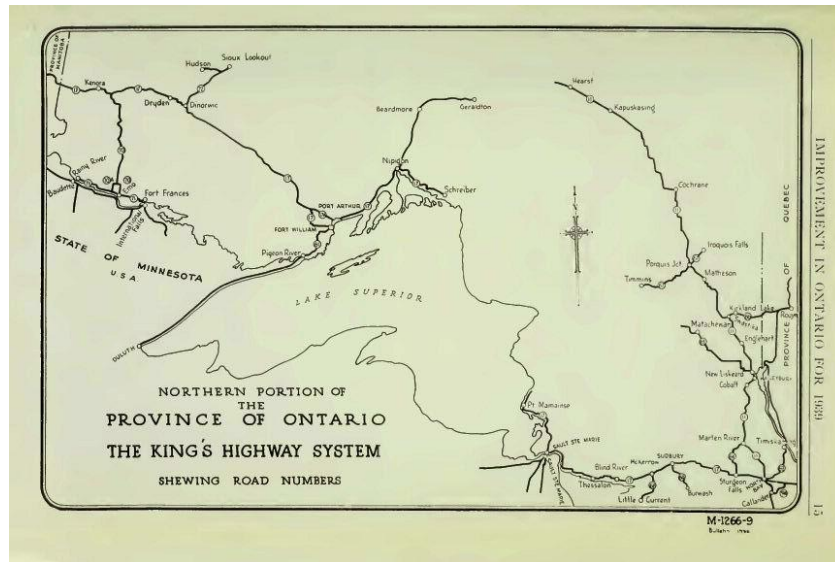


**THE LAST LINK PROJECT:
Completing the First Trans-Canada Highway in Ontario**

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View of the two broken links in Ontario's highway system in 1939.

Source: Annual Report of the Department of Highways, Ontario, ending March 31st, 1940.

For 2018, a group of volunteers are organizing to commemorate an historic event that occurred in 1943. For the first time, a highway linked Eastern and Western Canada entirely on Canadian soil.

In 1939, there was no highway link across Ontario between Quebec and Manitoba. There was a dream of a trans-Ontario highway, but that provincial dream was subsumed under the national dream of a Trans-Canada Highway (TCH). A Trans-Canada Highway would eventually link all nine provinces, from the Maritimes on the east coast to British Columbia on the west.

In 1939, there was no highway link across Northern Ontario. One could travel eastward from Manitoba to the Lakehead cities, and then north to Nipigon. From Nipigon a new highway led to Geraldton, and another, which officials hoped would become the TCH, went to Schreiber.

Travelling east to west, one came to North Bay or Sudbury, and then one carried on north and west to Cochrane and Hearst, or struck out immediately west to Sault Ste. Marie. Beyond the Soo and Schreiber, and Hearst and Geraldton, the roads petered out. In both regions, road-builders faced formidable stretches of wilderness.

Two railway systems did traverse these stretches: the Canadian National Railways in the north, and the Canadian Pacific Railway further south.

In 1939, Canada declared war against Nazi Germany, and some astute officials, looking at maps of Northern Ontario, came to a realization: enemy bombers, or enemy saboteurs, could easily sever the trans-Ontario railway links at countless vulnerable points. Ontario now urgently needed a trans-Ontario highway link.

The favoured route for the TCH, from Schreiber to the Soo, involved tremendous engineering challenges. The more northerly route offered fewer obstacles. So, officials now accelerated the plans to link Geraldton and Hearst by highway. Sixteen experienced contracting outfits worked separately on short stretches of the 153-mile route. Some started from the western end at Geraldton, others at the eastern end at Hearst.



View looking east towards present-day Longlac about 1930. The Canadian National Railway crosses the Kenogami River at the north end of Long Lake. Highway 11 would not be completed for more than a decade. Photo courtesy of Greenstone Historical Society.

By New Year's Eve in 1942, the job was done . . . kind of. There was no snowplowing program, and the spring breakup brought its own problems. Not until the first week of June, 1943, did officials feel comfortable enough to open the highway to civilian traffic.

There was no fanfare, no official opening ceremony, no banner headline. Canada was still in wartime mode. For a long time, each trip across the Geraldton-Hearst highway was an adventure.

Years after the war, in 1949, Canada's Parliament passed The Trans-Canada Highway Act, agreeing to share costs with the provinces for the shortest east-west route they could manage. Highway 17, from the Soo to Thunder Bay, qualified as the official Trans-Canada Highway link.

The Highway 17 link officially opened in 1960, eighteen years after the completion of Ontario's first Trans-Canada Highway. The complete east-west route, from Newfoundland to Vancouver Island, opened in 1962.

The year 2018 will mark the 75th Anniversary of the completion of Ontario's first Trans-Canada Highway. A group of volunteers are making plans to commemorate the anniversary. Plans include participation by organized communities along the route (e.g., Greenstone and Hearst) and further afield (e.g., Nipigon, Thunder Bay, North Bay) and representatives from the provincial and federal governments.

This historic event, the completion of the last link, deserves to be recognized and celebrated by all Canadians.

Anyone interested in learning more about this project, contact the author.

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View looking east towards Longlac in 1941. An overhead (i.e., bridge) is under construction to pass over the Kenogami River and railway trestle to accommodate the new highway. Photo courtesy of Greenstone Historical Society.