

# Autos Across Mackinac: Traffic on the Rise Again Across Straits

To celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the opening of the Mackinac Bridge, the St. Ignace News is serializing Les Bagley's history of Michigan State Ferries, Autos Across Mackinac. With the worst of the Great Depression apparently over, traffic on the straits ferries again began to build in 1934. The numbers continued to mount in 1935.

## Part 17: CLIMBING AGAIN

By Les Bagley

While Michigan has always tended to lean Republican, the state's politics are like a pendulum, and with the start of 1935 came the start of another Republican gubernatorial administration. While voters were fed up with the Depression in 1932 and voted out the Republicans, by 1934, they were fed up with the Democrats, and particularly Governor William Comstock. At his inaugural in Lansing, incoming Governor Frank D. Fitzgerald of Grand Ledge was presented with a bronze elephant that had once graced the desk of former Governor Brucker. When leaving office, Brucker had sworn the elephant would someday return, and with the presentation, he made sure it did.

At the Straits, cold weather did little to hamper enthusiasm for additional employment when the local ERA office received approval of a \$13,000 project to improve the State Coal Dock. Old pilings at the end of the dock were to be cut off, tapered, and recapped, with appropriate stringers, flooring and creosoting of the newly extended surface was also planned, to ensure the reconstruction would endure. Two shifts of 15 men were to be employed, with construction starting January 11. The ERA would provide the labor, while the highway department was to provide materials, designs, and supervision. State engineers believed workers could make better progress in wintertime, when the frozen lake surface could support some of the construction from below.

But the weather did not cooperate. By the time the lake froze hard enough, and construction actually began with a crew of six men in late February, estimated costs had risen to \$15,000. The state planned to employ two shifts of 12 men, each working for a week before being spelled by the other.

Meanwhile, winter auto traffic continued on the railroad boats. The *Chief Wawatam's* master, Commodore John A. Stufflebeam, retired in late January and moved to California. His crew presented him with a Crosley radio, which was shipped to his new Oakland home. The retirement party also welcomed a familiar face back to the Straits run. The *Chief's* new master was John Stufflebeam's nephew, Gerald Stufflebeam, late of the *Alabama*, and former superintendent of the State Ferry fleet, who was glad to return to employment near his many friends at the Straits.

In early February, the trial of Bruno Hauptman, the accused kidnapper of Charles Lindberg's infant son, made national news. Hauptman was found guilty and condemned to the electric chair. Locally, in an unusual joint meeting between Republican and Democrat committees in St. Ignace, veteran druggist Eustache LaRoque, a Republican, was unanimously selected to replace retiring Democrat Mayor Chester Wing for the upcoming term of office. Wing announced he was leaving office to open a new grocery business.

It was also not until mid-February that the weather bureau finally got around to issuing an ice condition report for the Straits, saying it was up to a foot thinner than in past years. Capt. Jerry had no trouble getting the *Chief* back and forth on her runs, although the ice bridge to Mackinac Island remained useable to horses, dog sleds, and pedestrians. Still, ice conditions led to speculation that the navigation season might open much earlier than normal.

In that hope, about a dozen State Ferry crewmembers began the job of fitting out The *Straits of Mackinac* at the Coal Dock on March 27, with the balance of the crew to report April 2. For 1935, The *Straits* would sail with 22 men, one more than in previous years. Supt. Doner announced the other two ferries would probably join the run in May, each with a crew of 21. For 1935, Capt. Sigruud Frey, who

had already reported for duty, would command the *Sainte Ignace* and the *Mackinac City* would sail under Capt. Murray McIntosh, who had not yet arrived.

On Sunday, April 14, a strong northwest wind blew ice out of the St. Ignace harbor. That cleared the way for The *Straits*, under Capt. George Loughlin, to move over to the auto dock, which she did, at about 2:30 Monday afternoon. The 1935 State Ferry season began as scheduled on Tuesday, April 16, with sailings on the same one-boat schedule as in the past.

At a speech in Iron River, George Bishop of the U.P. Development Bureau projected 1935 tourism would be worth more than \$7 million in the Upper Peninsula. He praised Rep. Fenlon's bill, pending in the legislature, to provide \$200,000 in promotion money for the upcoming biennium, saying any money spent would be well worth the investment. Bishop hoped improved tourism could replace the declining lumber industry as the region's economic leader. To help, the Michigan Department of Conservation set about an ambitious plan to improve streams for fishing, the Highway Department continued road construction and improvements, and local communities were asked to create more tourist friendly facilities, including public parks and rest stops.

In St. Ignace, promoters started a local "tourist club," an idea they borrowed from tourism boosters in Florida. Hotel and rooming house operators provided guests' names to the "club office," and meetings were held between tourism promoters and visitors in the area. For a nominal fee, a list of planned tourist activities was then offered to induce visitors to stay longer.

More tourists were coming to the area, as well. On May 18, the two smaller ships replaced *The Straits of Mackinac* and began sailing every 90 minutes. The larger boat was taken to the coal dock for two weeks



The modifications to the St. Ignace State Dock (seen here) done two years earlier had shown their worth. By summer 1935, traffic was already backing up nearly every day, both in St. Ignace and in Mackinaw City. While Michigan's Washington delegation tried to drum up federal support for bridging the Straits, motorists found they waited longer and longer in ferry lines. (Author's collection)

Defense Command, consisting of 113 vehicles and nearly 500 men, arrived in St. Ignace after war maneuvers in Keweenaw, Wisconsin. The trucks and trailers came at intervals starting early in the afternoon, and it took the rest of the day for the three state boats to ferry them to Mackinaw City. Five gigantic searchlights, five huge sound locator units, and four 10-ton anti-aircraft guns, along with base trucks, supply, and personnel carriers made the crossing, en route to the Cheboygan airport.

Tourist traffic just kept coming. June figures showed another 15 percent increase over the year before. All three boats were used on several weekends when traffic began to back up on the docks. By month's end, when the third boat should have started, many officials privately wondered what would happen during the Independence Day rush. They quickly found out.

To relieve congestion, the *Mackinaw City* was called into service at 12:30 a.m. as third boat. All three boats then began a 24-hour summer schedule, leaving each side hourly, from St. Ignace on the half

be more favorable.

The biggest problems were threefold: 1. The plans for financing might be illegal. One member of the board cited examples from three other parts of the country where similar programs were held unconstitutional, and the states were not responsible for the bonds issued. 2. The chairman of the board of review, also an engineer, felt if the present boat service was not sufficient, it would be more feasible to build more boats, than to build three bridges and miles of causeway as proposed by Mr. Fowler. 3. The Lake Carriers objected to closing the south channel, or restricting it to one 300-foot-wide opening. Their spokesman, Vice President L. C. Sabin, reminded the board that 21 million tons of shipping passed through the channel the year before.

The delegates returned home to await the PWA's decision.

On July 26, Governor Fitzgerald visited Mackinac Island to see what could be done to revive the tourist industry there, hard hit by the Depression, and the change in travel habits to an automobile-based itinerary. He had only recently received

and that the State Ferries add the island as a port of call. Cars could be parked in a lot near the dock, or used on the island on a "limited basis." One suggestion was that a single highway for autos be completed around the perimeter, but that cars should be banned from interior roadways.

Many island residents, particularly the local carriage drivers, strongly objected to the proposal.

Elsewhere in Straits Country, tourism was booming. In July, traffic on the ferries climbed 4,059 cars over the previous year's record. On a day-to-day average, business was up a whopping 20 percent. With good weather, area beaches were crowded and most resort operators reported near capacity bookings. And Commissioner Van Wagoner reported good news for worker relief efforts, as well. As part of a statewide, \$13 million program approved by President Roosevelt, almost \$1,276,000 would be spent improving "tourist roads" in Upper Michigan. The work was to start by the end of August.

By Saturday, August 10, Straits traffic records were falling daily. That day the three-boat fleet moved 2,030 cars, about 50 percent of them going in each direction. Captain Doner interviewed many of the southbound motorists to see why so many had ended their vacations early. He reported that most said they'd been called back to work at the Detroit auto plants to begin work the following Monday. But even as those vacationers left, they were replaced by more northbound travelers. Lines on the dock seemed to grow longer by the week. By month's end, traffic tallies were up 21.15 percent, passenger counts were up 19.41 percent, and revenues were up 21.94 percent over the previous year. With Labor Day and hunting season yet to go, the ferries had carried almost 81,000 cars!

To help out, the Highway Department arranged to charter the *Chief Wawatam* on a per-trip basis. By chartering the whole boat, more cars could be carried at less cost than paying the difference between the state and the railroad auto fares. The agreement came just in time.

In an editorial published August 29 in the *St. Ignace Republican-News*, E. J. Chatelle noted that with so much more traffic, the ferry service had proved woefully inadequate. Even with the *Chief Wawatam* pressed into service for several trips in the previous weeks, motorists had to wait two or three boats before they could board. He demanded the ferry service add another ferry, say-

ing at times as many as six were needed. He concluded that with the traffic the ferries were carrying, they could ill afford not to add another boat as soon as possible.

He was right. On Labor Day weekend, the all-time record for autos ferried was shattered twice in two days. All three state boats and the *Chief* ran wild to move 2,346 cars in 24 hours on Saturday. On Sunday, 2,625 were carried.

Asked about using the *Chief* for summer crush service, Capt. Doner said it had "solved a problem for us. Our equipment has not been adequate to handle the rush business this season, but the chartering of the *Chief* has enabled us to give autoists pretty decent service. There have been no long waits for passage, only a few cars indeed being asked to wait over an hour. By chartering the railway ferry, with its 95 small car capacity, we have used it just as one of our own ferries in the times we've needed it."

Over the weekend the big boat moved more than 1,000 cars.

Traffic started backing up onto highways ahead of the toll booths. Autos rolled into town, one right after the other all weekend, and had to wait in line to buy tickets before boarding. The jam only ended when the Labor Day weekend concluded.

When traffic finally dropped to more manageable levels, Capt. Frey took the *Sainte Ignace* on a 36-hour cruise to a minor overhaul in Detroit. The fall schedule with two boats went into effect, lasting until hunting season began on November 10, when once again all three boats would run wild.

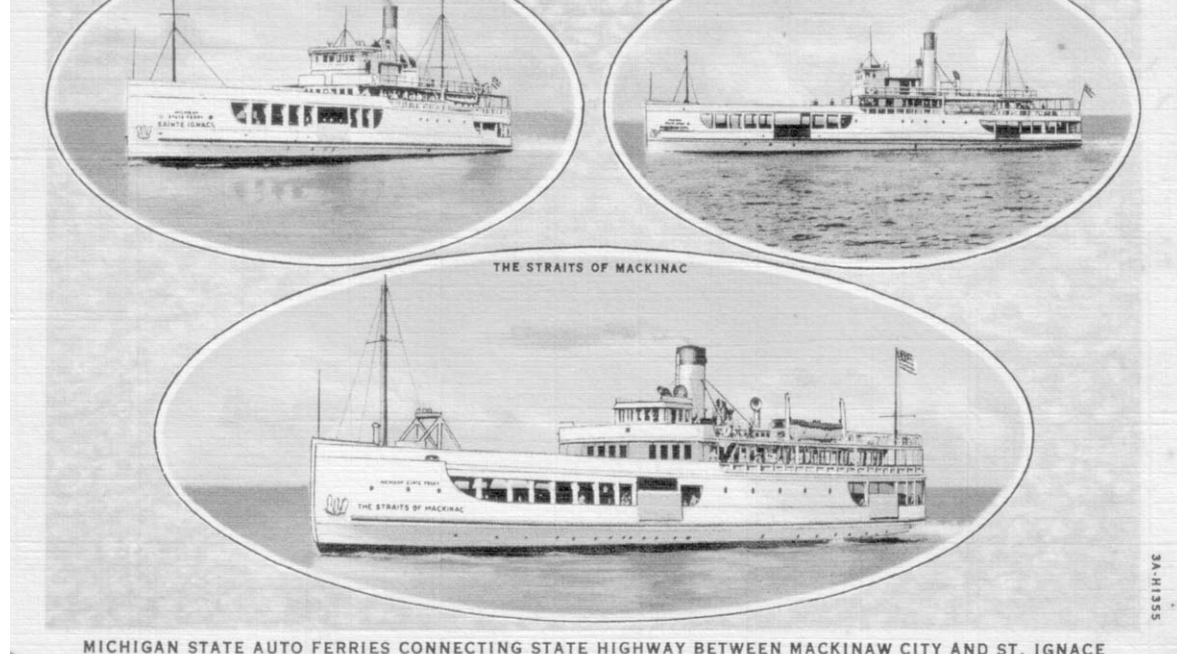
It is interesting to note that, as the fall schedule began, the Highway Department sent out a press release touting the combined 100 year experience of its ferry captains. Capt. Loughlin had 38 years sailing experience, Capt. MacIntosh had about 50 years of service, and Capt. Frey boasted 32 years. All three were licensed to sail anywhere on the Great Lakes. In addition, Capt. Doner, though not actively sailing, also held a license to command any vessel on any sea. All four had been appointed three years previously by Commissioner Murray Van Wagoner.

Despite their masters' experience, the State's three ferries were proving inadequate. From no less a publication than *The Christian Science Monitor* came suggestions that the Highway Department quickly look into acquiring more boats. The request became particularly poignant in late September when the New Deal administration in Washington dashed bridge hopes by rejecting the Bridge Authority's loan request. The Highway Department wasted no time and began a study to see if one or more boats should be added.

One proposal was to build another boat. But officials thought maybe the new boat should be of a different type. Since starting in 1923, the operation had always depended on side loading ferries. The arrangement began as an expedient for the little *Ariel*, a side-loader from the Detroit River. With side loading slips for her already in place, it was natural that the Colonels were built that way when they were modified for ferry service. The new-built *Straits* was again constructed along the same lines, and the arrangement had continued since.

In October, Superintendent

\*Please turn to page 15



Michigan State Ferries again entered the 1935 tourist season with three ferries, including their 5-year-old flagship, *The Straits of Mackinac* (bottom.) As the Great Depression eased, motorists returned to the ferries in ever increasing numbers, once again straining the fleet's 200-car-per-cycle capacity. (Postcard by G.H. Wickman, author's collection.)

of painting to get her ready for the summer "rush."

By Monday, May 20, the state boats had carried more than 7,000 cars for the year.

"Traffic on the ferries is one of the best barometers of the tourist business in the state," Highway Commissioner Murray Van Wagoner said. "This early season increase indicates that Michigan is in line for a record tourist season."

By late in the month, traffic was running 15 percent ahead of the previous year.

Memorial Day weekend brought a rush normally seen only in August. The *Straits*, which was to have been held in reserve until Independence Day weekend, was pressed into service over a month early to deal with the growing backups. With all three ferries running wild, more than 250 autos were transported in just three hours on Saturday morning. By afternoon, the rush had slackened and The *Straits* was tied back up. Yet, she was pressed back into service the next day, when 884 cars were transported, setting a new single-day *Straits* record for so early in the season.

No sooner had the holiday rush been handled than another rush developed. On the next Friday, 40 units of the United States Air

hour, and Mackinaw City on the hour. That schedule was slated to last until September 9, after Labor Day.

Commissioner Van Wagoner was one of the passengers that July 4th weekend. Along with much of his staff, he traveled north to dedicate a bridge at Sault Ste. Marie.

In early July, the Public Works Administration (PWA) conducted hearings in Washington, D.C., on funding the proposed bridge across the Straits. While waiting for the PWA's decision, there was widely conflicting speculation about the results. Cheboygan delegates said prospects for approval were encouraging, while those from the Mackinaw City Chamber of Commerce reported that, "for the present, the Straits Bridge is out."

Several problems had arisen. The PWA submitted a list of questions to be answered by Michigan's attorney general, but those were categorized as minor. More crucial were the Lake Carriers Association and Shore Captains Committee objections that the long bridge route, via causeway from Cheboygan, would obstruct navigation. The objections were ruled out of order, but observers felt that if only one route, the direct route, had been mentioned, the decision would probably

reports that on one July date the Grand Hotel had only 34 guests registered, and there were only 15 guests at other lodgings on the island. The Governor tentatively suggested that the Mackinac Island's ban on autos be removed



Even with the upper decks filled each trip, the three-boat fleet left cars waiting on nearly every departure. Traffic was particularly heavy on Memorial Day, a portent of things to come on the even busier Independence Day weekend, when the ferries set new daily traffic records. (Author's collection)