

Autos Across Mackinac: *City of Cheboygan* Readies for Transport

Each week this year, *The St. Ignace News* is presenting a portion of Les Bagley's previously unpublished history of Michigan State Ferries, "Autos Across Mackinac," as part of our recognition of the 50th Anniversary of the Mackinac Bridge. Last week, Mr. Bagley related how, in 1937, the state purchased the Lake Michigan carferry *Ann Arbor No. 4*, and renamed her the *City of Cheboygan*. The story continues.

Part 21: CITY OF CHEBOYGAN

By Les Bagley

Michigan's newly acquired ferry was not the first vessel to bear the name "City of Cheboygan." One of the Port Huron-Sarnia ferries had been named that before the name was changed to *City of Port Huron*. There had also been a side-wheeler owned by Capt. Sam Carrow operated on the Inland Route by that name.

Whatever the new boat was called, she paused only at the St. Ignace utility dock long enough for a few locals to get a look at her, and she was then taken to Lund's Shipyard in Cheboygan where the conversion to an auto ferry would be completed. She left St. Ignace just days before the steamer *Alpena* arrived at the utility dock, May 27, with 3,300 tons of coal. The collier left that afternoon, after unloading.

The coal arrived just in time for Memorial Day weekend. Traffic volumes built quickly, and the third boat was called into service on the evening of May 28, a day earlier than projected. The three boats ran wild, but could scarcely keep up. Finally, as the weekend began to wane, the *Sainte Marie (II)* was also brought online to relieve the remaining congestion. Final figures showed an increase of 54% over the

Wagoner admitted the state would not be able to re-christen the boat on June 30 and put her into service on July 1 for Independence Day, as planned. He blamed additional improvements, not originally anticipated, for the delay.

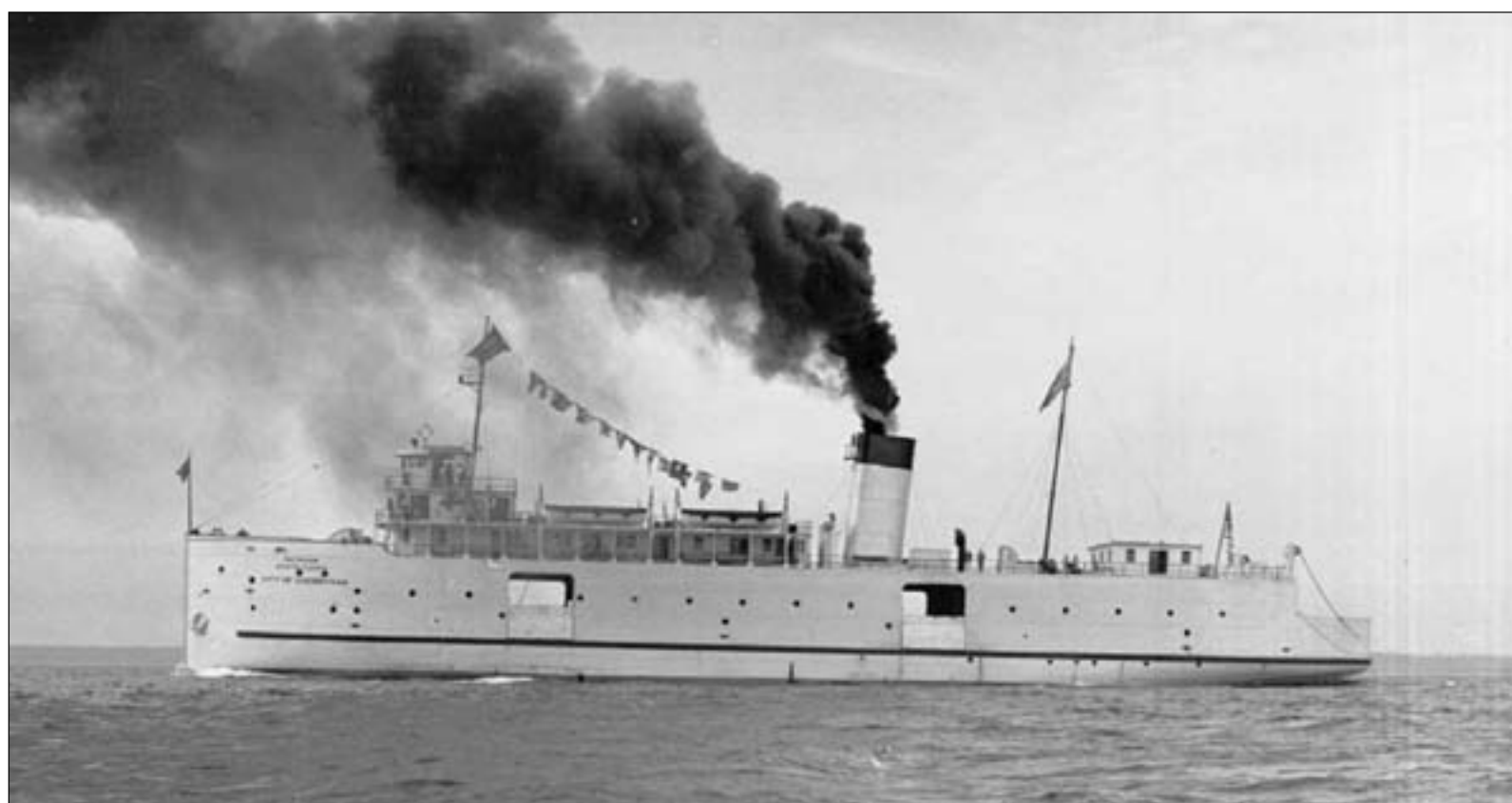
"Nothing will be left undone to expedite fitting the steamer for service at the Straits," he said.

Without the new boat, the ferry fleet moved into the 24-hour summer schedule at 12:30 a.m. on June 25. Now back from dry dock, both railroad boats supplemented the three-boat state fleet as it ran wild, moving traffic across the Straits on demand.

Just two days before, Joe Louis had run wild in Cominsky Park, Chicago, defeating James J. Braddock to claim the World Heavyweight Boxing Championship, a first for a black man. At the same time, the black-hulled ferry, *Ann Arbor No. 4*, was at last repainted. By now, more than 100 men were scrambling to complete the vessel. On June 30, Commissioner Van Wagoner announced, "We have just received approval of the U.S. Bureau of Navigation for the ferry's new name." He anticipated re-christening the ferry between July 8 and 10.

It couldn't be soon enough! As Independence Day weekend approached, traffic at the Straits grew to volumes never seen before. At one point on July 3, more than 1,022 cars were counted in line at Mackinaw City. With all available boats at full capacity, the wait stretched for up to seven hours. Motorcycle police patrolled the lineup, which extended more than three miles out of town. Local residents quickly pocketed small fortunes by carrying out water, soft drinks, and food to waiting tourists.

On the Fourth of July alone, 3,379 vehicles were ferried, a 40%



With smoke billowing and flags flying, the *City of Cheboygan* took invited guests on an inaugural cruise around Mackinac Island. The newly christened ship was placed into service from St. Ignace the very next day, while Commissioner Murray Van Wagoner left for New York, where he consulted on designs for the proposed new diesel ferry. (Author's collection)

Frankfort, formerly master of the *Sainte Ignace*. Plankholding officers of the *Cheboygan* would include First Mate Emil Potvin of Cheboygan, Second mate, W. J. Mackin from Detroit, and Chief Engineer, Ivo Coveyou, of St. Ignace. Captain John Marino of Cheboygan replaced Frey in the *Sainte Ignace's* command.

All the delays in getting the *City of Cheboygan* into service provided more fodder for the pro-bridge forces. Professor James Cissel, the University of Michigan's bridge engineer, told a banquet of the U.P. Development Bureau that it was apparent ferry service would never be able to meet the demand, even if a new boat was added to the fleet every year. He called for immediate surveys of the bridge location so construction could begin right away. He said Michigan should suffer no embarrassment that four of her congressmen had recently voted against the bridge measure in Washington.

An article in the *Detroit Free Press* cited Independence Day traffic figures, saying traffic was growing at the rate of 28% a year, with no letup in sight. The article quoted Cissel's remarks about adding a boat a year, and concluded that a bridge at the Straits was a good idea.

"The idea of the Straits as the shortest road route from North to South and from East to West appears again to be emerging," the paper said.

The paper also reported the deaths of wireless inventor Guglielmo Marconi, and Vivian Burnett, the man immortalized as "Little Lord Fauntleroy." At the same time, wire services carried the news that the Public Works Administration (PWA) had once again rejected the Mackinac Straits Bridge Commission's \$30 million

in the rest of the fleet.

Finally, on August 4, the *City of Cheboygan* was christened. Following a grand parade through town, in which the commissioner and his daughters rode in a horse-drawn buggy, hundreds of guests and spectators converged on Cheboygan's MacArthur Dock for the 2 p.m. ceremonies, sponsored by the chamber of commerce. A bunting-draped speaker's platform with public address system and chairs for invited guests had been set up along the ship's port side. The gathering crowd extended the length of the ship and into the adjacent parking lot. For a better view, many onlookers climbed aboard and watched the ceremonies from a vantage point on the boat deck. Col. Roger M. Andrews, chairman of The Mackinac Island State Park Commission, served as master of ceremonies. The municipal band played, community leaders spoke, and Mrs. W. R. Stringham of the Marion Brown Woman's Club presented the ship with a flag, which was accepted by Commissioner Van Wagoner as "admiral" of the ferry fleet. After the commissioner's keynote remarks, carried verbatim in the *Cheboygan Tribune*, his daughters, seven- and nine-year-old Ellen and Jo Van Wagoner, jointly swung a ribbon-hung bottle of champagne to officially re-christen the ferry.

In his remarks that day, Van Wagoner poked fun at his own speaking ability.

"Before coming up here today, I tried to brush up on the proper procedure for christening boats," he said. "Everyone, of course, told me it was necessary to crack a bottle of champagne over the boat's prow. However, I couldn't get anyone to agree with me that it was also neces-

sary from the naval architect and that bids for building the new boat would be advertised in just a few weeks. He also mentioned thoughts about moving the dock in St. Ignace to create a shorter route, capping the plans with a new park for St. Ignace visitors.

Lastly, the commissioner agreed that a bridge was needed as soon as possible, but the soonest it could be built was a long way off, five to seven years at least, for design and construction. He assured them that, meanwhile, the Highway Department would do everything it could to keep traffic moving across the Straits. But, he added, based on past experience, the ferries were engaged in a losing battle.

The afternoon ended with public inspection tours of all areas of the ship. She then departed on a smoke-belching VIP cruise for invited guests, which went out into the Straits and circled Mackinac Island.

Following the festivities, the Commissioner showed his daughters home and then joined his assistant, G. Donald Kennedy, on a trip to New York, where he visited the Naval Architect's offices and transacted "routine business" with the United States Bureau of Public Roads in Washington.

The *City of Cheboygan* entered service, making her first run at 11:30 a.m. Sunday, August 5. It was just in time. Traffic in July had increased 27.9% over the year before, with no letup in sight. The first day, the new ferry was able to carry more than 500 cars, moving 96 cars in one trip alone. Her nominal capacity was between 85 and 90 vehicles, depending on the size of the autos and number of trucks being carried. It was hoped she would leave her bad luck days behind.

one gangway while loading at the other. But the inefficiency of backing cars into and out of some corner parking spaces aboard quickly became obvious. By Labor Day, engineers were hard at work on plans to convert the St. Ignace utility pier into an end-loading dock for the ferry.

The dock would be widened, and a temporary end-loading slip established. At the same time, the causeway at Mackinaw City would be enlarged to provide a 40 foot entry lane and 20-foot-wide exit. Work would include dredging at both terminals in preparation for arrival of the still-anticipated new ferry. Bids for the new boat were to be called September 27. Plans to relocate the St. Ignace terminal were postponed indefinitely, pending construction of a bridge across the Straits.

Labor Day weekend showed just how great the need for the new facilities were. Statisticians armed with columnar pads kept tabs on auto arrivals at the end of each traffic line. Others marked down what time the same cars embarked on the ferries to determine just how long each auto had waited. The crowds were handled more easily than expected, and while the northbound backups were still very large, southbound lines totaled less than a mile, at their worst. At one point, traffic was backed up in St. Ignace from the dock to the State Police barracks, and to the depot in the other direction. An army of state and local police, ferry workers, and National Youth Administration (NYA) boys kept traffic lined up in an orderly manner throughout the weekend. To provide more room for traffic, St. Ignace police banned parking all along State Street. It helped the line-ups, but local merchants were less than happy there was no place for their customers to park.

Now that the *City of Cheboygan* was in service, officials planned to drop back to two boats immediately after the holiday rush ended. Traffic continued heavy well into September, however, so only the leased *Sainte Marie (II)* was pulled on July 9. The *Mackinaw City* broke off the schedule on July 11, and with Capt. Murray G. McIntosh in command, left the next day for the shipyard in River Rouge for routine maintenance. Finally, on the 13th, *The Straits of Mackinac* was taken to the coal dock to have her boilers washed, and the two-boat schedule at last became a reality. *The Straits* was kept ready, however, just in case her capacity would also be needed. Later in the month, the *Sainte Marie (II)*, which may have had the busiest year of her career, was also sent to the shipyard for general overhaul.

As planned, the Highway Department called for bids on the new streamlined, end-loading ferry in the third week of September, with a bid opening scheduled for October 21. The all-steel vessel would, this time, be 372 feet long, diesel powered, and capable of carrying 150 cars. At the same time, officials announced work on the terminals had been delayed, pending approval of the plans by the war department.

This was important, as while America remained neutral, war had broken out on two fronts, in Europe and in Asia. Germany invaded neighboring countries and Japan

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"Admiral" Van Wagoner and Ellen, both dressed in white, then hosted a tour of the ship, pausing to welcome guests aboard and to pose for photographs in the ship's entryway. (Van Wagoner Collection, Bentley Library)

previous Memorial Day weekend. On the day before the holiday, traffic was up 300%! Requests for information at the state-run "tourist lodge" near New Buffalo were up 90%. Based on these early figures, everyone forecast a huge resort season for 1937.

In Cheboygan, a crew of 50 shipyard workers toiled to make the state's new ferry ready for service. The first of four 15' x 14'3" holes were cut into her sides to make gangways, two on each side, for side-loading autos. Acetylene torches cut the outlines and then chains were attached to portholes to lift the unused steel panels being removed.

If the lines weren't bad enough, there was tragedy in the headlines. Flyer Amelia Earhart and her navigator, Fred Noonan, disappeared somewhere in the Pacific. There was an SOS call saying they were down on a small island, but despite a frantic search, nothing was ever heard from them again.

Finally, the Highway Department announced the new *City of Cheboygan* was almost ready for service. All she needed was a Bureau of Navigation inspection. Officials hoped to have everything ready so she could be re-christened and enter service around July 10. O.T. Pries was hired to paint the ship's new name on her pilothouse, her bows, and on the stern, along with her new hailing port, designated as Lansing.

Despite the July 10 projections, on July 15, the *Cheboygan* was still tied in her namesake city, with no word on when she would finally sail. By this time, 36 crewmen had been appointed, under the command of Captain Sigurd M. Frey of

While work on the railroad boats in turn went as projected, work on the state's new auto carrier took longer than expected. By mid-June, Commissioner Murray Van



The Cheboygan Chamber of Commerce sponsored the *City of Cheboygan's* christening ceremony August 4, 1937. Colonel Roger M. Andrews, chairman of the Mackinac Island State Park Commission, was the master of ceremonies as a huge crowd gathered at Lund's Shipyard to witness the event. (Michigan Department of Transportation)

bridge loan request.

On August 3, inspectors concluded their checks on the new ferry. With everything in order, she quietly slipped out of the harbor for a test run around Mackinac Island before tying at the St. Ignace pier about 1:30 in the afternoon to ship 350 tons of coal. She returned to Cheboygan later that evening. On the way, her compass was "swung" to align it, and make sure it read with the same calibrations as those

sary to make a speech. They thought that was carrying my authority as admiral a bit too far."

He complimented the ship's new name as well, but added, "For one thing, it was either select this name or have your state Representative, Ernest E. Faircloth, as a permanent resident in my office."

Most importantly, Van Wagoner revealed that the long-awaited plans for the new, modified, streamlined diesel ferry had just been received

Apparently, she did. Although she was now the oldest ship the state ferries owned, she became a reliable workhorse, and only once had any other serious problems for the rest of her ferrying career.

Once in service, it became apparent just how large the *Cheboygan* was, compared to the rest of the fleet. Her white hull and sides towered over the side-loading slips at each terminal. When properly aligned, she could unload cars from