

Autos Across Mackinac: 1937 'Army of Hunters' Descends on Ferry Docks

* Continued from page 14

was engaged in bombing raids on China. American industry geared up to supply war materials for each conflict. Meanwhile, work continued to design a bridge for the Straits. In late September, drawings of the proposed structure were released to the media.

As planned, the new, more direct route would leave Mackinaw City on a 4,600-foot causeway and viaduct type steel-work, heading in an easterly direction and swinging northeast to a main bridge about 14,000 feet in length. This structure would carry two lanes of traffic and a single railroad line over the main shipping channel to North Graham Shoal. There, the traffic would return to another causeway-viaduct, which curved north to the point just south of St. Ignace. Estimates pegged the cost at \$32,400,000, depending on what type of submarine construction would be needed to support the bridge.

In early October, Michigan highway officials hosted a tour of the proposed bridge site for highway engineers from California. The guests flew from Lansing to tour the site and look over plans for the new bridge, and the new ferry Michigan hoped to build in the interim. J.G. Stanley, Fred J. Grumm, F. W. Panhorst, and Richard H. Wilson were involved in building the 7-mile Oakland Bay Bridge, which cost \$75 million. While they refused to make any statement about the proposed bridge, they did note that, from an engineering standpoint, it appeared entirely feasible.

On the first Friday of October, Captain Stufflebeam left Capt.

Ryerse in charge of the *Chief*, and, after a year of charter, took the *Sainte Marie (II)* to Manitowoc to be dry-docked. Servicing the ferry was expected to take about two weeks. Meanwhile, although the work to widen the Mackinaw City state dock had not yet started, a group of Cheboygan restaurateurs purchased the old boarding house across from the dock. They planned to build a new "eating establishment" on what the *Republican-News* called the "most valuable piece of property in Mackinaw City."

The ferry *Mackinaw City* had remained at the shipyard in River Rouge, but soon after arriving, her master, Capt. McIntosh, had taken ill. Hospitalized at the Marine Hospital there, he died Saturday morning, October 16. His funeral was held in Detroit, attended by Capt. Ed Doner, and many family members, friends, and fellow ferry workers, who flew in for the occasion. Capt. Doner later named Capt. William L. McDougall of Detroit as the Mackinaw City's new master.

The state still planned to build its new ferry, and at the same time, beautify the St. Ignace terminal by making the entire waterfront into a park. But when bids on the new boat were opened October 21, the lowest, from Great Lakes Engineering Works in River Rouge, came in at \$1,625,280, which was \$25,000 higher for the non-ice crushing version than had been bid for the heavier version the year before. The only other bid, from Defoe Boat and Motor Works in Bay City, was \$1,847,800, \$250,000 higher than the planner's projections. The Highway Department characterized both bids as "excessive" and summarily rejected them. It left the traffic-choked ferries with only one thing to do.

Immediately following the bid opening, Ferry Superintendent Doner was called to Lansing, where he conferred with his superiors, and then left for Cleveland, where it was presumed he was "talking ferry boats, and looking over what's on the market." Cleveland was the headquarters of the Pere Marquette Railroad's ownership, and speculation ran high that Doner might be negotiating to buy one of that company's railroad ferries, much as the state had done the year before with the *Ann Arbor No. 4*.

Editorial sentiment favored such a move. The *Republican-News* said it made much more sense to spend a few hundred thousand dollars to refurbish a boat than to spend \$1.6 million to build a new one. The paper also commented that the *Mackinaw City* and *Sainte Ignace* were obsolete for Straits ferry service, and that the St. Ignace State Dock and Coal Dock could each be transformed to admit an ice-crushing, end-loading ferry.

Captain Doner's talks were cut short, however, when he came down with an undisclosed illness. Instead of seeking a boat in Cleveland, he was forced to seek a hospital room. He ultimately spent nearly a month at Mt. Clemens Hospital before returning to the Straits with his wife in early December, and checking back into their quarters at the Nicolet Hotel.

While Doner was away, in late October, the bids came in to modify the Mackinaw City dock. Price Brothers Co. of Dayton, Ohio, won the job with a bid of \$199,920. The work would not only widen the entry and exit lanes, to be repaved in the spring, but provide a 200-foot wide parking area, as well. Altogether, the new facility would be 271 feet wide. In awarding the contract in early November, Commissioner Van Wagoner said work to build a stone dike and breakwall surrounded by sheet piling would start yet that fall, and water at the face of the dock would be dredged to an 18-foot depth. The spoils would be used as fill to widen the dock all the way back to the street. Two other bids were also received, but rejected; William J. Meagher of Bay City bid \$238,794, and the Luedtke Engineering Co. of Frankfort bid \$245,820 for the work.

Again that November, an army of hunters descended on the ferry docks heading for the Upper Peninsula. For 1937, an army of ferry workers, 154 people strong, was there to greet them. All four state-owned boats and the *Sainte Marie (II)* were mobilized to meet the rush, although the railroad ferry almost arrived late. She had been taken to Manitowoc in September for dry-docking and was delayed by a strong northeaster storm, which delayed shipping all over the lakes when she tried to return. Excluding the *Sainte Marie (II)*'s crew, 128 men worked on the state boats and 20 or more people toiled on the docks. Four more men kept the administrative office open nearly full time while the boats sailed with no schedule during the 24-hour a day period, which started November 10.

Local businesses were kept



Seven-year-old Ellen Van Wagoner, daughter of Michigan's highway commissioner, Murray Van Wagoner, christened the ship. As Colonel Rogers held the microphone, her proud father looked on from behind her as she swung the champagne bottle against the ship's side. The Van Wagoners rode to the shipyard in a horse cart, part of a parade through Cheboygan's streets leading up to the christening ceremony. (Michigan Department of Transportation)



The City of Cheboygan conversion was done primarily at Lund's Shipyard on the Cheboygan River. Large side-loading openings were cut in the former *Ann Arbor #4*'s sides, the rails were removed from her cardeck, and, over the summer of 1937, she was made into the newest Michigan State Ferry. The work took longer than expected, and she wasn't ready for christening until August. (Postcard view, author's collection)

hopping day and night to meet the rush, as well. Nearly every tourist accommodation, closed since Labor Day, reopened to house the nimrod army. Restaurants were crowded to overflowing and stores selling hunting supplies did a land office business, vending guns, ammunition, clothing, and supplies almost as fast as they could be packaged and sent out the door.

The 1937 hunting season turned out to be the largest so far on record, with more than 18,330 hunters transported across the Straits in just five days. To handle the traffic, both the *Sainte Marie (II)* and *Chief Wawatam* were pressed into service, so with all six boats running, more than 450 cars could be moved from Mackinaw City every 90 minutes. Still, traffic was backed up for more than five miles waiting to board.

Returning traffic was spread out over a longer time, but still caused

headaches for Marshal John McLean in St. Ignace. The city's only police officer found himself untangling traffic jams, mediating line-cutting disputes, and answering foolish questions, like whether arriving autos were now in Canada, why no copper mines were visible, and why he wasn't attired like the pictures of "other policemen in London." Many returning hunters and tourists also stopped just long enough to tell him how much they'd enjoyed their Upper Peninsula visits.

A survey completed by the American Automobile Association showed that, of 1937 tourists in Upper Michigan, 85% had come by automobile, 10% by train, and 6% by steamships and buses. Fifty-four percent kept vacation schedules open, going where and when they pleased. Sixty percent preferred hotels, as opposed to tourist homes or camps. Forty percent said they would probably return year after year. The conclusion: If a resort or hotel operator extended the right service at the right price, and get even more through transients. The U.P. Development Bureau published a questionnaire for resort owners, reminding them that to increase business, they needed to put themselves in the tourist's place and treat people the way they wanted to be treated. If the owners answered correctly, they could almost be assured of increasing business, the bureau said.

Finally, by December, the hunting rush ended. The *Sainte Ignace* was tied up at the Mill Slip and the *Mackinaw City* was laid up at the State Dock. The chartered *Sainte Marie (II)* was also released for two weeks until the start of the winter navigation season. For early December, only *The Straits of Mackinac* and the *City of Cheboygan* were left on the run. They were laid up on December 14, as ice began to form in the slips, making it difficult for them to land.

In early December, Com-

missioner Van Wagoner took steps to make navigation on the Straits of Mackinac a whole lot safer. He ordered short wave radio direction finders installed aboard each state-owned ferry for the 1938 season. The receivers would indicate whether the boat was on the correct course and heading, despite decreasing visibility from darkness, fog, or snow.


On December 1, a demonstration of the technology was conducted aboard the lighthouse tender S.S. *Marigold*. A temporary transmitter was set up at Old Point Mackinac and Commissioner Van Wagoner, Deputy Commissioner G. Donald Kennedy, Captains Doner, George Loughlin, and McDougall, and Chief Clerk F. C. Davis all watched in awe as, using only the radio signal, the *Marigold*'s master navigated across the Straits with no visual references. Alex Tromblay, the *Chief's* second officer, witnessed the display for the Mackinac Transportation Company and took word back to Capt. Stufflebeam of what he had seen.

As winter once again embraced the region, Professor Cissel complained that only \$14,000 had been spent on bridge surveys and planning. He cited inadequate funding as the reason plans weren't drawn well enough for federal funding approval, already rejected twice before, in 1935 and 1936. He noted the proposed bridge would be built with revenue bonds, paid for entirely out of proceeds from tolls paid for the crossing, and that with ferry traffic increasing by 22.5% a year, it was nearly impossible for the ferries to keep up.

By the end of 1937, the boats had carried 268,000 vehicles, averaging 2,500 a day in August. Delays had extended up to eight hours to cross. Clearly, something more needed to be done. Both in the public eye, and behind the scenes, it was.

Next week: *Auto Ferries in Training, Part II*
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