

# Autos Across Mackinac: State Expands Ferry Service in New Direction

Each week this year, *The St. Ignace News* features a serialization of *Les Bagley's* history of *Michigan State Ferries*, "Autos Across Mackinac," to mark the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Mackinac Bridge, which ended the ferry service here. With hope still alive to find federal financing to bridge the Straits in 1936, auto traffic grew too fast to wait. So the Michigan State Highway Department took a different track.

## Part 19: AUTO FERRIES IN TRAINING

By Les Bagley

The Highway Department expanded ferry service at the outset of 1937, but the expansion was not at the Straits, and it was not in a move many people at Michigan State Ferries expected. In preparation for construction of the Blue Water Bridge between Sarnia, Ontario, and Port Huron, Michigan, the state bought the privately-owned Port Huron-Sarnia Ferry Company, which the bridge would eliminate. In the deal, Michigan got three ferry vessels, including the *Ariel*, which had opened Straits ferry service in 1923.

Under state ownership, the line continued moving vehicles and passengers in business conducted much as at the Straits. Assistant Ferry Superintendent Fletcher Davis was sent from St. Ignace to Port Huron to take charge of the operation. While it may not have been official policy, the state would use the smaller ships at Port Huron to train new hires before they were assigned to the larger boats at Mackinac. This practice apparently continued for several years. Even after the bridge opened for traffic, the *Ariel* was retained as a passenger ferry until bus service could be arranged for pedestrians. The ferry service ran well into 1939.

The fight to fund a bridge at the Straits gained a new leader when Prentiss Brown moved to the Senate. His replacement as Congressman for the 11th District, John Luecke from Escanaba, announced plans to continue the battle, reintroducing a bridge bill in Congress. Brown's bill the previous session had stalled in committee. Luecke said that tourism was about the only industry available to replace the declining lumber business in the Upper Peninsula, and a bridge would attract even more tourists to the area.

The triumvirate of Brown, Luecke, and Governor Frank Murphy all planned to go to Washington to meet with President Franklin D. Roosevelt to push for the bridge, after the excitement of the president's inaugural died down. Murphy was excited about the prospects of getting the President's approval, almost assuring funding from somewhere in the federal government. Brown, meanwhile, reported that the Works Project Administration (WPA) felt that approach work, building causeways for the bridge, would be an excellent relief project. He said he was assured of WPA approval, even though the proposal had been turned down before.

"Last time," Brown said, "the ends of the bridge just didn't quite meet."

He was confident the trio could put together some sort of package that would satisfy the WPA without throwing too much of a burden on the State of Michigan. In late January, Senator Brown introduced a new bridge bill before the U.S. Senate.

A huge flood in the Ohio and Mississippi valleys threw a burden on the Midwest in January. Newly inaugurated to his second term, President Roosevelt ordered all possible aid to the stricken areas, including help from the Coast Guard, WPA, CCC, army, and militia. To render assistance, the *Chief Wawatam* crushed through the ice to Mackinac Island early one morning to retrieve three coastguardsmen and a surfboat, heading to the flood area by rail. After arriving in Mackinaw City with her cargo, the *Chief* resumed her run, picking up the morning train to go northbound. On the way to St. Ignace, she got stuck in the ice about a mile and a half off Graham's Point. The *Sainte Marie* (II), doing an auto ferry run, tried to assist but became stuck, herself.

Both boats were imprisoned until early afternoon.

It was only the first time the *Chief* was stopped in 1937. On January 30, while carrying nearly a full load of rail cars toward St. Ignace, the ferry struck North Graham Shoal in an accident caused by a combination of blizzard conditions, strong currents, and heavy ice. The ship wedged herself nearly 100 feet onto the shoal, and even with the *Sainte Marie* (II) pulling as hard as she could, the larger boat remained stuck for nearly 100 hours. At one point, Captain Stufflebeam caught a ride to shore on the mail boat to confer with his superiors and call for reinforcements. When he returned on the *Sainte Marie* (II), some of the *Chief's* crew joined that boat to form a third crew there, to keep rail cars moving after auto ferry service ended each evening. Finally, after working his boat for days, Captain Stufflebeam was able to wash some rock out from under the *Chief* with her propellers, and she made the dock.

Divers found she'd broken all the buckets off her forward screw, so while the *Sainte Marie* (II) continued with her double auto and rail duties, the *Chief Wawatam* sailed off to the shipyard for repairs. Experts lauded Captain Stufflebeam, who somehow managed to sail his crippled ship through ice and storms to drydock without the benefit of navigational aids.

"The Old Man did a job not one guy in a thousand could do," bragged one broad-shouldered deckhand. It took 27 hours and 27 minutes to make the trip, despite having no forward propeller.

"And every minute he spent right there on the bridge," the deckhand said, "Him and Ginger,

The triumvirate of Brown, Luecke, and Governor Frank Murphy all planned to go to Washington to meet with President Franklin D. Roosevelt to push for the bridge, after the excitement of the president's inaugural died down.



In early 1937, the *Chief Wawatam* grounded on North Graham Shoal, breaking all the buckets off her forward propeller. She managed to make it to a Detroit shipyard for repairs, but while they dragged on, the *Sainte Marie* (II) did double duty, as a chartered auto ferry by day and as a rail ferry by night. (Author's collection.)

way back, by daylight, the crew could see a deer had fallen into the ship's channel from her last trip. Next trip, Captain Paddy Brown brought the bow of the huge ship directly over the struggling animal, and "cowboy sailor" Norman Paquin climbed down a ladder and looped a lasso around its neck. Hauled aboard, the shivering deer's legs were bound, and she was covered by a blanket. Taken to Mackinaw City the doe was turned over to the Conservation Department for release in Wilderness Park Game Refuge.

The doe was luckier than 28-year-old Lloyd St. Louis, who attempted to cross the ice earlier in the month with a dog team and a pouch of Mackinac Island mail. He disappeared en route, and the Coast Guard recovered his body

of Lansing announced that reducing ferry fares would mean increased tourist traffic for Michigan.

"The State should immediately reduce the fares charged to a point where they would be just sufficient to cover the operating costs of the ferries," Ziegler said. "Additional service should be provided to reduce delays and congestion of traffic."

The candidate advocated paying for ferry capital improvements out of highway tax money, instead of from ferry revenues, as was presently being done.

Once the candidates left the area, hard winter returned, and quickly the *Sainte Marie* (II) found herself stuck in the ice. Service across the Straits was held up for 22 hours while the ferry worked herself free. The delay prompted more pro-bridge editorials in papers across Michigan. One writer noted that federally funded bridges in other parts of the country had cost twice as much as the proposed bridge at Mackinac. He complained that perhaps Michigan just didn't have the political clout to get things done.

navigation season. After a brief delay while insurance matters were arranged, the *Chief Wawatam* and her crew headed toward Escanaba to go icebreaking, leaving the *Sainte Marie* (II) to once again handle both the highway department and railroad ferrying chores. Later, one of the state boats would take over the auto part of run, hopefully by mid-April, a week or so away.

As the *Chief* was leaving, local Democrats celebrated. They'd swept the April elections, bringing fuel dealer J. Edward Quinn to the Mayor's office in St. Ignace. Statewide, while their landslide wasn't quite as big, it was still enough for Highway Commissioner Van Wagoner to defeat former Deputy Commissioner Ziegler. Van Wagoner carried every precinct but four, and tied for one to win the office for another term.

As promised, he immediately resumed his efforts to expand ferry service at the Straits. But he was at a loss. Plans for the redesigned diesel boat were still not finalized. Even if the drawings were ready, there was a bid process to endure, followed by months of construction, before the carrier would be ready for service. There was no way a new ferry could be bought and built in time for the upcoming summer season, so to provide the capacity necessary, Van Wagoner and the state highway department turned to a different plan.

In late April, rumors started circulating throughout the ferry fleet that the state planned to tap the used boat market. The speculation made sense. The Depression had diminished the need for carriers on the Great Lakes, and many owners still had excess tonnage tied to the dock, waiting for business to return. Any number of them were happy to discuss selling surplus vessels to the State of Michigan.

Rumors began to fly when two officials from the ferry office in St. Ignace traveled to Frankfort on April 25, and met with people at the maintenance base for the Ann Arbor Railroad carferries. Highway Department spokesmen at the Administrative Office in Lansing refused to either confirm or deny that negotiations had been completed with the railroad to purchase their ferry, the *Ann Arbor No. 4*.

## A JOKER OR AN ACE?

As her name would suggest, the *Ann Arbor No. 4* was the fourth ship to be put into the service of what ultimately became the Ann Arbor Railroad. She was a carferry used by that line to carry railcars across Lake Michigan. As such, she was just one of many ships in a long line of ferries the Ann Arbor used over the years.

The idea for the first Ann Arbor ferry has to be credited to the former governor of the Montana Territory, James M. Ashley, who proposed a rail connection across Lake Michigan as early as 1877. The route would link the Toledo, Ann Arbor & Northern Michigan Railroad with railroads in Wisconsin and beyond.

While Ashley was given full credit for the idea, no one wanted to give him any money for the project. So instead of a carferry, a fleet of break bulk freighters, including *Osceola*, *City of Marquette*, and *Alice Stafford*, were used to transship cargoes. They primarily traveled a route

from Frankfort, Michigan, to Kewaunee, Wisconsin. Frankfort is on a natural harbor called Lake Betsie, but it wasn't long before a large warehouse was built across Lake Betsie in an area to the south called Elberta. Kewaunee was the closest port across Lake Michigan.

The first actual Lake Michigan carferry, the *Ann Arbor No. 1*, was designed by Frank Kirby and launched from the Craig Shipyard in Toledo in the fall of 1892, just four years after the *Saint Ignace* entered service at the Straits. Built of oak with a bow sheathed four feet above and below the waterline in plate steel, she was 267 feet by 52 feet. Like Kirby's Straits carferries, she had a forward propeller to help break winter ice. Unlike the early Straits ferries, she had twin engines at the stern, making her the first triple screw ship registered in America. Her three firebox boilers worked at 125 pounds to provide 610 horsepower to each of her engines at 86 revolutions per minute.

Unlike the ferries Kirby designed for relatively calm waters of the Straits, the lake ferries had fully enclosed high bows for running in heavy seas. Rail cars were loaded only from the stern. At first there was not even a seagate for stern protection. Crews had to keep the boats headed into the waves as best they could for safety. Later, after a tragic accident, stern seagates were added.

While Governor Ashley and the railroad were still looking for shippers willing to trust their cargoes to the new service, a second ferry, *Ann Arbor No. 2*, was also laid out at the shipyard. She would be four feet longer than *No. 1* and cost \$20,000 more. By Christmas 1892, she would leave the yard and, after a hazardous trip from Toledo, would join her sister in service.

But that was still a month away.

It took some persuasion, but at last, with four loaded cars from the coal company that provided the ferry's fuel, the *No. 1* set off from Elberta for Kewaunee at 8 a.m. on November 24, 1892, on what would be the first carferry crossing of Lake Michigan.

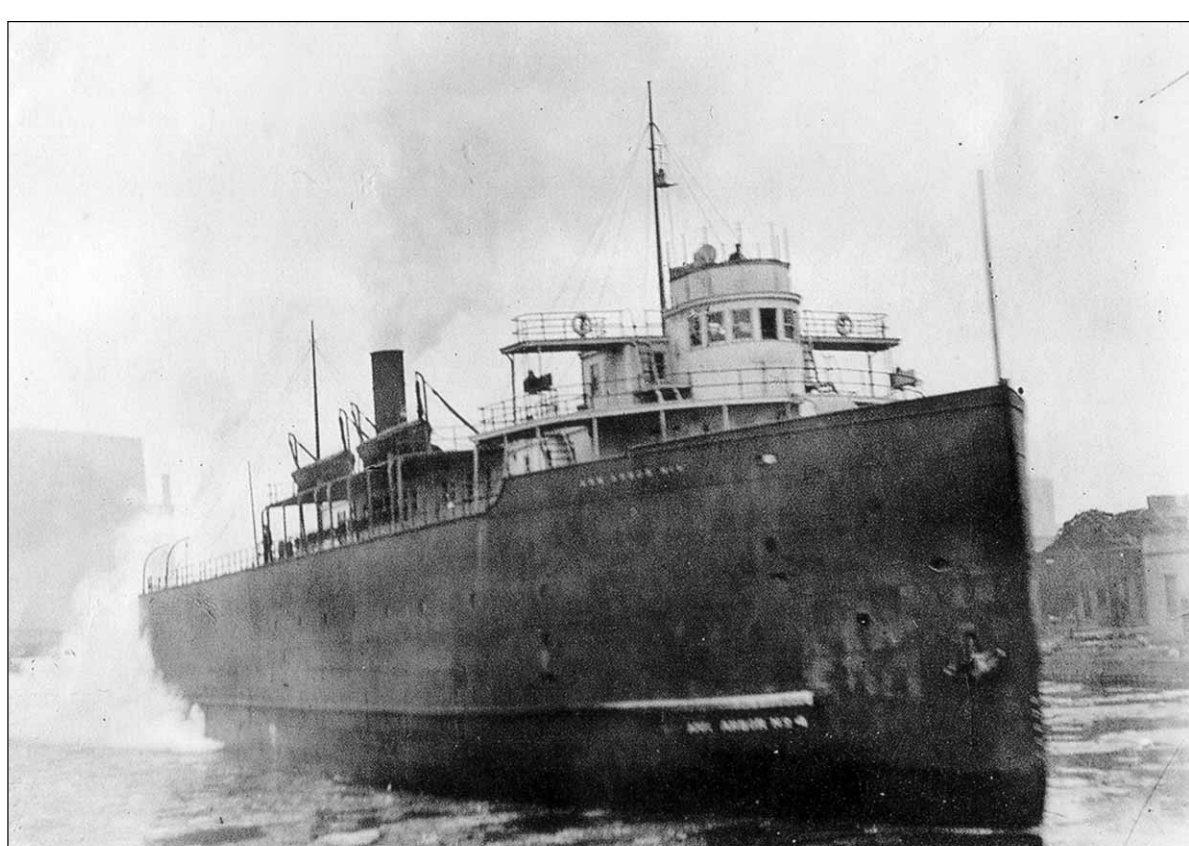
Unfortunately, the crew was not familiar with their route, their ship's speed, or the new compass they steered by. The ship just missed Kewaunee harbor in a thick fog, instead piling onto the beach slightly to the north of the harbor entrance. Realizing the accident would make all the papers, Ashley knew the ship had to come off in a hurry, so he told fishermen, attracted by the ships whistle, to send every tug available to help pull her back to deep water. He felt even bad publicity was better than no publicity at all.

Two days later, after a wrecking tug arrived and worked her way through the flotilla of onlookers, the ferry was finally towed free and made port at about 4 p.m. The publicity ultimately worked, as there were 22 carloads of flour from Pillsbury in Minneapolis waiting on the dock to be shipped back across the lake en route to England.

It turns out the *No. 1's* experience on the first trip was only the first of many incidents and accidents the fleet of Lake Michigan carferries would suffer over the years. In the days before accurate weather forecasting, radio direction finders, gyrocompasses, and even two-way radios, the potential for disaster was great. The list of strandings, groundings, and even sinkings experienced by the early carferries could make, all by itself, a book twice the size of this one. Over the years, several ferries from other lines were even lost with serious loss of life.

From the start, the railroad planned to operate both ships all year, and with package freighters tied up in the winter, off-season traffic was particularly heavy. To keep the harbors free of ice, the ships had to run every day, whether loaded or not, but by 1895, the ferries stopped running for lack of business. The economic slump caused the T,AA&NM to go bankrupt, emerging as the Ann Arbor Railroad. The new line began an aggressive carferry expansion as well.

By the late 1890s, the ferries served not only Kewaunee, but Menominee via Sturgeon Bay, Gladstone with a stop in Escanaba,



With no end to traffic increases in sight, Highway Commissioner Murray Van Wagoner turned to the used boat market and purchased the *Ann Arbor #4*, which had been built in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1906 for the Ann Arbor Railroad's ferry service across Lake Michigan. (Al Hart collection)

and somehow not one of us doubt-ed we'd tie up all safe and sound."

Ginger was a year-old cocker spaniel Stufflebeam had adopted as a captain's pet. "Ginger likes rough weather." Captain Stufflebeam said "though I kind o' missed the beacons and buoys."

Even with both auto and rail traffic now keeping the leased *Sainte Marie* (II) busy day and night, rubber-tired traffic records were broken at the Straits almost daily. By mid-February, Commissioner Van Wagoner announced figures from St. Ignace showed winter travel up 60%. He attributed the increase solely to the use of a leased ferry, making one more trip a day than the rail boat schedule, and the fact that motorists no longer had to wait for the train schedules to cross.

Ferry riders did have to wait for an unusual rescue in late February. The watchman aboard the *Sainte Marie* (II) spotted movement on the ice off the ship's bow about 3 a.m. In the dark, he thought he saw a dog walking on the ice. On the

the next day. The mail pouch was never found.

An important ferry passenger in late February was Commissioner Van Wagoner, making an early start for his reelection campaign. Riding the boat to and from speaking engagements in the U.P., he didn't get much of a chance to see extreme winter conditions. The weather produced an unusually warm sunny day. Van Wagoner said he appreciated seeing the ice floes for himself, however.

"It appears to be a mighty good thing the state had chartered the *Sainte Marie* for this winter," he said. "Otherwise, both rail and auto traffic would have suffered to a further extent than they did when the *Chief Wawatam* went aground."

While Van Wagoner studied wintertime ferry travel, his Republican opponent in the upcoming commissioner's race was also making ferry news. Former Deputy Highway Commissioner Charles M. Ziegler

Things weren't getting done at Great Lakes Engineering works in Detroit, either. While a new forward propeller had been fabricated and installed on the *Chief Wawatam*, a last minute inspection in early March detected a flaw, and the third crew, still working aboard the *Sainte Marie* (II), was told to stay there. The defect meant two more weeks of repair before the *Chief* could leave the shipyard and return to work. Since they were still in St. Ignace, many of the crewmembers were able to attend the funeral for the *Saint Marie* (II)'s purser, 60-year-old Thomas P. Mackin. He apparently suffered a stroke in his yard while coming home from work about 11:30 p.m. on March 9. The *Chief* finally returned on March 20, after another harrowing 23 hour, 300-mile trek up the ice-choked lake from Detroit.

She hadn't been back long, however, when she was chartered by the Lake Carriers Association to try to make an early start to the