel bell. This very loud bell was activated by oncoming trains just as signal lights are activated today.



The "Bell Crossing" was to the right (east) of the overpass. The old road is still there on the north side of the line.

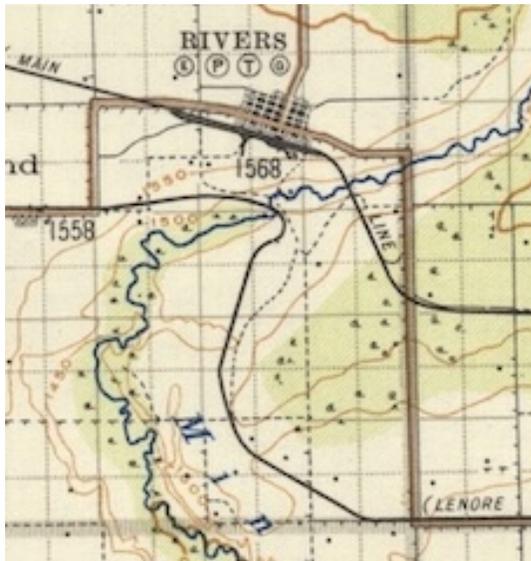
The Little Saskatchewan River: Cossar Crossing

N50.01953, W100.24225



This photo, by prolific Brandon photographer (and railway worker) Lawrence Stuckey captures, a train crossing the Cossar or Wheatland Bridge over the Little Saskatchewan River south of Rivers.

When the Lenore Branch of the CPR connecting Brandon with Lenore was built in 1901, Rivers did not exist. The Grand Trunk Pacific, a transcontinental line, arrived in 1908, and the new town of Rivers became the commercial centre of the district.



The route taken illustrates just how important it was to a railway surveyor to find the best (cheapest) site for a crossing. The high wide spans required to cross deep, wide valleys are very expensive to build. It was less expensive to angle gently down a deep valley and make a lower crossing, even if it added distance to the route.



The Grand Trunk Pacific transcontinental line nearby required a much more elaborate bridge.



Cossar Crossing from the west - a level crossing on the wide valley floor. The approach to the river required only a modest embankment.

The Lenore Branch was abandoned in 1980. I found no record of the bridge being torn down.

A Last Minute Find

The photo of the site is from a visit in 2018. When I visited recently I noticed this nearby...



Sure enough the map opposite shows an old trail just to the north of the rail crossing. I found no mention of this bridge in the Local History. It would have been unnecessary when new pattern of grids roads was established.

**ÍThe Little Saskatchewan River
Pendennis Bridge,**
N49.93365, W100.18773

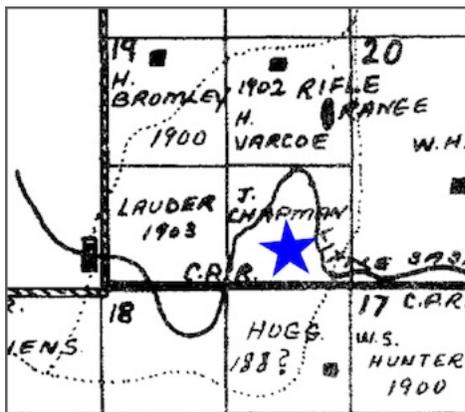
Hunter's Bridge, N49.93552, W 100.19849

I found this little story in the Kirkham's Bridge history...

"In 1928 Mr. H.J. Chapman bought this farm (NE 19-11-20). At the same time he bought the quarter to the south, which was owned by the CPR, and which had a plentiful supply of wood on it. In the days before Hydro this was quite an asset because a big pile of firewood was a "must" in every farmyard. The fact that the CPR was an "absentee landlord" and that a good road which ran down to the Pendennis Bridge, made that wood easily accessible from either side of the river, was a temptation hard to resist. Consequently, some farmers when questioned about where they got their wood, replied quite casually, "Oh-uh-on Section 37."

Now let me explain. If you grew up on a farm, as I did, and if you have reached a certain age, as I have, you know that farmland was surveyed on a system we borrowed from the Americans. A block of land six miles square was called a township. That means each township had 36 square miles. Each square mile was called a section.

Quiz: How many Sections in a Township?
Answer: Not quite 37.



The dotted lines represent trails used in the days before cars and graded grid roads.

Of course Google Earth gives us a complete

picture. I have walked that trail many times over the years. It offers great views of the river valley and up-close access to a bit of history.



The trail from the north is a road allowance today. The one from the south seems to branch into two routes. In the early days trails ignored road allowances, and the map to the left shows the old trail angling westwards. The trail to the right, heading straight south would likely have joined the road allowance used later on.



The site in 2021. The pilings are visible in low water.



The trail up the south bank is overgrown but recognizable. A "No Trespassing" Sign warns visitors that it is private property



A view from the trail.

In the local history I also came across this memory from John Nicholas (p64) who farmed on 22-11-20 (near Harrow School of the map.)

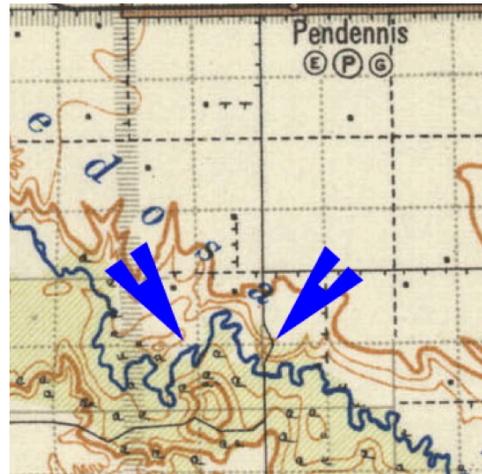
"Henry Quayle" (that's an apt name for a chicken-hunter) "and I drove out to shoot chickens, crossed river at Kirkham's Bridge, went west about five miles, crossed river at Hunter's Bridge, and came home from there.

Was that another name for the Pendennis Bridge? That happens.

Or...was there another bridge? Where?

Aside from Local History volumes and Google Earth, there is one more invaluable type of resource - friends who know more than me. In this case it was Gord Allen who set me on the right track. Gord and his wife Lois (Nee Chapman) operated the Chapman Museum, established by Lois's father, Ab Chapman, decades ago. They have done a superb job of

keeping the history of their region alive. Gord knew exactly where the bridges were.

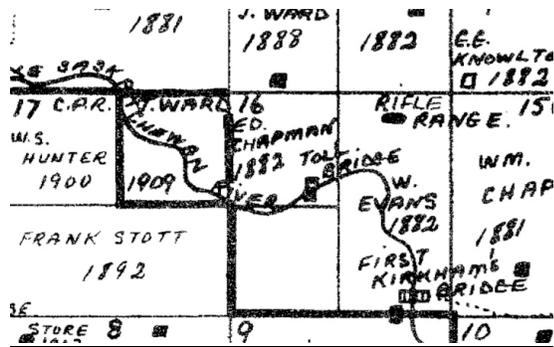


There was indeed a Hunter's Bridge. It was about a kilometre upstream from the Pendennis Bridge.

It is not so readily accessible, so I will rely on this map to show the location. The Pendennis Bridge and the road are shown on this map from 1922. To the left is the approximate site of the Hunter Bridge.



The Google Earth evidence shows a trail crossing near the middle of this image at 49.94150, W100.21346. That's my guess for the location.



Notice that W.S. Hunter owned land nearby.

As I noted in the chapter on the Souris River, there are some districts that ended up with a lot of bridges. The Kirkham's Bridge area was one of them. There could be a few reasons for that, but one reason is that if the river is narrow and has an easy approach, bridges could be home-made and relatively cheap. Logs for piles were found nearby. The loads were very much lighter than today.

Full Disclosure...

Long ago, while documenting heritage sites for the RM of Daly (Now Riverdale) I found this in the Kirkham Bridge history...

"Edward Chapman Sr. picked out a spot for a home on the river bank on the north-west quarter of 16-11-20. To reach this land the river had to be spanned, so he built a truss bridge costing \$200, but just wide enough for a team and wagon, and because it was a private bridge he collected a toll."

A helpful set of maps in the same volume also noted it - see above.

So when my wife Beverly and I were hiking a riverside trail and found the evidence of a bridge, I assumed that we had found the Toll Bridge.

It wasn't until I started working on this project and consulted Gord Allan, that I learned that I had been referring to Pendennis Bridge as the "Chapman Toll Bridge".

On Finding Things...

A friend once told me that there are two times to invest...now or five years ago. I think that applies to preserving both heritage sites and the natural world.

Change creeps up on us.

As I travel in search of old trails, old bridges and forgotten sites I am amazed at how quickly things disappear. How can the signs of a well-travelled road become so overgrown that they are hard to recognize? If parts of the trail to the Pendennis Bridge might pass unnoticed today, what will be left in a few more decades?

We can't preserve everything, but we can try to at least preserve the memories. Creating and encouraging an awareness and interest in abandoned sites is one way to generate support for conserving or at least documenting sites.

In that regard, nothing beats seeing things oneself.

To facilitate that we should, I believe give thought to access.

There are hundred of kilometres of abandoned road allowances throughout our land. They were wisely set aside in the surveys for good reason.

Access.

There were homes on every section and the old system of winding trails wasn't practical.

Now we don't need them all. But they were public land. Some have been preserved as "Conservation Corridors" or designated as "Machine Roads" while others seem to have been taken over by owners of adjacent land, either formally or informally. The public is losing access.

We have an opportunity to save as many of these pathways - and the time to do that is right now. Or else they will disappear.

The Little Saskatchewan River: Kirkham's Bridge

N49.91448, W100.14510



Kirkham Bridge (1906 - 1981)

For the prairie farmer in pioneer times, the river was both a necessity and an obstacle. Many farmers had land on both sides, and while crossing in late summer was easy enough, what was sometimes a mere nuisance, could be deceptively dangerous in high water.

During the spring flood of 1897 while the bridge was washed out, Walter Chapman had some ploughshares that he wanted to take across the river to Joe Kirkham to be sharpened. He swam the swollen river empty-handed, no problem, then returned for the shares. He strapped them on his back and stepped back into the river, but this time the river proved to be too swift and the load too heavy, so a life was lost.

In the early days, when the need of a convenient way to cross the river became apparent, surveyors were required to locate a suitable site for a bridge. In 1895 they arrived at the William Chapman home and after many measurements, they decided that the best location for the bridge was due west of his farm buildings. The bridge was named "Kirkham's Bridge" after the Kirkham family who had settled on the west bank of the river. All went well until the spring floods of 1897, when it washed out. Better footings had to be found. About 500 metres downstream suitable hardpan on which to support the piles was discovered, so the entire structure was floated down river and reconstructed on the site of present bridge. In 1906 a new steel bridge was erected.

Mr. William Baker, son of Mr. Jack Baker, was the first one to drive a truckload of grain across the new Kirkham's Bridge, just as his father had delivered the first load across the 1906 bridge.

During the 1930's the site became a favourite spot for school picnics, community ball games, and other forms of entertainment. Hundreds of people gathered here on Sunday afternoons to bathe in the cool water of the river and to enjoy a few hours of relaxation while visiting with friends and neighbours.

The proximity to Brandon has always meant that Brandonites used the site for recreation as well. I attended a Brandon University Frat Party there in 1966. I have embarked upon many a short paddling expedition from that site.

Locals regret however, that when the new Kirkham's Bridge was constructed in 1979-81 the beach, along the sandy river bottom, was ruined. Progress?



In 1981 the new bridge was installed next to the site of the previous one.



Today, the former picnic spot is a great departure point for a river trip.

The Little Saskatchewan River: Daly Bridge

N49.88076, W100.11332



The Little Saskatchewan ends its relatively short journey west of Brandon. The last crossing is the Daly Bridge, named after Thomas Mayne Daly, Brandon's first Mayor. It was built in 1982-83

The earlier bridge - built prior to 1912 was called the McMillan Bridge, after a local landowner.



This sign would seem to indicate that there was a bridge here as early as 1883 The Daly Bridge provides us with a look at the damage unpredictable streams can cause.

Evidence of the former bridge, which was located just a few metres upstream from the current one was readily visible in 2010. This view hadn't changed much since I started paddling this river in the 1990's.



Several years of spring flooding, especially in 2021, changed the riverbed drastically.



Each spring more of the old bridge was exposed.



By 2022 the view from Daly Bridge was much altered and the remains of the earlier bridge were now in the centre of a much wider channel.