

# Autos Across Mackinac: Ferry Workers Will Receive Unemployment

\*Continued from page 10

would have been no problem, as the taxi drove right on. Often, to keep the peace, the dockmen just let them ride. But on occasion it got as far as complaint letters to the Civil Service Commission, which had to investigate each incident, usually to determine the passenger himself was at fault.

The Civil Service Commission did, however, try to improve ferry workers passenger relations skills. For much of 1956, the Training Relations Division sent memos to Capt. Lloyd for posting on ship bulletin boards. The "Public Relations Circulars" with titles like "Meeting our Public," "Easy Does It.," and "We Need to Know How," presented a bi-weekly one-page synopsis of ways to improve crew people skills. Although their jobs would all soon end, everyone seemed to appreciate the gesture.

While annual ferry traffic counts were still down, hunting season loomed right around the corner. A rush of up to 60,000 red-coated visitors was expected, starting Friday, November 9. But the last hunting season for the ferries hardly merited coverage in the newspapers. There was more interest in businesses rushing to relocate and take advantage of access roads to the new Mackinac Bridge.

That week there was also a rush to the ballot box. Governor Williams won an unprecedented fourth term and President Eisenhower was reelected to his second, but Prentiss M. Brown, Jr., known by his friends as "Moie," was defeated in his first bid to become a U. S. congressman. Commissioner Ziegler wasn't up for reelection until April, but in December, he stunned fellow Republicans when he announced he did not intend to run. Tired of the hassles with Governor Williams, who'd just been reelected, and feeling vindicated by his participation in the new Interstate Highway system that was finally bringing much needed roads to his state, newspapers reported Ziegler had had enough. At 66 years old, he decided



In the summer of 1956, some lucky photographers snapped historic views that would soon become obsolete: A Michigan State Ferry (here the City of Cheboygan) crossing the Straits of Mackinac with the Mackinac Bridge in the background. In less than a year and a half, the bridge would be open and auto ferry service across the Straits would end. (Ziegler Collection, Bentley Library, University of Michigan)

to retire from public life. "I believe it is the best thing for the Republican Party," he wrote. "Governor Williams is back in for another two years, and if, because of my age, I would become incapacitated, this would give Williams a chance to put a Democrat in as Highway Commissioner." The letter, written to a friend, may have only hinted at the real reason for Ziegler's decision to retire. Wags speculated he had become a liability, even to Republicans who, with all of Williams' political smoke, were beginning to think there might actually be fire.

The man who took Ziegler's place on the ticket was Deputy Commissioner George M. Foster. In 1957, saddled with all the negative baggage Williams still heaped on the Ziegler administration, he would run against a lanky Democrat named John C. Mackie.

The same papers that announced Ziegler's planned retirement report-

ed the end of two old friends of the Straits region. The Detroit and Cleveland Navigation Company steamers Greater Detroit and Eastern States didn't get a long retirement, however; the two deluxe side-wheelers were burned to the waterline amid fireworks and a flag-lowering ceremony on the shore of Lake St. Clair. Their hulks were then towed away for scrap.

That fall, Representative James Goulette of Iron Mountain worked to make sure the same fate didn't befall the Michigan State Ferries after the bridge would open, less than a year hence. He sought help from other Michigan congressmen to get federal funds from the Bureau of Public Roads to build docks for the proposed new ferry run from Frankfort to Menominee. But lawyers for that agency turned him down, saying the 1956 Federal Road Aid Grants were designed for highway construction, not dock building. Goulette, who also chaired

the Governor's Committee on Ferry Employment, then asked Wisconsin congressmen to help amend the law, since the new run would also benefit nearby Marinette, Wisconsin. Altogether, Goulette estimated the project to relocate the ferries would cost \$6 million for docks and reconditioning the boats for the open lake run.

For the first time, voices rose in opposition to the Frankfort-Menominee route. David S. Lees, international representative for the Seafarers International Union, (SIU) Great Lakes District, AFL-CIO, said, "The union does not object to a ferry service operated by private industry, but it does oppose a state-subsidized operation." He cited the Civil Service Commission's poor record of negotiating with unions for prevailing wage rates and feared that state service would result in "lower state wages reflecting themselves in a lower standard right down the line."

Those state wages changed in December, however. In response to Employee Committee requests, Civil Service staff conducted a wage comparison survey between ferry jobs and similar work in private industry. On December 19, the commissioners approved an additional 8% pay raise for all classes of ferry personnel, along with a number of favorable rulings to help the men when the ferries terminated. One of the most appreciated in those days, when age discrimination was still legal, was a directive for a "liberal attitude" when applying age limits on state ferry employees who wanted to transfer to other state employment positions for which they were otherwise qualified.

While some ferry workers still seemed to seethe with unrest, most crew members began to realize that

with liquidation of their banked time, payout of unused sick leave, longevity payments, and unemployment compensation, they were looking at substantial checks when the ferries stopped. That thought helped keep most discontent in check through the close of the year.

Winter stopped bridge construction the Friday before Christmas, although some shore-based construction would continue all year. The main suspension cables had been finished in mid-October. Twenty-six of 28 approach spans leading to the cable anchorages had been installed. It was now possible to drive part way across the straits, if you worked for the bridge contractors. Everyone else still took the ferries across.

The City of Petoskey and the Vacationland held the hourly schedule through the Christmas and New Years holidays. Boats left St. Ignace every hour from 4 a.m. to midnight, with departures one hour later from Mackinaw City. If there were too many cars at night, Capt. Lloyd promised they'd also be handled to the "best of our ability." The winter schedule went into effect with only the Vacationland running every other hour from Mackinaw City, between 5 a.m. and 11 p.m. St. Ignace sailings left an hour later, all starting January 2, 1957.

When the calendars turned, the ferries entered their last year on the Straits of Mackinac. December had shown one of the brightest increases of 1956, with traffic up 8.8%, but the annual total was still down nearly 2% from 1955 levels.

Ice froze on Lake Huron, but a sudden thaw and wind in mid-January sent fishermen scrambling from their shanties as the ice broke up. Half a dozen shanties were lost, and the paper carried stories of hero-

ic rescues. It wasn't as critical, but the Chief Wawatam even made a rescue run. The big boat sailed to Mackinac Island to pick up 130 Moral Re-Armament members stranded at their first mid-winter conference on the island.

Communities in the U.P. hoped to rescue their one remaining passenger train. The DSS&A filed with the Public Service Commission to discontinue Shoreliner service, citing excessive revenue losses from running the single-car train. On average, only eight of the 84 seats aboard had been occupied since the service began in 1955.

Substituting for his son at a panel discussion at the Lutheran Brotherhood, Prentiss Brown projected a bright future for St. Ignace and the U.P. when the bridge opened, despite the dislocation of 300 local citizens who worked for the ferries.

"It will be a tough period of adjustment," Brown noted, "however, the future is not that dark. Traffic experts conservatively predict that traffic will double the first year the bridge is open. This will bring prosperity to merchants, auto service, restaurants, motels, hotels, and allied industries."

"Our problem is the 300 displaced men. In this case we must remember that the state stands to benefit greatly from the opening of the bridge. It could extend the period of unemployment compensation for these workers and finance a considerable separation pay by the sale of even a portion of the valuable ferry properties. What substitute employment can be readily provided, I can't honestly say."

But he did promise ferry workers would be given first consideration for some of the 60 bridge jobs advertised that week in the newspaper. He cautioned, however, that the men would have to train for jobs like toll collectors, traffic patrols, office work, and maintenance, on their own time, when they weren't working for the ferries.

As a faithful Democrat, Brown also applauded the plank inserted in that party's convention platform supporting severance pay for faithful state ferry employees. Brown was also a major proponent in passing a resolution through the Bridge Authority saying the bridge would give priority to hiring displaced ferry workers whenever possible.

Meanwhile, the Vacationland carried 5% less auto traffic across the Straits than she had in January 1956.

Copyright 2008 by Les Bagley. All rights reserved.

Next week: A new highway commissioner.

The author would love to hear from you if you have ferry stories, photos or memories to share. He can be contacted via e-mail at les@divco.org or through the office of the St. Ignace News.




In 1956, Highway Commissioner Charles M. Ziegler announced he would not seek another term of office. Although some historians have questioned his role in construction of the Mackinac Bridge, he was proud of his role as a charter member of the Mackinac Bridge Authority. His name badge was preserved in one of the scrapbooks he donated to the University of Michigan's Bentley Historical Library. (Ziegler Collection, Bentley Library, University of Michigan)

**RATES as low as 2.9%\***

**GM Certified Used Select Vehicles - 2.9%/up to 48 months**


**Impala  
Malibu  
Malibu Maxx  
Trailblazer  
Trailblazer EXT  
Envoy  
Envoy XL  
Envoy XUV  
Envoy Denali**



**Backed with GM Certified 5 yr/100,000 mile Warranty!**

\*Up to 48 months for qualified customers only. Other vehicles available, rates may vary. See dealer for details. Offer good on vehicles delivered between 01/03/08 and 03/31/08.

**GM Certified Used Select Vehicles - 4.9%/up to 60 months**




**Suburban  
Tahoe  
Yukon  
Yukon XL  
Grand Prix  
LaCrosse**

**"The people you know, the service you expect"**

**DAVE KRING**  
CHEVROLET ■ CADILLAC

**AN AMERICAN REVOLUTION**  
www.davekring.com  
1861 US 31 N, Petoskey  
231-347-2585  
Monday - Friday 8 a.m. - 6 p.m., Saturday 8 a.m. - 2 p.m.



**OVERSTOCK SALE!**



**HARMAN STOVE COMPANY**

**PC45 Pellet/Corn/Grain Stove**

**more than \$700 OFF**


Get the most environmentally friendly and versatile stove at a fraction of the price for a limited time only! The PC45 can efficiently burn pellets, corn or grain!

**SOO Fireplace & Stone**

LOCATED UNDER THE BRIDGE  
760 W. Spruce St., SAULT STE. MARIE, MI • (906) 632-0760  
HOURS: Mon.-Fri. 8-7 • Sat. 9-2

**Engaged**

**Emery, Underwood**



**Brandon Underwood and Kristina Emery**

Kristina Ann Emery of St. Ignace and Brandon Edward Underwood of Memphis, Tennessee, announce their engagement.

Miss Emery is the daughter of Mike Emery and the late Lisa Belonga-Emery of St. Ignace, and the granddaughter of Bob and Ann Belonga of St. Ignace and Norma Emery and the late Billy J. Emery of Moran. She is attending Grand Valley State University.

Mr. Underwood is stationed on the Coast Guard Cutter *Biscayne Bay* in St. Ignace. He is the son of Scott and Frances Underwood of Arlington, Tennessee, and the grandson of Shirley and Charles Phillips of Memphis, Cecelia and Jimmy Brown of Olive Branch, Mississippi, and Frank and Patty Underwood of Oakland, Tennessee.

The couple plan to marry in July 2009 in St. Ignace.