

# Autos Across Mackinac: Ferries Face Several Unfortunate Incidents

To celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the opening of the Mackinac Bridge, this year the St. Ignace News is serializing Les Bagley's history of the Michigan State Ferries, "Autos Across Mackinac." While state officials continued trying to finance a bridge in the days before WWII, ferry service kept growing, but not without unfortunate incidents.

## Part 24: CRASHES AND CLASHES

By Les Bagley

On January 2, 1939, Grand Ledge farmer Frank Fitzgerald was again sworn in as Governor of Michigan. In a modestly simple ceremony, devoid of pomp at Fitzgerald's request, he led an all-Republican cabinet into office in Lansing. The lone exception was Democratic State Highway Commissioner Murray D. Van Wagoner, who still had two years remaining on his four-year term. Van Wagoner hired Louis M. Nims, former Michigan Director of the WPA, to be deputy highway commissioner, replacing Varnum B. Steinbaugh, who resigned owing to ill health. Steinbaugh did agree to stay on part time as a consulting engineer. With the changes, the new administration plunged ahead into operation of the state.

The next day, January 3, the *Chief Wawatam* plunged headlong onto North Graham Shoal in a blowing wind and blinding blizzard. The ferry had left Mackinaw City with a full load of railcars, but had been unable to find her St. Ignace dock in the storm. Trying to stay out of harm's way, Captain Charles "Paddy" Brown sailed back into the Straits until he could get his bearings. Later in the day, he was able to hear the dock siren, but in steering toward it, his ship crossed the shallow water north of the shoal and ran firmly aground. There she sat for nearly 145 hours, as dropping lake levels and dwindling coal supplies hampered efforts to free her.

It took the combined efforts of the wrecking tug *Favorite*, summoned from the Soo, the *John Roen*, brought in from Green Bay, the *Saint Marie (II)*, and the Coast Guard icebreaker *Escanaba*, all pulling with the *Chief's* own engines, to free her. The rescue only happened when the water level rose a foot overnight on January 9. In the interim, coal was passed by the bucketful to refuel the big ferry, and food supplies were carried out to her from shore. Once freed, the *Chief* at last unloaded her cargo of rail cars and then tied up at the Merchandise Dock for a complete inspection. Divers found she'd broken all the buckets off her forward screw and damaged several hull plates, an after screw, and bent a shaft. She was immediately sent to Manitowoc for repairs. The *Saint Marie (II)* was left to handle both the railroad and auto ferrying runs.

State Ferry Superintendent Ed H. Doner had been in Detroit attending Captain William L. McDougall's funeral when the *Chief* went aground. In his absence, his assistant, Captain George F. Loughlin, was asked for comment, and noted that in this case, only the *Chief's* crew, their families, and a few shippers had been inconvenienced. The accident could just as well have happened to a State Ferry carrying hundreds of passengers and their autos through the fog, and, therefore, could have been much worse. He pointed out that the accident could have been avoided had the much needed light and fog alarms been installed on the shoal, as had been authorized the year before.

Not wanting to experience the embarrassment of having such a grounding inconvenience State Ferry passengers, Commissioner Van Wagoner had a representative of the Bludworth Direction Finder Company flown in to survey each of the state boats for installation of newer, upgraded radio direction equipment. This was to be installed as soon as the spring navigation season opened and the radios could be properly calibrated.

Captain Doner got back from Detroit just in time to welcome a duo of inspectors from the American Bureau of Shipping, up from Detroit, themselves. C. H. Lincoln and L. D. Weston conducted a thorough inspection of all the state ferries' hulls, mechanical and

safety equipment, general seaworthiness, and overall conditions. Doner said the state would comply with any and all of their recommendations so as to provide the traveling public with the best-equipped steamers in the country. Michigan had by now invested nearly \$2 million in auto ferry service at the Straits. A tally of costs showed that in the first 16 years the Highway Department had run the service, the State had spent about \$1 million on the five boats in service, another \$942,178 on docks and facilities, and nearly \$3 million more to run it all. Commissioner Van Wagoner said that since the service started, it had cost a total of \$4,913,077 to the start of 1939. Receipts over the same period were \$4,257,778. The balance was made up from advances from regular state highway funds.

There were those who wanted the Highway Department to spend more. In late January, Victor A. Knox, the State Representative from Sault Ste. Marie, introduced a bill in Lansing to require the state boats to land at least twice a day at Mackinac Island, providing free service to walk-on passengers destined there. Editors of papers around the Straits quickly condemned the proposal, noting that while free rides to the Island would increase tourism there greatly, it would be to the detriment of motorists and tourists trying to travel between Michigan's peninsulas. The writers noted Mackinac Island was already well served by an entire fleet of private passenger ferries.

"Providing adequate service between Mackinaw City and St. Ignace is already a perennial problem," The *Cheboygan Tribune* wrote. "Until that problem is solved, it would be well for the state to let the present splendid fleet of private boats take care of the Mackinac Island business."

The winter of 1939 proved to make it difficult for anyone to take care of cross-Straits ferry business. On February 10, Captain Emil

hours of battling the ice.

Meanwhile, her sister ship, the *Chief Wawatam*, encountered pack ice at Lansing Shoals in the early Sunday morning hours while returning from the shipyard, and waited until daylight to enter the Straits. Some of the ice she crushed in the next 41 miles was more than 50 feet thick. That held her fast, and the *Saint Marie (II)* had to come out to break her free on her trip back to St. Ignace. The *Chief* didn't reach her slip until after 2 p.m. At the time, she was operating on only five of her boilers, having blown a tube in the sixth. It was repaired once she reached port and Straits traffic resumed with both railroad boats sailing from each side, trying to keep the channel open.

On Monday, the wind changed and drove ice back into the ferry slips. Both railway boats were held in port, and ferry travel across the Straits was again suspended indefinitely. With no boats sailing, a private pilot, Ralph Berry of Saginaw, used his plane to ferry a few travelers across, including the owner of the St. Ignace Theater, who flew to Mackinaw City and back to retrieve that night's feature film from the railway depot.

The interruption was a good example for investigators who had arrived in town to probe the *Chief's* earlier grounding on N. Graham Shoal. It gave them a chance to see Straits conditions for themselves, and it allowed them to interview crewmembers and others who otherwise would have been engaged in battling the ice at the time. Officers testified that the problem had been caused by lack of lights and sound devices in both St. Ignace and on the shoal, allowing the ferry to become lost in the blizzard then blowing through the region. The investigators forwarded their findings to Washington, to await any type of decision.

Yet another series of blizzards descended on the Straits. The *Chief* and *Sainte Marie (II)* struggled valiantly to maintain service, but in the height of the battle, the



This early St. Ignace view shows the old Ore Dock about the center of the photo. It was later cut down to a coal dock and was used as the ferries' service pier. Over the winter of 1938-39, it was made into an end-loading slip for the former railroad ferries purchased by the state.

single bond issue. The promoters proposed to charge the same as the State Ferries for the Straits crossing, but slightly higher than the ferries at the Soo charged for the bridge there. They noted that a cross-Canada highway would soon be completely paved, that the around-Lake-Superior route was just about finished, and that bridges at the Straits and at the Soo would see greatly increased traffic within just a few years.

On March 9, the *Chief Wawatam* suffered another accident. Backing out of her Mackinaw City slip for the 8 a.m. trip, she struck an iceberg with her left stern propeller, breaking off 26 inches of one blade. Lund's shipyard sent engineers to cut off a corresponding portion of the opposite blade to balance the propeller and allow her to operate until her next scheduled drydocking. By March 10, continued ice fields, and bergs 30 feet deep in the Straits, led the state to extend the charter on the *Sainte Marie (II)* through April 30. The smaller railroad ferry sailed up

go-ahead for the project. That approval was seen as the last hurdle before the search for financing could begin in earnest.

Almost simultaneously, the Mackinac Bridge Authority released its own report on the need for a bridge. Chairman G. Donald Kennedy said, "Despite every modern aid to safe navigation and despite added facilities, the dangers and delays at the Straits persist. ... There can be no question of the need for some physical link between the two peninsulas; there remains only the question of what type of link will be built and when." Bridge backers were heartened when, despite the rigors of the winter, the triangulation station built on pilings atop N. Graham Shoal was still standing that spring, relatively unscathed. It was, they said, a sign that modern engineering could design bridge foundations that could withstand the worst a Straits winter had to offer.

Winter was one thing, but war was quite another. As stunned Americans watched from afar, the German Third Reich swept across Northern Europe in a blitzkrieg that brought the swastika to more and more of the continent. As the invasions captured more headlines, the Straits bridge seemed to become more remote by the day.

Bridge or not, work on the conversion of the Coal Dock for the end-loading ferry fleet continued during the winter, when not held up by the weather. Workers set fender pilings along the side of the pier, and a local worker, William Suksi, stood atop a 10 foot scaffold drilling holes into the piles so bolts could attach them. Suddenly, the drill hit something solid, twisting around and throwing Suksi to the ice below the dock. As the plank on the scaffold collapsed, a fellow worker jumped, landing on his feet on the ice without injury. But Suksi wasn't so lucky. He fractured his left femur, the bone between the hip and the knee, jamming it into the hip socket. He was rushed to a local doctor's home and was then transferred by ambulance to the hospital at the Soo. There he was expected to stay for at least two months recovery.

It took several days for the region to recover from another blizzard that hit in mid-March. Snowdrifts between five and 10 feet deep snarled rail and highway traffic. With lines clogged to the north, the *Chief Wawatam* left the morning passenger train in Mackinaw City, as there was no place for it to go. The *Saint Marie (II)* continued on the auto ferry run until noon, Tuesday, March 14, when, with no cars arriving at the docks, she, too, tied up for the duration of the storm.

The blizzard lasted nearly 36 hours, with both boats lying in their docks at opposite sides of the Straits from Wednesday evening until late Friday morning. Then they both attempted a crossing, each making it nearly halfway, where they encountered a thick field of fast-moving ice. It took the ships nearly five hours to break through the barrier, allowing cross-Straits travel to resume. Everyone agreed, it was one of the worst winters on record for delays in Mackinaw City - St. Ignace travel.

It turned out to be a bad winter in Lansing, as well. Governor Frank Fitzgerald, who had only been in office since January,

caught the flu in early March and by the middle of the month was incapacitated by a severe case of influenza. That led to heart problems, and on the evening of March 16, he passed away at the Governor's Mansion, the victim of a flu-induced heart attack. The first Michigan Governor to die in office was succeeded by Lieutenant Governor Luren D. Dickinson, who took the oath of office on March 17, only about a month shy of his 80th birthday. Dickinson said being governor would do little to change his normal daily routine. He insisted he would decline any weekend social invitations, as those would interfere with teaching his Sunday school class.

Ten days later, on March 27, about 50 men arrived at St. Ignace to prepare the Michigan State Ferry fleet for the 1939 season. Fire Chief John Moore and men from the St. Ignace fire department brought out the pumper truck to fill the boilers on the *Mackinaw City*, *Sainte Ignace*, and *The Straits of Mackinac*. Within a week, more than 125 men were preparing the boats for the season, projected to start on April 16, ice and weather permitting. The early spring schedule called for two of the three boats to make crossings every 90 minutes though June 1, when the larger boats would be added. Ferry officials noted that, should traffic build more quickly, service could be expanded to hourly any time before June 1. The ferries were now ready to go, but ice kept them at the dock.

On Saturday, April 15, an unexpected change took place at Michigan State Ferries. Highway Commissioner Murray D. Van Wagoner announced the immediate and indefinite suspension of Captain Ed. Doner from his position as Ferry Superintendent, "for the good of the service." Other than noting that Doner had been with the ferries for six years, and that perhaps he would take a job somewhere to the east, perhaps in Boston, no further information was released, particularly as to why Doner was dismissed. But, as in the death of Jerry Stufflebeam, there was speculation alcohol was involved.

Since the end of prohibition, drinking was an increasing problem, not only at the Straits but all across America. Sailors, with their solitary lifestyles, long hours, independent thinking, and spirit of camaraderie had been, since time began, candidates for the overindulgence in many vices. Smoking, drinking, and shore-side shenanigans all seemed to fit the sailor's profile, and some of the ferry crewmembers were no exception. Adding to the problem, in late 1938, none other than former ferry captain Fred Cronan had successfully challenged the St. Ignace Council's ruling that had previously allowed only seven liquor licenses in the city. Politically active as ever, and still living in St. Ignace between assignments elsewhere, Cronan now served as Commander of the local American Legion Post. Seeing that posts in other communities were able to enlarge their incomes through lounges and club liquor sales, he lobbied for additional licenses, and a number were granted, including one to his organization.

The increased competition

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Workers cut beams and huge planks to surface the new end-loading slip, formerly the ferries' coal dock in St. Ignace. This is the site that would come to be known as "Dock 2." In the background, just to the left of the white gravel pile, is the Nicolet Hotel, a popular watering hole for ferry workers and much of the city, as it had one of the few bars licensed to reopen at the end of Prohibition.

Potvin left St. Ignace with 30 autos and 125 passengers aboard the *Saint Marie (II)*, attempting to maintain the service. The ship sailed about 6:15 Friday night, but didn't reach Mackinaw City until after 4 on Saturday morning. Trying to return with 23 cars, 90 passengers, and an express railroad car with mail, the ferry was stuck another 14 hours.

That night, both Mackinaw City and St. Ignace became festive locations as stranded tourists joined locals in celebrating "no special occasion" long into the night. A number of visitors joined impromptu card games, dances, and social gatherings at restaurants, lounges, and hotels all across the towns. The exception was a busload of 11 convicts bound for the State Prison in Jackson from the penal facility in Marquette. The two "lifers" and 9 "short-termers" were put up for the night in the Mackinac County Jail.

State Ferry officials warned everyone in St. Ignace to be aboard the *St. Marie (II)* by 7 a.m. Sunday, when she would try to make another crossing. With the tourists, convicts, and an ambulance making a southbound emergency run, the ferry pulled away from the pier about 7:10 a.m. and reached Mackinaw City only after several

smaller boat lost a piston in her forward engine, sidelining her until a replacement could be manufactured and sent from the shipyard in Manitowoc. With only one boat to maintain the channel, and shifting winds and blowing snow conspiring to obscure it, the *Chief* was at a loss to handle autos and passengers in the daytime, freight at night, and still maintain a schedule. She spent almost as much time stuck in the ice over the next 11 days as she did sailing. Finally, toward the end of February, the weather changed, the *Saint Marie (II)*'s new piston arrived, and things began to get back to normal. In an emergency measure, the Post Office requested and received permission to contract for emergency airmail service across the Straits, in the meantime. Of course, with blizzard weather prevailing most of the time, the planes were at a loss to deliver the mail as well.

The weather-related tie-ups only served to pique bridge interest again, and in late February, a private company made a tentative offer to the governments of Michigan and Ontario to build not only a bridge across the St. Marys River at the Soo but to construct a privately operated Straits bridge. Their idea was that both bridges might be more easily built with a

to the State Coal Dock on the 11th and tried to break out *The Straits of Mackinac*, which was tied there, but officials said the state boat was still stuck fast and probably could not take over the run until at least April 20. Cold weather and ice held up the start of shipping all over the lakes.

Rogers City Congressman Fred Bradley took the ice conditions as reason to introduce another bill in congress. This one called for construction of a Coast Guard icebreaker to be stationed at St. Ignace to keep the Straits open for rail and auto ferry traffic, fishing tugs, and other forms of marine commerce throughout the year. Prentiss Brown introduced a companion bill in the Senate six weeks later. Bradley also pressed the Interstate Commerce Committee of the House to hold a hearing on his bill approving construction of a Straits bridge. He said he expected the hearings to be held in April. Across the capitol, Senator Brown forecast favorable action by the Senate on the companion bridge bill he sponsored.

In March, Bradley asked the Army Engineers to expedite a report they were making on the proposed bridge. The House committee needed it to decide whether the United States should give the