

# Autos Across Mackinac: Snowstorms and Ice Cause Problems for Ferries

Last week's installment of Les Bagley's "Autos Across Mackinac," the history of Michigan State Ferries, covered the changes that came to the ferry fleet as WWII fuel and tire rationing depleted tourist travel all over the country, and especially in Northern Michigan. By 1944, people looked for hope, but found little at the first of the year. The St. Ignace News is serializing this history to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the Mackinac Bridge.

## Part 33: 1944 and a New Icebreaker

By Les Bagley

All over America in 1944, recycling campaigns were the rage. Communities around the Straits busied themselves in massive newspaper drives, but it was a blizzard of snow that set the tone for the start of the new year.

Trouble started at 11 o'clock the evening of Tuesday, January 11, when, while making a railroad run, the *Chief Wawatam* developed some mechanical problems and had to stop mid-trip. By the time her crew had made repairs, she had become frozen into the thickening ice. By 6:30 the next morning, the *Sainte Marie (II)* got a crew together and set out to free her, but in breaking a channel to the stranded ferry, the second boat also became stranded. Both boats remained stuck for nearly three hours until the *Marie* finally worked herself free and then freed the *Chief*. Area residents noted with joy that this type of situation would soon be a thing of the past. A cadre of more than 800 workers was busily building the new icebreaker for clearing the Straits at a shipyard in Toledo, Ohio. The *Mackinaw* was projected to enter service later in 1944.

The *Sainte Marie* next knocked herself out of service on February 3 when she struck a crib while entering her slip. With damage to a propeller shaft, she was towed off for repairs, expected to last three weeks. The highway department was forced immediately to institute an emergency schedule, using only the *Chief* for both rail and vehicular carriage. The ship left Mackinaw City at 8 a.m., 11 a.m., 2 p.m., 6 p.m., and 8 p.m. Return trips were made from St. Ignace at 6 and 9:30 a.m. and 12:30, 3:30 and 6:30 p.m., Central War Time.

Then ice caught the *Chief* for more than 24 hours on February 9 and 10. With no boat available to assist the stranded ferry, passengers were forced to wait, and were, therefore, a whole day late in arriving at their destinations. The next day, slush ice piled nearly 20 feet high stalled the *Chief* again, this time for more than eight hours, with more than 200 passengers from the DSS&A passenger train and a number of truckers on board. The return trip also took 2.5 hours longer than normal, delaying Michigan Central's southbound train departure. While the Lower Peninsula dug out from a major snowstorm, the U.P. braced for temperatures of more than 15 degrees below zero. Ice stranded the *Chief* for another 12 hours the day before Valentines Day with 70 passengers on board. This time she was stuck along with two ice crushing tugs and a Navy submarine chaser, when moving ice closed her channel unexpectedly. Captain Hilliard Bentgen noted that ice conditions in the Straits were the worst he'd seen in years.

Fortunately, repairs to the *Sainte Marie (II)* took only two weeks, a week less than expected, and she returned to her run on February 16 to give some well-needed relief to the crew on the *Chief*. The smaller boat immediately returned to the auto run, making the normal schedule of five round trips a day. That lasted until March 1, when Commissioner Charles Ziegler received a special request from the navy to free a trio of warships stuck outside the Straits by a 6-mile-long sheet of ice. He ordered Captain Bentgen to personally take the *Sainte Marie (II)* out to assist, and the *Chief* resumed both railroad and automobile runs again.

In addition to the ice in the Straits, the *Sainte Marie (II)* also helped open the St. Marys River to traffic during the month of March. She then opened the South

Channel below Bois Blanc Island, cutting off pedestrian traffic on the ice bridge, but opening another channel for shippers pushing for an early start to the navigation season.

The ferry's crew was away much longer than expected, a fact underscored March 26 when the post office raised the price of a first class letter home from 2¢ to 3¢.

And still, the winter of 1944 wasn't over. On the morning of March 29, gale-force winds smashed windows, toppled trees, and brought ferry traffic across the Straits to a standstill, as the *Chief* sought shelter in her St. Ignace dock. Winds whipped snow at a sustained 46 miles per hour, with gusts over 60 mph cutting visibility to under 100 feet. That also drove a Coast Guard tug into shelter at Mackinaw City, and for a time the *Sainte Marie (II)* went unreported, though she turned up fine the next day after spending the night uneventfully crushing ice in the Straits.

The ice held on, and by the first week of April, lake carriers had formed a city off shore, with nearly 30 vessels trapped within sight of Mackinaw City, waiting for a channel to be opened between lakes Michigan and Huron. Twenty-five more were stranded at the Soo, and a cadre of Coast



The once proud *Algomah*, was towed to Mackinaw City, very near where she'd landed for much of her career. Once there, she was sunk again, this time as part of a breakwall. The bones of the venerable ferry are today buried under the rock that makes up part of Shepler's dock.

Guard icebreakers and the *Sainte Marie (II)* worked for days to free them. There were reports that many of the ships were short of crew members, as the draft had taken so many available men, and some ships were operating at the bare minimum required for a licensed crew. Lake shippers pressed for a deferment for their sailors, but with little hope of a favorable ruling in time for the 1944 sailing season.

One man who was out of work announced he wasn't looking for a job. Former Governor Murray D. Van Wagoner announced he would not seek nomination for a return trip to the governor's mansion.

With the *Sainte Marie (II)* still off breaking ice and the *Chief Wawatam* handling both railroad and automobile traffic, the highway department decided to move to a spring schedule on April 21. The *City of Cheboygan* was fitted out and entered service making six round trips a day.

On the same day, half a world away, England's future Queen, Elizabeth II, celebrated her 18th birthday.

The spring schedule gave way on June 16, when the summer schedule went into effect.

Everyone hoped for a better

summer tourist season. As early as March, the state legislature earmarked \$50,000 for tourism promotion, plus \$20,000 more for each local tourism bureau. The U.P. bureau's George Bishop was elected president of the newly formed Michigan Tourist Council, and based on requests for information, tourist associations predicted an unprecedented demand for facilities and services. Headlines in the *Cheboygan Tribune* noted, "Indications Point to the Best Tourist Season in Years."

But things were not very good in the halls of the Highway Department offices in Lansing. Gas rationing meant less gas sold and a profound loss of gas tax revenue for the department. Speaking at the 1944 U.P. Roadbuilder's conference, Commissioner Ziegler noted that department revenues in 1943 were down 37% from 1942 and 45% below 1941. Military call-ups meant severe manpower shortages. The men who were left put in long hours to get their jobs done.

The *Detroit Times* said Ziegler, himself, led the way as a "prodigious worker, at his desk daily by 8:30, seldom leaves before 5:30, and back frequently for night sessions." To fit the reduced revenues, Ziegler streamlined department staff, slashed state mileage travel

in the last six months of 1943 by 365,000 miles over the same period the year before, and enforced savings in expense accounts and long distance phone calls.

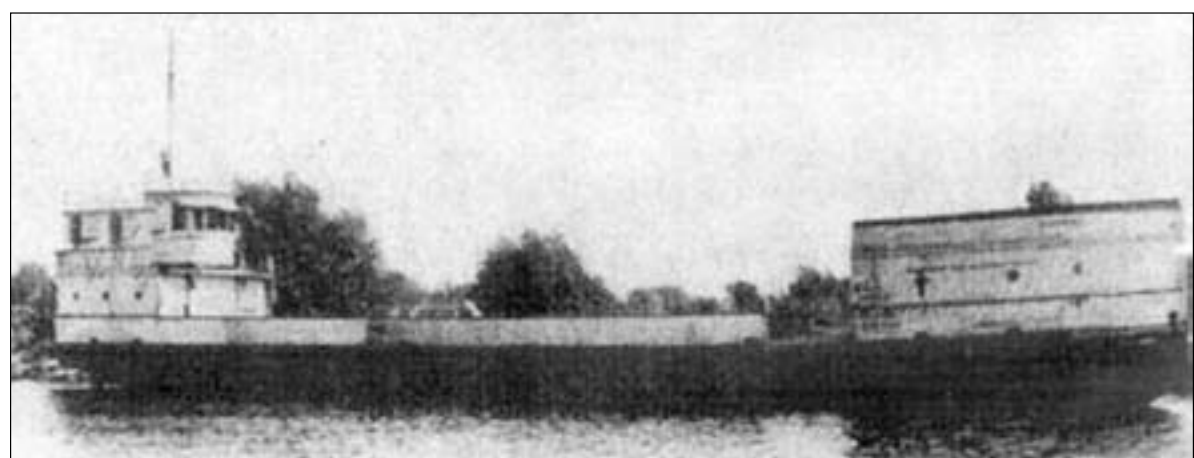
To save even more, Ziegler contracted out state highway maintenance to county road departments. Under an agreement, the displaced state workers would be hired onto county payrolls to help with the increased workload, while the expenses of duplicate garages, equipment and support staffs could be minimized. Ziegler also offered the surplus trucks and equipment to the counties at bargain-basement prices. The savings to the state were immediately felt.

The ferries were also operating under austerity measures. To save added costs, the one-boat ferry schedule of six round trips a day was extended past the traditional start of summer at the end of May. Ziegler announced the summer schedule with two boats wouldn't start until June 16. Then the *Cheboygan* and the *Petoskey* would combine to make 13 sailings from each side daily. After the previous year's experience with Trucker's Steamship, Ziegler decided not to attempt to charter out surplus vessels again, despite requests from a Cleveland-based

ship broker with a client who wanted to either buy or lease the ships and a Washington, D.C. attorney who's client wanted ship-loaded truck trailers up and down the Eastern Seaboard. Instead, *The Straits* and the *Munising* would be held in reserve, in case the predictions of a spectacular tourist season proved true.

But before the summer schedule could take effect, a much more massive ferry operation, of a like never seen before, took place half a world away. The Allies ferried entire armies from England across the English Channel, to launch an attack on the beaches of Normandy, France, the largest amphibious assault ever attempted.

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The ship which started formal ferry service at the Straits, *Algomah*, had by 1943 been converted to a barge. In a loading accident, she was sunk at the Olds Dock in Cheboygan. Many thought she would be scrapped there, but the Village of Mackinaw City purchased her remains for use there.

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The operation increased war production in the U.S. even more, and that meant much greater freighter traffic in the Straits. In June, the Lake Carriers Association proposed that to prevent accidents between ferries and freighters, the State equip their fleet with distinctive sounding horns. That way the ferries could be more readily identified from freighters in fog or darkness. Although he had been off work sick for some while, Captain Bentgen was not impressed. In a letter about the suggestion to Commissioner Ziegler, he said he felt that no matter what the whistle sounded like, a vessel master would try to stay clear of any ships in poor visibility. He pointed out that the ferries already had a distinctive sounding whistle, since an older style device was used on the state boats, unlike the more modern ones used on most freighters and tugs.

He mentioned the Motorola radios each ferry carried, which allowed communications between ferries and with the shore offices in Mackinaw City and St. Ignace. He also noted the Lorrain radio-telephone recently installed on the *City of Petoskey* which operated on the same frequencies as the Lake Carriers' vessels. Bentgen said any ferry master wanting to talk with a freighter could have his messages relayed by the master on the *Petoskey*. He also put in a subtle request, that as soon as possible, all the ferries should be equipped with the Lorrain-type radios.

The Lake Carriers Association committee heartily agreed with Bentgen's radio suggestion, and after a strong recommendation from Vice-president L. C. Sabin,

Ziegler ordered the matter investigated, and the radios installed, if the cost wasn't prohibitive.

The summer of 1944 was another season of political conventions. President Franklin Roosevelt accepted the Democratic nomination to run for an unprecedented third term, dropping Vice-president Henry Wallace and naming Harry Truman to be his running mate. But at the Straits, the big excitement was the chance to ride a real military amphibious DUKW ("duck") boat. Thousands bought war bonds to get tickets in Cheboygan that July.

They also watched headlines from local papers that outlined progress on the new icebreaker *Mackinaw*, which reporters described as a true "marvel." The \$10 million vessel would displace 5,090 tons with a hull 290 feet long and 75 feet wide. Like the *Chief*, she would have three propellers, two at the stern and one at the bow, but with more than 10,000 horsepower at her disposal, she would be the most powerful vessel on the Great Lakes. She would be crewed by a compliment of 12 officers and 164 men.

With delivery expected sometime that fall, the question on everyone's mind was where the new ship would call home. Cities all around the region vied for the honor. The Cheboygan City Council offered space for her dock in the river near town, perhaps even at the Olds Dock, and Highway Commissioner Ziegler offered the Coast Guard the use of a slip at the State Dock in Mackinaw City.

In an unrelated move, Ziegler also announced bids would be taken in August to repair the stone dike at the end of the Mackinaw City dock, and to strengthen the pier in St. Ignace. The work was soon awarded to Luedeke Construction as low bidder. He also delighted local businessmen when plans were revealed to black-top State Rt. 23 from Rogers City to Cheboygan. Some of the work would start immediately. The rest would be completed in 1945.

Ziegler also promised trucking companies that he would investigate why the same truck would be charged different fares to cross on the ferries. One Saginaw Company said their driver was sometimes charged \$3.75, sometimes \$4.10 for the same vehicle.

And the commissioner also promised cooperation to the State Department of Health, which wanted free shipment of blood plasma between peninsulas. Captain Bentgen assured him that the precious fluid was being carried with no problems. Laboratory drivers dropped it off at the slip on one side, and the ferries transported it to another driver on the opposite shore. When the driver was late picking it up, the dockmen even stored it until he arrived. The only problem, Bentgen noted, was that one driver felt he should be able to take his car across free. This, Bentgen said, was politely denied.

Meanwhile, in Europe, the Allies made steady progress toward Berlin. With the liberation of Paris in late August, people began to anticipate the end of hostilities. Officials even announced plans to ban liquor sales on "V" or Victory Day, whenever that might be. The favorable headlines gave people reason for hope and more reason to travel. State Park attendance grew by 10% in the first part of 1944, and ferry traffic rose 8.6% in the first seven months over the same period in 1943. But Ziegler noted that traffic was still down over 60% from the days before gasoline rationing.

The commissioner went even

further to increase ridership. He offered free ferry rides for the duration to U.S. and Allied servicemen and women in uniform, if they requested a free pass from the dock ticket office before boarding.

Through August, salvage crews worked to refloat the wreck of the steamer *Humphrey*, which had been blocking the ferry lanes. The work was finally completed on September 16 and the way cleared for a more direct crossing of the Straits. The salvage master, Captain John Roen, celebrated by hosting a lavish dinner for friends and guests in the private dining room of the Straits Inn. That same day, the fall ferry schedule went into effect, with 11 sailings from each side each day. The schedule would last until the fall hunting onslaught began about November 10.

With the potential for much greater traffic, Ziegler and Bentgen coordinated plans to streamline the November rush. In a series of letters through the late fall, they outlined ideas to better communicate with motorists waiting in lines that could seem endless. Ziegler asked that two or three men, possibly from the Lansing office, be assigned to work the lineup, passing on information and watching out for cars with women and children and trucks with perishable goods, which were to be sent to the head of the line. They also planned to coordinate with area restaurants to make sure the crowds didn't go hungry during the waits. This, Bentgen noted, might cause a problem, however, because with wartime rationing, the only restaurants in Mackinaw City that catered to tourists were not able to supply additional service. He said their proprietors thought they would probably get enough business during the hunting rush, anyway.

Instead, Bentgen proposed supplying a truck so that a caterer could work the line selling coffee and fried cakes. He said he planned to visit a doctor in Lansing soon, though he had been feeling much better, and perhaps they could further discuss their ideas then. But Ziegler suggested that his assistant, Harry Ward, be on hand to help coordinate all the additional efforts. Bentgen noted that he didn't really anticipate any major problems, however. This year, all the large boats would be available for service, including the *Chief Wawatam*, which would give the fleet a capacity to carry more than 400 cars every two hours, as opposed to the season in 1943, when the reduced fleet could handle only about half that. Everyone felt the added capacity would be needed, as by October, ferry traffic was up by nearly 19% over 1943.

On November 3, President Roosevelt and Representative Fred Bradley were reelected, and on the November 4, newspapers carried stories that the ferries would run every 40 minutes to move hunters, who would, for the first time, be able to buy coffee and donuts from vendors working the waiting lines. While there would be some lines, the papers noted, Ziegler anticipated there would be fewer problems than in the peak years before the war.

But to make sure, when the hunting season started, Commissioner Ziegler personally went to Mackinaw City and spent time working the ferry waiting lines, talking with motorists and making sure everything was running smoothly. By November 11, Ziegler estimated that nearly



Rep. Fred Bradley had set the wheels in motion to solve the icebreaker shortage when he sponsored legislation to build the Coast Guard's new icebreaker *Mackinaw*. She was accepted into the service December 20, 1944, and quickly delivered to her new homeport of Cheboygan, where Bradley and other dignitaries welcomed her with a huge civic celebration. The *Mackinaw* would call Cheboygan home for the next 63 years.