

April 14, 1846: "We believe the disposition to compromise on some fair basis — say that of 49° — is now stronger in the United States than ever."

The MONTREAL GAZETTE, in response to President Polk's Oregon message.

The Pembina (Like The Border) Has Not Stayed In One Place

The Pembina runs from Swan Lake in Manitoba to the Red River in North Dakota. In 1971, it flooded thirty-five thousand acres and threatened many a farmer's sugar beet crop. Some built dikes to divert the waters and inundated their neighbours. Tempers flared on both sides of the border.

The Canada-United States border is a symbol of fair-mindedness and a triumph of reason. It takes the sun five hours to follow its 5,526 mile length. It is composed entirely of straight lines — the last curves were removed in 1925.

The longest line runs straight across the prairies and the Rockies; the shortest, twenty-three inches, separates Quebec from slightly less than two feet of Maine. It begins in the east through a litany of rivers — St. Croix, St. John, St. Lawrence — and it ends in the Arctic on the edge of the Beaufort Sea. Once it was the source of bitter argument and constant confusion; now it is crossed by tens of thousands of Canadians and Americans daily, almost as if it did not exist.

It was created in 1783 at the end of the American Revolution. Canadians thought it should follow the Ohio



Young Yankee Doodle teaching geography to Britannia

River; Benjamin Franklin believed there should be no line at all — that Britain should cede Canada to the United States.

The boundary agreed on was unfortunately vague, and it took decades of quarrels, surveys, arbitrations and negotiations to fix it to everyone's satisfaction.

On the Fourth of July 1827, John

Baker, an American living on the upper St. John, hoisted a homemade American flag in New Brunswick. He was jailed. A dozen years later, Maine and New Brunswick lumbermen clashed one day in the Aroostook War, but General Winfield Scott calmed it down before it amounted to much more than one night of sound and fury. The Webster-Ashburton Treaty of 1842 finally settled the major points of dispute.

The dispute moved west to the rich lands of the Oregon Territory. American militants put their demands in a slogan — "Fifty-Four Forty or Fight." Had it been realized, all of British Columbia's major population centres would now be in the US. Canada wanted the boundary to follow the Columbia River. If it had, Seattle would be in Canada.

Cooler heads prevailed. One, representing the Hudson's Bay Company's interests, was almost too cool. Captain John Gordon, commanding The America, a fifty-five-gun British frigate, came to Puget Sound to show the flag and catch a salmon. He did the first but failed to do the second. Hudson's Bay records describe him as "exceedingly kind but no wise enthusiastic about Oregon. . . . He does not think the country worth five straws."

US President Polk let it be known that he was willing to draw the line at the 49th, not the 54th, parallel. The British Foreign Office agreed, provided all of Vancouver Island be British. Surveyors began to mark the border, working slowly past snow-covered

peaks and glacier-filled gorges, through thick forests of virgin pine. Mosquitoes killed mules and horses, and when Lieutenant Charles W. Wilson of the Royal Engineers sat down to write in his diary, "the bites came through the needle holes in the seams" of his kid gloves.

The surveying took seventy years. Three men, all Canadians, were killed, two in a landslide. The third, an impulsive young man, walked to the very edge of a snow cornice to get a clear view of the beautiful valley two thousand feet below. S w o o s h !

Time cooled old resentments. In 1909, the Boundary Waters Treaty created the International Joint Commission to arbitrate problems.

During American prohibition, the spirit of cooperation peaked. Hundreds of houses, barns, sheds, stores and miscellaneous buildings sat on top of the 49th parallel, and a great many of these "line" houses became barrooms, with the bartender and his bar securely at one end and the inviting front door at the other.

Today, the pollution of the Lakes (which the 1909 Treaty failed to prevent) is a problem of mutual concern. An International Joint Commission Report provided the basis for the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement in 1972.

Meanwhile, the Pembina still rises in the spring, and judicious men in Winnipeg and Bismarck, Washington and Ottawa are considering solutions to the common problems of dikes and flooded fields.

Calendar grid for April 1976 with days of the week (S, M, T, W, T, F, S) and dates (1-30).