

Autos Across Mackinac: Ferry Traffic Decreases With Start of WWII

This year the St. Ignace News is serializing Les Bagley's unpublished manuscript on the history of Michigan State Ferries, the only link between the Upper and Lower Peninsulas before the Mackinac Bridge was completed 50 years ago. In our last installment, WWII began, and with it came a sharp reduction in ferry travel and tourist traffic. But there was still a glimmer of home for resort, restaurant, and hotel owners.

PART 30: WWII Problems Come Home to the Straits

By Les Bagley

The Upper Peninsula Development Bureau asked travelers to continue to visit Upper Michigan. In April, the 1942 edition of the "Best Lure Book ever published by the bureau" hit the streets for distribution throughout the Midwest. Sixteen pages longer than earlier versions, the publication featured a beautiful picture "looking out on 'God's Country' from the deck of a State Ferry" to open the Mackinac County section.

Secretary George Bishop noted, "With a little extra effort on the part of all individuals engaged in the tourist business, coupled with our increased program, we should have a good tourist year in 1942."

That sentiment was echoed by the Automobile Club of Michigan, which, in May, noted rationing would keep thousands of people in the industrial Midwest close to home. Michigan, the club noted, was a close-by vacation destination.

"Mark down in your little books that more Michiganders will thrill to Michigan in this 1942 than in any year since there was a Michigan," a AAA spokesman said.

That was sweet news to resort operators, but presented problems for Mackinac Island's growing fudge industry. At nearly the same time, the government announced a new plan under which sugar, a primary fudge ingredient, would be rationed. Island fudge makers would have to scrimp and experiment to ply their trade for the rest of the war.

It didn't take sugar to build the new ferry landing/bridge-causeway, it took rock. And with quarries now caught up, Johnson and Greene worked two shifts from dawn to dusk, and by the end of May, a quarter-mile-long finger of stone poked into the Straits from the northern shore near St. Ignace. Steel arrived for construction of a three span bridge about 700 feet offshore, to allow small boats to pass through the construction close to the beach, but the bridge would not be built until all the fill work was completed. The rest of the two-slip ferry dock and structure was planned for wood construction, owing to wartime shortages of steel beams and sheet piling. As fill work continued, the Highway Department kept busy moving buildings from the right of way near the scenic highway, where the road from the causeway would come ashore.

Workers from J. B. Lund's Sons of Cheboygan were busy in mid-May as well. The *Chief Wawatam* sailed into that city's MacArthur Dock for a course of machine repairs and improvements, which were expected to take from 10 days to two weeks. At the same time, State Ferry Chief Engineer M. F. Madden checked into the Soo Hospital for cataract surgery. With his eye bandaged, he may have missed Prentiss Brown's announcement that he would run for reelection as U. S. Senator from Michigan. He also missed the Memorial Day Holiday rush at the ferries.

By the end of May, projections for a good tourist year, despite the war, seemed to be panning out. W. S. Woodfill announced that the Grand Hotel had received more early season inquiries than ever before, and more reservations had come from the Eastern Seaboard than usual. To prepare for an anticipated Memorial Day rush, Commissioner G. Donald Kennedy instituted a three boat schedule on May 27, rather than wait until June 1, even though May traffic was actually running about 1% behind the year before. For the week before the holiday, volume was up 17%, however. Under the new schedule, boats left St. Ignace,



To catch up with causeway construction, Johnson and Greene worked two shifts hauling rock to the site just south of St. Ignace. The causeway would reach its maximum length during this period, before the war brought construction to a standstill. (Michigan Department of Transportation)

at 12:30, 3:30 and 5:30 a.m., then hourly on the half-hour until 9:30 p.m., with one more sailing at 11:30 p.m. From the Mackinaw City side, boats left at 2 a.m. and 5 a.m., and then hourly on the hour until 11 p.m.

To further prepare for the holiday, Highway Department District Engineer Edmond T. Carmody directed a fleet of trucks and equipment to seal-coat the asphalt atop the drives and parking area on Dock 2 across from the Nicolet Hotel. The tar-and-chips seal was rolled on in two coats to seal cracks which had developed in the surface over the winter.

But from Washington came word of a potential "crack" in the rosy tourist forecast for 1942. Rumors began to circulate that the federal government might impose gasoline rationing to further cut use of automobiles and rubber tires for the duration. Motorists scrambled to take vacations early so fuel shortages wouldn't ruin their summer plans. Senator Brown went to work to prevent rationing from keeping Detroit factory workers from commuting to their jobs, noting many drove to work. Even then, a new four-lane expressway was being planned to speed travel to and from Ford's Willow Run bomber plant and the Ford industrial complex in River Rouge. As an afterthought, he hoped to prevent gasoline rationing from destroying the tourist industry in his state. From all sides came proposals and counter proposals, all trying to resolve the issue without forcing the American public to realize America was engaged in war.

Signs appeared all over, however. Greyhound announced curtailment of service on less traveled routes to conserve buses for heavy traffic lines, since no more buses could be purchased. Second sections for many crowded routes were canceled, and charter bus service was eliminated, unless the trip was pre-approved as necessary by the War Department. The bus company asked travelers' patience, as movement for Americans was getting increasingly difficult.

As the ferry fleet prepared for the Memorial Day holiday, ferry workers found themselves moving to the LaSalle High School gymnasium to take exams for the Civil Service Commission. Both dock workers and boat crews were required to take the exams, which took place over several days the last week of May.

With extra boats in service, Memorial Day went well, but the anticipated crush of traffic did not appear. Instead, total traffic fell off a little from the year before, ending up down by about 12% for the year so far. Commercial traffic continued to show gains, however, up 17% in the first five months of 1942. In balance, traffic was only off about 5%, a direct reflection of the wartime economy taking hold across the country.

While the news for resort operators was bad enough, news reached the local maritime community in early June that was even worse. George E. Densmore, the last surviving crewmember of the original *Saint Ignace* on her delivery voyage from Detroit, had passed away of stroke complications at his home in St. Ignace,

about 10 a.m., June 6. He'd spent 45 years working for the Mackinac Transportation Company, and even in retirement had worked as a marine engineer on the state boats until 1938. A long-time link with the region's past, Densmore's pallbearers and honorary pallbearers included a Who's Who list of the Strait's maritime community.

Even with decreased travel, the war quickly was becoming felt on the home front. A boatload of passengers from the *S.S. North American* checked into the Grand Hotel in June, only to find themselves participating in a "black-out" drill during a dance in the hotel ballroom. The drill affected about 500 guests. It was the first exercise conducted by employees organized into the hotel's own "Civilian Defense Corps." The hotel staff worked closely with other defense units on the Island and in St. Ignace.

Fortunately, the move toward gasoline rationing was postponed at the last minute, with officials from the White House on down agreeing that recreation was

Carrier's Association, but the men claimed that, despite two raises, their pay still did not match. The highway department made another offer, but the men said it was still too little and threatened to walk out at noon on July 3.

At the last minute, the strike was avoided. Governor Murray Van Wagoner issued an executive order proclaiming, "I hereby order you not to strike at the State Ferries. Any differences in pay between the men and the highway department can be worked out at a later date. The war is on and any vital system of transportation must not be held up, even momentarily, at this crucial time."

The men agreed to continue working until the issue could be settled through negotiations, but the seeds of an escalating labor/management rift had been planted, and that rift would grow larger so long as the ferries operated at the Straits.

While holiday travel wasn't directly affected, the strike threat may have also caused some motorists to avoid crossing the



While tire rationing slowed travel, motorists were more fearful of a threat to ration gasoline at the start of WWII. Many vacationed early in 1942, slowing tourist travel at the Straits later in the year. Here, the new *City of Petoskey* backs in for a landing at Mackinaw City. Gas was soon rationed, but, fortunately, the start of the program was postponed until after the 1942 hunting season. (Postcard from author's collection)

important to contribute to morale during the war. Officials cautioned resort operators to "talk of other subjects" and "don't be a worry wart." They noted that guests were vacationing to avoid the war, seeking relaxation to build their morale.

But even without gasoline on the rationing card, travel continued to slow. June 1942 levels fell 6.3% below June 1941, but were still above 1940. For the first half of the year, traffic was down 5.7%. Cool, rainy weather may have contributed to a continued decline at the end of the month, and a requirement to work at war production plants downstate over the holiday meant a lack of Independence Day travel, too.

There was also a threatened strike by ferry workers. Crewmembers represented by C.I.O. Local 382 were still dissatisfied with the wage scales being paid under civil service guidelines, compared to what other great lakes shippers paid. Both the union and the department had agreed to match scales set by the Lake

Straits that weekend. Those who did, however, got more war-related information. *The Republican-News and St. Ignace Enterprise* received a supply of censor approved state highway maps sent out by Commissioner Kennedy to help guide travelers, without helping guide the enemy. The maps were distributed free to motorists, just for the asking.

Maybe a motorist who accidentally injured seaman Durwood Carmean of *The Straits of Mackinac* as travelers headed south after the holiday was reading one of the maps and not paying attention. Carmean was heaving a line when it accidentally caught on the car bumper. The driver didn't notice, and drove off unexpectedly, painfully straining the muscles in the seaman's arm. He didn't miss much work from the injury, however, because, soon after, sagging travel prompted the Highway Department to tie up *The Straits* for the rest of the summer. The ferry was laid up at Dock No. 1 to await increased traffic. For a time, a skeleton crew was kept working,

should the boat be needed, but it soon became apparent that the only reason would be another boat breaking down. In that case, the crew could be transferred from the disabled ship, so the balance of *The Straits'* crew was sent home.

By mid-July, travel was off nearly 19% from the year before. Early July showed a decline of more than 40%. About the only tourists visiting were fishermen using inland lakes and shoreline resorts. Those were the only fishing sites available, as the government closed St. Ignace piers and docks to perch fishing in an effort to cut down the chances for sabotage. Even the fishing business was slow. According to some reports, as late as July 23, the "tourist season hasn't begun yet."

While *The Straits* tied up, the *City of Petoskey* kept working. And that led to another accident in July, which injured two crewmembers. Chief Engineer Leo Foglesonger and Third Assistant Engineer L. H. Benoit were scalded about their faces when live steam escaped from a capstan. Foglesonger was able to continue working, but Benoit had to lay off, although his burns healed quickly.

A former ferry worker wasn't so fortunate. 30-year old Charles W. "Chuck" Haynes had left the ferries several years before to become a Detroit fireman. In a huge fire on Woodward Avenue, he died of injuries suffered in a fall from a ladder at the fire scene.

All across Michigan, the war was taking its toll. By the end of July, which should have seen the height of the tourist season, traffic on the ferries was down 42.8% from the year before. It was off at least 50% by mid-August. The cumulative total for the year now averaged a decrease of 23.6%.

Tourist resorts were feeling the pinch. At Grand Hotel, Woodfill booked a traveling review troop to present a show called "You Can Defend America," and offered the show free to anyone who wanted to see it. He especially hoped local people would make an effort to attend, primarily wanting to swell the audience, which was sadly lacking in hotel guests. He made a

haul heating oil to the East Coast, where shortages of petroleum had begun to appear. Michigan hoped storage tanks and waterborne transportation might avert the crisis for the time being. But auto travel continued to decline, making a dismal August out of what had traditionally been the area's tourism crest.

St. Ignace, alone, lost thousands of dollars owing to closed fishing at the docks and piers downtown. Tourists and hay fever sufferers who could travel went elsewhere. The city noted that since the docks and ships were all under constant surveillance anyway, people armed with only a bucket and a pole could easily be even safer fishing under the watchful eyes of those who guarded the area. The government was unmoved by the plea. One resident noted that at least there would now be three bays for fishing when the war ended. Don Densmore pointed out that in addition to Moran Bay downtown, the new causeway created two new bays, "Densmore's Bay" west of the construction, and "Graham's Pte. Bay" to the east, both of which would probably prove to be fine fishing grounds.

The causeway was just part of the tour made by a group of inspectors from the U.S. Army. The group including Major General George Grunert, commander for the Sixth Corps Area, his aide-de-camp, Captain Brown, and Major General Lawton. They arrived in St. Ignace on August 20 to inspect the ferry service. Deputy Highway Commissioner L. B. Reid guided them, pointing out the various activities of the ferry service and its facilities. The trio judged the boats "a vital transportation link" for the American war effort.

The inspectors' visit was just a prelude to the further inspection conducted by Under Secretary of War Robert F. Patterson a month later. At Governor Van Wagoner's invitation, Patterson and his party flew into the Pellston airport and then motored to Mackinaw City, where they boarded a special sailing of the *City of Petoskey* for a complete tour of the Straits region. It was part of a three-day industrial transportation tour the Under Secretary was conducting in Michigan. The tour started on September 12, when he dedicated the new defense highway system access roads connecting the Willow Run bomber plant in Detroit and addressed Ford workers. It ended in Muskegon with a huge parade in Patterson's honor. Apparently the ferries impressed the Under Secretary, who also felt they were "a vital link in defense transportation."

Vital or not, the ferries were carrying fewer and fewer automobiles. August traffic fell 48.5% below August 1941 levels, and the yearly average dropped by 32.8%. Officials felt it unlikely more boats would be needed for the Labor Day "rush," so *The Straits* remained in lay-up while the three larger boats handled the traffic. For the first time in many years, the *Chief Wawatam* was not even asked to stand by for additional service if needed.

The projections were correct. Labor Day traffic declined 42.9%, and with the holiday over, the *City of Munising* was pulled from the schedule and sent to Detroit for her three-year dry-docking and inspection.

That left just two boats to maintain the auto service, with one ferry running a 24-hour schedule to accommodate travelers through the nighttime hours. Copies of the new schedule were rushed into print, but were not available immediately after the new times were put into effect. There was no apparent rush. Tourism inquiries had dropped 23% compared to the previous season. It was just one more indicator of the effect WWII was having on the ferries and Upper Michigan's tourism-based economy.

Transportation problems over Labor Day affected nearly everyone. As the holiday began, Captain George Loughlin's grandson, George A. Loughlin of Detroit, ended a two-week visit with his grandparents at the Straits. Unable to get timely train reservations southward at the "end of the season," young George was escorted to Mackinac Island, where he

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