

1972

The International Boundary Line

Jim Connors

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Story: "The International Boundary Line"

Storyteller: Jim Connors

Town: Allagash, ME

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Collector: Helen K. Atchison

Date: 1972

The story heard here provides a humorous but fictional explanation of how the Maine-Canada border came to be established, particularly the straight section in the northwestern corner. As Connors told it, the surveyors got drunk, took the wrong river, and then cut a line to get them back on track. This was, of course, not what really happened. Instead, the border was established through decades of negotiation between the American and the British governments, including arbitration by the King of the Netherlands from 1829 to 1831. These negotiations began after the American Revolution and culminated with the Aroostook War of 1838-39. The dispute was finally settled in Article I of the Webster-Ashburton Treaty of 1842 (the text of this treaty is available at http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/br-1842.asp).

This type of story is not uncommon, and has been used to explain any number of observations and experiences that do not seem to make sense. In this case, the border between Maine and Canada breaks away from the St. John River, which is arguably a logical or natural boundary line. The story is somewhat odd in that it seems to be making fools of the men who were assigned to draw the line and whose mistake benefited the United States (not to mention that it begs the question of why Britain would have accepted this line). This suggests the story may have originated among Canadians or at least among Americans with close ethnic and cultural ties to Canada. Considering the close connections between Maine and eastern Canada, it is possible that some residents of the area would still be sympathetic to Britain and Canada's case even in 1840. One note on geography may be helpful: Connors mentions the town Estcourt in the story, which is the town in Quebec where the border takes the sharp southwestern turn.

Transcript:

Now, back in the day, they say, that the international engineers that ran the boundary came to St. Francis, and they went to Clara Hotel in St. Francis and they got slightly inebriated and they stayed there for two or three days because it was a stopping place. And then with a goodly supply of alcoholic beverages, you know, back in those days, as they did today, as they *do* today rather, they drank it in the summer to keep cool and in the winter to keep warm. And it was a good fly [*unclear*] so they claimed. In any event, they left after a few days in St. Francis and they went up the St. Francis River instead of the St. John all the way to Estcourt [,Quebec]. By the time they got to Estcourt, the story goes, they knew they were on the wrong river then, but it was a mighty long way to retrace their steps, so they just took a compass heading that they thought would bring them back over on the St. John where they should be and they had to make a small correction before they got back to the St. John as you can see on the map. Now this is a story and I will not vouch for the veracity of the story, but it is a story.