

Autos Across Mackinac: John Mackie Is Elected Highway Commissioner

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meaning a reinforced hole in a ship's side. This one was a wooden wheel chock from the car deck, which Cronan used as a chopping block when he lopped off about 80 feet of the retreating rope with a fire ax. He still had a 30-foot specimen in his rope collection half a century later.

*This knot was tied to the top-center spoke of a ship's wheel so it could be found in the dark.

After a quick inspection, which showed no hull damage, and refilling her ballast, *Vacationland* resumed service about 2:30 Friday afternoon, relieving the congestion on the docks. Despite a loss of electric power in St. Ignace, which required crews to raise and lower the ferry apron by hand, she had the backlog cleared by nightfall.

The storm was the last blast of winter. By then, both forward and after crews had begun fitting out the steamboats to relieve the ice-breaker. Men worked feverishly, using plenty of elbow grease, sugi*, and paint, giving the vessels the appearance of a "Monday morning fresh wash." The *Vacationland* soon headed for the shipyard for her spring overhaul, while the *City of Cheboygan* and *City of Munising* took over the spring schedule. By May, all five boats were back on the run.

*A "Sugi" (pronounced "soo-gee") barrel originally contained a boiling mixture of water, bulk soap, and lye, into which sailors dipped a mop or a broom, used to scrub decks and bulkheads. In modern terms, boat crews still refer to "sugiing," whenever a mixture of water and soap is used for scrubbing purposes.

Another housecleaning also became apparent April 1, when in the hotly contested highway commissioner race, 36-year-old Democrat John C. Mackie defeated Republican Deputy Commissioner George M. Foster in his bid to take over management of the Highway Department. Mackie was born June 1, 1920, in Toronto, but moved to Detroit with his parents at the age of four. A graduate of Detroit's Southeastern High School, he earned his degree in civil engineering from Michigan State University in 1942. He then took a year of post-graduate work at New York University before joining the Army Air Force in World War II, serving 18 months as an operations officer in the South Pacific. After the war, he established the Flint Surveying Company, which he owned and operated. Prior to the election, he was also Genesee County Surveyor.

Mackie immediately began plans to take over the Highway Department, appointing a new Deputy Commissioner, 46-year-old Sidney H. Woolner, formerly the Deputy Secretary of State, who would take office with him July 1, 1957.

Having lost the election, George Foster tendered his resignation to accept an appointment as executive director of the Indiana State Highway Department. Saying he regretted not being able to continue working with Commissioner Ziegler, he asked to be relieved effective June 22 so he could get started in his new job.

Ziegler contemplated his own retirement 90 days away.

He wrote, "The UAW-CIO controls Governor Williams and at the Democratic Convention. These groups took over and nominated John Mackie for State Highway Commissioner. He was elected April 1, and this means the Highway Department will now also be controlled by those groups and Williams. Mackie has only been qualified as a land surveyor and to lay out drains in Genesee County. He made the statement in the press that he has never been in on the construction of any highway. Neither is he experienced in any way with Highway Administration. He has no experience working with the Federal Bureau of Public Roads, nor does he have any knowledge of the use of Federal funds allocated to our state to be spent on the construction of Federal Highways. Williams already has control of the State Supreme Court and the State Civil Service Commission, as well as all other boards and commissions in the State of Michigan. He will really be the State Highway Commissioner and Mackie will



At his retirement party June 10, 1957, Michigan State Highway Commissioner Charles Ziegler received a new television set, a vibrating reclining chair, a camera, and a slide projector, along with other "parting gifts." Here he enjoys the recliner onstage, at the party, while his wife looks on. (Michigan Department of Transportation)

only be his stooge!" He added, "We've had a cottage since 1928 at Twin Lakes northwest of Baldwin. We have good fishing in our lakes and there are 46 trout streams in Lake County, and I have done very little fishing in those streams for the last several years. ... If it were not for my love of the State of Michigan at all times of the year, I might be inclined to move out myself!"

At the Straits, there was another problem. Early one morning, just before the *Vacationland* returned from the shipyard in early May, a power cable shorted out and burned through at St. Ignace Dock 3, cutting electricity to the ferry aprons. To continue service, the steamboats switched to Dock 2 for several hours as workmen dug up the cable and patched it. The new dock was back in service by mid-afternoon.

Also in early May, tourism officials launched a campaign to educate workers who served visitors on the finer points of the Mackinac Bridge. Local chambers of commerce sponsored "Bridge Education Days," providing waitresses, gas station attendants, motel clerks, and others with a boat tour to inspect and learn about the bridge up close. The Mackinac Bridge Authority even provided individual "information kits" with answers to tourists possible questions about the structure.

To celebrate the bridge, the Upper Peninsula Development Bureau scheduled a meeting in St. Ignace, for the first time. To be held at the end of October, the bureau's 47th Annual Convention would feature Governor Williams as keynote speaker. Bureau members hoped they could cross the new bridge the day before it opened to the public. Governor Williams, of course, would also be part of that occasion.

On May 26, crowds gathered in nearby Cedarville to witness another ceremony, the re-christen-

ing of the Great Lakes limestone carrier *Cedarville*, owned by the Bradley Transportation Company. Several ferry warehouse workers joined in the celebration, as shore engineer Lee Specht's son, Arnold, was chief engineer of the vessel. The ship would be the pride of the region, until May 7, 1965, when she collided with the *Topdalsfjord*, a Norwegian merchant ship, ironically while trying to navigate the Straits of Mackinac in a heavy fog. Mortally wounded, the 603-foot carrier sank with the loss of 12 lives.

While Michigan was about to lose its ferry service, it didn't want to accidentally lose its fleet. In late May, the state senate killed a bill that would have set up a study committee to determine the fate of the ferry boats after the bridge opened. First budgeted for \$25,000, and later reduced to only \$15,000, the committee was rejected after Hillman Republican Senator Frank Andrews said, "I don't favor such a committee, but we better give instructions to sell the boats as quickly as possible after the bridge opens." He revealed there would be an additional insurance bill of \$198,000 to protect the laid up vessels, and that to put the boats in service across Lake Michigan would cost \$1.5 million for the operation and as much as \$7 million to \$9 million to build docks and facilities. Andrews said he compiled the statistics in the interest of working out employment plans for displaced ferry workers.

Those workers were also beginning to get backlash over the severance pay Democrats were asking for them, over and above the "severance" already granted by the Civil Service Commission. In a response to a letter in the *Republican-News*, Employee Committee Chairman Richard Hankin countered that most of the severance the men would receive was just back pay they were already



Republican Commissioner Ziegler was replaced by Democrat John C. Mackie, who took his oath of office on July 1, 1957 and immediately set about helping ferry workers find new employment. Mackie would be in charge of the Michigan State Ferry operations for only four months, but would also have to try to dispose of the boats and docks, once the Mackinac Bridge opened and the ferry service came to an end. (Michigan Department of Transportation)

entitled to, such as banked time and unused sick leave.

"Our accumulated annual leave and longevity pay are not severance pay," he noted. "All state workers receive these benefits, and their jobs will not end with the completion of the new bridge."

Hankin added, "It is true that in 1956 we were included in the state unemployment compensation. Prior to 1956, many state ferry employees were forced to spend their savings and even go into debt to exist through the winters. To you people who say you have a certain obligation toward we state ferry employees, we say this: We are desperately in need of immediate employment at termination of the state ferries. Also, we need training for types of work other than sailing. It these two things are not available, then you can plainly see we are in need of substantial severance pay, one that will benefit not only a few, but every individual state ferry employee who loses his means of livelihood at the termination of the state ferry system."

The Civil Service Commission was unmoved, instead mailing a press release to papers statewide citing all the benefits they'd already offered to the soon-to-be-displaced ferry workers. The men were adamant, and rabble-rousers

among them began talking of another strike, possibly to tie up traffic during the peak Independence Day rush.

With the coming bridge, Memorial Day ferry traffic no

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