

Autos Across Mackinac: Start of WWII Slows Causeway Construction

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parts and medical supplies. Tire sales were suspended by the end of the year, and a program of rationing was designed to go into effect sometime in 1942.

Despite the tire sales ban, the Christmas holiday saw a traffic surge on the ferries, with volumes at "holiday proportions" during the days before December 25. For the two days before Christmas Eve, the two largest ferries ran 24-hour schedules, and still left cars and buses on the docks. Six big passenger buses traveled northbound on Wednesday morning, and four more followed on the next trip. By the end of December, traffic for the month had increased 45% over the year before. The ferries transported more than 373,000 cars in 1941, an increase of 25.6% over 1940.

Winter came in earnest on New Year's Day, when temperatures dropped and a blizzard snarled roads and rail traffic. The *City of Petoskey* managed to keep running through January 7, but that day encountered increasing ice, and after leaving Mackinaw City that afternoon at 4:45, battled for five hours before tying up in St. Ignace for the winter. The *Sainte Marie (II)* took over the auto ferry runs the next day.

But even the powerful railroad ice crushers were not immune to

war production, the bureau assured potential visitors that there would still be plenty of rail, bus, and steamship access to vacation destinations.

"Michigan resorts may expect a good year," the bureau noted, "even though they give up hope for the banner season that loomed before Pearl Harbor. Until recently it was estimated that more Midwesterners were planning vacations in upper Michigan in 1942, than ever before."

Many of those plans had changed. In a newspaper article entitled, "How to Get a Tire," the *Republican-News and St. Ignace Enterprise* explained the requisition process of the rationing board: "If you are a trucker, doctor, or some similar 'indispensable person' or you need a new tire for your school bus, get an application from the county clerk. Take the tire to the designated inspector to determine need. If he approves, he will stamp OK on the blank. If approved, present the application to the county tire allocation board to obtain an OK for the purchase of a new tire. Buy the tire."

The paper added, "You people who operate passenger pleasure cars really don't have much of a chance to get a tire in any event."

Tire rationing wasn't the only problem. The Office of Price

Company of Manistique, and that firm couldn't keep pace with Johnson & Green's production requirements. The prime builder couldn't extend construction more than about 150 feet, without the surfacing rock, in fear the fill might be washed away in a storm. Island continued quarry work all winter, with surface stone stockpiled and shipped to St. Ignace by train. In the spring, subcontractor Luedka Engineering would barge the rock to the construction site where it could be put in place as the fill was extended. Causeway construction would finally resume April 2, when workmen began building dynamite storage sheds to prepare for rock blasting on the approach. A large shovel to remove the blast debris and an air drill and compressor were also moved in to assist construction.

Meanwhile, although only the *Sainte Marie (II)* continued winter auto ferry work, all ferry workers were called back to the docks in mid-February so the Coast Guard could register them. Each worker, whether in St. Ignace or Mackinaw City, was fingerprinted and descriptions and information were included on personal identification cards, which the crewmembers were required to carry at all times. Similar registrations were conducted for workers at all lake and



Captain George Loughlin returned from a trip to find Straits traffic increasing steadily. The ferries were forced to operate extra night runs to carry traffic that couldn't be accommodated during the daytime. The boats "ran wild," meaning the ferries arrived, unloaded, loaded, and departed as quickly as they could, ignoring the printed ferry schedules. (Michigan Department of Transportation)

The war also changed causeway plans in early March. While Commissioner Kennedy announced that work would begin again very soon, he noted that wood beams and pilings would be substituted wherever possible for the original steel specified for bridges, culverts and the new ferry landings. With steel getting harder to buy, the state would instead use wood obtained from the nearly 1.5 million board feet salvaged from the razing of an ore dock in Escanaba.

Workmen descended on the existing ferry docks to begin fitting out the fleet for the coming year. Crews began working on the *City of Cheboygan* and *The Straits of Mackinac*, joining those who had worked all winter on the *City of Munising* and *City of Petoskey*. A septic system was installed on the *Munising* matching the one installed on the *Petoskey* during her conversion. Electricians and technicians wired in the new ship-to-shore radios, and Jack Marshall's crew of highway workers installed a new crib off Dock 2, across from the Nicolet Hotel. The crib would make it easier for the longer end-loading boats to land.

Each of the ferries had been kept under constant guard all winter. The docks were also closely watched to prevent sabotage. While nobody would officially project when the state fleet might be put on the run, many reports indicated an early thaw might mean a quick start to Straits navigation.

Nobody counted on a blizzard, which snarled land travel in

run, ran late because of moving ice. Bus service was canceled until Wednesday, and the road from Mackinaw City to Cheboygan was blocked for two days by snowdrifts. When the snows subsided, cold weather continued.

A week later, another weather-related incident occurred. Two men parked their car on the Mackinaw City railroad dock when they arrived in town about 2 a.m. To stay warm while waiting for the ferry, they left the motor running and fell asleep with the windows closed against the cold. The driver's foot fell on the accelerator.

Fortunately, Frank Paquin and Albert Abbott, two ferry crewmembers, noticed the car's racing engine when they arrived for work about five that morning. Unable to rouse the asphyxiated travelers when it came their turn to get on the boat, the crewmen dragged them from their exhaust-choked car and called a doctor, who worked for nearly two hours to resuscitate them. Fortunately, the travelers recovered enough to continue their journey later in the day. The crewmembers were credited with saving the men's lives and were later awarded letters of commendation by Commissioner Kennedy.

By March 15, the *Munising* had been fitted out and passed inspection. The *Petoskey* and *The Straits* were just about ready, and the *Cheboygan* awaited the spring thaw before relieving the *Sainte Marie (II)* on the auto run. Lake shippers had other ideas, however, and on Tuesday night, the leased

run to clear ice from the Mackinaw City slips and then joined the *Chief* in service on March 25. It was hoped *The Straits* could replace the *Chief* very soon. But high winds and cold weather continued to plague the region, even causing unexpected damage. The wind blew down a pole holding a temporary phone wire for the ship-to-shore radio antenna at the St. Ignace office. The pole and its support were quickly replaced, restoring radio service between the office and the boats.

One boat would never be restored, however. Area residents learned the military had requisitioned the former cruise liner *S.S. Seelandbee*, which had made frequent excursion trips to Mackinac Island over the years. The navy planned to remove the side-wheeler's upper decks and convert her into an aircraft carrier named *Wolverine* to train pilots on the Great Lakes. The conversion was extensive, and with the ship's advanced age, she was never restored, being scrapped after the war. She remained the only American side wheeled aircraft carrier ever constructed.

Wartime was causing inflation, and in late March, the Civil Service Commission agreed to give ferry seamen a 10% raise to match the wages paid by the Lake Carriers Association. Captain Loughlin had worked most of the winter to secure the agreement for his men, but noted at the same time, traffic for the month had fallen below March levels of the year before, making March 1942 the first negative traffic month since the depression. Nevertheless, a second boat was added March 31, 16 days earlier than ever before. Service began at 6 a.m. and continued at 90 minute intervals until nine each evening.

There was excitement in St. Ignace, as the government considered making the city a major iron ore port to speed shipment of the commodity to steel mills further down the lakes. That plan never came to fruition, but to increase ore carrying capacity, the government rushed completion of a new lock at the Soo, which Congressman Bradley and Senator Brown proposed to name after General Douglas MacArthur, the "dauntless defender of the Philippines." Bradley said he felt the name would serve to inspire everyone who was building the structure, and perhaps help it to be completed sooner.

That angered some local residents who had proposed naming it after Chase S. Osborn. But Osborn quashed the idea when he wrote editors of local papers noting that to compare him to General MacArthur was unfair to both of them.

"It is of no concern whatever whether the new lock is named for me or not. As far as General MacArthur goes, he is entitled to any honor the world and the people and the Lord can bestow."

The lock was named for MacArthur, but whether the name stimulated workers to rush it to completion is open to conjecture.

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With WWII suddenly underway, construction on the causeway/ferry dock extending south from the Upper Peninsula shoreline ended for lack of trucks to haul materials. Large rocks were deposited along the banks to keep winter weather from washing the construction away, and the quarry that supplied them had trouble keeping up. But the war also diverted materials needed to complete the ferry slips at the end of the causeway, so wood was substituted for steel. Meanwhile, the ferries continued to land at Dock 2 in St. Ignace. (Michigan Department of Transportation)

the weather. Both the *Sainte Marie (II)* and the *Chief Wawatam* experienced several delays over the next days and weeks as winter and wartime set in at the Straits.

The Michigan State Highway Department started the war year of 1942 with a cash balance of nearly \$37 million. Commissioner G. Donald Kennedy announced that virtually all the funds would go to create a strategic network of roads for defense work. Nearly all construction off the strategic network would have to be financed by state funds as well, meaning every cent would be needed in light of lost tire and automobile manufacturing tax revenues.

Other areas of state government weren't so lucky. Governor Murray Van Wagoner called the Michigan Legislature back to special session to find ways to finance the state's wartime economy. His advisors said he was defying superstition, that a sitting governor could call a special session only at his own reelection expense. Van Wagoner made the call anyway.

With the ferries now on a winter schedule at the Straits, land transportation providers switched to curtailed schedules, too. Great Lakes Greyhound dropped service to two buses each way each day.

But the Highway Department took steps to improve ferry safety. For \$4,640, high power radiotelephone transmitters were purchased for installation on all the boats. The Federal Communications Commission approved the "ship to shore" phones to connect each ferry with base stations at Mackinaw City and St. Ignace. The gear would be installed as soon as possible, well ahead of the start of the summer ferry season.

The Upper Peninsula Development Bureau also looked toward the summer. While auto traffic was expected to decline owing to tire rationing and the sudden conversion of manufacturing plants to

Administration (OPA) announced that, effective February 2, automobiles would be rationed the same way. Driving vacations suddenly seemed very unlikely. Yet, despite the scarcity of new cars and tires, January auto traffic across the Straits still increased by 13.4%. The only lull in growth was for about seven days during the second week of the month. Bad weather and the increased talk of rationing slowed travel, but once the skies cleared, traffic picked up again. Some forecasters even predicted another banner year for ferry usage.

George A. Osborn, of the *Sault Evening News* suggested that war workers would need vacations even more than normal, and since most cars crossing the Straits on the ferry in 1941 had been only a year or two old, they should still be in good condition. While new records might not be set, everyone hoped the first year of the war might be as successful as the year before the war began.

One traveler helped a Maryland tourist camp be a little more successful. Senator Prentiss Brown and his family were headed back to Washington after the holiday at home when they discovered there were no other accommodations available along the way. They spent the weekend there, before making the nation's capitol Monday afternoon.

Straits area residents speculated about the stalled causeway job, abandoned by Johnson and Green in December. Three theories surfaced: The State was going to revoke the contractor's bond for failure to do the job, the contractor couldn't get the equipment needed to do the work until after the war ended, and the State had scrubbed the entire program for the duration. None of the theories were correct. In truth, the causeway needed to be lined with surfacing rock supplied by the Island Lime and Stone

ocean ports throughout the country.

After registering, Captain Loughlin headed off for an annual three-day highway convention in Ann Arbor. He got back in time to console his wife, who learned her 21-year old cousin had been killed when the destroyer to which he'd been assigned was torpedoed by an



The fleet experienced a huge growth in traffic on the eve of WWII, as shown here. But with the attack on Pearl Harbor December 7, 1941, America lost its supply of rubber from the South Pacific, and tire rationing quickly went into effect, followed by limitations on other commodities. Travel across the Straits began to decrease as more and more people found their lifestyles changed by the war rationing programs. (Michigan Department of Transportation)

Axis submarine in the Atlantic.

The war finally began taking its toll on Straits auto traffic. February travel was still somewhat above that of the same month in 1941, but the increase was only 4%, well below the 13% in January. That brought the average 1942 increase to just 8.9% for the first two months of the year. Observers still hoped for a good tourist season, but many expressed surprise that, under rationing conditions, travel had grown at all.

March. The snow started on Sunday night, the March 8, and continued almost all the next day. The *Sainte Marie (II)* kept running, although she missed two round trips Monday, one at noon and one at 6 p.m. Few travelers were affected, however, as all the roads leading to the ferry docks were blocked by snow.

Tuesday dawned bright and sunny, but the wind continued and both the *Sainte Marie (II)* and the *Chief Wawatam*, on the railroad

rail boat was pulled in order to be fitted out for icebreaking in the St. Marys River. Fit-out was expected to take one or two days, and since ice still wouldn't let the white boats run, the *Chief Wawatam* assumed both rail and auto duties. She was scheduled for five round trips a day for rubber-tired vehicles in addition to her rail chores.

The *Chief* would do double duty for about a week. Tuesday morning, March 24, the *Cheboygan* made a "deadhead"