Prologue

It's easy to drive across Canada. If you have a reliable car, you can do it in a week. Over six time zones, it's 7,700 kilometres that blend and blur across the landscape on smooth asphalt curving through fields and trees, arrow-straight on the Prairies, punching over the mountains.

That's not the way to do it, though. You should take your time to appreciate the country and meet the people while experiencing some of the natural and cultural wealth of Canada. You don't need to do it all at once: just a few days at a time if that's all you can manage. The road is here now and it didn't come easy, so make the most of it.

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The first drive across North America from ocean to ocean in a motorcar was completed in 1903 by Horatio Nelson Jackson, a Canadian-born doctor who'd married one of the wealthiest women in Vermont, and his mechanic, Sewall Crocker. It took 64 days to travel from San Francisco to New York City in their Winton car and included countless misdirections, breakdowns, rebuilds, and second guesses. Certainly, it was a rigorous challenge, but the

landscape was well documented and there was already a path worn down by the stagecoach. A Californian named George Wyman completed the same journey three weeks earlier on a motorized bicycle, often bumping along on the railway ties of train tracks, though its engine eventually failed and Wyman had to pedal beside the Hudson River for the final 250 kilometres into Manhattan. In the following five years, at least 10 more cross-country road trips were completed as pioneering pairs of drivers pushed their way in rickety roadsters from one coast to the other.

Canadian drivers, all wealthy with varying spirits of adventure, read in their newspapers of the American exploits with a certain envy. Nobody followed the progress of the automobile more closely than Albert "Bert" E. Todd, who'd inherited his father's wholesale grocery and salmon-canning business in Victoria, British Columbia. Less than a week after Jackson and Crocker began their successful American drive, 24-year-old Bert Todd took delivery of a two-seater car built by the White Sewing Machine Company of Cleveland, Ohio. He paid $1,800 for it but had no experience of driving, so as a test run, he set off with the dealer's rep for Shawnigan Lake, 70 kilometres away. "They made the distance in the fast time of 2 hours and 53 minutes," reported the *Victoria Daily Times* later in the week. "Near Whiskey Swamp they encountered a black bear, and tried to run it down, but the beast got out of the way too quickly."

Todd was hooked! In the first decade of the last century, cars were a curiosity and much scorned by cynics who saw them as dangerous and expensive playthings, but Todd recognized their potential for personal transport. He was an advocate for building better roads, which would attract visitors in their motorcars. He became known as "Good Roads Todd" and organized the Pacific Highway Association in Seattle, which lobbied for a paved road to connect the entire west coast from Vancouver to Tijuana. In 1910, he married the daughter of the dealer who'd sold him his White Steamer car, and they spent their honeymoon driving home from Los Angeles through the dust and mud in a new Cadillac. As vice-president of the Victoria Automobile Association, and always looking to boost roads to his city, he commissioned a gold medal to be awarded to the first motorist to drive from Winnipeg to Victoria. When he was elected as the association's president the following

Dozens of motorists — affluent and optimistic — met at Alberni in 1912 to call for a Canadian Highway.

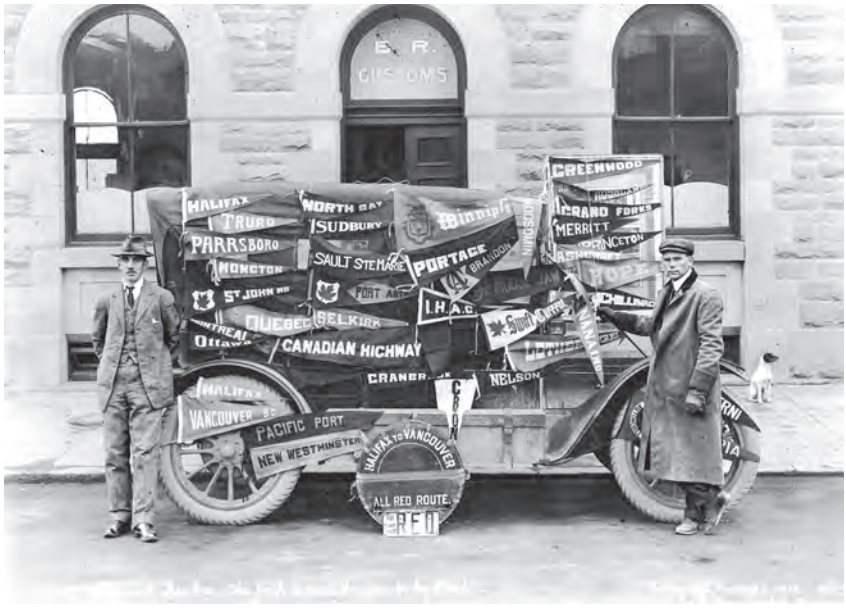
year, he commissioned another gold medal for the first motorist to drive right across Canada, staying within the country, from Louisbourg, Nova Scotia — about as far east as you could get before Newfoundland joined Canada in 1949 — to Victoria, to bring home the dream of a national highway. He put $500 of his own money into a bank account to pay for the awards dinner.

Todd was in Alberni on Vancouver Island on May 4, 1912, when the Canadian Highway Association gathered hundreds of enthusiasts from as far as Seattle to declare the need for a cross-country highway. The mayor of Victoria told the crowd that such a road "would arouse the whole dominion," and Todd helped dig a hole to plant a signpost that declared itself the western end of the "Canadian Highway." At the time, Alberni was one of the farthest-west communities in Canada and the town was keen to link itself to the national highway; its upstart neighbour, Port Alberni, was the western terminus of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), and the two towns were rivals. Nobody from Port Alberni attended the motorists' gathering because, somebody told the newspaper, "they were too busy making money," though

they found time a few days later to steal the signpost. It was returned the next morning by Port Alberni's apologetic mayor and re-erected, this time with a fierce-looking bull terrier, borrowed from the local doctor, chained to it for protection.

Back then, the railway was always considered superior to the highway. If you wanted to travel any distance in any kind of comfort, you took a ship or a train; roads were for delivering goods to market with a horse and cart, and most people never travelled much more than 20 kilometres from home. Not ever. That was about the comfortable distance a horse could pull a buggy in a day. So railways were the responsibility of the federal government and roads were just a provincial issue. Outside the cities, roads were usually mud tracks that led to the train station. In 1912, the only paved road in Canada was a 16-kilometre length of concrete outside Montreal.

That didn't deter Thomas Wilby, a 45-year-old English journalist living in New York City who had already driven twice across the United States. He



Thomas Wilby, left, and Jack Haney, at the end of their journey across Canada in 1912, with their Reo car festooned with pennants.

heard of the two medals being offered in Victoria and persuaded the Reo car company of St. Catharines, Ontario, to provide him with a new touring car and full sponsorship. More than that, he heard the call from the gathering in Alberni for a Canadian Highway and resolved to make the drive from coast to coast, if he could find the roads. There were no reliable maps to confirm it would be impossible. Jackson and Crocker had taken the prize for the United States; Wilby wanted Canada.

There was a challenge, though: Wilby didn't drive. It wasn't that he couldn't drive, but he believed a properly bred Englishman should leave such menial work to the chauffeur, as he and his wife had done on their road trip from New York City to San Diego and back. He persuaded the Reo company to also provide a driver so that he could sit in the deep leather of the rear seat and peruse the finer points of life on the road as the countryside rolled past, scribbling in his notebook and typing reports at rest stops for his eventual book, *A Motor Tour Through Canada*. Reo sent him the company's head mechanic, Fonce Val Haney, from Indiana. "You can call me Jack," said the 23-year-old Haney when they met in Halifax. "You will call me sir," said Wilby. The relationship went down from there. When his book was published in 1914, Wilby mentioned "the chauffeur" only rarely and never once referred to him by name.

Somehow, the two men not only survived their 53 days of travel together but actually made it to Victoria, where Wilby was feted by Bert Todd and the good roads dignitaries while Haney was all but ignored. They didn't win the medals, though. There was no road north of Lake Superior, where they took a steamer and then a train through to Manitoba. And in British Columbia, despite picking their way through the mountains as best they could, they were forced to detour briefly into the United States to find their way west. At one point, they even drove on the narrow road beside the Fraser Canyon where the car's gas-fired lights failed in pitch-dark, with a guide lying on the fender holding a lamp while all three men prepared to leap for their lives if the wheels slipped over the edge. But the rules held that the journey had to be made entirely in Canada.

A photographer named Ed Flickenger did complete the Canadian drive in 1925, with help from Dr. Perry Doolittle, but they took a different approach:

The Ford Model T that crossed Canada with Ed Flickenger in 1925 had its wheels changed to drive on railway tracks where there were no roads.

the Ford Motor Company supplied a Model T and they registered it as a train, switching over to flanged wheels so it could drive on railway tracks where there was no road. The car covered more than 1,300 kilometres like that, the first motorized vehicle to drive along the north shore of Lake Superior, and through the mountains from Golden to Revelstoke. Flickenger, who worked for Ford of Canada, didn't win the medal because the car didn't stay on roads, something Doolittle wasn't concerned about. He was the long-serving president of the Canadian Automobile Association (CAA), and the trip was publicity to press for the Canadian Highway that still didn't exist.

As an aside, it's been generally reported until now, by me and others, that Doolittle and Flickenger drove together for the whole distance, probably because this was what Ford's public-relations department announced in 1973 when it re-created the trip to publicize the new Mustang and Cougar models. But Doolittle was just an organizer based in Toronto, Flickenger was in charge of the car, and local Ford executives did most of the driving.

In fact, the first person to drive across Canada without changing his wheels was J. "Jimmy" Graham Oates in 1928. He was from Britain's Isle of Man and had been a military dispatch rider in the First World War, when he lost an eye in a gas attack and came home to start his own, unsuccessful motorcycle company. As a stunt to promote Castrol Oil, he rode a 500 cc

Jimmy Oates and his Ariel motorcycle, seen here with a young passenger in the Sturgess sidecar.

Ariel from Halifax to Vancouver, sleeping in its sidecar and bumping along between the railway tracks for the long roadless stretches in Ontario and British Columbia. But Jimmy Oates didn't win the Todd Medal, either, because the rules didn't allow using the railway in any form; they also held that the vehicle should be a car. He ended at Vancouver and never met Todd, who had become mayor of Victoria and then an alderman and literally worked himself to death that October.

It took the Second World War for Canada to finally build the last stretch of highway that would link east and west. The remaining 250 kilometres of gravel road through the endless trees of Northern Ontario was completed in 1943 between the logging towns of Hearst and Geraldton, so military supplies could be moved without relying on American support. And three years later, once gasoline rationing eased, Brigadier (Retired) Alex Macfarlane of St. Catharines drove in a sponsored Chevrolet from Louisbourg to Victoria in nine days with his friend Ken MacGillivray, the former city editor of the *Globe and Mail*. It was an uneventful drive with just two flat tires.

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The road that would be the Trans-Canada Highway was finally declared open in 1962, 50 years after those motorists planted their signpost in Alberni. It had been a half century of political brawling and backroom deals. The problem was, while the federal government wanted the road built, it wasn't a federal responsibility. The Feds handled trains and ships, and more recently, aircraft, but highways were still a provincial matter. No prime minister could get away with telling a provincial premier what to do with the roads, and the Trans-Canada was no different.

Interest in a Canadian Highway had grown in the 1920s with the popularity, and affordability, of personal cars, spurred further by the constant promotion of people like Doolittle and Todd. It waned in the 1930s as the Great Depression dug in and car ownership declined, and then the Second World War took priority over everything. In 1949, as a recession loomed, the Liberal Party government of William Lyon Mackenzie King saw a way to put the country back to work. "The Trans-Canada Highway was built to provide employment, pure and simple," says David Monaghan. His 1996 thesis, *Canada's "New Main Street*," is considered the definitive explanation of the highway's many political challenges. "The federal government had it as a 'shelf project,' and when they finally pulled it off the shelf, it was to create employment after the Second World War."

As with everything, money talked. In the United States, when President Dwight Eisenhower's government committed to build its interstate highway system in the 1950s and 1960s, it agreed right off the top to pay 90 percent of the cost of construction to be financed through a gasoline tax. Young Lieutenant Colonel Eisenhower had driven in a coast-to-coast military convoy in 1919 that convinced him of the need for a system of dependable roads that could help defend the country. Canada wasn't so concerned about defending itself and was more fiscally cautious, so offered its provinces just half the cost of upgrading existing roads or building new ones. Only six of the 10 provinces agreed at first. Prince Edward Island knew the Feds would build a bridge or a tunnel to finally replace the overworked ferry and was the first to sign on, but Nova Scotia and New Brunswick balked at the proposed

route that would bypass Halifax and Saint John. Newfoundland balked at the cost. Quebec — well, Quebec really didn't care about linking itself to English-speaking Canada.

There were exceptions to the 50/50 deal, of course. The federal government had responsibility for national parks, and the roads in those parks were built to a high national standard, based on the construction standards for the new U.S. interstate system. The roads leading to them were another matter entirely. "You knew as soon as you were in the park," a Newfoundlander once told me about Terra Nova National Park in the early days. "Miles of dust and crap to get there, but inside the park itself, it was smooth sailing from one end to the other. It was all a tease for the miles of dust and crap on the other side when you left."

It was more than a decade before all the special deals were signed to make the Trans-Canada a reality. Saskatchewan was the first to complete its share of the highway, in 1957, but it had only 650 kilometres of flat roadway to widen and pave. Quebec was the last to agree, under the new premiership of Jean Lesage and with the promise from the Feds to build an ambitious — and expensive — bridge or tunnel across the St. Lawrence into Montreal.

The final stretch to be opened was a glorious 150 kilometres over the risky Rogers Pass between Revelstoke and Golden in British Columbia. The mountains were beautiful but prone to avalanches, and a series of snowsheds had to be built to carry falling snow and debris over the highway. It passed through Glacier and Mount Revelstoke National Parks and so the federal government paid for almost all of it, but that wasn't enough for B.C. premier W.A.C. Bennett. He'd wanted the Feds to pay for everything. So while Prime Minister John Diefenbaker was due to lead a convoy to Rogers Pass to formally open the Trans-Canada Highway in September, Bennett set up his own ribbon-cutting event for "B.C. Highway 1" five weeks earlier. He declared the road open in front of several thousand onlookers, allowing an estimated 347,000 people to drive through the national park before the prime minister's ceremony. "There was one of the most peculiar, self-centred actions that I've ever known," Diefenbaker reportedly said later.

That was at 3:00 p.m. on July 30, 1962 — the day I was born.

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I first travelled the entire length of the Trans-Canada Highway in 2012, driving a yellow Chevrolet Camaro convertible borrowed from General Motors and blogging about the journey for *Maclean's* magazine. Again, in the summer of 2023, I drove the highway, this time in a borrowed Lexus SUV and writing for the *Globe and Mail*. Both times, I drove from east to west, from St. John's to Victoria. The first time, I brought my then-12-year-old son with me for the second half of the trip, and more recently, I travelled with my old friend, Peter, who I've known since we failed most of our exams together at college in the United Kingdom, before I moved to Canada in 1980.

Peter flew in from his home in Gloucestershire to meet me at my house in Cobourg, Ontario, and the two of us drove east a couple of days later in the Lexus RX 500h. The SUV was a hybrid prototype, and I chose it because it was built in Canada at Toyota's assembly plant in Cambridge, Ontario, just as the Camaro before it was built at the General Motors plant in Oshawa. Both makers were happy to lend me their vehicles for the publicity it would bring, though I warned them I'd be critical in any appraisal. Eleven years apart, they both shrugged. "Bring it on," they said.

Aside from clothes, notebooks, cameras, and all the other paraphernalia of a road trip, both times I carried three unique souvenirs. One was a horseshoe, found beside the road in British Columbia by Jack Haney during the 1912 drive with Wilby and then carried in his toolbox until his death. It was mounted on a small wooden shield and lent to me by the St. Catharines Museum. Another was a tin CAA grille badge from 1925 — the same year Ed Flickenger's car drove across the country on road and rail — given to me by the CAA. And the third was the Todd Medal itself, lent to me in 2012 by Alex Macfarlane's grandson, Jim, and in 2023 by Jim's widow, Nancy. "Take good care of it," they both said, "and we'll see you when you get back. It should be quite the journey."

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It took Peter and me four days to drive the 3,000 kilometres to St. John's from my home near Toronto. It wasn't an auspicious drive because, like most travellers these days, we just wanted to get to the other end. The road through to Nova Scotia was four lanes and divided by a wide median with controlled access junctions, designed for fast and effective trucking. Very different from the days of the old pathfinders, and not very interesting at all.

Our golden rule was that we had to drive the entire length of the Trans-Canada on its traditional route across the country. If we left the highway to explore the countryside, we had to rejoin it at the exact same place to not miss anything. The rule could be stretched, though, because it was okay to miss a section heading west if we had already driven that same one headed east; we took advantage of this later to leave the monotony of the blacktop in Quebec and New Brunswick to explore the scenic roads beside the St. Lawrence and Saint John Rivers. And, after all, those older roads had been the original Trans-Canada in the 1960s before it was widened and improved.

The Trans-Canada Highway network diversified over the years and now officially accounts for about 13,000 kilometres of roads, including a long stretch of highway north of Montreal in Quebec that leads up to Val-d'Or before crossing into Ontario, where it follows the same road through the northern woods that Macfarlane took in 1946. The Yellowhead Highway in the Prairies is also officially Trans-Canada, though nobody ever thinks of it as such: it splits away just west of Winnipeg and travels through the more northerly cities of Saskatoon and Edmonton until it reaches Prince Rupert on the Pacific coast. In Ontario, an alternate route leads west from Thunder Bay to Rainy River and then north to Kenora, and another travels directly northwest from Ottawa to North Bay before reaching the Great Lakes. Peter and I would stick to the traditional route that was intended to cross the country in as short a distance as possible. That 1962 designation already included a split that gave a choice of driving through northern Nova Scotia or Prince Edward Island, so we drove east through Nova Scotia and would return west through the island province.

We shared the driving, roughly a couple of hours behind the wheel before pulling over for coffee, or gas, or just a pee, or all three, and then swapping places. That was the same arrangement Jackson and Crocker agreed

on when they drove across the United States in 1903 — though they'd stop far more frequently for repairs and digging out — and very different from Wilby and Haney nine years later, when Wilby never once took the wheel or even assisted with maintaining the Reo. In truth, both Peter and I would have been quite happy to have not had the other person drive at all. Our styles at the wheel were very different, and neither of us ever quite got used to the foibles of the other, but that's a tale for another chapter and we pressed on regardless.

It was early June, and the 18-hour ferry that links Nova Scotia with eastern Newfoundland wasn't open yet for the season. That meant we had to take the six-hour ferry across to the southwestern point of the island at Port aux Basques and then drive the 900-kilometre length of the Trans-Canada across the province to St. John's. There's no other route over The Rock. We made it, stayed with some friends and explored the area, then, on a foggy Tuesday morning, drove to the Atlantic Ocean to begin our drive across Canada.