

Lake Country Legends

Newsletter of the Lake Country Scenic Byway

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EXPLORE THE ROAD TO ITASCA...AND BEYOND

Jefferson Highway: Travel our way from Pine to Palm

My first article on the Jefferson Highway was from information taken from articles in the Park Rapids Enterprise. I now have more information from the 1916 Bemidji Pioneer and maps found in the files at the Resource Center in Beltrami County.



By Frank Mitchell, Byway Historian

The route from New Orleans to St. Paul had been established following close to the present Highway #71. The Minnesota Highway Commission had suggested three different routes through Minnesota.

A statement was issued by J. H. Beek, vice president, and Henry Orme, director, for the highway in Minnesota. They had awaited the arrival of J. D. Clarkson, general manager of the Jefferson Highway Association. Mr. Clarkson had visited all the towns along the route

from New Orleans to St. Paul. Of the three routes proposed #1 in Minnesota would be called the western route. This route would go from St. Paul to Anoka, Elk River, St. Cloud, Melrose, Alexandria, Henning, Perham, Detroit, Lake Park, Moorhead, Crookston, Warren, Steven, Hallock and on to Winnipeg. #2 would be the central route going from St. Paul to Elk River, St. Cloud, Little Falls, Staples, Wadena, Park Rapids, Itasca Park, Yola, Bemidji, Bagley, Red Lake Falls to the boundary at St. Vincent and on to Winnipeg. #3 the eastern route would go through Anoka, Elk River, Princeton, Mill Lacs Lake, Garrison, Brainerd, Pine River, Walker, Cass Lake and on to Bemidji then following the same route as # 2 to Winnipeg. Mr. Clarkson and Henry Orme were to inspect

all three routes before deciding on the final route.

This is when the people in the counties of the route #2, organized and met in Wadena to try to convince the commissioner to use route #2 to come through Wadena, Park Rapids and Itasca. One hundred delegates from Itasca to St. Cloud met in Wadena in May. The delegates from Park Rapids were L. H. Rice, president, W. M. Taber, trustee, H. A. Willbright, C. E. Spencer, and Frank Heisel. This organization was called the "Central Minnesota Jefferson Highway Association." This group was successful in getting route #2 as the official route. Then from Itasca the route went through Yola, Bemidji, Wilton, Solway, Shevlin, Bagley, Clearbrook, Gonvick, Gully, Trail, Oklee, Brooks, Red Lake Falls, Thief River Falls and on to Winnipeg. (Yola was a small town four miles

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

- **May 1, 2009** Monthly meeting at Grace Community Church, Osage, 8:30 am
- **June 2, 2009** Annual Meeting at Douglas Lodge, 5:30 pm

north of the present Lake George. There was no road to Lake George and no town of Lake George at that time.)

In an article in the Bemidji Pioneer, July 27, 1916, the headlines read "Central Loop Picked for Northern Lap of Jefferson Highway." J. D. Clarkson decides on route through Itasca Park and Bemidji. Although the route has been designated, the communities touched must fulfill certain obligations to retain the highway. A committee of seven men must be organized and an assessment of \$9.00 a mile must be raised

(Continued on back)



Jefferson Highway (continued)

and the road had to be designed to be used 365 days a year. Any community failing to meet its obligations would forfeit the highway designation and another route would be selected.

On July 17, 1916 the headlines in the Park Rapids Enterprise stated, "Park Rapids is now on the Jefferson National Highway." The first Jefferson Highway Sociability Run came into Park Rapids from St. Joseph, Missouri. The Run stayed on schedule within five minutes at every town on the route. As it entered Park Rapids, 150 local cars joined in the procession. There were cars from all the neighboring towns. The thanks of the Park Rapids community was due the people of Ponsford, Hubbard, Menahga, Osage, Akeley and Nevis

as well as the local resorts for joining in the procession. They turned onto Main Street and stopped at the junction of 2nd Street where an arch had been erected. The arch was decorated with pine boughs and flags with a sign, "Gateway to Itasca State Park." Each car carried a pennant saying, "Park Rapids, we like it, you'll like it."

Mr. Rice gave a short talk and then introduced Mr. Clarkson who talked about the "victory" they had won by keeping this highway as the designated Jefferson Highway. He said we are all neighbors since we live on the banks of the same great river, the "Father of Waters." We are building a neighborhood 1800 miles long.

The 1st Jefferson Highway Sociability Run came into Park Rapids at 3:39 p.m. and arrived in

Itasca Park at 4:48 pm, the party had supper at Douglas Lodge then left for Bemidji arriving there at 8:00 p.m. They spent the night in Bemidji and left there at 8:00 a.m. going to Shevlin, Bagley and reached Oklee at noon. Then they spent the night in Thief River Falls.

Mr. Clarkson had asked that the automobiles line up to await the arrival of the group in each town and then accompany them to the next town. When they arrived at Emerson on the border they were met by Premier J. C. Norris of Manitoba. He presented Mr. Clarkson with the Union Jack flag, which was entwined with the Stars and Stripes that was carried on the Flag car. Mr. Rice went with the officials to Winnipeg, where they were greeted by an enthusiastic crowd, and a royal reception was given the party. There were pennants all along the

route to guide the lead car. The pennants had a white center with the letters JH on the white and the top and bottom were blue.

So in July 1916, the Jefferson Highway was officially dedicated and became a popular tourist highway from New Orleans to Winnipeg, or from "Pine to Palm." The ad in the Pioneer states, "No highway in America gives a more comprehensive idea of the natural beauty and vast resources of this continent than the famous and popular Jefferson Highway. It is truly the vacation route in America - every mile rich in natural wealth, rich in points of historic interest and scenic beauty. For more information contact the Touring Information Bureau, St. Joseph, MO"

We do have evidence that the highway came through Park Rapids as there is a metal sign in our museum that says "Jefferson Highway."

Why become a member of the Lake Country Scenic Byway Association?

"We have lots of natural beauty and things to see and do in our own state. Our Lake Country Scenic Byway is a great tour guide highlighting these special things. I'm glad to support the Lake Country Scenic Byway."

Lezli Zimmerman

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