

**ST. JOHN'S, NL** — I'm at the eastern start of the Trans-Canada Highway, preparing for an 8,000-kilometre drive west along the highway to the other end in Victoria, BC, which also thinks of itself as the start of the road.

In Victoria there's a large sign in a park beside the road down by the Pacific that declares itself "Mile Zero." There's no such sign here. There is a sports complex downtown called the Mile One Centre, but it's not technically on the highway.

No — the TCH begins in Atlantic Canada at the dump.

"The TCH technically begins on the Outer Ring Road at the Logy Bay Road overpass," says Emily Timmins, the communications manager for Newfoundland's Department of Transportation and Works. That's about five kilometres from downtown. If you drive in from the west, as I did, then the road just keeps going without anything to suggest you're no longer on the TCH until you pass the Robin Hood Bay Regional Waste Management Facility and, after a kilometre or so, come to a stop at Quidi Vidi Lake.

It was not an auspicious end to the 4,000 kilometres I'd just driven from Toronto, so I headed over to the Mile One Centre for a photo. Tom Petty was playing that night and parking was an issue; security tried to shoo me from putting the car right beside the sign, but a gentle chat and a little persuasion won the day.

I'll be telling stories as I drive west. Two thousand twelve is not just the 50th anniversary of the Trans-Canada Highway opening officially in 1962, on the day I was born, but also the 100th anniversary of the first road trip through Canada from ocean to ocean.

There were several pioneering drives across the country before it became simple, and I'll also be retracing their routes and telling their stories:

- The Thomas Wilby drive of 1912, in which a snooty English journalist was chauffeured across the country and wrote a book that never once named his driver.
- The Perry Doolittle drive of 1925, in which the founder of the Canadian Automobile Association swapped the wheels of his Model-T Ford to drive along railway tracks where there were no roads.
- The Alex Macfarlane drive of 1946, the first time anybody was able to drive across the country on all-Canadian roads. That trip earned Macfarlane the Todd Medal, created in 1912 by the future mayor of Victoria to award to the first person to drive across Canada, all four wheels on the road.

I'm carrying the Todd Medal with me on this road trip. I'm also carrying a horseshoe from Wilby's journey and a 1925 CAA radiator badge. I'll be more comfortable than all those pioneers, of course. General Motors provided me with a 2012 Chevy Camaro convertible for this drive, and the CAA is ready to rescue me should I get into any trouble. That may happen when I dip the wheels of the Camaro into the ocean here to begin the journey — I'm hoping the wharf won't be too slippery, and this journey doesn't end in the water before it's even begun....

Follow me on this road trip, and we'll explore Canada together.

## Day 1: Trinity Bay, NL

Trans-Canada Distance: 90 kilometres

**THEN: (Whitbourne)** It's not been so far to drive today, but back in 1962 this was the end of the paved road west from St. John's. The highway turned to corrugated gravel before Whitbourne and separated the casual tourists from the determined traveller.

Author Edward McCourt described his 1963 drive along it, in his book *The Road Across Canada*, as "an endless succession of iron-surfaced washboard, gaping pot-holes, and naked rock — a shoulder-twisting, neck-snapping, dust-shrouded horror." And by all other accounts, he was being kind.

It was not until 1965, when McCourt's book was published, that the road was properly paved across the province, at great expense. And canny premier Joey Smallwood made sure the great expense came from the pockets of the federal government, not the provincial coffers.



Edward McCourt.

**NOW: (Petty Harbour)** I began my drive with the Camaro's wheels in the Atlantic Ocean, dipping into the water on a wharf at Petty Harbour, just south of Cape Spear, the most easterly point in Canada. Like all the pioneering drivers, it's important to drive out of one ocean in order to drive eventually into the other one at the opposite side of the country. I did a trial run with some friends yesterday, but then it was late in the afternoon and today it was noon: low tide.

The reluctant tide meant I had to drive a lot farther down the boat ramp, with the rear driving wheels venturing down onto the wet concrete that had been submerged just a couple of hours earlier. It was very slippery. The CBC sent a cameraman to record the event for posterity, and he slid his shoes around on the concrete. "If this is too slippery for those tires, this video could go viral," he warned, probably rather hopefully. Last year a YouTube video of a million-dollar Ferrari Enzo crashing into the sea during the Targa Newfoundland was viewed millions of times. You can see it online if you have a cruel sense of humour — and irony.



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*The Camaro dips its wheels in the Atlantic.*

But all went well, the wide tires gripped and the car made it back onto the road. I gathered some salty Atlantic water in a bottle, which I'll pour into the salty Pacific when I reach the opposite coast, and then drove into St. John's with the top down for a last look at the Mile One Centre before heading out to the dump and the real start of the Trans-Canada Highway.

**SOMETHING DIFFERENT: (Dildo)** The towns have colourful names in Newfoundland. Here's local businessman Kevin Nolan, the owner of the



*Captain Dildo, the town mascot of Dildo, NL.*

nearby Dildo Dory Grill, describing the communities of Trinity Bay: “You turn just before you get to Come-By-Chance, you go past Spreadeagle, and then you get to Dildo. After you leave Dildo, you enter Shag Rock, and then it’s Heart’s Delight and then Heart’s Desire and Heart’s Content. And then you enter Conception Bay. That’s just before Cupids.”

He took a photo of me with a statue of the town’s mascot, Captain Dildo, named for the town which is supposedly named after a place in Spain — nobody’s really sure. The statue is cemented into the ground, to stop it suffering the same fate as the road signs whenever college students come to visit.

## Day 2: Gambo, NL

Trans-Canada Distance: 301 kilometres

**THEN: (Gambo)** Every Newfoundlander knows where Gambo is, because every Newfoundlander knows that this is where Joey Smallwood was born — the man who became the first Newfoundland premier when he signed his province into Confederation in 1949, and the man who mastered the art of wringing dollars out of Ottawa.

The Trans-Canada Highway was no exception. In 1962, when the TCH was declared officially open by Prime Minister John Diefenbaker, 600 kilometres of its 980-kilometre stretch across The Rock was still unpaved; when the circus wanted to come to town in 1963 it ended up cancelling because highway bridges wouldn’t support the weight of the elephants, which would have had to be walked separately from their trucks over the road’s numerous river crossings.

The agreement first proposed in 1949 between Ottawa and the provinces called for each province to share the cost of construction 50/50 with the federal government, though Ottawa would pay the cost of road-building through national parks. Smallwood delayed construction while he spent his provincial money on other things, like schools and hospitals. In 1964 he argued that hardscrabble Newfoundland just couldn’t afford



to complete the highway, and eventually Lester Pearson's new Liberal government caved and agreed to foot 90 percent of the bill. "That'll do nicely," said Smallwood, and promptly coined a provincial slogan: "We'll finish the drive in '65." Which they did on November 27, 1965, when the last strip of asphalt was laid and two convoys of cars, one from St. John's with Smallwood among them, and one from Port aux Basques that included Pearson, met halfway across the province in Grand Falls.

I'm headed to Grand Falls tomorrow. I'll go look at Pearson's Peak — the monument erected to thank the prime minister for cutting the big cheque.

**NOW: (Clareville)** I noticed the bicycles propped against the window of the Tim Hortons when I walked inside. They looked heavy, loaded with luggage. Another bicycle was propped against the other door and it looked even heavier. The cyclists were inside, greeting each other as they met for the first time, cycling in opposite directions across the country..



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*Will Samson-Doel, Harry Jones, Daman Milsom, and Kibby Evans.*

Daman Milsom and Kibby Evans, both recently graduated biology students, are cycling home to Victoria. They flew in to St. John's last week and left Cape Spear four days ago, pedalling into the west wind.

Harry Jones and Will Samson-Doel, both university students with a summer to themselves, left home in Toronto on May 1 and expect to reach St. John's by Friday. Then they'll fly with their bikes to Vancouver and cycle home from there.

All are in their early 20s and none of them have done any serious cycling before these journeys. Daman and Kibby had never ridden farther than 60 kilometres in a day, and Harry and Will were even less prepared: "I only used a bicycle to commute," said Will, "and I've never commuted more than 15 minutes. You don't need to be super-athletic to do this. You just need the time, and the bike."

The Toronto cyclists had seen only one other pair of cyclists before today, in Nova Scotia, and they'd not stopped to chat while they pedalled in different directions. Are they having fun? "Yes, in most ways, this is what we expected," said Harry. "Once you're into the rhythm and your legs have adjusted, it's a great way to travel." His friend Will agreed: "I've never been east of Quebec City. I didn't expect to see such differences between the provinces."

The greenhorn Westerners were pleased to hear this, since they've cycled only a little more than 200 kilometres so far and the weather's been terrible. "I've been surprised by the weather," said Kibby. "I thought uphill would be bad, but the downhill — you go so fast and the wind's so cold. At least uphill you get warmer with the pedalling."

All four are doing their cross-Canada rides to raise money and awareness for causes close to their hearts. Harry and Will say they've raised \$13,000 so far for the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society; you can read their blog at *willandharrybikecanada.blogspot.ca*. Daman and Kibby say they've raised \$16,000 toward a \$50,000 goal for Trekking4Transplants, which also hopes to persuade 10,000 people to become organ donors. You can read about them on their website at *trekking4transplants.ca*.

I wished them well, got in the Camaro, and turned up the heat as I drove west. I didn't want my coffee getting cold.





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*Mark with Newfoundland's first premier.*

**SOMETHING DIFFERENT: (Gambo)** Here in former-premier Joey Smallwood's hometown, the man seems honoured with the same level of reverence that North Koreans offer their late Dear Leaders.

The scenic lookout beside the TCH above town, with its dramatic view over Freshwater Bay, is named after Smallwood, but there's little evidence that he would come to ponder the vista. However, a massive black-and-white photograph of his head looks out from here now that he's been dead these last 20 years.

Newfoundlanders may hold Smallwood dear in their thoughts, but, in their words, they're far more practical. Us Mainlanders call the site "Joey's Lookout," but it's known across the island as "The Big Giant Head."

## Day 3: Grand Falls, NL

Trans-Canada Distance: 441 kilometres

**THEN: (Grand Falls)** When Premier Joey Smallwood drove west from St. John's in 1965 to greet Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson, who was driving east from Port aux Basques, they met just outside town here at the provincial halfway point of the fully paved Trans-Canada Highway. In doing so, the TCH was declared complete across Newfoundland. "We finished this drive in '65," declared the signs and posters, "thanks to Mr. Pearson."

As I recounted yesterday, Pearson agreed to pay 90 percent of the cost of the road's construction in order to get it finished while he was in office, and the province set to with vigour while Smallwood knew the funds were available. In appreciation, a monument was erected at the halfway point — a rock pillar roughly 25 metres high — and it was named "Pearson's Peak" to commemorate the federal generosity.

But there's nothing there now. Nobody here is quite sure what became of it. Long-time residents recall that it fell into disrepair after the two back-slapping Liberals left office; it became unsafe, with pieces of rock sometimes falling from it near the cars that were parked by amorous couples. There was nothing else to do there, after all — no picnic area or green space, just a circle of asphalt surrounded by bush with a pillar in the middle, about 100 metres up from the road.

The province chose the cheaper option of dismantling it instead of repairing it; again, nobody in town is quite sure when, though the tourism people in St. John's say it was removed in 1997. The entrance to the paved drive was dug up to prevent cars from going in, and aside from some rubble and firewood sticks, there's nothing whatsoever to mark the spot.

What happened to the bronze sign on the peak? Apparently it was found at a landfill site, but where it went then no one can — or will — say.

**NOW: (Norris Arm)** There are signs all along the highway in Newfoundland warning of moose on the road. I can't recall seeing a single one, despite driving through both national parks and covering more than 2,000 kilometres on the island, both east and west.



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*Michelle Higgins with DJ, who's a lot smaller than a moose.*

Michelle Higgins also doesn't recall seeing a moose recently, though she surely did early last month when she was driving in the evening from her home at Norris Arm to work at Gander. I dropped in to see her this morning, so let her tell the story:

"I remember looking at the clock and I seen 7:28. The police officer said after that must have been the time that I hit the moose. The next thing I know, I was pulling into work's driveway. I remember getting out of the car, and I remember my co-worker coming up and putting her arm around me, and asked me if I was OK, and I kind of looked at her and asked her, 'Well, why wouldn't I be?' And she said, 'Michelle, you're bleeding.' She said, 'Look at your car — were you in an accident?' I said, 'No, I wasn't in an accident.' And she said, 'Did you hit a moose?' I said, 'No, I never even seen a moose, let alone hit one.' She said, 'Look at your car,' and when I turned around and looked at my car, I couldn't believe it."

The windshield was smashed in and the roof peeled back "like a sardine tin." Higgins is now famous as the woman who drove more than 30 kilometres along the TCH in an open, wrecked car, with no

recollection whatsoever of hitting the moose that police found dead on the road.

She's lost count of the journalists who've found her on the phone in Norris Arm; she's not in the directory, though there are plenty of Higgins who all know each other. New York, Chicago, London — they've all been calling. "My cousin is in South Africa, and she saw it in the paper there," she says. They're all intrigued that she would have kept driving, and by all accounts of the few people who noticed her, driving quite responsibly.

She's off work now from her job as a behavioural therapist because two of the bones in her neck are broken and she must wear a brace to help them heal. As well, she cannot lie flat without becoming nauseous, and she's booked for a third MRI in a couple of weeks to check her progress. The accident hasn't stopped her from being driven on the Trans-Canada, though.

"The first time I drove out there, I had knots and butterflies in my stomach, thinking that it would all come back to me, but I didn't remember a thing," she says. "Maybe it's good that I don't remember. I've seen maybe 10 moose in 10 years, on the road, and then I went to St. John's the other day with my son and on the way back, we saw three moose. I wasn't worried."

**SOMETHING DIFFERENT: (Grand Falls)** It's been raining all day. ALL DAY! I haven't seen the sun in more than a week. And it's cold: seven degrees at most. So much for driving a convertible.

There's no point griping about this to Newfoundlanders though. "Aye, it's some terrible ting, but dat's de way she is," said my host this morning. They're calling it "Juneuary." Apparently, last June it rained 23 days of the month. People here are hoping this summer will be better and are quick to say that April and May were warm and pleasant months. And the weather is good right now in Labrador, apparently.

## Day 4: Port aux Basques, NL

Trans-Canada Distance: 921 kilometres

**THEN: (Whitbourne)** Lloyd Adams is “on the light side of 77,” and when I met him, he and his wife, Audrey, were celebrating their 48th wedding anniversary. But before they married, Lloyd spent years in the bush, surveying the future Trans-Canada Highway across Newfoundland.

“I got the job straight from school and stayed for 13, 14 years,” he said. “I learned everything on the job. Started as an engineer’s assistant, holding the tape, then worked my way up to using the instruments and plotting the road. We took it for granted back then and it was just a job, dealing with the blackflies, drinking water out of a boghole.” He paused, and then he said, “We didn’t realize it at the time, but we really were pioneers.”

There was no complete road across Newfoundland when he began in the mid-50s. From Clarenville to Gambo, cars had to be carried by



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*Lloyd and Audrey Adams.*

train, on the rail-car ferry. Lloyd would trek into the bush with a team of half-a-dozen surveyors for weeks at a time, hauling their own supplies and building their own camps. When they'd surveyed five kilometres of potential road, they'd pull up the camp and move it the five kilometres to the start of the next leg and begin again.

At least they had their own cook, and he didn't have to do the heavy work — the clearing of the survey lines was done by another team of six men, equipped only with axes.

"It was tough land to work on," he remembered. "You'd get to a pond and the construction crew would have to drain it and fill it all in, or to a rock and have to blow through it. These days, you don't even notice when you're speeding past.

"Now we have a four-lane highway and it only takes 45 minutes to get to Walmart. I guess that's progress."

**NOW: (Corner Brook)** There's one word that describes today: Monsoon.

The drive from Grand Falls was just a slog along a soaking wet, spray-filled road. Any scenery worth seeing was hidden behind a wall of water, or of cloud, until I got to the west coast. The Trans-Canada Highway here is a slippery road, too. More often than not there were two channels of rainwater where the asphalt has been depressed into shallow tracks by years of vehicles driving the same point in the lane.

Where there was standing water, which was frequent, the wide and sporty tires of the Camaro slid from side to side, jerking the car. Wider tires mean there's less weight concentrated on the same area of rubber than regular tires, which does not make for a relaxing drive. I don't really want to be calling the CAA for a tow truck out of the ditch in my first week on the road — give me moose any day.

**SOMETHING DIFFERENT: (South Branch)** How do you market the unmarketable? Somebody at Gale's Septic Pumping north of Port aux Basques found a way.

With a captive audience driving past all day long, these 1,000-gallon septic tanks are lined up beside the road to greet drivers.





*Yes, they really are septic tanks.*

And no, I didn't check if they were empty.

## Day 5: Rose Blanche, NL

Trans-Canada Distance: 921 kilometres

**THEN: (Rose Blanche)** You get to Rose Blanche by turning right instead of left when you leave the ferry at Port aux Basques, or by carrying on an extra 42 kilometres when you get to the western end of the paved Trans-Canada Highway in Newfoundland.

That's what author Edward McCourt did when he drove the TCH in 1963. The ferry was fully booked, so he and his wife Margaret were forced to spend an extra day on The Rock. Here's what he had to say in his book, *The Road Across Canada*,

The thirty mile run by car from Port aux Basques to

Rose Blanche at the end of the road is one of the most novel and spectacular in all Newfoundland. The road, a new one, is surprisingly good and safe considering that much of it appears blasted out of solid rock....

Rose Blanche more than fulfills our dreams of what a Newfoundland village ought to look like.... Houses perch on the point and the off-shore rocks and cling to the cliff faces rising from the water's edge. The parts of the village are bound together by elevated wooden sidewalks snaking over water and rock and occasionally a substance that might pass for land. Since most places in the village are accessible mostly by boat, Rose Blanche suggests a Venice in miniature — if you can accept a fish-packing plant for a doge's palace and a rowboat for a gondola.

The wooden sidewalks are gone, but not much else has changed.



*Rose Blanche today.*

**NOW: (Petites)** I stayed here last week on my first night in Newfoundland, after reading McCourt's description, and met Lynne Sawford and Norm Gentner, a couple from Petawawa, Ontario, who run the excellent Rose Sea Guest House in town. Just as well, it's the only place in town to stay and it's one of those hidden secrets of the province. They took me for a walk to the granite lighthouse that is the community's only tourist attraction, and pointed out the tiny community of Petites across the bay, about three kilometres east of here and past the end of the road.

I was intrigued by the distant houses, empty now since the government resettled the place in 2003 and forced its residents to move. Lynne arranged for a boat to take me out there for a poke around on my return, which was today.

I swallowed a Graval, got into the small boat, and held on gamely to my life preserver; men here usually refuse to wear them on the water, despite very few knowing how to swim.

It took 20 minutes to get across the bay and I was dropped at the



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*Austin Bennett, left, and Wayne Spencer.*

old wharf. Petites used to be a community of a couple of dozen houses, complete with church, school, and fire hall, but the buildings have fallen apart in the last nine years they've been empty. I walked through a number of them over the next couple of hours, shooting video and saying wistful things into the microphone, until I walked down an overgrown path and heard voices.

It was Austin Bennett chatting with his lobsterman friend Wayne Spencer. Bennett was born and raised at Petites and never really left. "I was the last one to sign the papers," he told me, sitting on the porch of the house he still owns. "I took the money the government gave me and bought a place in Rose Blanche. The family's there, but I still come here to lobster fish in the summer."

It's like a cabin in the woods, he said, except that it's on the ocean and accessed only by boat. His Petites home has a generator and a wood-burning stove, and inside it looks like any other cottage. A couple of other people have also maintained houses in the settlement and come to stay every summer.



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Mmmm — whole squid, maybe? Or cod cheeks?



“There’s nothing to stop me being here, so why would I leave?” he reasoned. It’s a base for lobster fishing, and a getaway when the hectic pace of Rose Blanche, population 600, grows too much for him. Is he nostalgic for the old community?

Not really, he says. There’s no fishing anymore, except for the lobster that he takes from around the harbour, and most of the community had already moved away by 2003 to find work elsewhere — maybe a dozen people were left.

Back in Rose Blanche, I tell Norm and Lynne about my bittersweet afternoon at Petites, and I ask them if they think their adopted town will ever be abandoned. They’re both sure it will. Already, most of the men work in Alberta, and the women also work elsewhere.

“I don’t know if this will last 30 years,” says Norm, and then Lynne cuts in: “But we’re going to make the most of it while we can — while it’s still here. It’s too wonderful to leave.”

**SOMETHING DIFFERENT: (Port aux Basques)** In Newfoundland little goes to waste, and that includes food. I stopped at a Port aux Basques fish shop that leaves out nothing that could possibly be eaten — including cod and halibut cheeks, whole squid, and squid tubes — though not by me.

## Days 6/7: Baddeck, NS

Trans-Canada Distance: 979 kilometres

**THEN: (Louisbourg)** In 1946, Brigadier R.A. (Alex) Macfarlane (retired) and his friend Ken MacGillivray, a former RCAF squadron leader, drove their new Chevrolet Stylemaster, borrowed from General Motors, to Louisbourg, NS, and dipped its wheels in the Atlantic there. Then they set off for the Pacific to become the first drivers to cross the country entirely on Canadian roads.