



Early motorists pause for a photo at the Rock Cut on Vaseaux Lake
in the South Okanagan
Photo courtesy of Kelowna Museum

Road Trip: From Trails to Highways In the Okanagan

Okanagan History Vignette



A Conference Call

Vince: *Hi everyone. This is Vince at head office in Vancouver. Our sales presentation is on the agenda for 4:00 pm. What time do you think you will get here?*

Sally: *Well, I'm just getting ready to leave Salmon Arm now, and it's 8:00 a.m. I'll take the Trans-Canada Highway to Kamloops and come down the Coquihalla Highway. I should be at your office before 2:00. Let's meet for coffee then.*

Ken: *Great idea. I'll leave Kelowna about 10:00. I'll drive the Coquihalla Connector to Merritt, and then take the Coquihalla Highway to Vancouver. This will give me a couple of hours to make some changes to my report. Being able to meet together is a good way for us to do business.*

Penny: *I'll leave Penticton in an hour or so and drive the Hope-Princeton Highway to Vancouver. After coffee, let's spend an hour going over our presentation. I really want to get this contract.*

Vince: *I'm glad you will all be here so soon. Being able to drive yourselves to the meeting saves a lot of hassle. And you will all be able to leave Vancouver when it suits you. I know the management will love our ideas. Have a good trip.*

Ken: *Thanks, Vince. The Coquihalla is a smooth ride. I always enjoy highway driving.*

Penny: *Me, too. And the mountain scenery is spectacular. I enjoy the freedom of travelling by car because I can stop anytime I choose.*

Sally: *This will be my third road trip to Vancouver this spring. I'm looking forward to seeing you all later today. Bye for now.*

Road Trip: From Trails to Highways In The Okanagan

Today, conversations such as this one take place all the time. People can easily drive from the Okanagan Valley to the West Coast for business or pleasure. The completion of the Hope-Princeton Highway in 1949, the Trans-Canada Highway in 1962, the Coquihalla Highway in 1986, and the Coquihalla Connector in 1990 make travel between the Okanagan Valley and Vancouver a short journey. However, travel in British Columbia and the Okanagan Valley was not always this easy. There were no roads in the Okanagan Valley in the early 1800s. The only trails in the area were those made by the First Nations people. Even in the early 1900s, land transportation was far different than it is today. The roads were primitive, and the vehicles were mainly horses and wagons. So how did we get from rough trails to super highways? Well, it all began with the Hudson's Bay Fur Brigade Trail.

Fur Brigade Trail

The Hudson's Bay Brigade Trail, also known as the Fur Brigade Trail or the Okanagan Brigade Trail, was one of the earliest commercial trails in the Okanagan Valley. The trail started in Fort Vancouver in what is now the state of Washington, and it went east along the Columbia

River. Then it went through the Okanagan Valley and continued on to Fort St. James. It was called the Fur Brigade Trail because the trail was used to take supplies and trade goods from England to the fur trappers in the interior. Supplies going north included food, dry goods, and tools. Trade goods included guns, blankets, pots and pans, and other items to trade with the First Nations people for furs. The trail was also used to take furs out to world markets. From 1810 until 1846, many furs from the BC interior were transported along the Fur Brigade Trail through the Okanagan Valley.



This photo from the 1800s shows two area fur traders proudly displaying their fur pelts.

Photo courtesy of Kelowna Museum

Nations trails that sometimes were only paths through the Okanagan. The Hudson's Bay Company saw the need for a more clearly marked trail. In 1824, they asked their employee, Tom McKay, to blaze the overland portion from Fort Okanogan to Kamloops. The trail had been in use since 1810, but McKay made the trail easier to follow.

From 1821 to 1846, the Fur Brigade Trail was busy. Twice a year, two or three hundred pack horses and men would use the trail. These groups of men and pack animals were called pack trains or horse trains. They would take goods north and bring furs south. Each horse would carry over 150 pounds on its back and would travel about 20 miles each day. Every morning the brigade was underway by 9:00 a.m. after the horses were rounded up and loaded. After 4:00 p.m., the packers would set up camp, and the horses would be let out to graze in the wild grasslands. There were many rest areas along the trail, with grazing land and fresh drinking water for the horses. Westbank, across Okanagan Lake from Kelowna, was a popular spot for stopping.

At first, the Fur Brigade Trail was mainly used by fur traders. But the fur trade route came to an end in 1846. At that time, the American border was drawn at the 49th parallel. The British-owned Hudson's Bay Company did not want to travel through the new American territory. So the Company stopped using the Okanagan portion of the Fur Brigade

Trail between Kamloops and Fort Vancouver. Instead, furs were brought south down the Nicola Valley to Hope and then on the Fraser River to Vancouver. However, in the Okanagan, the trail continued to be used by miners, missionaries, and other travellers. In fact, Father Pandosy, the first white settler in the Kelowna area, travelled on the Brigade Trail for

part of his trip between Colville, Washington, and Kelowna. The trail was so well used that even today there are places on the west side of the lake where the trail is still visible. One can still walk part of the trail near Okanagan Lake Resort. In 1949, a cairn with a plaque telling about the Okanagan Brigade Trail was erected in Westbank.



This cairn marking the Okanagan Brigade Trail is located at the corner of Highway 97 and Old Okanagan Highway.

Wagon Roads and Stagecoaches

By the mid-1800s, there were still no wagon roads to speak of in the Okanagan Valley. Teams of horses and wagons would just travel along stretches of land that were free of trees, rocks, and steep hills, or

they would use existing trails. The first wagon train to pass through Kelowna was the Palmer and Miller expedition in 1858. These Americans were travelling from Walla Walla, Washington, to the BC interior using the old Fur Brigade Trail. The Palmer and Miller expedition had nine wagons, each pulled by a team of oxen. The wagons were loaded with food, tools, and other goods that Palmer and Miller wanted to sell to the miners in the Cariboo. They crossed Okanagan Lake during their trip. It took 50 rafts to get all their supplies and wagons across the lake. The horses and oxen were taken around the lake using the east side trail. Travel was extremely rough for wagon trains. In some places, the wagons had to be unloaded, taken apart, carried over the rough spots, and then put back together again. In fact, the expedition was advised to stop when they reached Kamloops. They were told that the trail got worse the further north they went. So Palmer and Miller sold all their supplies in Kamloops. They even sold their oxen teams for \$900 a pair. One miner was so hungry for beef that he promptly butchered one of the oxen and roasted it.

A variety of stagecoaches and wagons were used for transporting people, supplies, and mail. Some stagecoaches held ten passengers and a driver. From one to six horses pulled the wagons and coaches. The roads were so rough that stagecoaches often broke down. Even



“Driving stage was hard work. The weather might be bad and the roads full of holes or blocked up, or the harness might break, or the stagecoach itself might break down,” said a BX Stagecoach Driver.

Photo courtesy of Greater Vernon Museum and Archives.

though passengers paid up to 10 cents a mile for their trip, the cost of the ticket did not guarantee a trouble-free trip. Once, a breakdown occurred outside Princeton. It involved the Welby Stagecoach on its regular Penticton to Hedley run. All the passengers had to get out and help fix a broken wheel. Once it was fixed, the wheel still needed some oil, but the driver didn't have any. One of the women passengers saved the day. In her suitcase, she had a bottle of castor oil. When the oil was poured on the axle, the wheel turned smoothly, and the stagecoach was on its way.

In 1859, gold was discovered at Rock Creek, just east of the Okanagan Valley. It was hard to collect taxes and provide supplies for



A wagon has slipped off the corduroy road.
It is stuck in the mud.

Photo courtesy of Kelowna Museum

the miners who rushed in to the area. So BC Governor James Douglas hired Edgar Dewdney to build a trail from Fort Hope on the Fraser River to Rock Creek, passing over the rugged Cascade Mountains and along the Similkameen Valley.

Construction of the Dewdney Trail began in 1860. The first portion of the trail ran from Hope to Princeton, and it was completed in 1861. The trail was 4 feet (1.3 m) wide. Logs were placed across the wet places in the trail. A road made of logs was known as a corduroy road. In 1861, the trail was extended to Rock Creek. In 1865, it was extended again to Wild Horse Creek in the East Kootenays. This narrow, 290-mile (467-kilometre) trail could be considered the first provincial highway.

Over the next couple of decades, many trails and primitive roads were built that helped to open up the Okanagan Valley. The Allison Trail

between Princeton and Okanagan Lake was built to move cattle from their summer grazing pastures in Princeton to their winter grounds on Okanagan Lake. There was also the Pandosy Trail that followed the east side of Okanagan Lake between Penticton and Kelowna. There was a wagon road between Spallumcheen and the head of Okanagan Lake as early as 1873. The first wagon road between the north end of Okanagan Lake and Kelowna was built in 1875.

Automobiles and Highways

The early roads were first used by horses and wagons. Automobiles started showing up in the Okanagan in 1904.



An article in the *Victoria Colonist* newspaper in 1896 warned about women driving. "Ladies have learned to manage gentle horses but it is highly improbable that they will ever be able to drive motor cars which may take some mechanical skills, for the latter is something ladies, by nature, do not possess."

Photo courtesy of Greater Vernon Museum and Archives

The first car was a McLaughlin two-seater. Then came the Model T Fords. In 1919, a person could buy a Model T Ford for \$600. All early Model T's were black. The gas tank was under the front seat, and there was no fuel gauge. People had to estimate how low they were on fuel. People would buy gasoline by the barrel and keep it at home because there were no gas stations. In the early days, there were no speed limits on the roads, and no licence was needed to drive. By 1911, Vernon had passed a city bylaw setting the speed limit to 15 miles per hour (just under 25 kph). On some roads, a mixture of sand and hot tar was placed on the surface to keep the dust down. This was the start of modern pavement.

Early car owners demanded better roads in their own areas. They also wanted to travel to other towns and to other provinces. There were early attempts to drive across Canada. In 1912, an Englishman named Thomas Wilby took 52 days to get from Halifax to Victoria. He drove through swamps, forests, open prairie, and mountainous terrain. In some places he had to use a train or a boat to get through. In 1920, Percy Montgomery drove from Montreal to Vancouver in 32 days. But he dipped down into the U.S. because sections of the road in Canada hadn't been built or were too rough. Then in 1925, two Canadians crossed Canada by car, but not always by road. They had a special set

of wheels for their car that fit on railway tracks. When the driving got too difficult, they slipped on the train wheels and rode along on the tracks. Finally in 1946, two men drove from Nova Scotia to Victoria on Canadian roads. It took them nine days in a new Chevrolet.

Municipal governments constructed local streets, and the provincial government built roads linking towns in the province. By 1940, there was a two-lane highway built across BC. But there was no highway stretching across Canada from coast to coast. Railways had been crossing the country for years. And in 1937, Trans-Canada Airlines, now Air Canada, began flying across the country. But there was still no continuous highway. The federal government in Ottawa would need to give money to the provinces to help them extend their



Carmi is located 50 km southeast of Kelowna
Photo courtesy of the Kelowna Museum

roads and make them link up with the roads of neighbouring provinces. Funding was made available, and by 1946 there was a through road across the country. However, stretches of the road were often made of gravel and were in poor condition. In 1949, Parliament passed the Trans-Canada Highway Act to provide a modern paved road. Today, the Trans-Canada Highway is the longest, fully-paved road in any country in the world. It extends 4,860 miles (about 7,820 kilometres) from Victoria, BC, to St. John's, Newfoundland.

British Columbia has always had more cars for the size of its population than any other province. However, in 1900, it was estimated that there were only 1,000 miles of roads and trails in the province. BC's rough terrain made it hard and expensive to build roads and highways. In 1927, the coast was linked to the interior when the Fraser Canyon Highway opened. This highway followed sections of the old Cariboo gold rush trail. People in the Okanagan wanted a faster route to the coast than the long drive to Kamloops and Cache Creek and then down the Fraser Canyon to Hope. So in 1949 the Hope-Princeton Highway was opened. It followed parts of the old Dewdney Trail along the Skagit and Similkameen Rivers, with a new loop through Manning Park. It cost nearly \$3 million dollars to build. Because of the difficult terrain, some

areas of the road cost \$100,000 per mile (over \$62,000 per kilometre).



The type of rock crusher used during the building of highways in the Okanagan.

Photo courtesy of the Kelowna Museum

The year 1952 saw the beginning of a road-building boom in BC. W.A.C. Bennett from Kelowna was elected premier of the province. He appointed Phil Gaglardi from Kamloops to be Minister of Highways. These two men from the interior of the province knew the importance of roads to link the interior to the West Coast and to the rest of Canada. They thought good roads would help to develop natural resources and would attract people to live in BC. Therefore, narrow roads were widened, and highways were built. The Bennett government was soon called the “Blacktop Government.”

In 1958, a bridge was built between Kelowna and the Westside. It was a floating bridge because the lake was so deep that it would have been difficult to sink the support columns of a fixed bridge. There was a lot of boat traffic that could not pass under the bridge's regular span. So the new bridge had a lift span on one end. The lift span could be raised 60 feet (18 metres) above the water line.

Also in 1958, the Bennett government decided to build a new road between Revelstoke and Golden. Travellers would not have to use the rough Big Bend route going through Mica Creek that was built in 1940. The new highway through Rogers Pass went across difficult terrain, and it took 4 years to finish. But when this 92-mile (148-kilometre) stretch of road was opened in July, 1962, the Trans-Canada Highway was officially declared complete.



Rogers Pass, 1962
Photo courtesy of Art Rogers

Between 1979 and 1990, a new route was built from Hope through the Coquihalla Pass to the southern interior. Much of the route followed the old Kettle Valley Railway line. The Coquihalla Highway was built in three stages. The first phase joined Hope with Merritt. The second phase went from Merritt to Kamloops. The final stage, known now as the Connector, went from Merritt to Peachland. The builders of this highway had to deal with tons of snow and move tons of rock. They crossed 67 avalanche paths. They moved sections of the Boston Bar Creek 15 times and the Coquihalla River three times without disturbing the trout spawning grounds. In 1984, there was a push to complete the highway for the opening of Expo '86 in Vancouver. At this time, 7,000 workers were employed seven days a week to build the route. The difficulties of building the four-lane highway are not evident now. All that motorists see today are gradually sloping hills, gentle curves, and spectacular scenery.



The Coquihalla Highway
just after it opened in
1986.

Photo courtesy of
Isobel Morris

The Coquihalla Connector, also known as Highway 97C, opened in 1990. It cost \$225 million (in 1987 dollars) for pavement, labour, and fences. It brought Okanagan residents 90 minutes closer to the Lower Mainland. To lessen the impact of the new road on wildlife, the Connector has a \$10.5 million wildlife protection system. This features a 100-kilometre fence on both sides of the highway to keep deer and moose off the road. There are also 25 wildlife underpasses and one overpass to allow animals to roam freely. The wildlife fence is a success. In 1991, 27 deer were killed on Highway 97 between Peachland and Summerland, which did not have a fence at the time. But only one was killed on the Connector. The new highway has boosted growth in the Okanagan by attracting new businesses, new residents, and year-round visitors.

Today we take roads for granted. From the Okanagan Valley, we can easily travel to Vancouver. For a region to grow, roads are important. They provide communication links as well as business and recreation opportunities. Roads are used to make money. Over the years, Okanagan trails and roads have carried furs, gold, fruit, and supplies of all kinds. People are more likely to settle in areas where road transportation is readily available. Good roads give people independence and improve their quality of life. Roads are expensive to

build. But their value has always been far greater than their cost to the country and to its people.



To use wagons and pack animals, wagon roads had to be built. The old trails were just not wide enough. With the arrival of cars, roads then needed to be even wider and paved. Road building crew with horses outside of Oyama, 1911.

Photo courtesy of Greater Vernon Museum and Archives

Glossary

agenda	list of things to do
blaze	to mark a trail by chipping pieces of bark off trees
brigade	a group organized for a specific job. eg. fire brigade
bylaw	law made by the governing body of a town
cairn	pile of stones serving as a landmark
castor oil	thick oil used as a lubricant and as a laxative
conference call	telephone call in which a group of people take part
expedition	a difficult or long journey for a special purpose. eg. expedition to Mt. Everest
grazing	feeding on grasses
hassle	bother or nuisance
missionaries	people sent out to do religious or charity work
municipal	local government of a town or region
Okanogan	alternate spelling of Okanagan
plaque	thin piece of metal with words written on it
primitive	at an early stage of development
terrain	land or territory