

THE GAP ON THE MAP:

Sparse Midwest Transit Options Between Canada and the United States



Prepared by:

Bill Thoms
Affiliated Staff

UGPTI Staff Paper No. 182
January 2016

NDSU UPPER GREAT PLAINS
TRANSPORTATION INSTITUTE

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In the 19th century, steamboats plied the Red River between Fargo, Grand Forks and Winnipeg. By 1900, regular railroad service for freight and passengers connected the two nations on that route. Rail passenger service between the two countries continued until April 30, 1971, when the newly formed National Railroad Passenger Corporation (Amtrak) declined to offer the international route. That marked the end of a possible continuous rail journey from Churchill, Manitoba to Cutucu, El Salvador.

With the departure of the Great Northern Railway and its connection, the Midland Railway of Manitoba, surface passengers were carried by Greyhound buses between Minneapolis-St. Paul and Winnipeg, where transcontinental trains and buses were available to Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal and points in between. When Greyhound retrenched its system, Jefferson Lines (so called because it covered the states of the 1803 Louisiana Purchase) took over its operations in North Dakota and Minnesota.

Jefferson continued the international bus line until 2014, when it ceased to offer service north of Grand Forks. That is the system that prevails today. It is not possible to travel by bus directly between the Twin Cities (the largest metropolitan area in the Upper Midwest of the United States) and Winnipeg, the Manitoba capital and the largest city in the Canadian Midwest).

How do you get across the border by transit today? Well, you don't. For a while, until mid-2015, a Canadian entrepreneur named Scott Stroh was licensed to carry passengers from Winnipeg to Grand Forks and Fargo. The trips operated on weekends only and were billed as shopping excursions. In late 2015, Stroh's company, Northern Sparrow, threw in the towel and there were no more buses going through the Pembina gateway. There is now a large hole in the transit map of North America.

There is also no more North Dakota-Manitoba air service, although you can fly there by first heading south to Minneapolis for 300 miles, and then flying north for 600 miles on Delta. It is expensive and relatively inconvenient, but possible.

And Minneapolis travel agencies are still offering routings that take Amtrak to Stanley, ND, then by cab across the border to Bienfait Junction, Saskatchewan, where you can catch a bus to Regina and a final bus to Winnipeg. The trip is scheduled for about 20 hours each way. For the real gluttons for punishment, Jefferson offers a bus to Brainerd, which has a connection to Duluth, where a

further bus leg is available to Sault Ste. Marie, MI. Cross the Soo Locks to Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, and start heading back west again. You will arrive in Winnipeg in a bit more than 36 hours travel time.

And, once again, theoretically there is an all-rail routing via Amtrak to Chicago on the Empire Builder, then the Lake Shore to Buffalo, NY, with a connection on the Maple Leaf to Toronto, where one crosses the border near Niagara Falls. Alas, the passenger who opts for that journey would seem to be the same sort of adventurous soul who would brave Niagara Falls in a barrel!

As our population ages, there is a growth in the non-driving citizenry of the Upper Midwest, who are unable or unwilling to use their own automobiles for long trips. Surface passengers in the North American Midwest deserve better options for a journey that took no more than 5 hours just a few years ago.

Bill Thoms has been interested in transportation since his formative years as a crew caller for the now-defunct New York, New Haven & Hartford RR while attending law school. He has written and lectured extensively in the field of transportation law, with a particular interest in railroad issues.