

# Autos Across Mackinac: Ferry Traffic Still Continues to Increase in 1941

\*Continued from page 11

"No one in the department has any intention of making a bypass - at least not until a large increase in traffic warrants such a move."

Reid repeated that Commissioner Kennedy suggested the city annex the entire area around the causeway from Moran Township, and the council voted unanimously to invite township officials to their next meeting. "If a bypass is built someday," Reid added, "such a bypass would go through the city, and you possess the authority to deal with that permission which is necessary if such a road is built through the city." The council agreed to submit a petition to the Board of Supervisors at their meeting October 13.

That, however, did nothing to alleviate ferry traffic. August showed the same growth trends as previous months. For the first eight months of 1941, volume was up 26.3%. The Labor Day holiday showed an increase of 23%, although arrivals were more spread out and traffic came nowhere near the one-day record set on the Fourth of July. Both the *Sainte Marie (II)* and the *Chief Wawatam* helped with the crowds, but backups were small and the longest waits were about one hour and ten minutes.

Congressman Fred Bradley returned home from Washington with happy news. Three years after he initially submitted a bill for a Coast Guard icebreaker to be stationed at the Straits, the guard had reversed its initial rejection and approved the plan to build a heavy-duty ship to keep the ferries running all year and extend the northern lakes navigation season. With the long-sought approval in hand, Bradley said, "I feel this important legislation now has a very considerable chance of passage, which should be of considerable benefit to our entire district."

Within a week, the National Defense Board summoned the *Chief Wawatam's* Captain Paddy Brown to Washington to discuss icebreaker designs. Whether his input was for Bradley's proposed boat or another project wasn't revealed, but he talked

about the railway ferries, how they were built, and how they operated in the Great Lakes, and particularly in the Straits of Mackinac in winter.

With Labor Day over, the State Ferries reverted to a fall sailing schedule. With three ferries running, boats left Mackinaw City at 2 a.m. and 5 a.m., then hourly until 9 p.m., with the last sailing northbound at 11 p.m. From St. Ignace, boats left at 12:30 a.m., 3:30 a.m., and 5:30 a.m., and then every hour through 9:30 p.m. That plan was to remain in effect until the entire fleet ran wild for hunting season, November 10 through November 30.

No sooner had the fall schedule been implemented than it was interrupted on the *City of Petoskey's* 3 a.m. sailing the next Monday morning. A Cheboygan man had been fishing in a skiff on the Cheboygan River Sunday afternoon when his outboard motor failed. As he rowed frantically, his boat drifted into Lake Huron, where it was caught in a windstorm and blown from shore. Overnight he'd lost both pairs of emergency oars and was desperate for help. Early the next day, the big ferry was called to look for him, but spent seven fruitless hours crisscrossing Lake Huron near Spectacle Reef. The ferry finally gave up and returned to service at 10 a.m. Fortunately, the missing man was spotted about the same time and rescued by a Coast Guard amphibian plane.

The *Cheboygan Observer* continued to rail against causeway and bridge construction, despite assurances that no bypass around St. Ignace was being planned.

"Any kind of detour around or away from a city or community, especially those that must depend on the summer visitors to keep healthy and alive, tends to wreck that city or community," Al Weber wrote. "Northern Michigan does not want to see St. Ignace or Mackinaw City wrecked."

His writings and those of others brought a crowd of about 50 people to the Mackinac County Courthouse for the Department of Engineers hearing at 1:30 p.m. on October 24.

After reviewing plans for the bridge, the highway department engineers turned the floor over to speakers who questioned property acquisition procedures. Letters were read charging that the railroad ferries carried a billion pounds of payload annually, and by comparison, the auto ferries carried very little. The author charged the amount needed to build the causeway would more than pay to dredge the entire Graham Shoals out of existence, thereby shortening both the railway and auto ferry routes.

Others complained that the proposed landfill would cause the removal of up to 20 buildings, while moving the site 2,000 feet west would give the causeway a perfect north-south alignment and cause the loss of only one building. An attorney asked how the proposed site was chosen, but was told the hearing was solely concerned with navigation problems. Another speaker asked if the causeway/bridge/ferry dock would divert traffic from St. Ignace and was told that the war department was not concerned with that.

There were no objections from marine interests at the hearing, so the war department gave the go-ahead for causeway construction.

Getting the land to build the

causeway was another matter. A number of property owners objected to the highway department's offers for property acquisition, so Commissioner Kennedy scheduled another public hearing on property easements to be held the next day in front of a circuit court judge. In total, the state had offered \$71,882, for the property adjacent to the causeway site, but property owners felt the offer was not generous enough and tried to hold up construction until the Highway Department made them a more acceptable offer.

At that hearing, the department outlined the entire causeway plan, including construction of a new administration building for the ferries, a pair of large parking areas, a tourist park, and maintenance buildings. The development would take about a square mile of waterfront, with a direct connection to St. Ignace by extending Marley Street through a cut, across Rt. 2, and into town. All in all, the Highway Department proposed to make a large, park-like entrance for travelers arriving in the Upper Peninsula.

The department also hoped to avoid the mistake made in Mackinaw City, where, already, additional parking for ferry traffic was being planned outside of town,

at the intersection of Routes 23 and 27. There was, apparently, no place closer available, owing to commercial development all around the Mackinaw City ferry dock, which had taken on an almost carnival-like atmosphere.

The judge agreed that causeway construction could still begin, even though not all of the adjacent property had been acquired. He said the state should pursue condemnation procedures, which would probably take between 60 and 90 days to begin. By following the procedures, fair valuation could be put on the properties in question, without delaying the start of construction.

With that obstacle out of the way, causeway construction began October 10 with brush clearing on the Densmore property. A crew of about a dozen men began the work, with more to be hired within a week or so, until a full compliment of 25 to 30 workers was employed. Two graders and tractors also were brought in to ease the initial workload.

Meanwhile, there was no letup in sight for the ferry workload. In the first nine months of 1941, the fleet had smashed all previous traffic records, and already more than 300,000 cars had been carried that

year, more than all of 1940, with three more months to go before the record books closed. September, alone, showed a gain of more than 4,300 cars.

Next week: *Michigan State Ferries go to war.*

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Editor's Note: A newly published photograph collection of the Michigan State ferries by author and historian Les Bagley will be the subject of a free program at the St. Ignace Public Library Wednesday, July 25, at 6:30 p.m. "Michigan State Ferries," a collection of vintage photographs, has been published by Arcadia Publishing in its "Images of America" series. More than 225 photographs will be presented about the history of the ferry fleet, including rare images of what became of the ships after they were no longer needed at the Straits of Mackinac. Mr. Bagley will sign copies of his photograph book at the library, and copies will be available for sale.

The pictorial history volume does not include Mr. Bagley's historical articles about the ferry service. Installments of this manuscript will continue to be printed in *The St. Ignace News* weekly through 2007.

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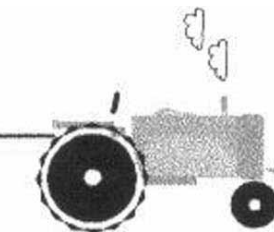


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