

Autos Across Mackinac: *Pere Marquette* Makes New Home in St. Ignace

To commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the Mackinac Bridge and the end of auto ferry service across the Straits, the *St. Ignace News* is serializing Les Bagley's previously unpublished history of the ferries, entitled "Autos Across Mackinac." Last week's installment related how traffic continued to build during 1937, despite the addition of the City of Cheboygan to the fleet. More holding lanes were needed for all the autos, unless even more ferry capacity could be found. A solution to both problems was set into motion at the end of 1937.

Part 22: AUTO FERRIES IN TRAINING (Part II)

By Les Bagley

Work on the Mackinaw City dock expansion proceeded rapidly, so that by January 1938, a wall of field stone gathered from all around town had been built parallel to, and 350 feet south of, the ferry causeway. The rock extended out to a water depth of 16 feet, where it turned north to meet the existing dock structure. The area between was filled with sand, rock, and dredge spoils, making a solid peninsula extending out from the shore to deep water. Ray Durocher of DeTour and Ray Majestic of Cheboygan won the contract to do the fill work, and they felt the job would be completed by the spring sailing season. They had hired more than 50 truck drivers from all over Northern Michigan to haul

John Sherman. But the *Sherman* proved too small, so, starting in 1876, the railroad chartered boats from the Goodrich Transit Company, one of the largest shippers on the lake. The arrangement lasted seven years, until the railroad bought two new ships for its own operation, the F&PM Nos. 1 and 2. They were typical small steamers of their day. With increased traffic, the railroad soon ordered more boats, appropriately named F&PM Nos. 3, 4 and 5.

While other lines entered the car ferry business, these five vessels handled the railroad's cross-lake traffic. Meanwhile, the railroad watched. Finally, in December 1895, it ordered a steel car ferry to be designed by Robert Logan, a noted Cleveland naval architect. The ship was to be 337 feet long with two propellers aft, powered by compound engines. Like the Straits ferries and the early Ann Arbor boats, she was originally to have a bow propeller for ice work. The bow screw was ultimately eliminated from the plans when the Ann Arbor's experience proved it wasn't needed.

Named simply the *Pere Marquette* when launched by F.B. Wheeler & Company of Bay City in December 1896, she was a true pioneer. Her design of twin screws, four tracks on the main deck, passenger and licensed crew cabins on the upper deck, with two stacks fore and aft, was used by nearly every other lake ferry to follow. Unlicensed crewmembers were

started up from "15." The line also owned several ferries on the Detroit River. These were numbered downward starting at "14."

Whatever her name, *Pere Marquette 16*, like *Ann Arbor No. 4*, seemed to have more than her share of bad luck, much of it involving insufficient power to keep her bow into storms. On several occasions she fell off into troughs of the waves and, while broadside to the seas, her loosened cargoes smashed equipment and steam lines. Once she was intentionally sunk just off Ludington when she was swamped, grounded, and her back broken. The scuttling kept her from being a total loss. She also lost steering several times in her career, smashing other vessels and doing considerable damage to things on shore near where she tried to land.

Despite all the accidents, traffic out of Ludington continued to grow, and the *Pere Marquette* soon ordered four more steel ferries, also designed by Robert Logan. American Shipbuilding's Globe Iron Works of Cleveland launched the first, the *Pere Marquette 17*, as their hull No. 406 in 1901. She was 338 feet by 56 feet by 19.5 feet in dimensions. Unlike her Logan designed predecessor, she had triple expansion engines, 19" + 31" + 52-1/2" x 36" powered by four Scotch boilers of 13'8" x 12' generating 175 pounds of steam pressure for 2,300 horsepower. She could carry 30 rail cars on four tracks, and had a full-length pas-



It took days, and nearly \$25,000 in emergency repairs, before the *Pere Marquette 20* could even be certified to sail from Ludington to the shipyard in Manitowoc, Wisconsin. She was a sorry sight when she arrived March 22, 1938, and ferry superintendent Capt. Ed Doner believed her entire superstructure would have to be replaced. (Michigan State Archives.)

passenger cabins. *Pere Marquette 20* was identical to the *19* but was, again, built in Cleveland, making the *19* and *20* the first actual sister ships in the fleet.

The *19* was American Shipbuilding's hull No. 418 (US 200459), and the *20* was hull No. 419 (US 200531). Both ships were 338 feet x 56 feet x 19.5 feet, powered by two triple expansion engines of 19" + 31" + 52" x 36". They had four Scotch 13'9" x 12' boilers which generated 175 pounds of pressure, meaning they operated with 2,280 horsepower. Again, each ferry carried 30 rail cars on four tracks.

While the *19* was finished in the fall, the *20* was not completed until late in the year of 1903, and thus had to battle ice all the way from the shipyard to Ludington. The trip took her nearly two weeks, but she was put into service with her sisters almost immediately. It would be one of the worst winters on the lake and, for the entire month of February 1904, the lake was frozen solid, shore to shore.

Soon after the new boats arrived, much of the break-bulk fleet and the wooden *Pere Marquette 16* were sold. For the next 15 years, the five steel ferries provided service, with only several accidents and one major disaster. On May 29, 1905, the *Pere Marquette 20* struck a scow while leaving Milwaukee in a fog, sinking the scow with no loss of life. On November 21, 1906, the *17* was headed to Manitowoc when she encountered a tremendous storm. While she made port safely, she required a tug to help her land in the wind. As the tug and ferry passed through a bridge en route to the ferry slip, the wind pushed the ferry into the tug, which in turn crushed a fishing tug moored by the bridge, sinking her. The bridge also suffered several hundred dollars damage.

The accident *PM 17* suffered December 30, 1908, was much worse. Arriving in Ludington after a crossing from Manitowoc, she

was navigating in 30-mile-per-hour winds and a driving rain from astern. Far off course, she struck the beach about seven miles north of the harbor entrance and was driven by the waves to a point only about 800 feet off shore. The captain ordered her scuttled so she wouldn't break apart in the seas, and compartments around the engine room were intentionally flooded, while watertight bulkheads kept the boilers and engines dry. Unfortunately, she was so far onto the beach, there was thought of abandoning her to the underwriters. Finally, a pair of tugs were able to pull her free the following month. Fortunately, there was no loss of life.

The *Pere Marquette 17* was also present when the line suffered the worst accident in its history. But the accident happened to her sister ship, *Pere Marquette 18 (I)*. The *18* had the best passenger accommodations of the fleet, and so for several seasons she was chartered for excursions out of Chicago in the summer months. She was doing that again in 1910. Following Labor Day, she was returned to Ludington, where the railroad checked her out and did minor work to refit her as a freight handling car ferry. On September 8, 1910, about 11:40 p.m., she left on her first trip, headed for Milwaukee. Somewhere near mid-lake, around 3 a.m., an oiler went to the flicker to oil some bearings on the propeller shafts. There he discovered that, for some reason, the ship was taking a great deal of water, with about seven feet already in the aft compartment.

He immediately reported the situation, and upon inspection, a broken deadlight* was found. The crew sealed the opening and started the pumps, but the flooding only increased. With the stern settling noticeably, more deadlights were submerged and broken, and even more water flooded in. The crew jettisoned loaded rail cars to lighten the vessel, and between nine and 15 cars were shoved over

the stern. They also flooded some forward compartments in an effort to equalize the weight fore and aft.

*A deadlight is a strong plate fastened over a ship's porthole in stormy weather.

Captain Peter Kilty ordered the ship's wheelsman to steer directly for the nearest Wisconsin shore, and the purser began sending CQD* distress signals on the radio about 4:30 a.m. By 6:30, the nearest ship, the *PM 17* was spotted as they sailed about 20 miles off Sheboygan, Wisconsin. Even then, the crew thought they might make port. The pumps were working and the situation didn't seem to be getting much worse. No one had ordered anyone to abandon ship or even put on life jackets.

*CQD was replaced later by SOS.

Around 7:15, the *17* came along the *18's* starboard side, but since it was to windward, she couldn't get close enough to make fast or take off any passengers or crew. She put about to approach from the port side, but as she repositioned, suddenly the *18* took an enormous amount of water and sunk almost immediately by the stern. Captain Kilty was last seen standing on the flying bridge as it slipped beneath the waves. The enormous build up of air pressure blew out the bow, hurling debris high into the air. In moments, the *PM 18* was gone.

The *17* immediately launched boats to pick up survivors, but the high seas smashed one boat against her own side, killing two crewmembers. The other boats picked up about 35 people, most of whom had been sucked down by the sinking ship but had regained the surface. Still, the accident claimed 27 to 29 lives, as no one knew exactly how many people had been on board.

There was a full investigation, but since all the *18's* officers had been lost, no conclusive reason was ever found for the sinking. The speed that it sank, however, seemed to indicate something needed to be done to increase buoyancy on all the Lake Michigan ferries. Representatives of each operating company met and decided to equip each new boat with seagates across the stern. All of the existing ferries were similarly retrofitted.

The *Pere Marquette* immediately ordered a replacement boat, and the *Pere Marquette 18 (II)* was launched in record time from a yard in Chicago, the only ferry to ever be built there. Within about 90 days, the new ship was ready for service in January 1911.

The winter of 1911-12 was also difficult for the ferries. On December 10, 1911, the *20* went aground in a storm off Milwaukee, and seemed to be in danger of breaking up. Her captain ordered her scuttled, and the Coast Guard took off 16 crewmembers. But the captain and 20 others remained on board. On December 14, *PM 17* arrived and all 28 railcars were transferred from the stricken ferry. With the help of two tugs, the *17* was then able to work the



Work began to convert the ferry on March 23 by ripping the rails off her cardeck. Over the next few weeks, cranes removed her pilot house and superstructure, and her dilapidated boilers were removed, to be replaced by a better set, taken out of the *Pere Marquette 15*. (Michigan State Archives)

stone for the work, which would continue until the ice melted and regular dredging could begin.

In February, the state also advertised bids to finally extend the utility pier in St. Ignace for use by end-loading ferries. It was work that needed to be done, because on February 8, the Administrative Board in Lansing approved the purchase of another used ferry-boat, larger than any yet owned by the State. They agreed to buy a ferry from the *Pere Marquette* Railroad in Ludington.

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Unlike the Ann Arbor Railroad, which was built with a car ferry connection in mind, the Flint and *Pere Marquette* Railroad was built primarily to haul lumber from the area around what is today Ludington to Toledo. The town of Ludington was originally named "Pere Marquette" for the French missionary from St. Ignace. Father Marquette died near there while returning from his travels and was originally buried on the shore of the lake that bears his name. *Pere Marquette* Lake serves as the community's natural harbor, connected to Lake Michigan by a dredged channel, much like Lake Betsie in Frankfort. But by the time the rail line reached the shore of Lake Michigan in 1874, the town of *Pere Marquette* had been renamed for a local lumber baron.

By the 1870s, the lumber boom was nearly over, so the F&PM established a break bulk shipping connection across Lake Michigan using a small side-wheeler, the

lodged below the stern of the cardeck in a room that soon came to be called the "flicker," apparently because of the single flickering 25-watt bulb used for illumination. The ferry had the same track layout as the Ann Arbor boats that preceded her, allowing her to land at the same slips, and she was thus able to enter service between Ludington and Manitowoc on the night of February 16 and 17, 1897. Soon after the new ferry was received, the *F&PM No. 1* was sold.

A success from the start, the *Pere Marquette* had a relatively uneventful career that spanned 38 years.

In 1900, the F&PM merged with two other rail lines to form the *Pere Marquette* Railroad. The other lines also operated a car ferry, the wooden *Shenango No. 2* that had been renamed *Muskegon*. For awhile, that ship ran between *Muskegon* and Milwaukee, but was soon moved to join the *Pere Marquette* out of Ludington. After the merger, in 1901, the line renamed all of its fleet. The remaining break-bulk boats became *Pere Marquette 2, 3, 4, and 5*, while the *Muskegon* became *Pere Marquette 16*. Plans originally called for the *Pere Marquette* to become *Pere Marquette 15*, and often her crews called her "The 15." But the name change wasn't actually made until 1924.

The railroad adopted a ship numbering system like they used for locomotives. Their break-bulk fleet started at "1" and went up. The Lake Michigan car ferries

senger cabin with more extensive passenger facilities than the older ship. Officially numbered US 150906, she was registered at 2,775 gross tons.

The next ship, *Pere Marquette 18 (I)*, (US 150972), was launched from the same place the following year. At 2,909 gross tons, she was slightly larger than the *17* as she had more passenger space. *Pere Marquette 19* was launched from Lorain, Ohio, in October 1903 and was an almost duplicate of the *17*, but, at 2,626 gross tons, had no



No one brought a set of plans for the existing ferries at the Straits, so engineers had to have someone quickly measure the side loading openings on the *City of Cheboygan* so the new ferry could be built to match. The openings were quickly cut into her sides. New funnels were fabricated and installed along with a whole new superstructure. (Michigan State Archives.)