

# Autos Across Mackinac: Ferry Capacity Increased To Meet Demands

2007 marks the 50th Anniversary of the opening of the Mackinac Bridge, but for four decades before that, ferries carried autos between Michigan's peninsulas. In his new book, "Autos Across Mackinac," author Les Bagley relates the history of the auto ferries, with excerpts each week in the St. Ignace News. As recounted last week, 1928 was a banner year for ferry traffic, with even more volume anticipated in 1929.

## PART II: A CHANGE IN THE WIND

By Les Bagley

The highway department spent 1928 looking for dangerous curves and intersections on trunk lines in an effort to improve them. Michigan's Governor Fred Green spent much of the year looking for ways to improve the crossing at the Straits. In April 1928, he'd noted an article by Warren H. Manning, a Cambridge, Massachusetts, architect, which had been published in the Development Bureau News, the periodical of the Upper Peninsula Development Bureau. Manning had spent summers in the Straits area, and he was of the opinion that Michigan should be planning to build a bridge.

"There is something the matter with the State of Michigan and its citizens," he wrote, "or there would be definite plans for a high level bridge over the Straits of Mackinac. There is first the clumsy, slow crushing and bumping about with the trains of cars and loads of autos and people on big boats. Then comes the "out of season go as you please or no go at all" of the smaller boats that serve the straits and the family of islands in that region."

"In thinking of a bridge, consider the income from the hundred thousand automobiles carried from Mackinaw City to St. Ignace last year at a charge that averages about three dollars each, and brings a return of about three hundred thousand dollars."

In August the governor ordered the Highway Department to survey the Straits, taking soundings and gathering all needed data, so the information could be turned over to the new legislature when it convened in January 1929. He noted that even with three ferries operating, traffic still backed up the first week in August 1928, when 6,500 vehicles and 12,000 passengers were carried. The boats were forced to make extra trips after hours, just to keep down the backlog of traffic accumulating on their docks.

Green was also aware that private engineers from a firm he only identified as "back east" had visited the Straits that summer to make their own surveys. He felt that if any bridge were to be built, it should be owned by the state and operated by the Highway Department. He even went so far as to suggest that convict labor from the prisons in Marquette, Jacksonville, and Ionia could be used to build causeways out from both shores, thus making the high level span shorter and less expensive. With an unlimited supply of free stone and cheap prison labor, the work would be very inexpensive. He noted the convicts would also be freed from doing other prison work that competed with

private industry, and would even be able to help pay for their upkeep, which at the time cost the state about \$1.25 per prisoner, per day.

The governor continued to push, hoping to continue survey work in conjunction with a survey being done by the federal government.

"Michigan needs a bridge across the Straits," the governor said. "The project is absolutely necessary to bring the Upper Peninsula into a closer relationship with the rest of the state."

Former Highway Commissioner Earle agreed.

"More than 20 years ago, I publicly declared that the two peninsulas must be connected above the water, and now that Gov. Green has revived the project I propose to give my best efforts to have it done during my lifetime - and I'm now 73. I am hopeful that it will be."

Local residents also wondered what benefits a bridge would bring to their communities, and whether it might actually be a detriment. State Senator H. J. Rushton of Escanaba urged caution. He suggested no one become too impatient with the project: the survey needed to be finished and the results analyzed first. Only then would the state make a decision.

Elsewhere in Michigan the decision was made to build two new ferries. These boats were not to run at the Straits, however. The Pere Marquette Railroad was experiencing tremendous growth ferrying rail cars from Ludington to points across Lake Michigan in Wisconsin. The new boats would bring to nine the number of ships the railroad was using to move freight across the lake.

## THE BOOM BEFORE THE BUST

For Straits residents, 1929 began as another cold, dark winter. January blizzards raged for days. The danger of travel on the ice was brought home when several ice fishermen drove out to their favorite fishing spots. Shifting winds opened leads under their cars, stranding them, and the men barely escaped with their lives. An Alanson man drifted on a flow for nearly a week, clinging to life amid howling winds and blowing snow while rescuers searched by ship and plane. He survived and even walked himself to safety when his floating island miraculously blew ashore.

In St. Ignace, the winter might have been even colder and darker. On Saturday morning, February 16, fire broke out in the roof above the city power plant. The building and all its contents were threatened. For awhile, firemen struggled to gain the upper hand, but then the water ran out in the city standpipe. Without electricity from the burning plant, there were no pumps to replenish it. Only the timely arrival of the Chief Wawatam from Mackinaw City, with her own pumps and hoses, saved the day. The fire was out by noon, although the building roof was completely destroyed.

During the blaze, plant workers braved falling beams and flaming embers to cover the generating equipment with tarps. Soaked by fire hoses, the machines and switchboards were soon shrouded in a thick coat of ice, which saved them from serious damage. Most



After sailing for only part of one season, *The Straits of Mackinac* was fitted with an upper cardeck capable of handling more than 20 additional automobiles. Her new capacity of over 80 cars was badly needed during the summer of 1929, before the stock market crashed. (Postcard, photographer unknown. Author's collection.)

power was restored by afternoon, as soon as the largest debris could be cleared. Fearing the waterworks pumps might have been lost, a temporary solution was to employ the *Sainte Marie* (II), which was steamed up to charge city mains with lake water. While residents were cautioned to boil water from that source, the waterworks were found to be undamaged, and the *Sainte Marie* was quickly relieved from duty.

It could have been much worse. On Monday, clear skies sent temperatures plummeting to between 15 and 20 degrees below zero. It stayed cold for several days, with blizzards adding more snow when the temperature slightly warmed.

Ferries Chief Purser Tower had spent the winter in St. Ignace and near the end of February, both he and Captain Hilliard Bentgen received telegrams from Commodore Stufflebeam asking that soundings be taken off the end of the St. Ignace ferry dock. Highway Department engineers planned to extend it 110 feet to deeper water and make other improvements as soon as possible for the coming season. The measurements were forwarded without delay.

In March, the reins of the federal government passed from President Calvin Coolidge to President Warren G. Harding. On Mackinac Island, ownership of the Grand Hotel passed to Joseph Ballard. E.J. LaChance stayed at the reins there, however. Ballard would only buy the property on condition that LaChance remain. It said so in the sales contract.

Still another blizzard in early April held down voter turnout in local elections, but the Republican Party swept most Michigan races, anyway. Despite the snow, Commodore Stufflebeam made the trip from Cheboygan to St. Ignace to announce that if ice conditions allowed, the State Ferry would begin running on April 10. He returned on the next train.

Apparently, spring weather also returned sooner than expected. On Saturday, April 6, the ferry *Mackinaw City* surprised everyone when she sounded her whistle for a St. Ignace landing, arriving from Cheboygan's lay-up several days

before anticipated. She was greeted with whistle salutes from the railroad ferry, the railroad switch engine, the Arnold Line steamer, and even the ferry landing's own fog siren. The *Mackinaw City* assumed her run at 6 o'clock the next morning, maintaining crossings every three hours until 6 p.m. Sailings were between 7:30 a.m. and 7:30 p.m. from the other side, Central Standard Time.

The question of time proved to be important that year. For several months, cities had been given the opportunity to select whether to stay on "standard time," or advance to "daylight savings time." Having been aligned so closely with Wisconsin, the Upper Peninsula went with the Central Time Zone. By selecting Daylight Time, St. Ignace voters could better connect themselves with the time on the Lower Peninsula. The St. Ignace City Council decided to leave it up to voters, and a special election was held May 1.

While the *Mackinaw City* shuttled back and forth, her sister, the *Sainte Ignace*, remained in Detroit, where she had spent the winter undergoing an overhaul at Great Lakes Engineering works. She was expected to come north in time for the heavy tourist season in late May. The newest ferry, *The Straits of Mackinac*, was still in Cheboygan, but she had undergone changes. Over the winter, J. B. Lund & Sons Shipyard had installed the previously-planned upper car deck forward of the passenger cabins, increasing *The Strait's* capacity to more than 80 cars. An onboard elevator lifted vehicles one at a time between decks at her bow. That work was completed by May 21, and after passing stability tests with flying colors, *The Straits* also sailed for St. Ignace. She was put into service the last Wednesday of May. With two boats, the State now offered 90-minute departures until 9 in the evening.

The Straits' new upper deck proved to be popular with tourists. Many requested their cars be parked there for improved views of the passing scenery. By July, as many as 26 cars had been crammed aboard the new deck on a single trip, and with careful loading, the ferry could carry as many as 96 of the smaller autos of the day. Her new, expanded capacity was sorely needed by the fast growing ferry service.

May, 1929 figures showed a 33-1/3 increase in traffic over the May the year before. In May, 1929, - 6,556 passengers and 4,794 vehicles took the ferry, with revenues of \$12,493. Total season revenue was \$14,544.25 up to May 21, with only one boat running. With two boats in service, traffic continued to build. Capt. Barney Sloan's crew brought *The Sainte Ignace* from Detroit on the evening of June 9, and she was tied up at the old Ore Dock, awaiting the call to service. Ferry spokesmen said they thought she would join the run June 29, unless needed sooner.

The US Department of Commerce released figures that month to show there was now one car to every five people in the country, with room in each for an additional child. The figures showed the U.S. had nearly three

out of every four motor vehicles operating in the entire world.

George Bishop of the Upper Peninsula Development Bureau wanted more of them to come to Upper Michigan. That spring, the bureau launched a campaign to recruit new members and raise \$30,000, half to pay back debts over the next three years and half to buy new promotional advertising. The bureau already received \$17,000 annually from county and local government contributions, and the State now also offered an advertising matching grant of up to \$25,000 more. Lansing would provide an additional dollar to match each advertising dollar the bureau spent, and Bishop hoped that his budget for the year would thus top \$62,000.

To achieve the goal, U.P. counties were assigned to recruit a quota of new members who paid \$25 a year for a three-year membership. Bishop hoped he could swell UPDB ranks by 1,200 members, and through an internal economies and reorganization, provide even more advertising to attract tourists to the region. He hoped to place display ads in most major newspapers in Ohio, Wisconsin, and Indiana, the states where much of the tourism already originated.

By 1929, automobile-based tourism was becoming even more important in the Upper Michigan economy. In those pre-Depression days, one study published in the *Republican-News* showed the average auto load of 3.5 tourists spent \$17.70 per day while traveling.

(The figures reported for an average carload of tourists are interesting in light of today's "modern" economy: Gasoline - 250 miles @ 15 mpg, x 16 cents a gallon = \$2.75 per day. Oil - average 3 pints per day @ .30 per quart = 45¢ per day. Auto incidentals, including storage = 50¢ per day. Meals - Bkfst @ 50¢, Lunch @ 50¢, Dinner @ \$1 = \$7.00 per day. Lodging @ average of \$1.50 per person = \$5.25 per day. Incidentals - \$1.75 per day. Total: \$17.70 per carload per day.)

By July the Bureau's recruitment drive was lacking, however. Only about half as many members had signed up as Bishop had hoped, and of the 15 participating counties, only three had met their quotas. Bishop blamed the poor showing on local volunteers who were too busy running their own businesses to sign up other members, and said the bureau directors themselves were unable to cover the entire region in so short a period. While local newspapers enjoined other businesses to sign on, Bishop vowed the new membership and fundraising drive would continue.

One paper, the *Mining Journal*, even so much as said tourism would be the wave of the U.P.'s future economy. The *Journal* cited depletion of all the other peninsular resources (animals, forests, and minerals), saying that when they were all gone, only the tourists would remain. Nevertheless, when the State Legislature apportioned money for the 1929 season, the UPDB only received \$1,347, the least of any tourism organization in the state. Apparently, the money

wasn't desperately needed. By mid-August, the *Republican-News* reported that 1929 tourist traffic was still up 28 percent over the previous year.

In July, the ferries, with all three boats running, averaged 1,359 cars a day. In August, the traffic counts continued to climb higher. Revenues had been \$91,283 for July alone. For August, they were even more. The ferries "ran wild," without a schedule for almost half the month. Still motorists often waited two or three hours to board. Sometimes they waited even longer. On Sunday, September 8, the three ferries managed to carry 1,920 cars, and then traffic finally began to drop off.

On Monday, September 9, the schedule was reduced to 90-minute headway with only two boats running. The *Straits of Mackinac* was tied up at the old Ore Dock in St. Ignace in case she would still be needed in hunting season.

The figures for traffic and revenues in 1929 had been astonishing, and they served to set tongues wagging about another reduction in ferry fares. But the Highway Department resisted, and in an editorial, the *Republican-News* agreed, saying ferry fares desperately needed to be plowed back into the system.

For many weeks that summer, the ferries had been crushed with riders. As traffic continually increased, the newspaper wrote, that crush would become the summer norm. City streets and local businesses would be clogged beyond capacity, so tremendous sums were needed to improve the docks and the way traffic was being handled on them. The cause was also taken up by the *Mining Journal*. That editorial expanded on the *Republican-News'* call for better facilities: "It would ... be highly uneconomical and a waste of money to provide a plant sufficiently large to obviate any delays under all conditions. The objective should be development of a plant that will obviate unreasonable delays. If this is done, there will be little or no fault found."

In response to both papers, Commissioner Dillman wrote: "I am pleased to note your stand in regard to the agitation for lowering ferry rates. It surely would be a blow to this service at present because of the need for considerable expense being incurred during the next 12 months to provide facilities sufficient to handle the traffic as it should be handled next season. The revenues we are now getting through the present rates should be put into [the] service, and if that is done, the motorists crossing the Straits, I am very sure, will not complain."

While there was still no word on exactly what improvements Dillman planned for St. Ignace, where the dock location was still in question, the state stepped up plans to further expand boat capacities and the dock in Mackinaw City. The upper deck on *The Straits* had been most successful, so each of the older boats would have a similar deck installed during the following winter. In Mackinaw City, more soundings were taken so the dock could be widened and

\* Please turn to page 11



While not an icebreaker, *The Straits* had a heavier hull than her two sister ships and officials hoped she could operate both earlier and later each season. Still, when too much ice formed, traffic was diverted to the railroad ferries. This photo was found pasted in an album at the Michigan State Archives in Lansing, and what looks like a dent near the anchor, is really a crease in the old photograph. (Michigan State Archives)