

# Autos Across Mackinac: Bids Are Taken for Causeway Construction

\*Continued from page 10

ferris carried nearly 4,500 cars, a record for a non-holiday weekend. With the increase in tourism, resort and cabin operators rushed new accommodations to completion and hurriedly modernized older facilities.

The state, meanwhile, rushed to take bids for causeway construction. Governor Van Wagoner, Commissioner Kennedy and most Highway Department division heads met with the Straits Bridge Authority at St. Ignace in early August, and mapped out final specifications for the bidding. The first of two requests for bids was to be published August 20. Part one of the project would involve construction of the 44-foot-wide, 12-foot-high causeway, extending 4,000 feet out into the Straits between Graham Shoals and Green Island. Officials believed the causeway construction would cost in the range of \$1.7 million. The second phase of construction, to be bid later, would be for construction of the actual ferry slips at the end of the causeway. That part of the project was projected as being still two years away. The conferees also discussed the possibility of building a bypass to route north-bound traffic from the causeway around St. Ignace. That project was referred to engineers for further study.

The bypass proposal immediately raised red flags for St. Ignace business people. The Mackinac County Board of Supervisors met immediately and over the next two



After the reception guests were invited to cruise back to the Straits. Highway Department personnel drove guests' cars to Mackinaw City so they would have a way home. The only snag was that too many people took advantage of the invitation, and planners had to quickly "uninvited" some guests. The local Boy Scout color guard had to give up the ride, but later got a private trip aboard when the *Petoskey* sailed to the River Rouge shipyard. (Author's collection)

days discussed city plans to annex part of Moran Township, where the causeway would be built, into the city. Moran Township protested the plan and the supervisors tabled the matter until later in the year, when more information might be available.

As St. Ignace merchants contemplated what a bypass might do to

their community, the community band, dressed smartly in their new uniforms, performed an exchange concert series with the band from Cedarville, which came to St. Ignace to appear at the Nicolet Hotel. Chester Wing looked into providing "feeder" airline service to Mackinac Island from existing airline routes, and the output of American aircraft factories in the first six months of 1941 eclipsed the entire 1940 output by over 1,000 planes.

The *City of Munising's* master, Ben Houle, got eclipsed as well. An avid cribbage player, Houle was leading a Friday night tournament by 10 points and going home when his opponent, Munising seaman Willard L'Amiotte, laid down a perfect hand and counted out on him. There was no word on what happened on their next watch together, but cribbage was apparently becoming an important pastime for many ferry workers.

The St. Ignace City Council had not tabled the causeway/by-pass dilemma. To protect their merchants' "vital economic interests," the council adopted a daring plan to purchase both the ferry docks in town and the site of the causeway from the State Highway Department. Councilmen admitted State Street had become too crowded, and that the bypass would relieve the congestion to the detriment of downtown businesses. To thwart the bypass, the council offered to widen State Street and pay to build the causeway and new docks from city funds. That money would be derived from revenue bonds sold on both old and new

ferry docks and causeway, which would then be leased back to the Highway Department. The councilmen hoped the lease revenues would repay the initial investment for purchase and construction.

City businessmen enthusiastically endorsed the proposal, and in a *Republican-News* editorial entitled, "At the Crossroads," the editor also backed the plan, saying, "It is a good plan and a progressive means of solving our problem and securing our position as the northern terminal of all Straits traffic." Mayor Glashaw appointed a "traffic committee" of five local businessmen to confer with the state on the proposal, and state officials agreed to consider the matter. The officials also continued with their plans to open causeway construction bids August 20.

In the *Cheboygan Observer*, Al Weber wrote, "While this [bridge and causeway] development is taking place, it will throw into St. Ignace millions of dollars for supplies and labor, all of which will make our neighboring city a very busy center for at least a five year period. But after that work is all done, the causeway completed, and the bridge built and in use, what will happen to St. Ignace? Will it have grown out to meet the proposed new terminus or will it cling to its old environs and attempt to bring this new artery of travel into town instead of having them pass the town? ... The question persists: Will the proposed Straits bridge contribute to northern Michigan magnetism as does the ferries? ... To most summer visitors that hour on the boat is one of the shortest hours

of their whole trip. It is a new, thrilling and lovely experience."

For some Michigan ferry riders, that experience ended that summer. The Blue Water Bridge at Port Huron had been completed for several years, and with bus service for pedestrians finally in place, Michigan discontinued the passenger ferry service it had provided. The ferries the Highway Department operated there were no longer needed, and in mid-August, two boats, the *City of Sarnia* and the former Straits ferry *Ariel* were sold at auction. The ships were both sold to the Refining Metal Company of Detroit, which intended to scrap them for their available metal. The *Ariel* was sold by Michigan for a final time, for a bid of \$70,000.

The bids for causeway construction came in below the state's estimates, at \$616,000 for the rockwork and another \$700,000 estimated for building the docks later. Johnson and Greene of Whitmore Lake beat out Alpine Excavating Company of St. Ignace, which bid in conjunction with the Meagher firm, already dredging near the ferry docks. The winning bid was \$100,000 lower than the next lowest, and the Highway Department moved to

144,000 tons more of rock in various sizes for fill and other uses. None of the regional quarries was cutting stone in the larger sizes the project needed, and some rock might have to be imported from Indiana. But most people felt that if someone ordered it, at least one of the quarries would probably try to provide the material.

Rock or not, the Army Corps of Engineers abruptly delayed the start of causeway construction, announcing public hearings would be held in late September. Nearly two dozen potentially "interested parties" and the public were invited to express views on the location and the suitability of the state's plans, as they might affect navigation. The Highway Department waited to start construction, but property acquisition continued anyway. In late August, the St. Ignace traffic committee met with Highway Commissioner Kennedy and his department heads in Cadillac to outline the city's \$2.4 million harbor and causeway purchase deal. The department didn't turn down the proposal, but it didn't accept it, either. Kennedy assured the committee he would consider their plan, and further said his department was



Seventeen-year-old Shirley Lou Walker was chosen as "Sweetheart of Michigan State Ferries" and photographed by a photographer from the Saturday Evening Post, before representing the ferries at the "Great Lakes Sailors' Sweetheart" competition. She would later marry a state ferry engineer. Shirley Walker Bentgen still lives in St. Ignace today. (Photograph courtesy of Shirley Bentgen)

award contracts and get the work started as quickly as possible, in the hope the causeway could be completed before the end of the 1942 tourist season. Right-of-way buyers had already begun contacting property owners at the site, and the department made plans to buy up to a square mile of land, giving the agency virtually all developmental control of the soon-to-be gateway to the Upper Peninsula.

There was one problem. More than 81,000 tons of giant 10-ton stones would be needed to face the sides of the causeway, in addition to 8,200 tons of 5-ton stones, and

not presently contemplating a bypass highway.

Ultimately, the Highway Department rejected St. Ignace's offer to buy the ferry docks and build the causeway. Deputy Commissioner L. B. Reid told the city council his preliminary investigations showed that plans for a revenue bond issue just weren't feasible.

"I really believe the 250 miles between historic St. Ignace and Lansing are responsible for the discussion which has developed over this causeway project," Reid said.

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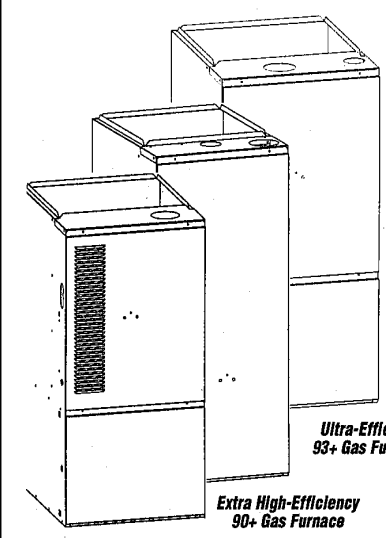
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