

Autos Across Mackinac: Gov. Sigler and Ziegler Disagree on Causeway

In last week's serialization of Les Bagley's unpublished history of Michigan State Ferries, "Autos Across Mackinac," we recalled the 25th Anniversary of the ferry fleet, celebrated in the summer of 1948. This week, we include additional photos of that celebration and continue the story immediately following the end of the ferry jubilee.

Part 38: The Jubilee

By Les Bagley

Following all the publicity of the celebration, the ferry waits in August 1948 increased, but despite predictions of a crush like never before seen, and perhaps because of the huge traffic surges earlier that month, Labor Day weekend proved only slightly larger than the year before. Of all the cars and trucks that crossed in 1948, only 16 (0.01%) more vehicles crossed than in 1947. The "big day" of the weekend was Saturday, when 5,633 vehicles were transported in a 24-hour period.

The big news was that on September 3, a 27-year-old farmer from Amand, Ohio, Arnold Shavers, while returning from his Northern Michigan vacation, drove his car onto the ferry, making it the 5-millionth car to make the crossing. Altogether, August traffic was 5% greater than it had been the year before.

The weeks leading up to Labor Day saw a small skirmish on the ferry docks become a war of words in Lansing. On August 23, Ferries Superintendent Capt. John Kelsner issued a memo to dockmasters at each terminal stating, "There will be no selling or soliciting whatsoever on this dock." The order was actually initiated by Commissioner Charles Ziegler, who felt that all the vendors were interfering with traffic flow and the loading of the ferries. He also wanted to protect small children, some as young as six years old, who had been running through the lines selling sandwiches, soft drinks, popcorn, and candy to motorists waiting to board. The result was that newspaper vendors were banned from selling on the ferry docks just as the lucrative Labor Day Holiday was approaching.

That brought a howl of protests from the paperboys, who contacted the governor's office, the Michigan attorney general, and just about anybody who would listen. On September 2, the attorney general wrote to Ziegler saying that his banning of paperboys and others on state trunkline highways, including the ferry docks, was illegal, and if it was enforced, it would have to mean that no other pedestrians could walk on the docks, either.

In a statement to the *Detroit Free Press*, Governor Kim Sigler reportedly said, "I can see no reason why any state officials would attempt to ban the sale of newspapers on state property. Freedom of the press is involved in this, and as far as I'm concerned, newspaper reporters and newspaper boys may have access to any state property."

Asked if that meant the boats as well as the docks, Sigler said, "That is state property."

But later, Sigler told Commissioner Ziegler he was misquoted. And in mid-September, Ziegler pointed out that the legal precedent cited by the attorney general failed to include the act of selling, and that the freedom of speech and the press guarantees did not extend to disrupting traffic and forcing the acceptance of printed matter by pedestrians or motorists. The newsboys and other vendors were, therefore, restricted to selling in the space only between the street and the tollbooths, a distance of about 300 feet. "Every motorist has to pass right by them there, anyway," Ziegler noted.

Newspaper sales on the docks, however, were just a tempest in a teapot compared to Governor Sigler's other message. Besieged with letters from motorists complaining about delays and ferry lines, at the end of July, Sigler asked Ziegler for a complete review of the idea of moving the northern ferry terminal to the end of the abandoned causeway. He asked how much the Highway Department had spent to build it, and what it would take to move the dock there, saying "at least half the time of the crossing."



In a fundraising effort, Straits-area businesses sold Silver Jubilee Tokens, worth a quarter at participating stores. While some were used in trade, most ended up as souvenirs and today fetch between \$4 and \$10 when sold on Internet auctions. (Author's collection)

Sigler also discussed the idea with a group of about 30 men at a Young Republican's luncheon over Labor Day weekend, saying he actually preferred a bridge or tunnel across the Straits, but realized such a project wouldn't be feasible without federal assistance.

Commissioner Ziegler had already said he was opposed to moving the terminal to the causeway, and he prepared an extensive report, stating the causeway and its approaches had so far cost just under a million dollars, but Sigler told his audience, "Charles Ziegler and I can't see eye to eye on utilization of the causeway, but I believe the State of Michigan can't dump a million dollars worth of rock into the lake and let it go to waste."

Ziegler said consultants, not the Highway Department, had designed the causeway and it was too narrow and too low for safe driving when winds of 50 miles per hour or so whipped waves over it. The commissioner said he'd personally been on the causeway to observe those conditions and "no motorist would drive through that, even if there were a ferry waiting for him at the end. To make it safe, it would have to be raised at least 15 feet higher."

While Ziegler said he'd never

actually measured the distance from Mackinaw City, either to the existing dock or to the end of the causeway, he believed it was actually only a savings of 3.5 miles. That wouldn't mean proportionate time savings, he noted. The time in docking, turning, loading, and unloading would still be the same, no matter where the dock was located.

Since he'd taken office, ferry captains had been recording when wind and waves would make landings difficult, and they checked ferry logs to find that over the last seven years, the average was about 40 to 50 days a year. To make landings safe there under those conditions would require at least \$7 million in breakwaters and improvements to build a harbor, Ziegler noted. He concluded that he couldn't see spending \$7 million more to save a \$1 million investment, unless the governor "wanted to throw good money after bad, or throw state money down a rat hole."

"Charlie and I have two honest, different points of view in the matter," the Governor replied. "He says the causeway is already showing signs of wear, and it will cost millions to make a pier out of it, and the engineers I've talked with say it won't cost nearly that



As part of the 25th Anniversary Celebration for Michigan State Ferries in 1948, Miss Straits of Mackinac, Alice Beatrice West, served a slice of the anniversary cake to Governor Kim Sigler, at a VIP dinner held aboard the Icebreaker Mackinaw. Republican Sigler would lose his bid for reelection that fall to upstart Democratic candidate G. Mennen "Soapy" Williams. (Michigan Department of Transportation)

much.... Every one of us has prejudices, and I believe Charlie's viewpoint may be affected by the fact that Pat Van Wagoner built the causeway. Van Wagoner has done a lot of fine things in Michigan, and I believe we can use that causeway now. I'm going to keep on talking on this matter and will try and interest the people of the State of Michigan in this matter. I can't demand the Highway Department use this causeway, but something will be done to improve the traffic flow at the Straits, even if I have to call on the people of the State of Michigan to help me." Sigler said.

But Ziegler noted that in 1941, there had been a 14-mile backup of hunters when six boats were running. Now, with only four boats in service, the traffic was much

members. He took along a "recognized authority on boats," a former commander in the U. S. Navy, Eugene McDonald, now president of the Zenith Radio Corporation, who made a report "to the effect that our state ferries are efficiently operated, very safely handled, and well maintained." The governor's expert did, however, ask for some improvements in public relations. He suggested installation of public address systems on the ferries and broadcasting a history of the region and sightseeing attractions during the crossing. He and Sigler also looked at the boats with regard to requests from the traveling public for lunchrooms, but made no public opinion on that matter.

Still one matter the ferries never did address in their "public relations," was the "smoke nuisance." William Walt wrote his state representative complaining that the smoke of every boat was so terrible "it blankets the view completely in all directions, and with so many boats running, the view is mostly covered at all times. Is the coal so plentiful up there that it can be sent up the chimney just to see a stream of smoke following each boat? ... What satisfaction is it to the Lords to be to see that boats and passengers are covered with soot on each trip so that you could not tell them apart, if they are white or colored? ... What must be done to stop this nuisance?"

Apparently, nothing could. The coal burning ferries from both the state and the railroad continued to belch huge black clouds of smoke for as long as they ran at the Straits, and residents simply took as a matter of course to check the wind direction before hanging any laundry out to dry.

Nor did Governor Sigler let the matter of the causeway terminal drop. He continued to discuss it into October, in a radio address he delivered in Marquette. And, fed up with Ziegler's apparent inaction on the matter, he even hinted that he might seek to change the Highway Commissioner's job from an elected office to an appointed one.

On September 13, 1948, the ferries went to the fall schedule, with a boat leaving each side every 90 minutes from 6 a.m. to 10:30 p.m., and two nightly sailings spaced three hours apart. That schedule would last until hunting season brought all four boats back online November 7.

Then, on September 27, a different breed of politics came to call. A 36-year-old Democrat, wearing a green polka-dot bow tie, visited Mackinaw City and St. Ignace on the opening day of his campaign to unseat Kim Sigler as governor of Michigan. At first, hardly anyone noticed him. In fact, one paper said that G. Mennen "Soapy" Williams was "of the shaving cream Williams," and hence his nickname. But Gerhard Mennen Williams was the heir to the Mennen Toiletries fortune. Born February 23, 1911, in Detroit, he'd already been a lawyer for both the state and federal governments. A large man, at 6 feet 4 inches and 220 pounds, he stood out in any crowd, and he was a

protégé of former governor Frank Murphy. Although he'd never before held a political office, Michigan would hear a lot more about Soapy in the weeks and months to come.

Williams was just one of the passengers that made September a record month for ferry ridership, with traffic increasing a whopping 26.1% over the previous September's levels. That made the year's average 10.4% greater than 1947. Tourism officials blamed good weather, lengthened resort seasons, and, of course, the Jubilee for the increase.

In fact, on October 5, the St. Ignace Lions Club gathered to hear Ralph Swan of the Highway Department summarize the recent Ferry Jubilee Celebration, watch movies of the event, and hear recordings of the radio broadcasts it generated. The Lions reported that, despite a huge cost of \$4,600 to stage the event, the group still had a balance of \$6.11 in cash and savings in their account. Swan also called for making the Straits swim an annual event. He also noted that the anniversary had received two full pages of pictures in the U.P.'s own *Hiawathan Magazine*.

October's traffic increase was 10.7 percent above the previous year, with 3,598 more vehicles crossing. With a huge crush of hunters expected to start around Armistice Day, all their available extra boats were moved to Mackinaw City and St. Ignace to be ready for the rush.

On November 1, Captain Kelsner and his family moved to one of the new Lipnitz houses on Medora Street. And around Michigan there was other movement, as well. Soapy Williams was moving around a lot!

With his wife, Nancy, at his side, he crossed and recrossed the state in a beat up gray Desoto convertible, piling on the mileage and stopping wherever he could find someone to shake his hand and listen to him speak. He normally gave at least 25 speeches a day, and he felt the day was wasted if he hadn't tallied at least 2,000 handshakes. With that firm handshake, his brash good looks, and wide smile, he quickly gained voter support across the state.

Williams strongly supported New Deal Democrats and FDR's social programs. An avowed liberal, he was a good friend of organized labor, courting the CIO's backing of the Democratic Party, even before he agreed to run for Michigan's highest office. He may have spent so much time at the Straits because of the problems ferry workers were having trying to regain recognition of the CIO.

That fall, unlicensed personnel had contacted the union about what they felt was an unfair calculation of their payroll. Back in 1946, the Civil Service Commission had ruled they would bank an extra day's pay for every 7-day week they worked, in effect, giving them a day of overtime for anything over 48 hours. Most men used the extra days as a cushion during the winter layup. But if they took the seventh day off, they were docked a day's pay, plus they didn't receive the overtime. Further, some men who did take time off during the running season found that they were charged 14 days of vacation time for every two weeks they took off, even though they were only supposed to be working six days a week and banking the seventh day, in effect, causing them to be charged twice for the same day. And lastly, the men complained that some workers were told on short notice that they were to take some vacation time in the middle of the running season, contrary to Civil Service rules about scheduling their vacations when they wanted.

The men asked the union to intervene, but the Civil Service commission balked at recognizing the union again.

Meanwhile, the ferry officers petitioned for a 15¢-per-hour raise as well, saying that inflation and poorly adjusted salaries were seriously eroding their standards of living at the Straits.

While Williams courted the CIO and labor votes, Governor Sigler pretty much relied on newspaper reporters to carry his story to the voters. Apparently he felt his reelection was a shoe-in with such

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The anniversary celebration included a swim across part of the Straits of Mackinac, with participants leaving from British Landing on Mackinac Island early in the morning and trying to reach St. Ignace. It was reportedly the first "sanctioned" swim across the Straits. (Michigan Department of Transportation)



The fastest swimmer was Dave Pushman of Detroit, who reached Dock 1 in 2 hours, 22 minutes. Of the dozens of swimmers who started the day, only four managed to complete the entire 4-mile course. (Michigan Department of Transportation)

greater, but the lines were only half as long, owing to small changes in operating procedures and efficiencies.

"I have another item of importance in mind which would make the difference in running time only about six minutes more per trip than if the ferries were operating to the end of the causeway," Ziegler added. "I will discuss this with you when we get together."

No minutes or notes of the Ziegler-Sigler meeting have surfaced, but, apparently, Ziegler suggested an alternative docking plan. With a new, larger ferry on the drawing board, the state had nowhere to dock it on either side of the straits. Ziegler was eyeing a new dock at the existing location in Mackinaw City, but he also was considering moving the St. Ignace terminal to the old furnace site, which the Highway Department had purchased years before. It is not known whether he discussed that plan with Sigler.

Meanwhile, as the Labor Day rush began, and citing what he called the "deplorable idleness of a million dollars worth of rock in the Straits," the governor took it upon himself to inspect each of the state ferry terminals, ride each of the ferries at the Straits, and interview each of the captains and crew