

# Autos Across Mackinac: Situation Becomes Tense for Ferry Workers

The St. Ignace News is serializing Les Bagley's unpublished history of Michigan State Ferries, the fleet that carried automobiles, trucks, and passengers across the Straits of Mackinac for 34 years prior to the opening of the Mackinac Bridge in 1957. By the summer of 1955, ferry crews watched the bridge going up, and their livelihoods about to go up in smoke. Their concerns were increased when a huge influx of well-paid ironworkers descended on the Straits housing market, driving up rental prices beyond what the summer-only crewmen could afford. Then there were unfounded rumors of a letter to the bridge builder asking Merritt-Chapman and Scott not to hire ferry employees. It really just asked them to require that new hires give notice to the ferry fleet before they "abandoned ship."

## Part 52: ANOTHER STRIKE?

By Les Bagley

The letter and the rumors it spawned made ferry workers feel like they were trapped in an untenable situation: They couldn't afford to live in town and work for the ferries, and their employer was standing in the way of getting better jobs.

By the end of April, the situation had become tense. Civil Service offered a carrot: 100% accumulated sick leave, paid in cash as a bonus, upon the end of the ferry operation. But the ferrymen wanted more, now. They demanded either overtime for Saturday and Sunday work or an immediate 30¢-per-hour raise to cover the cost of inflation. Things got so charged that on May 3, Russell Van Avery, the vice-president of the Association of State Ferry Employees, wrote to Capt. George Lloyd and Highway Department personnel directors: "Dear Sirs: This letter is to inform your office the officers of the Association of State Ferry Employees will not be responsible for any work stoppage, strikes, or labor disputes which may arise in the future."

His letter was followed by one sent to Arthur Rasch of Civil Service. "We, the employees of the Michigan State Ferries, do hereby give notice that unless we receive premium pay for Saturday and Sunday, or thirty (.30) cents per hour increase in pay, we will be forced to resign our jobs on the 28th day of May, 1955. If we are forced to resign and then rehired, all seniority, sick leave, and vacation time will be restored."

There was no signature. It was just signed by "Michigan State Ferry Employees."

A petition signed by more than 70 workers followed a few days later. The signers demanded the Civil Service Commission give them the raise, backdated to March 1, and do it by May 27, the day before the threatened mass resignation. Rasch responded that while the commission would consider the men's request, it could not make any ruling by their deadline, as the matter required significant study.

Francis "Pat" Kelly again scrambled to the Straits to interview sailors and try to get a picture of what was causing the problems. He promised his four-page report, submitted to Arthur Rasch May 23, would be duly given to the commission when they considered the raise at their next meeting on June 17. He also invited an employee delegation to testify at the hearing in Lansing. His presence apparently helped soothe the men, who, in meetings in both Mackinaw City and St. Ignace, agreed to postpone any kind of labor action so as not to disrupt ferry service during the four-day Memorial Day weekend.

That was fortunate. Traffic that weekend exceeded the previous year's holiday by nearly 10%. The ferries handled almost 18,000 vehicles, with more than 5,300 on Saturday alone. While three-boat waits were the norm, traffic kept moving, and it only once backed up southbound from the St. Ignace toll-booths to the intersection of Ferry Lane and US-2.

The weekend was just the cap on volumes that had been building through May. Counts showed an 8.6% increase for the month and a boost of 4.1% for the first five months of the year. To spruce up the terminals for the growing tourist hoards, dockmasters Ed Chase and Frank Paquin groomed lawns, and



Here is the City of Cheboygan discharging autos in St. Ignace. With two railroad ferries, four auto ferries, and several of the Mackinac Island passenger ferries all powered by coal-fired steam boilers, residents had to keep close track of wind direction before hanging laundry out to dry. Of all the large ferries at the Straits, only the Vacationland was diesel-powered, although by the end of the decade, Arnold Transit would also be switching to diesel boats. (Author's collection)



Here The Straits has arrived in St. Ignace and landed at the side-loading slip on the north side of Dock 3 (where the Coast Guard is today.) The City of Munising is in the north end-loading ship, and the City of Cheboygan is arriving from Mackinaw City and lining up to land in the south slip, where Arnold Line freight boats load today. Southbound auto traffic appears to be just as heavy as that seen in the northbound view. (L.L. Cook Postcard, author's collection)

Chase even painted the Mackinaw City ticket offices.

But as tourists began their annual treks to the Straits, a few ferry workers managed to escape. The Vacationland's chief engineer, Ben Wiggins, left assistant Bill Bentgen in charge while he vacationed in Seattle. Others didn't travel as far and just enjoyed rides in the countryside, as the newsletter Hy-Lighter reported many ferry crewmen, especially those on the ice-breaker, had purchased new cars.

Apparently, the Civil Service Commission didn't consider new cars when they reviewed the ferry wage situation that June. While the invited employee delegation never appeared, because they couldn't get time off from the boats, the commissioners met with Deputy Commissioner George Foster and Ferries Personnel Director Merle Walker. Following their conversation, the Civil Service Commission granted a raise of 15¢ per hour, half of what the men had demanded, retroactive to May 15. For the lowest paid sailors, that meant a minimum wage of \$1.58 per hour, without overtime. The Highway Department estimated it would cost an additional \$100,000 per year. The raise effected boat and dock crews, but not the office staff. The commission asked to review their wages later.

The marine raises were just part of Commissioner Charles Ziegler's problems that June. In April, voters approved only a 1.5% raise in the gasoline tax, instead of the 2% he'd requested. Still, the boost increased his department budget by nearly \$35 million dollars and, by June, Governor G. Mennen Williams demanded to know why the commissioner hadn't started building any new roads yet. Ziegler patiently explained that the legislation called for the taxes to be paid quarterly, and the first money hadn't yet been received. Williams said he was "disappointed" at the lack of progress, and Ziegler snapped, "I'm not God, or even any of His relatives!"

Ziegler also said he faced shortages of concrete, steel, and manpower, but promised to move as many 1956 projects to 1955 as possible, once the money trickled in. The governor said he was "informally notified" there was plenty of concrete and insisted the department work faster. Then, to Williams' surprise, the commissioner popped up with a \$1,200,000,000 highway plan to give the state 1,440 miles of major new highways over the next 10 years, including bridge approaches,

which Ziegler dubbed, "phase two." He made the proposal in a major presentation, which obviously had been a very long time in planning. Williams was forced to back off slightly, admitting that, perhaps, Ziegler was doing the best he could.

At the Straits, boat crews felt Civil Service commissioners had not done the best they could. As steel began to rise on the Mackinac Bridge foundations in late June, the men felt an even greater sense of the impending demise of their livelihoods. The 15¢ raise helped

more to raise their hackles than to assuage their frustrations, and another petition was prepared, signed, and sent to the commission demanding still better pay and overtime.

June traffic was up nearly 11%. On July 1, the Highway Department raised tractor-trailer fares from 50¢ to \$2 above prior prices. The rate for trailers towed by autos also went up between 25¢ and 75¢. Despite the fare hike, the boats got slammed when more than 25,000 autos were carried over the



Although she was the smallest ship, even The Straits of Mackinac was pressed into service during the busiest summer days. Passengers could get a good view of the passing freighters, and all the marine activity in the Straits supporting construction of the Mackinac Bridge. This view toward the ship's bow is mis-captioned, "One of the earliest State Ferries." In truth, only the Vacationland was built later. Though larger than The Straits, all the other state ferries were built nearly a half-century before. (Hiawatha postcard, author's collection)



Bridge construction, and strong tourism promotion combined to load the ferries as never before. By the mid-1950s, full holding areas in both Mackinaw City (shown here) and St. Ignace were the norm on most summer days. As a line of autos along the bottom of this view waits to buy tickets at the toll booth (just out of camera range to the left), the City of Munising leads in the stern loading slip, The Straits of Mackinac is unloading on the east face of the dock by the unused elevator tower, and the Vacationland can be seen in the distance just to the left of The Straits. At the railroad dock, just to the north, the Chief Wawatam is preparing for another crossing with railroad freight cars. Note the southside exit lane (on the right of this photo) where an ice cream vendor and a man selling newspapers are waiting, despite efforts to ban them from the docks. (Hiawatha postcard, author's collection)

Fourth of July weekend.

The largest rush was northbound on Saturday, when 8,588 cars were carried. Traffic backed up five miles off the Mackinaw City dock. The long pier had been the scene of a tragic, fatal accident only the night before. Three-year-old Roderick Hamilton of Edmonton, Alberta, darted from his parents' car between waiting traffic lanes and into the path of an oncoming taxicab in a line that was still moving. The cab driver wasn't charged.

Once the holiday crush was over, the ferry workers presented their "ultimatum" to Arthur Rasch, with more than 200 signatures demanding "premium pay or the equivalent" by July 15. The men also appealed to the governor's office for help.

"I don't know if this means the men will strike or not," Rasch told reporters.

Privately, he wrote to C. J. Hess and noted he'd spoken with the Civil Service commissioners and all agreed to his plan to interview the petition signers and immediately accept their resignations, "if their attitude warrants."

He prepared a memo outlining consequences of a labor action to the ferry employees, and along with a pile of resignation forms, dispatched Pat Kelly and John Downes to St. Ignace on July 10 to talk with the men, as "Kelly speaks their language." While Kelly had worked on the boats years before, he was also a blustery Irishman who tended to shout to make his point in conversation. "We've been shouted at all our lives," one ferry worker noted. Downes was actually the cooler head of the two.

When they arrived at the Straits, the pair checked into some tourist cabins and then began to interview as many men as they could to determine just what the general feeling was about a strike. Since many men weren't sure, and didn't really know if they wanted the Ferry Employees Association representing them, Kelly posted a memo on all the boats calling for the election of a committee to represent ferry workers in their talks. Boat personnel, with the exception of captains and chief engineers, quickly voted for four licensed officers and four unlicensed sailors to represent them.

The men elected Willard Lamyotte, an able seaman, as temporary chairman because he gathered the most votes, followed by Richard Hankin, a 2nd engineer, Jerry Cronan, a 2nd mate, William Johnson, an able seaman, Ken Smith, a 1st mate, Tommy Jewell, another 2nd mate, Pete Viau, another able seaman, and Russell Van Avery, the vice-president of the Ferry Association and a maintenance worker.

Willard Lamyotte had been particularly vocal about the state of affairs. He had sent in the original petition, and had marked "yes" behind a number of names on the document. The men had not written "yes" themselves. "I've half a mind to fire him right now!" Kelly said.

"Go ahead, fire him now!" Jerry Cronan, a mate, seconded. Lamyotte was aghast. "What are you saying?" he demanded. Cronan explained to Willard that he was so well liked, if he was terminated, the men would tie up the boats immediately. Kelly realized his mistake and quickly backed down, instead accepting that all the petitioners

were of a mind to quit.

But even before the committee met, that morning the Civil Service Commission rejected the petition for immediate overtime and premium pay for weekends, citing the precedent it would set for other state employees. Kelly ordered a press release printed and it was quickly distributed to the media and each crewman.

"The right of employees to resign if they are dissatisfied with their rate of pay or working conditions is clear," the release read. "We suggest, however, that they consider carefully and wisely the question of quitting before taking such action. The Civil Service Commission has been sympathetic and responsive to the problems of the State Ferries employees in the past, and there is no reason to doubt that it will not be equally so in the future. However, the Civil Service Commission cannot and will not, permit any group of State Employees to dictate, either by implied threat of quitting, or striking, or otherwise, the conditions of their employment or the setting of their rates of pay. Neither the interests of the State Ferries employees, themselves, nor the interests of the public are served by the use of threat or coercion."

To Captain Lloyd he wrote, "Any State Ferry employee who either walks off his job or fails to report to work after midnight tonight, without good reason, shall be dismissed."

He lamented that it was too bad because some men still wanted to work and they had not given their elected representatives a chance.

But the new committee was highly reluctant to get involved.

"You've been selected to represent the fleet," Downes told them. "Its a very serious responsibility."

They only agreed to serve once they were promised pay for their travel and expenses and that they would experience no reprisals of any kind for their involvement.

The elected men gathered that evening in Supt. Lloyd's office and quickly asked for time to discuss their options among themselves. Kelly offered a key to his cabin, the committee accepted it, and departed, returning to ask that operations of the fleet be halted for a time that night so that all the men could meet.

Capt. Lloyd said he couldn't take that responsibility himself, and instead called George Foster in Lansing, who refused the request, saying the ferry was a public service and the public shouldn't be inconvenienced. So Capt. Lloyd pulled The Straits of Mackinac off her run to bring-off duty men over from Mackinaw City and to use as a meeting place in St. Ignace. Alerted by news bulletins on the Cheboygan radio station, the meeting was well attended. The committee also polled on-duty crewmen when their ships landed. The men voted 136 to 27 to strike at midnight Friday, July 15, if their demands weren't met. About 60% of the fleet voted. By the time the tally was announced, it was early Friday morning. The strike was set for midnight that very night.

The crews began plotting a strategy to bring ferry traffic to a halt, even if some men tried to keep working, or if the Highway Department found scabs to take over the boats, and Kelly and Downes scrambled to release statements to the media reinforcing that any strikers would be terminated immediately. They instructed Lloyd's office manager, Ben Wiggins, to prepare termination slips in advance, to be passed out if the men walked off the boats.

Even Father Bernard A. Karol, the pastor of St. Ignatius Loyola Catholic Church in St. Ignace, attempted to mediate the dispute that evening, but having no sleep the previous night, many of the committee members failed to appear. Instead, at 10:45 p.m., Capt. Andy Munson of the Petoskey notified Supt. Lloyd that he would not have a crew to take the ship out of St. Ignace on her scheduled 11 p.m. sailing. Similar action was taken on the Cheboygan, and she missed her 11:30 p.m. St. Ignace departure. The Straits and Munising both left Mackinaw City at 11:45 p.m., the larger ship landing at the old Dock 2 and the smaller ship tying up the side loading slip at Dock 3.

Lloyd realized the strategy of striking at midnight and told the Vacationland not to leave

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