

Autos Across Mackinac: Ferry Strike Ends Causing Fares To Increase

For 34 years before the Mackinac Bridge opened in November 1957, the ships of Michigan State Ferries were the only way for motorists to cross the Straits of Mackinac. Author Les Bagley has chronicled the history of the fleet in his unpublished book, "Autos Across Mackinac," which is being serialized in the St. Ignace News. In this week's installment, traffic begins to return to normal following the longest strike in State Ferry history.

Part 53: AFTER THE STRIKE

By Les Bagley

Fear of another strike kept auto traffic at the Straits to a minimum the weekend of July 25, 1955, but once the men on the boats heard the favorable decision from the Civil Service Commission, they vowed to keep working the rest of the summer. The following weekend, traffic spiked, setting a new one-day record when the boats carried 9,776 cars, exactly a year after the previous one-day record had been set in 1954. Traffic backed up three miles on either side of the Straits, while boosting July traffic to a 6.6% gain. Hawkers took advantage of fine weather to sell candy bars and soft drinks along the curb, some making as much as a \$30 profit for the day. On the boats, at least for the moment, the men seemed satisfied with the Civil Service concessions they had received.

But the return of banked time came at a cost. Beginning August 1, 1955, car drivers would no longer be carried free, but instead be charged the normal 25¢ passenger toll. In effect, it raised the fee for automobiles from \$2.50 to \$2.75. There was concern the new fares might also impact bridge tolls, as when it opened, the bridge was to charge the same as the ferry fare at the time.

The same day ferry fares went up, the quality of mail service at the Straits went down. On August 1, the Duluth, South Shore and Atlantic discontinued mail car service across the Upper Peninsula, instead substituting a Rail Diesel Car (RDC) called the "Shoreliner" for passenger service only. Local agencies scrambled to circulate petitions, asking the government to inaugurate a replacement Highway Post Office between St. Ignace and Calumet, and citizens were urged to call their congressmen to demand the replacement.

Ferry workers were more concerned with replacement jobs once the state fleet closed down. The 16-hour shutdown in July served to get attention, and part of the outcome was cooperation between Civil Service and the governor's office. Far from being a placebo or just a thorn in the side of Commissioner Charles Ziegler's highway department, Governor G. Mennen Williams' task force on post-ferry employment took its work seriously and began a series of hearings in August to explore ways a huge group of state employees might remain gainfully employed once their present jobs ended.

The first meeting, held at mid-month in St. Ignace, brought together employee representatives, management, and local and state employment office people. Survey forms were mailed to ferry employees asking for personal employment histories, educational backgrounds, and skills which might qualify the men for other jobs in the future. State Employment Security Director O. K. Fjetland chaired the meeting to find out how his committee could best help the men. Talk centered at first on the proposed new ferry route to the Western U.P. from Frankfort, but later gravitated toward continued education, retraining, and secondary job placement. When the surveys came back, the committee scheduled private interviews at the state employment office with many of the men to get their personal work histories. Of nearly 460 ferry employees, nearly one-third, or 150 men, said they had serious doubts about their future when the ferries stopped running.

In the meantime, the ferries still had a job to do. Labor Day traffic grew to more than 26,000 cars in just four days, a 7.9% increase over 1954's holiday. While there

were auto lineups both ways, boats sailed every half hour and excessive waits were avoided. Commissioner Ziegler's office announced August traffic had increased 8.8%, and levels were ahead 7.3% for the year. According to the U.P. Development Bureau, that meant more than a million cars would cross in 1957. As a side-light, the bureau noted that since records were first kept in 1916, when 75 autos crossed the Straits, 8,726,003 vehicles had moved between Mackinaw City and St. Ignace. They projected the increase, once the bridge opened, would be "astronomical."

September traffic increased 9% and posted a 7.5% gain for the first three quarters of the year. Temperate weather and bridge construction activity may have spurred the increase. The Civil Service Commission spurred an increase in pay for ferry office and warehouse workers that month. They ordered the Highway Department to include them in the raises given the boat crews earlier, retroactive to mid-May.

As post-holiday travel declined, so did employment levels on the bridge job. Contractors reported just over 660 men were working on the bridge, down from more than 800 at the peak of summer construction. The first lateral steel was installed on the bridge when a huge back span was floated out and lifted into place above the water.

In late September, the *Chief Wawatam* left the crossing to the *Saint Marie (II)* while Capt. Ben Houle took her to Manitowoc for her annual checkup and maintenance prior to icebreaking. But the smaller boat broke a throttle valve in early October and, with the *Chief* gone, rail freight across the Straits ground to a complete halt. Mackinac Transportation's Commodore Mike Bishop made an emergency drive to Manitowoc for a replacement part while 35 crewmen sat idle on the crippled ferry. The crossing was down for an entire week, with more than 60 additional railcars stacking up in freight yards each day.

The rail boat wasn't the only thing out of service that October. On the 3rd, the *Vacationland* was put on standby duty at her dock in Mackinaw City so her crew could get her ready for the winter. Then, on the 16th, the *City of Munising* limped into the state coal dock when a propeller came loose from its shaft. Capt. George Lloyd con-

and the northern woods were filled with hunters.

Commissioner Ziegler spent much of the weekend on site in Mackinaw City, personally observing how his fleet handled the traffic. He then crossed to St. Ignace to meet with city officials about plans for the town once the ferry service ended. He said he had no word on disposition of the ferry docks, which the city wanted, and that construction of a harbor breakwater from excess fill from the bridge job was up to the Mackinac Bridge Authority. But he expected much of the fill would be needed elsewhere, as they still had to raise the level of the causeway.

He planned to bring a four-lane highway to within eight miles of St. Ignace, but the final route beyond there would also be up to the bridge authority. Unofficial maps showed that route would go directly north from the bridge, bypassing the west side of the town, causing the city fathers great concern.

A storm with hurricane-force winds caused concern for hunters out in the U.P. woods on Wednesday, November 16.

Temperatures plunged to 20 degrees, and 72-mile-per-hour gusts toppled trees and television antennas. Telephone and power service was knocked out, and for safety, the ferries tied up that night at 5 p.m., loading the docks on both sides with more than 200 waiting motorists. The drivers probably shouldn't have gone anywhere, anyway. Visibility was so poor that highway travel was also unsafe. Rooms on both sides were booked solid for the night.

Ferry service resumed the next morning at 10 a.m., just in time to begin the southbound hunter rush, as nimrods sought the safety of their homes after a harrowing night in the woods. By Friday, the back-ups were constant, and by Saturday and Sunday, the southbound lineup extended more than seven miles to Bryce's Hill, west of town. Waits extended up to nine hours over the weekend as the ferries carried up to 6,000 cars on Sunday, alone.

Despite the hunting rush and a record number of bagged bucks, November ferry traffic actually declined 2.7% from 1954. Annual traffic statistics were up 6.6%, however, as the ferries prepared for winter.

With hunting season over, the *Vacationland* sailed for a week's worth of maintenance at River



At one point in early 1956, the railroad ferries *Chief Wawatam* and *Sainte Marie* were sidelined for repairs. Rail traffic snarled for nearly a week while motorists continued to cross the Straits of Mackinac aboard the auto ferry *Vacationland*, shown here at her slip in Mackinaw City. There were times that year when the roads in Northern Michigan were so bad that no automobiles could reach the docks on either side, so the ferry waited until the roads were cleared. (Author's collection)

spent his Christmas recovering from surgery at War Memorial Hospital at the Soo.

Also, just before the holidays, American Bridge installed a second back-stay span to wind up their construction season, shuttering their marine operations for the year and promising fascinating sights for visitors crossing the Straits in 1956, as the bridge aimed for completion by the fall of 1957. The ferry workers would soon be able to easily watch the progress of the instrument of their jobs' demise.

As the men settled into their winter routines, Governor Williams' ferry advisory committee offered four recommendations to help men displaced when the bridge opened: 1) That state retirement plans be amended to provide protection for those employees with 10 or more years of service separated because of unavailability of jobs for which they were qualified; 2) That the employment security act be amended to provide unemployment insurance for workers from state ferries and other agencies where separation was due to cessation of activities; 3) That arrangements be made for general education development (GED) tests for ferry workers who had not completed high school, and thus were ineligible for other Civil Service jobs. The committee also suggested that men who failed the tests be trained by public schools in Cheboygan, Mackinaw City, and St. Ignace, so they could pass them on a later try. Finally, the committee decided that recommendation #4, consideration of a new ferry route from Frankfort to the Western U.P., was outside of its province. While boosters of the route had appeared before the committee, the members thought any data on the run should be for-

not been included in the raises the commission gave to other ferry workers, so that by the end of the year he was actually making less than the captains he supervised. It took several months, but after a flurry of memos and a direct request by the Highway Department to the commission, his salary was raised to match that of Motor Vessel Captain, \$613.00 bi-weekly, or \$15,938 per year.

While most of the crews turned to winter activities during the lay-off, the *Vacationland* plowed back and forth in the shadow of the Mackinac Bridge construction, looming ominously above the icy water. And despite the seasonal layoffs, the Ferry Employees Committee continued monthly meetings with Civil Service Commission staff, though at times it was a thankless job for everyone involved.

Ferry employees were beginning to feel very uneasy about their futures. Many blamed their own elected committee for their unrest. Moderates felt the committee members were troublemakers trying to stir up the state's pot. The more vocal crews felt the committee was a pawn of the Civil Service Commission, able to accomplish nothing. And at times, the committee, itself, felt it was only spinning its wheels, with agreements being reached between their members and Civil Service representatives being second-guessed and re-interpreted either by the commission itself or Highway Department management. Some simple agreements seemed to take years to implement, and when in place, were done differently than what everyone thought had been agreed. Others never went beyond the agreement stage.

On the other hand, the Commission's Pat Kelly characterized the employee committee as leaning more and more toward the employees instead of holding balanced neutrality. He even went so far as to send a private memo asking that the committee be disbanded, citing an almost complete lack of Highway Department management decision-making in employee relations.

He noted that agreements were hammered out between the committee and commission staff and then left to management to implement, with hardly any input in the process. This led to major frustration for the Highway Department, from Commissioner Ziegler through Deputy Commissioner Foster and down through Captain Lloyd, all of whom also seemed to blame the employee committee for bypassing the proper chain of command.

Feeling pressure from all sides, and noting their own frustration with what appeared to be little results for lots of labor, several committee members submitted their resignations, saying they'd never wanted to serve in the first place. The winter of 1955-56 was a depressing time for most people involved with the ferries.

The Michigan Civil Service Commission granted most Michigan employees an 8% to 10% pay raise effective in February, and adopted a system of longevity pay to reward those who stayed in state service longer. But the ferry crews didn't participate in the raises, and they looked with envy at those who could stay beyond the date the Mackinac Bridge would open. Instead, the employees committee negotiated a 5% annual bonus for ferry workers, retroactive to January 1. The men were also granted a better sick leave program, though it still didn't make up for the 10% granted other state workers. But the Civil Service Commission cautioned that any

threats of work slow-downs or stoppages in the future would simply not be tolerated.

Unfortunately, the submarine cable that provided power to Mackinac Island didn't tolerate the cold winter of 1955-56. While repair crews tried to patch it, ice formed and winds blew, making the work impossible until spring. To keep electricity flowing to island homes, the *Mackinaw* made a mercy run, delivering 10,000 gallons of diesel fuel from her own onboard reserve tanks to fuel the island's backup generator.

The cold weather made February 1956 seem even longer than the 29 days of Leap Year. But the extra day helped boost February ridership on the *Vacationland* by 8.3%, and traffic for the first two months of the year showed a 4.3% gain. The cold also brought snow, and by early March, a pair of back-to-back blizzards left high drifts that covered the tops of cars in many places. The first, on March 7, forced so many ferry office workers to shovel snow that not much else was accomplished. The temperature dropped to 12 degrees and stayed there, meaning winter wasn't close to over.

Then, on Sunday morning, March 11, thermometers plunged to eight degrees and the winds howled. The *Vacationland* just lay in her Mackinaw City dock, as there were no cars to transport, and nowhere for anyone to go if they had been transported. She finally resumed service about 3 p.m.

In St. Ignace, several large tractor-trailers got stranded, blocking State Street, and snowplows spent most of the day freeing them, to clear the main road for fire trucks if needed. Only then could they plow the rest of the city. The large grader broke an axle and one plow truck burned out a clutch. But, slowly, the region recovered. That weekend the Coast Guard even called for help, and the *Sainte Marie (II)* responded, breaking ice in the Straits, freeing the *Mackinaw* to open shipping lanes elsewhere. Later, the railroad boat joined the "Big Mac" in the upper St. Marys River, taking along a crew of 52 men, some of whom normally worked on the state ferries.

Just as she left, Captain Lloyd called back the after crews of the *Munising* and *Petoskey* to prepare them for the spring schedule, and the forward crews were called by the end of the month. By early April, the *Cheboygan* was also nearly ready to go, and on April 4, all three boats were moved from Dock 2 so the state could receive a new season supply of coal there. Lloyd hoped ice conditions would lessen soon so the steamers could join the *Vacationland* on the run.

In March, the big boat had carried 8.4% more cars than the year before, without a longer month. Volume for the first quarter of 1956 was up 6.1%. On Easter weekend, the *Vacationland* left cars on the Mackinaw City dock all day and all the following night as the single-boat schedule just couldn't meet the demand. Still, the ice didn't let up for another week, holding the steamboats in their slips.

April 5 saw construction resume on the Mackinac Bridge, and on the same day, the Arnold ferry *Huron* finally carried a load of 85 people from Mackinac Island to St. Ignace. She only landed at Dock 1 after a Coast Guard ship cut away heavy ice near the shore. Finally, on Saturday, April 7, the *City of Munising* joined the *Vacationland* to affect an hourly schedule for the auto ferries. Two weeks later, the *Cheboygan* relieved the big ice-

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Just before marine operations shut down for the winter of 1955-56, steelworkers installed the first two truss spans that would form the roadway of the Mackinac Bridge. The view of the structure's progress served to remind ferry crewmembers that their jobs would soon be ending, and it stimulated them to seek better compensation and benefits from the Civil Service Commission, which handled labor issues for the Michigan State Highway Department. (Detail of Hiawatha Post Card, author's collection)

sidered reactivating the *Vacationland*, but she wasn't needed. Workmen filled the *Munising's* forward ballast tanks and emptied the ones at her stern, tilting her propellers out of the water so the problem could be repaired. She returned to service the next day.

But the *City of Cheboygan's* chief engineer did not return to service. Jack "Salty" Williams was stricken aboard and advised to go directly to the hospital. Instead he went home, where the 57-year-old suffered a fatal heart attack.

Ferry traffic in October again exceeded that of the year before. The 8% increase was just the precursor to a hunting season like none before. In four days, the weekend of November 10 through 13, the ferries carried more than 18,500 cars. On Saturday, the 12th, when 6,117 were carried, lines backed up 19 miles from Mackinaw City. Six thousand more were carried on Sunday, but the lines were gone by Monday

Rouge while the *City of Cheboygan* and *The Straits of Mackinac* were laid up in St. Ignace. The *City of Munising* and *City of Petoskey* assumed the winter schedule December 2, with boats leaving northbound hourly from 5 a.m. to 1 a.m. and southbound from 4 a.m. to midnight.

The *Chief Wawatam* at last returned from Manitowoc and took over the rail ferry route in mid-December, just as temperatures dropped to 11 degrees and ice began forming in local bays. The *Munising* and *Petoskey* tried to bull their ways through to keep the hourly schedule, but wind-driven shore ice blocked the Mackinaw City dock for 14 hours one night between Christmas and New Year. Finally, on January 2, the *Vacationland* took over the run.

Capt. Frank Nelson just made it back, following the funeral of his father, who passed away just before Christmas in Traverse City. Meanwhile, Capt. Pete Everson

warded to the governor's office for the appropriate decision.

Their suggestions played an important part in helping the ferry workers whose jobs were less than two years from an end. Of the more than 400 men who worked for the state ferries, a committee survey showed only 13 were eligible for full retirement and social security when the ferries closed, just 20 more would have been able to get retirement, but without social security benefits, and 37 could receive only reduced or differed retirement. That was less than one quarter of the employees. The rest would need the proposed rule changes to survive until they found other work, either inside or outside of state government.

Captain Lloyd, the ferry superintendent, also got good news from the Civil Service Commission in late 1955. After a review of his salary, compared to vessel captains in the fleet, Deputy Commissioner George Foster discovered he had