

# Autos Across Mackinac: *Pere Marquette* Becomes *City of Petoskey*

This year Michigan celebrates the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Mackinac Bridge. But for 34 years before that, the State of Michigan ran the nation's first high-way ferry. As part of the celebration, the *St. Ignace News* is serializing Les Bagley's unpublished manuscript on the history of the ferries. In 1940, the state purchased the *Pere Marquette 17* to replace two smaller ferries sold back to the federal government in the buildup for WWII. But after running the ship for hunting season, they sent her off to a Detroit area shipyard for more work. As the 1941 season got underway, few suspected the changes coming with war clouds on the horizon.

## Part 28: BUILDING THE CAUSEWAY BEGINS

On April 12, 1941, Michigan State Ferries added the *City of Cheboygan* to join the *Chief Wawatam* on the cross-Straits auto ferry run. Ice in Moran Bay went out Easter Sunday morning, allowing the ferry to make a trial run Wednesday and pick up the run and start the Highway Department's early spring schedule on Thursday, two days earlier than in 1940. A ferry left each side every 90 minutes between 6 a.m. and 10 p.m., with the last trip held an hour from the normal 9 p.m. departure time on the Mackinaw City side.

While service got underway at the Straits, modifications to the *Pere Marquette 17*, at anchor in a shipyard slip, came to a temporary halt in River Rouge. A watchman discovered a fire, of undetermined origin, in the hold of the ferry where an oil drum and lumber had been stored. Two fire engines, one each from River Rouge and Ecorse, responded to the call and brought the blaze under control, after it smoldered for more than an hour. Despite the fire, officials still hoped the ship could make its first run of 1941, scheduled for May 15. Captain George Loughlin traveled to Detroit to inspect the damage and reported the ship "looked fine." He said the damage, amounting to "several thousand dollars," would soon be repaired.

Ecorse Fire Chief Albert Jaeger blamed the blaze on sabotage, because the fire erupted when the vessel was unoccupied. John S. Bugas, head of the FBI's Detroit office, later discounted that theory. He said a preliminary investigation showed no indication of foul play and that the fire probably was started by spontaneous combustion. Bugas said the ship would be a poor target for saboteurs, inasmuch, as it has no connection with national defense. He also said his office had not been officially asked to investigate.

The hot topic, however, was the vessel's new name. By May 1, despite all the suggestions and proposals in local papers, the State Administrative Board decided to designate the ferry as the "City of Petoskey."

In May, to make landings safer for the all the boats, the Highway Department solicited bids from contractors to dredge the area around the St. Ignace piers. The work was expected to cost in the range of \$15,000. Bids were opened almost immediately, on May 7, with the work to begin quickly thereafter.

Traffic on the ferries was already building at a rate of 29% greater than in 1940. More than 6,700 vehicles had been carried in the first four months of 1941 than had been moved in the same period the year before. Each month had shown an increase of more than 1,000 cars, with 3,500 more in April, alone. Greater business activity and an increase in domestic tourist travel were expected to set new records for ferry travel through 1941.

The tourist season almost got off to a bad start. Owing to a mix-up which had clerks in the new Civil Service Commission checking and counter-checking wage records, checks for ferry dock workers at the Straits were delayed, some by as much as three weeks. The dockmen at Mackinaw City announced they planned to strike Monday night, May 19, if they hadn't been paid. Dozens of men, particularly those newly hired for the 1941 season, were affected. To avert the strike, the Highway Department flew a plane in from Lansing, bearing a man authorized to write checks on the department's First National

Bank of St. Ignace account. Those checks were written and given to the men, the strike was averted, and once the Civil Service Commission checks came through, they were redeposited at First National. Ferry traffic continued, without interruption.

With so much growth, the Highway Department was eager to get the newly named *City of Petoskey* in service as soon as possible. The ferry missed the May 15 target, but was sailed north from River Rouge, arriving at the Straits on the weekend of May 24. She rested in St. Ignace all day Saturday for preview by St. Ignace citizens. But before she could go into service, there was the small matter of a christening ceremony. That was held on Sunday, May 25, in the ship's namesake city, Petoskey, on Little Traverse Bay.

On Saturday night, the ship made the trip down the Lake Michigan shore, arriving at the Petoskey breakwater about dawn.

City Mayor Arthur Hinkley was in charge of the program, which featured speeches by Governor Murray Van Wagoner and Highway Commissioner Donald Kennedy. Hundreds of people crowded around the bandstand on the Petoskey waterfront, appropriately decorated with flags and bunting. A colorful group of Boy Scouts, Sea Scouts, city officials, and leaders of Petoskey Indian tribes graced the grandstand and watched as Governor Van Wagoner's daughter Joan, christened the ship with the traditional bottle of champagne.

Apparently, a witness later recalled, either she was weak or the ship was rocking, but after almost half a dozen tries, the ship's bow and the bottle had still not connected. Finally, Commissioner G. Donald Kennedy took Miss Van Wagoner's hand, and with his help, the bottle was broken to christen the new *City of Petoskey* into the fleet. Mayor Hinkley presented the ship with a Petoskey city pennant, which was run up the mast, and everyone left for Harbor Springs, across the bay. The ship went by water, and the

of attack and collapsed, requiring hospitalization. Aid was called, and he was rushed to the Petoskey Hospital, where he was diagnosed with high blood pressure. After treatment, he recovered nicely and soon returned to the Straits, although not aboard the *Petoskey*.

The Boy Scout Troop invited as the official color guard didn't return aboard the *Petoskey*, either. Rubin abruptly recalled that the troop size

whopping 184%, with 22,000 more people carried in four days than ever before. Between May 29 and June 1, the ferries moved nearly 7,000 more cars than they had the previous year. The real rush began Friday morning at 2 a.m. when people trying to "beat the rush" showed up at the Mackinaw City dock. Capt. Loughlin sent the schedule running wild then and there, but still the wait extended at times up to

officers, such as captains, mates, and engineers, and while the talks continued, the ferries kept running.

At least they tried. On June 9, at about 6:30 p.m., the *City of Cheboygan* took on a load of 30 cars and nearly 100 passengers. As Captain James Gallagher maneuvered his ship into the turn toward Mackinaw City, the stern failed to clear the dock soon enough for a short swing, and the ferry went



The *City of Petoskey* could most easily be distinguished from the similar looking *City of Munising* by her single side-loading ramp. The earlier-modified *Munising* had two, left over from the days when all the ferries loaded that way. By the time the *Petoskey* joined the fleet, end-loading ramps had been constructed. The *Petoskey* was also the first ship in the fleet to have sewerage treatment tanks onboard. The others just pumped raw wastes overboard. (Tourist's 1941 snapshot, author's collection)

was just about the same as the excess he'd been quoted by the Coast Guard. He asked them to go ashore.

"It was a bum decision," he later recalled, "but under the circumstances, any other decision I made would have been even worse."

Rubin later made amends by inviting the troop to travel on an exclusive overnight sailing of the *City of Petoskey* the next time she left the Straits for servicing at the River Rouge shipyard.

Meanwhile, minus one sailor and a troop of Boy Scouts, the *Petoskey* carried her invited guests

three or four hours, and up to 500 cars spilled beyond the large holding area out onto the highway.

Every hotel, rooming house, and accommodation was booked to overflowing throughout the area. Restaurants ran out of food and turned diners away. Because no one had anticipated the crowds, a number of resorts had yet to open for the season. Those that were open compared Memorial Day 1941 with larger seasonal holidays like the 4th of July the year before.

Boosted by the huge end-of-month crowds, May's ferry traffic increased substantially over the pre-

somewhat further northwest into Moran Bay than her normal course. Despite the dredging carried on earlier, her bow ran aground while making her turn.

There she sat for about 45 minutes, until Captain Ben Houle brought the *City of Munising* over and put a line aboard. One good tug and the *Cheboygan* came free, none the worse for wear. She then continued her trip across the Straits.

The next day, the U. S. Bureau of Marine Inspection and Navigation's inspectors Gellick and Kelke conducted an inquiry aboard the ship as she sailed back and forth from about noon to 3 p.m. In front of Captain Loughlin, they interviewed crewmembers and officers and conducted a thorough inspection of the hull, finding no apparent damage. They also used one of the *Cheboygan's* lifeboats to conduct soundings of the area, and discovered the bay had filled perceptibly with edgings and other moveable bottom matter. More dredging was ordered, to be undertaken as soon as possible, and equipment from W. J. Meagher & Sons Construction was brought in to begin the work by early July.

Not everything was such serious business that June. A committee of the local Lions club selected a 17-year-old high school student as "Sweetheart of the Michigan State Ferries." Shirley Lou Walker, a 5-foot, 4-inch, 110-pound blonde, and her chaperone, won a trip to compete for the title "Great Lakes Sailors' Sweetheart" at the Gladstone Roleo and Forest Festival held July 4 at that community's yacht basin. She was professionally outfitted for the contest, and photographed by Saturday Evening Post photographer Ivan Dmitri, along with girls from a number of other Great Lakes communities, including Cleveland, Chicago, Escanaba, and Milwaukee. Other lensmen represented Life and Colliers at the event.

As Shirley headed off to the competition, L. C. Sauers, Michigan's director of personnel, arrived at the Straits with more payroll checks flown in from the Civil Service Commission in Lansing. The trip was a last minute move to avert a strike by unlicensed personnel, who still hadn't gotten the Lake Carrier's wages they'd requested. At the Highway Department's request, the commission finally agreed, with Civil Service Director Thomas J. Wilson even conceding the commission might make the raise retroactive as suggested, but was awaiting the Highway Department's instructions in that regard. About 30 of the fleet's 260 employees were affected. Salaries under the newly approved schedule went to \$96 a month for porters, \$100 for ordinary seamen, \$110 for cabin watch B, and \$115 for dockman B. Stewards, able seamen, and wheelmen would get \$120 a month, while dockmaster A employees received \$125 and foremen and oilers got \$130 a



The *Pere Marquette 17* was rechristened *City of Petoskey* on the Petoskey waterfront May 25, 1941. Since she had to tie up at the breakwall, the ceremony actually took place at the city bandstand. Afterwards, she sailed across Little Traverse Bay for a reception at Harbor Springs, where people were invited to come aboard for ship tours. This heavily retouched postcard was made from a photograph taken that day. An enlargement of the original is on display at the Northern Michigan Hospital in Petoskey. (Author's collection)

crowd went by land.

There, the ship welcomed aboard a huge crowd of dignitaries for the five-hour cruise back to the Straits. But the departure was not without incident, and, once again, Highway Department public affairs flak Larry Rubin was involved. Rubin had made up the guest list for the return trip, and more than 150 VIPs and dignitaries had been invited. At the last minute, the invitation had been also extended to anyone in the audience who wanted to go along. No one paid any attention to the number of people onboard, except for the Coast Guardsman with the counter at the gangplank, who realized the people onboard had by now exceeded the ferry's licensed capacity.

"You have too many people onboard." He told Rubin. "You can't hoist anchor and sail until at least so many people have been told to leave." Rubin later couldn't remember the exact amount, but he suddenly found himself faced with the perplexing problem of disinviting a number of people, many of whom were his bosses, or guests of his bosses, from riding back to Mackinaw City.

While he pondered this dilemma, another problem arose. Seaman Milo L'Amiotte suffered some kind

back to the Straits. Coming up the lake, the galley crew kept busy serving hot dogs and coffee to the passengers, who bided their time tramping across the decks, singing to an orchestra in the lounge, and relaxing in the passenger cabins, which were modernistically decorated with chrome framed furniture upholstered in varied colors.

The passengers didn't know it, but they would be using a new innovation in the ferry fleet. Below decks for the first time, sewage was alternately pumped into a pair of 3,000-gallon treatment tanks. As one tank filled, the other was closed and hot steam was injected for an hour, then the sanitized sludge was pumped overboard. Raw sewage would no longer be dumped directly into the water.

The ferry landed at Mackinaw City first, for the convenience of Petoskey area guests. The highway department provided drivers for those guest's cars, which were driven overland to meet their owners when they arrived. She then sailed on to St. Ignace, and entered the ferry rotation the next day.

The *Petoskey's* arrival came none too soon. Memorial Day weekend, which started on May 29, slammed the ferries to an extent no one imagined. Traffic increased a

vious year's figures. For the five months ending May 31, the annual increase was an impressive 33%.

The return trips on Sunday, June 1, were less hectic. To help with the anticipated lines, the *Chief Wawatam* made four trips, and the backup was kept at a manageable level all day.

Unlicensed ferry crews felt their wages had fallen below a manageable level, however. As the holiday rush wound down, Noel Vallier placed petitions aboard each boat, seeking signatures of crewmembers wanting a raise in pay. According to Vallier, the Highway Department had, in the past, paid the same wages to unlicensed ferry workers as other lake carriers paid their crews. The shippers had raised wages April 1, but the Highway Department hadn't followed suit. The discrepancy was again blamed on the new Civil Service Commission.

Captain Loughlin, trying to avoid having his ferries tied up, went to Lansing to discuss the matter, and the commission agreed to match the other wages. Vallier asked that the raise be retroactive to April 1, and the men threatened to form some sort of a "local union" in their efforts to increase their wages. The dispute did not affect licensed

month, the same as sailors elsewhere on the lakes.

The commission was pretty much forced to make the concessions. Commissioner Kennedy predicted traffic over the four-day Independence Day holiday might reach 20,000 cars. Figures were already ahead 28% for the year. Kennedy said all four state boats, and both rail ferries would be available for service, and that the Highway Department was scouring the lakes for another ferry to help ease the congestion. But with so little time, he doubted another ferry could be found.

To ease waits, the department placed drinking water canisters on the docks and arranged for extra highway department employees to help state police with traffic control. Kennedy's 20,000 estimate was off by less than 1,200 cars. By the time the fireworks ended, Michigan State Ferries had transported 18,810 vehicles, a 28% increase for the holiday period. July 4th set the new one-day mark, at 5,946 cars in a single day.

Even with everything open for the summer, there were no accommodations to be had. People slept in hotel lobbies or in cars in parking lots and on the docks. Both Mackinaw City and St. Ignace were jammed. While businesses liked the traffic, residents demanded something more be done.

Since the *Petoskey* had replaced the *Mackinaw City* and *Sainte Ignace*, the ferries had lost about six cars total capacity per cycle. But now they had one more end-loading boat in operation, instead of two side loaders, which used time-consuming elevators to place cars on their upper decks. The savings in time and expenses were enormous. The department continued a search for another boat, but with the defense buildup for the war in Europe, the railroads suddenly found they also had no excess capacity. The suitable used boat market had dried up almost overnight.

The shift from the end-loading dock, where the three largest boats landed, to the side-loading dock, where *The Straits of Mackinac* still loaded in St. Ignace, was inconvenient for motorists. The state took immediate steps to dump more gravel fill between the two piers, to create a driveway, and more parking for drivers waiting to board.

The department also stepped up efforts to start construction of the causeway/dock south of St. Ignace to shorten the ferry run, announcing that while it couldn't be done in time for Labor Day, the sooner the project was started, the sooner ferry capacity would be much more greatly expanded. The state hoped to start causeway construction as early as the end of July.

But some people began to wax nostalgic at the thought of losing the ferry ride that had been part of a trip to Upper Michigan for nearly two decades. After observing how smoothly the ferries handled the Independence Day crush, Al Weber, in the *Cheboygan Observer* wrote that the ferry operation, loading, riding, and unloading "was interesting to most people, and whether we ever get a bridge or not, the greatest bridge in the world will never be as interesting to the average tourist and resort traveler as that trip across the Straits by boat, and its attendant incidents leading up to it and away from it. The major part of those summer visitors are not as familiar with great bodies of water and boats and their operation as Michigan people are, and this crossing of the Straits is one of the highlights of a trip into the northland. To learn how safely and how orderly and good that trip is made is also an added contribution to a summer's outing."

The *St. Ignace Republican-News* re-ran part of the editorial under the headline, "Them's our Sentiments [Too.]"

A familiar face returned to the ferry fleet in August. Fletcher C. Davis, who had been chief clerk in the administrative office from 1934 to 1939, replaced A. E. DeLoria as Assistant Superintendent. In the interim, Davis had been a clerk for the Highway Department in Alpena. He and his wife moved back to St. Ignace to accept the promotion.

He arrived just in time to tally up the biggest month in ferry history. July 1941 showed a 20% increase over July 1940, and traffic for the first seven months of the year was up over 25.7%. On August 2, the

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