Autos Across Mackinac: Bridge Construction Continues; Tourism Down

The St. Ignace News is serializing Les Bagley's unpublished manuscript on the history of Michigan State Ferries, the "Great White Fleet" that ferried automobiles, trucks, and passengers across the Straits of Mackinac before the Mackinac Bridge opened in 1957.

PART 54 - 1956

By Les Bagley

In June 1956, bridge workers strung catwalks and prepared to begin spinning suspension cables above the Straits, but an accident claimed two lives when several men fell to the water from high on the walkway.

Below, the Edison Sault Electric Company completed laying some new cables under the Straits. A high voltage underwater power line connected the power grids of Michigan's peninsulas for the first time that summer, bringing a new and nearly unlimited supply of electricity to the region.

Some of it was tapped in mid-July when the bridge's catwalk lights were powered, casting a magnificent glow that could be seen for miles. The sight so impressed Mackinac Bridge Authority Chairman Prentiss Brown that he later asked Dr. David Steinman to include lighting on the bridge's suspension cables when they were finished.

With cowbells tinkling, cable spinning started in mid-July, but the lights and the sights did not induce hoards of visitors to flock to the Straits that summer. Unseasonably cool weather downstate kept people at home, and ferry traffic again showed monthly declines, to the point that by mid-summer, annual numbers were off by 2.6%. July numbers fell by 4.7%, with a resulting lag in tourist business. Forecasters predicted better weather for August, and more tourists, they hoped.

In July, a bill was passed in the state senate to provide unemployment compensation for state employees. It was then sent to the House Labor Committee for study, where it appeared doomed to die in committee. The benefit for ferry workers was that they would get up to 14 weeks of pay for the winter months when they were unemployed while most of the ferries were not running.

On August 7, Willard Lamyotte and Richard Hankin went to Lansing and testified before the committee. Their action spurred the members to bring the bill to the house floor, where it passed, 71 to 0. The most important aspect of the bill was that it was amended to be retroactive to January 1, 1956, meaning nearly every ferry worker would get the minimum weeks of work to qualify for the benefit that fall. A laid-off worker with four dependents would get an additional $54 per week.

The Ferry Employees Committee took up a collection from crew members to pay the pair's salaries and expenses while they were gone. When he got back, Richard Hankin was elected as the new chairman of the employee committee.

In 1956, Michigan's Turnpike Authority sat poised to ask state voters to approve a $300 million bond issue to finance more than 500 miles of new toll roads in the state. One of them was slated to connect the new Mackinac Bridge to the Ohio state line, another would connect Detroit with Chicago. It looked like their proposal might go through, despite Highway Commissioner Charles Ziegler's opposition to toll roads.

Ziegler was invited to a "show down" meeting with George Higgins, chairman of the Turnpike Authority. He declined to go, instead writing, "The Michigan Turnpike Authority came into being in 1953. … It is now over three years later, during which time the Authority has not been able to accomplish anything tangible as to actual road construction. There has been not one foot of highway built by the authority. So just what has it done? As far as I can see, it has spent $500,000 of State Highway funds plus part of an additional $150,000 of the same funds. The results to date are an unsatisfactory set of preliminary plans and a traffic analysis that is insufficient."

He also wrote, "I am sure that you would not want the improvement and development of free roads halted in order to subsidize a toll road."

But Ziegler knew something most toll road advocates didn't. Through his work with the Eisenhower administration in Washington, D.C., a new system of four-lane freeways was coming to America. That year, Congress passed President Dwight Eisenhower's Interstate Highway program and suddenly states received a fount of federal money for super-highway construction. Michigan was no exception. By combining the federal money with that approved by the state legislature's Good Roads Bill in 1955, for the first time since the Depression in the 1930s, the Highway Department had a budget sufficient to actually get ahead of the curve for highway construction needs without resorting to toll roads.

Ziegler immediately put the money to use, announcing a huge road building program and derailing Michigan turnpike efforts for at least the next half-century. The road between Ohio and Mackinac would be a freeway, part of the new Interstate Highway system. The road would continue across the bridge to the Soo, but the exact route still had to be decided.

Below Mackinaw City, huge stretches of the old roads would be bypassed with new four-lane construction. Whole towns would be cut off from the main highway, connected only through access roads and "clover leafs." The coming of the highway spelled disaster for hundreds of mom and pop businesses like motels, restaurants, and roadside attractions cut off from the main traffic flow. Some, like the Underground Forest, an exhibit of mounted native Michigan animals in an underground hallway near Grayling, made plans to relocate. The exhibits became the Call of the Wild Museum in Gaylord. Others would struggle to survive, or would quietly fold their tents to make way for chain motels, restaurants, and gas stations at the interchanges.

Merchants were fearful the same thing would happen in St. Ignace, as the Highway Department announced plans to build a four-lane bypass from the intersection of the bridge road and Highway 2 northward along the west side of the city, to near Castle Rock. The four-lane would then continue to the Soo.

To counteract adverse conditions the city fathers anticipated, the chamber of commerce launched a campaign to secure title to the State Ferry docks once the ferry operation closed down. With the St. Lawrence Seaway under construction, members hoped the city could use the docks to become a major international port.

The leaders of Mackinaw City felt the same on the south side of the Straits and approved a resolution letting the state abandon part of its highways as village streets. In return, the Highway Department signed a letter of intent giving the town priority to secure the dock when the ferries stopped. But the state delayed making any decision on the St. Ignace properties, which were more numerous and had greater potential value.

As summer turned to autumn, traffic continued its downward turn. August traffic set no records. Labor Day saw lines at the docks, but nothing like the carnival atmosphere of years before. September traffic also declined by 3,313 cars, making the annual decrease about 2.7%. Looking back, tourism officials said the season had been good, but not record-breaking, and noted the area had four inches more rainfall that summer.

The highlight of October for many ferry workers was the opportunity to take their high school equivalency General Education Development (GED) tests. The Civil Service Commission administered the tests in the basement of St. Ignatius Loyola Church, since there were no unused public school classrooms available on weekdays. The exams allowed men who passed, but had not been graduated from high school, to apply for state jobs requiring a high school diploma. The tests were one of the first visible results of the Governor's Commission on Ferry Employment, which had been meeting monthly throughout the summer and fall. For many crewmen, they were a godsend; several admitted they'd felt ashamed they'd never finished school, and now they could hold their heads proudly as they applied for new employment opportunities.

Over the course of three days, the men completed five examination booklets. The church women made coffee and sold cakes and donuts for refreshments, raising money for a picture project fund. And two Employee Committee members, Richard Hankin and James Jonas, spent five days each on administrative leave to allow men from each watch on each boat take the test on their own time. They did such an excellent job, the office gave them each an extra day off with pay as a reward. Of 82 men who took the tests, 79 passed. Ferry management was so happy with the results that they strongly encouraged more men to take the test the next time it was given.

But before they did that, there was still a ferry fleet to run. October traffic actually showed a slight gain, about 4%, for the first time in months, although the annual count still lagged by 2.3% from 1955. Commissioner Ziegler gave Captain George Lloyd permission to hold the 9 a.m. ferry departure from Mackinaw City to make sure to it made the mail connection. Since the railroad had discontinued mail car service, mailbags came by way of the New York Central passenger train from Detroit, normally arriving at the depot at 8:30 a.m. They were then carried by taxi to the state ferries to be taken across, since the railroad boats no longer handled the mail, either. But if the train was delayed, the connection could be tight. Still, Ziegler rationalized, "The mail must go through. But don't hold the boat too long."

The mail connection wasn't the only rail link causing problems. During the summer, the railroad discontinued sending a bus across on the ferries for train passengers and instead hired Rube's Taxi Service to take them across on the ferry, along with the mail. This caused confusion for some passengers, who bought a through train ticket and then made their own way to the state docks. The train ticket didn't include passage on the ferries, and some passengers became very upset when told they'd have to pay another quarter. Had they taken the taxi, it

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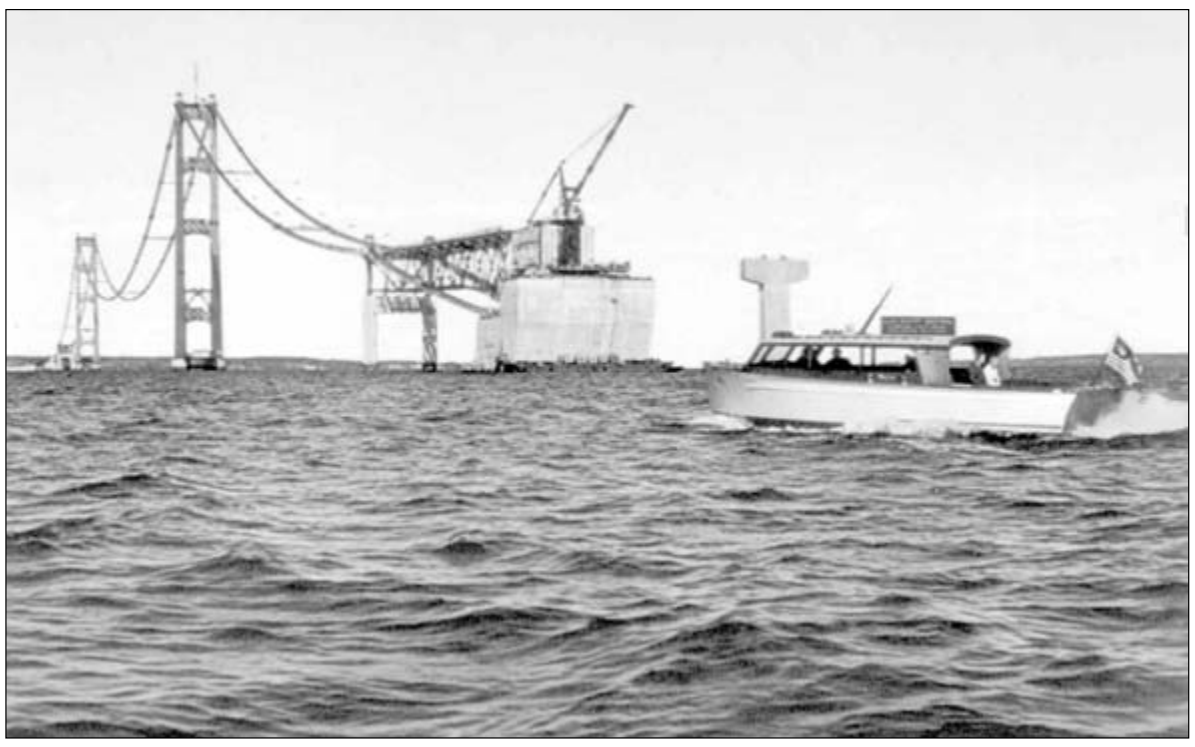
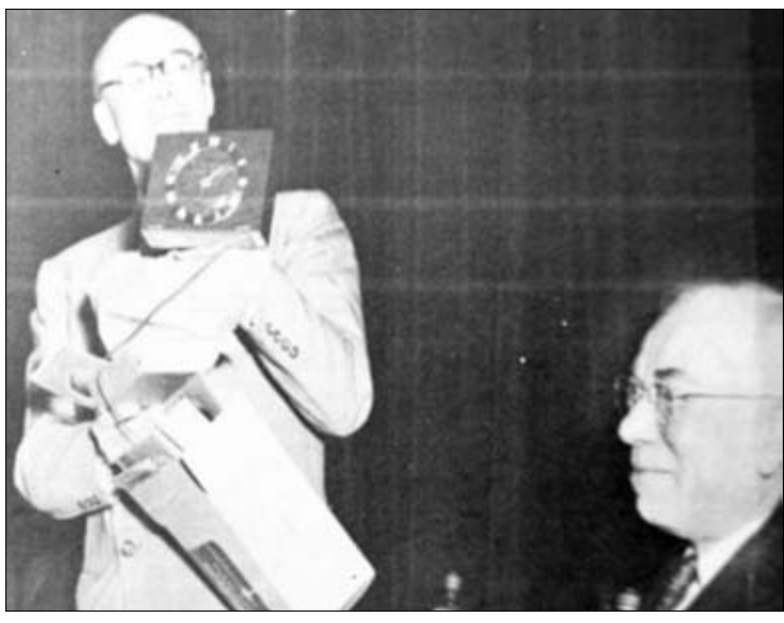


In June, 1956, workers began constructing catwalks between the towers on the Mackinac Bridge, and tourists, at last, got a good idea what the final bridge would look like. A number of operators pressed cabin cruisers, speedboats, and other watercraft into service as sightseeing boats to watch the bridge construction up close, and some remained after the structure was finished to become competitors serving Mackinac Island. *(Hiawatha Card Co., author's collection)*



George Foster receives a clock from Commissioner Charles Ziegler at a recognition banquet. He would later run against John Mackie for Ziegler's post. *(Ziegler Collection, Bentley Library, University of Michigan)*

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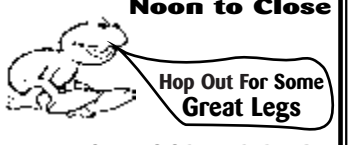

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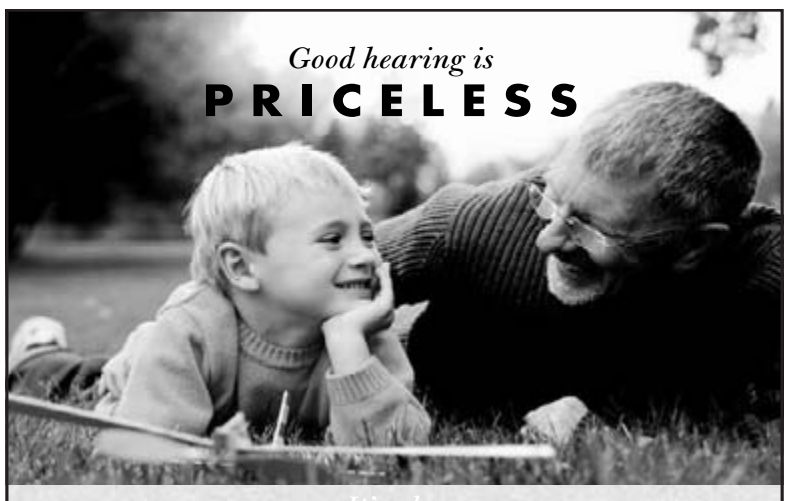

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