


# THE GREAT 'SKINNY BRIDGE' DISASTER

Anyone who's been to Lac du Bonnet probably knows about our "skinny bridge" located along Hwy. 313. Countless residents and cottagers head over the bridge each year, and right now, doing so is a bit of a headache — the bridge is in need of repair and has been narrowed to one lane.

But this isn't the first time the bridge has needed upgrades. In fact, it's not the first skinny bridge to have existed there — the original bridge collapsed exactly 100 years ago. The Lac du Bonnet District Museum, with some help from Peter Lacey's *Tramway to the Pointe*, tells the story.



Pictured: The original Lac du Bonnet "skinny bridge" collapsed in June of 1914 — exactly 100 years ago. The locomotive passing over it was too heavy, and the engineer lost his life. It's believed the boxcar hanging from the bridge is still at the bottom of the river.



**THE FIRST WINNIPEG** River bridge, located along what is now Hwy. 313, was built for the Winnipeg Hydro Tramway in order to haul gravel, freight, construction materials, and passengers to the Pointe du Bois hydroelectric dam for its construction and maintenance.

By June 1907, 50 men and eight teams of horses had cleared the right-of-way from the Lac du Bonnet CPR station to the Winnipeg River crossing, and by Dec. 28, 1907, 35 men had completed work on the cribs and capped them with concrete.

The bridge was completed and in service by May 4, 1908 at a cost of \$46,048. The tramway line of 26 miles from Lac du Bonnet to Pointe du Bois was first serviced by Locomotive No. 1. She worked so hard and was in such poor shape — and the cost of repairing her so prohibitive — that she was finally discarded in April 1914.

Locomotive No. 2 was purchased on May 26, 1914 in Kingston, Ont., but was too heavy for the tracks. On June 30, 1914, the “skinny bridge” collapsed under her. The train was just going at a crawl at the time and firefighter Peter Riddell was able to jump free, but engineer George Wrighton went down with the engine and lost his life. The steam explosion could be heard several miles away in the Newcombe area. It was determined a splice at the west end of the bridge span had given way because it was not up to the load.

With help from the CPR, Locomotive No. 2 was taken apart to get her out of the river and refurbished at the

Weston shops in Winnipeg. It is believed that the boxcar hanging precariously from the bridge was uncoupled and tipped into the river, where it remains to this day.

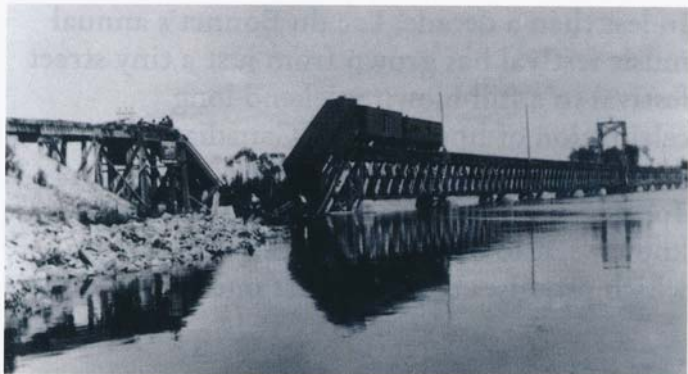
A call for tenders for a new bridge was made in 1930 and Macaw & Macdonald was successful in their bid to build a new steel bridge, and it was completed by late 1931. This is today’s “skinny bridge” which was raised four feet in 1954 when the water was raised for the new McArthur Falls power plant — still only allowing for the passage of small boats.

The skinny bridge that visitors to Lac du Bonnet know so well is once again in need of repair or replacement. In 2013, a routine inspection found a corroded girder under the structure. Traffic lights have been erected at the bridge, and pylons put up to limit traffic to one lane on the south side of the bridge.

As a result, traffic has at times been backed up from the bridge all the way to Hwy. 11 by Drifter’s Inn, causing frustration and headaches for those trying to get to the cabin on Friday night. The province says the traffic lights will be there for the foreseeable future until the proper repairs are made. Many are hoping an entirely new bridge will be built.

Copies of *Tramway to the Pointe* are available for purchase at the Lac du Bonnet District Museum, located in Halliday Park at the junction of Hwy. 502 and Hwy. 313. For info and museum hours visit [ldbhistorical.ca](http://ldbhistorical.ca).

*-Terry Tottle on behalf of the Lac du Bonnet and District Museum*



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