

# Autos Across Mackinac: Colonel Card, Colonel Pond Added to Service at the Straits

The 50th Anniversary of the opening of the Mackinac Bridge and the end of auto ferry service across the Straits of Mackinac is this year. In his book, "Autos Across Mackinac," author Les Bagley traces the 34-year history of Michigan State Ferries. In Part Four, he told how the state came to acquire the first ferry, the *Ariel*, which was really not up to the task.

## PART 5 THE FERRY TAKES OFF

By Les Bagley

It was apparent from the start that the *Ariel* could not offer the frequency or reliability of service that the planners had envisioned. She was much too small, too easily sidelined by bad weather, and not at all designed for the rigors she was now being expected to surmount. She had been purchased as a stopgap measure, and nothing more.

On August 14, the State Highway Administrative Board met in Lansing and authorized the purchase of a second vessel for the service. The new boat would be put into service the following spring and was expected to have ample capacity and proportions to handle traffic under most all seasonal conditions. While she still would not be an icebreaker, it was hoped wind and bad weather would not keep the new ship in port.

The board also authorized the purchase of the land and construction of the new dock in Mackinaw City. State Attorney General A.B. Dougherty solicited proposals from several contractors so the construction could begin immediately. At the same meeting, the board approved plans to renovate the State Dock in St. Ignace. Over the coming winter, much of the existing structures were to be demolished and the space filled in. The plans also called for fill between the dock proper and State Street to create parking and a landscaped park on the property.

The Mackinac Transportation Company also announced plans for a new St. Ignace landing that week. A new slip to the east and along the side of the existing landing would be constructed and the road to them would be widened. While the move was primarily to provide a backup for the original apron and landing structure, which had fallen into disrepair, the community speculated that the real reason for the work was so both railroad ferries could be used at the same time. There were even suggestions that the MTCO. wanted to go into competition with the State Ferry in the near future. The St. Ignace *Enterprise* devoted nearly an entire column to speculation about that possibility in the next edition.

For motorists, however, the cost savings of using the "State Boat" over the railroad boats was immediately apparent, and traffic grew dynamically. Despite heavy traffic delays and a number of days when the ship could not operate owing to high winds, heavy seas, or other inclement weather, the numbers the pursers

### Ariel Receipts:

6235 cars ferried at	\$2.50	\$16,687.50
2906 cars ferried at	\$3.50	\$10,171.00
81 trucks ferried		\$494.50
56 trailers at	\$1.50	\$84.00
18 motorcycles at	\$1.50	\$37.00
2293 foot passengers at 25¢	\$573.25	
Miscellaneous		\$11.75
Total		\$26,949.00
Disbursements:		
Boats and lands		\$50,000.00
Operating expense		\$15,807.59
Total		\$65,807.59

recorded continued to grow through August.

While drivers hoped the service would soon be offered free, a month of steadily increasing revenue caught the politicians' attention. State Representative Harry Osborn, who had introduced the original ferry bill, told the *Soo News* that "the ferry should be self-supporting, and I shall insist that it shall be by statute, if necessary." Osborn observed that a good share of ferry riders were out-of-state tourists who paid no taxes for highway maintenance. He thought it unfair to ask Michigan taxpayers to dig into their pockets for the upkeep of the ferry. Osborn made it clear that he was just as enthusiastic about the ferry, as a branch of the state highway system, as he was when he introduced the legislation. He said he just wanted to be sure it could pay for itself. Other lawmakers agreed.

And pay for itself it did. By the end of the first season, the little *Ariel* had carried 10,341 vehicles. Chief Accountant C.A. Parker said the steamer had earned more than \$11,000 net by the time bad weather forced the suspension of service on November 20. His itemized statement is shown in the box above.

The accounting methods took amortization into consideration, but for the abbreviated season, everyone thought it was a fine showing.

There was only one accident to report for the season. On October 12, Commissioner Rogers wired the governor that the *Ariel* had run aground.

"I have a report from the Purser of the Steamer *Ariel*," Rogers wrote, "that yesterday afternoon or last night, I am not sure which, she ran onto the shore at St. Ignace due to a dense fog. No damage was done, and nobody was hurt, and the boat will be off this morning."

The fog in October was only a precursor of weather to come. In the weeks that followed, the weather grew worse, and by November had deteriorated to the point the *Ariel* could seldom land at Mackinaw City. During the two weeks prior to November 20, the little boat had made only a few trips, and unfavorable forecasts grew more frequent. On bad weather days, traffic had been diverted to the *Chief Wawatam*. Now, beginning November 21, and for the rest of the winter, the *Chief* would again carry it all.

The coming year of 1924, however, held promise for even more improvement in the state's serv-

ice. While the *Ariel* churned back and forth, the Federal Government finally responded to Governor Groesbeck's request for surplus vessels. A committee consisting of at least Captain May and a Mr. Bloem was sent to the Atlantic Seaboard to inspect a pair of former government ships that were available for sale. He reported that he found them to be satisfactory, so instead of building a boat, as had been announced in August, Michigan bought two used government vessels in early October 1923. Just three days after the *Ariel* grounded in the fog, the governor received another telegram. At 3:55 PM on October 15 it simply read: "We have bought the two boats. Fifteen thousand each. - BLOEM." When the *Ariel* ended her season and was tied up on November 20, it was already known she would sail at the Straits no more. She was laid up, apparently in Cheboygan, and, for the time being, nearly forgotten.

### Two Colonels, Two Towns

As World War I ended, shipyards across the United States wound down construction of contracted government work. One of the last war orders filled at the Fabricated Shipbuilding Corp. in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, was for a pair of junior mine planters for the United States Quartermaster Corps. Both built in 1919, the *Colonel Pond* and *Colonel Card* were steel-hulled sister ships 128 feet long by 28 feet wide and 535 gross tons. Since they were registered to the U.S. Army, they had no official numbers. Except for a trip down the lakes, through the Welland Canal and up the St. Lawrence River, the ships saw little use, so they were still practically new five years later. The *Col. Card* was stationed in Portland, Maine, while the *Col. Pond* was docked a little further southwest, in Boston, Massachusetts.

When Michigan bought them, the pair received official registration numbers for the first time. The *Card* became US 223962 and the *Pond* was assigned US 223963. The state wasted no time in sending crews to retrieve the steamers, and after fitting out both for the voyage to Michigan at Portland, the pair left Maine on October 31, 1923, Halloween Day, spending the first night out in Rockland. Perhaps the Halloween departure was a precursor of the scary things to come.

Night two was spent in Machias, Maine, before attempting to cross the Bay of Fundy for



Fabricated Shipbuilding Corporation of Milwaukee built a number of "river steamers" for use in World War I, but the war ended before many of them were launched. The *Colonel Card* (Steamer No. 13) hit the water July 15, 1920, and sailed for the East Coast, where Michigan purchased both she and her sister, the *Colonel Pond*. (Marine Historical Collection, Milwaukee Public Library)

Shelburne, Nova Scotia. As on the lakes, November weather on the Bay of Fundy can be fickle, and a good wind picked up as the steamers tried to cross. The coal they'd acquired in Portland was of poor quality, so the ships were low on power. During the trip, the wind and waves tossed the little vessels to the point that the *Col. Card* was swung around five times in the seas. The entire crew was called from their bunks to stand by and help the firemen shovel coal into the boilers. It took the steamers twice as long for the crossing as it should have. In the shelter of Shelburne harbor, the ships laid over five days waiting for the weather to clear.

Finally able to re-embark, they spent the next two nights in Lunenburg and Halifax, leaving to meet more trying conditions in what's known as the "Gut o' Canso" on Cape Canso. Single nights in Hawksbury and Charlotte Town on Prince Edward Island were planned next. But at the Charlotte Town stop they discovered it was November 12, Canadian Thanksgiving Day, and all the stores, even coal suppliers, were closed. To replenish the ships, they would have to wait another day.

With time on their hands, the crew from the *Col. Card* paid a visit to a five-masted sailing ship tied up nearby. The vessel was loading a cargo of potatoes destined for Cuba, and their hosts were very friendly. They were also very well stocked with Cuban rum, which was readily available and flowed all too freely. The party continued back on the *Card*, but when the inebriated celebrants started breaking up tables, chairs, and other fittings, things had to stop. Capt. Goudreau, a Frenchman from Detroit, summoned Canadian police who piled the entire complement into paddy wagons and hauled them off for a night in the pokey. Once he'd received provisions, the captain had to go up and bail the men back out before the ships could get underway the next day.

Somewhat wiser, and hopefully more sober, the crews departed next for Summerside, P.E.I., and then Gaspé Bay, where they encountered yet another mishap. One of the firemen aboard the *Card* accidentally turned on the water under the grate bars in the boiler and burned out the grate. There was just one main furnace in each ship, a pipe boiler with three doors. Without the grate, they were stranded. Fortunately, Chief Engineer Mike Madden had a pattern for the grate, which was sent to the nearest foundry 300 miles away. With snow falling and gale winds howling, they laid there for five days waiting for a new grate to be manufactured and installed. Meanwhile, the *Pond* continued on to Quebec.

Leaving Gaspé at 7 o'clock on a moonlight night, the *Card* made a calm run for the mouth of the St. Lawrence River, where they would pick up a pilot at Father Point Station. But winds came around to the southwest, and with the tide running, it took six hours for the boat to move only four

miles upriver. The tide turned at midnight and at last making fairly good time, the ship rejoined her sister in Quebec, where they stayed another two days. The next nightly stops included Montreal, Ogdensburg, New York, The Thousand Islands, and Port Colborne on the Welland Canal. Crossing Lake Erie, they paused for fuel in Sandusky, Ohio, and continued on to Detroit. They arrived just the day before Christmas. Their voyage had taken 55 days.

While the boats were enroute, the state sought proposals from Great Lakes shipyards to convert them into auto carriers. Sturgeon Bay Drydock's General Manager F. W. Stevens asked for a chance to bid on the work, but to keep funding in-state, the contract was given to Detroit's Great Lakes Engineering Works. The Colonels were immediately taken to that firm's Ecorse, Michigan, yard, where the conversion would be done over the 1923-24 winter.

Captain May summarized the expenses of moving the two Colonels back to the lakes in a letter to John Stevenson at a total of \$28,780.97. Another \$115,250 was spent at Great Lakes Engineering Works, where each boat was lengthened 50 feet by splicing a foredeck between the bow and the superstructure. Their cabins were also modified for Straits ferry service to make more suitable passenger lounges. By spring, the boats were each capable of carrying 30 cars. State officials felt they'd gotten a good deal on the Colonels. Originally built for nearly a quarter million dollars each, Michigan had purchased and moved the pair for just under \$60,000.

As springtime approached, state officials proposed a new schedule of service. A ship would sail from each side of the Straits every other hour, meaning nearly twice the sailings the *Ariel* had provided. Tourism to Cloverland was expected to increase two-fold, as well.

In early April 1924, newspapers across Michigan reported that the new ferries were about to be renamed. There was strong sentiment in Lansing that one of the boats should be named for State Senator F. P. Bohn, the man who'd introduced the ferry bill in the Senate the year before. The governor had even promised Dr. Bohn that he would look into the matter. But apparently nobody told the State Administrative Board, which took action on the name change at its meeting on April 8. *Colonel Card* became *Mackinaw City*, and *Colonel Pond* was named *Sainte Ignace*. Whether intentional or not, the feminine "e" in the French spelling of "Sainte" helped to distinguish her from her railroad ferry predecessor.

Captain Stevenson reported conversion of the *Sainte Ignace* was completed on April 20, and she was turned over to Captain May at the shipyard. Stevenson arranged with A. J. Reutter to cover the ship with a \$75,000 insurance policy and she sailed for the Straits the next day. The

*Mackinaw City* quickly followed.

### Harbingers of Spring

North Americans revere certain harbingers of spring. Swallows return to Capistrano. Buzzards fly back to Hinkley, Ohio. Robins are sighted, crocuses peek through the snow, and groundhogs spot shadows to predict an end to the icy grip of winter. In Northern Michigan, there is no more sure sign that winter's stranglehold is over than the opening of the Soo Locks for another season of navigation.

Starting in 1924, and for the next quarter century, another sure sign of spring in Cloverland would be the start of service on the Michigan State Ferry. But as 1923 calendars gave way to 1924, those days of springtime seemed a long way off.

In February, the Upper Peninsula Development Bureau announced that the previous year set a tourism record. Nearly 20,000 autos had crossed the Straits to visit St. Ignace and other points in the U.P. More than half had come in just three months on the new State Ferry service, so its return was eagerly anticipated. The rest had arrived on the railway ferries, with traffic continuing to be strong all the way through a mild December.

Plans to handle even more tourists in 1924 were well underway. A new State Park for camping and picnicking was to open

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### Moving the Colonels, Summary of Expenses

"Col. Pond", Boston to Detroit	
Boat Equipment	\$1,335.54
Dry Dock,	
Scraping Hull	292.00
Engine Department	2,390.05
Food	937.67
Fuel (233 T)	1,840.18
Running Exp.	
Pilotage, etc.	352.71
Stewards Department	950.83
Traveling Expense	327.83
Wages, Inc.	
Subsistence & R.R.	4,882.65
Wages, Laying up Boat	242.03
Water	87.22
	13,638.72
Discount:	83.87
	15,226.12

### "Col. Card", Portland to Detroit

Boat Equipment	\$1,630.91
Dry Dock,	
Scraping Hull	137.50
Engine Department	1,627.30
Food	1,057.24
Fuel (310 T)	2,958.32
Running Exp.	
Pilotage, etc.	465.23
Stewards Department	567.89
Traveling Expense	389.97
Wages, Inc.	
Subsistence & R.R.	6,088.95
Wages, Laying up Boat	207.67
Water	164.00
	15,294.98
Discount:	68.86
	13,554.85
GRAND TOTAL:	\$28,780.97



The Quartermaster Corps planned to use the *Colonel Pond* as a "Junior Mine Planter" in Boston Harbor, but the war had ended, so no mines had been planted when the search committee from Michigan found her tied up at a Boston pier in 1923 and purchased her for \$15,000. (Michigan State Archives)