

Autos Across Mackinac: Tourists Flock to See Bridge, Last Ferry Ride

For the past year, to commemorate the opening of the Mackinac Bridge, the St. Ignace News has been serializing Les Bagley's previously unpublished manuscript, *Autos Across Mackinac, A History of the Michigan State Ferries*. Now, with only months remaining until the bridge opened on Nov. 1, 1957, the ferry workers found themselves with new upper management in the Michigan State Highway Department.

PART 56: The Last Crossing By Les Bagley

Charlie Ziegler's retirement and the return of the Democrats to control of the Michigan State Highway Department had several effects. First, the "us against them" attitude of ferry employees softened, helping even more to avert the threatened Independence Day 1957 strike. With Ziegler and his deputy, George Foster both gone, the only ones left to fight were the Civil Service Commission, which already showed its unwillingness to budge on additional pay and severance issues, and the Democrats, who had already come out in favor of a better severance package.

The Governor's Task Force on Ferry Employment worked overtime to drum up employment leads for ferry workers who wanted them. The Great Lakes Carriers Association offered several categories of marine jobs. U.P. forest products suppliers offered prospects at saw mills and wood processing plants. The Michigan Department of Agriculture had several leads. There was even a suggestion to place 20 to 40 sailors as attendant nurses at the Mt. Pleasant State Home and Training School. The school offered to send monitors to the Straits to conduct required Attendant Nurse B examinations for interested personnel.

Locally, Charles Cherry, owner of St. Ignace Sales and Manufacturing, suggested ferry workers pool a percentage of their vacation and severance pay to fund a program to bring small parts manufacturing plants to the area, offering as many as 200 potential jobs. The highway department also offered a chance to work at new ready-mix plants in Mackinaw City and elsewhere, while Hillman Republican Senator Frank Andrews launched a campaign to help ferry workers stay in state employment until they could reach the age of retirement.

Before he took office, Highway Commissioner-elect John C. Mackie had instructed his future department heads to closely look in-house to find openings for displaced ferry workers. Though he said he wanted to start over with a clean slate, Mackie's administration was saddled with \$88,800,000 in highway construction contracts recently let by the outgoing Ziegler. Fresh Interstate Highway funds, and the revenue from the new highway bond issues put the department in its best financial condition ever, with many areas slated for growth.

In 1957, the department took back the responsibility of state trunk line maintenance, which had been farmed to county road departments for most of Ziegler's tenure. That meant additional jobs on state road building and repair crews and in state garages in every jurisdiction. Mackie offered these to ferry personnel. Many would take him up on the offer.

But there was caution in welcoming Mackie. While he was a graduate engineer, he wasn't a member of certain engineering organizations, which expected their standards to be met. The Michigan Society of Professional Engineers filed in the Michigan Supreme Court to determine if Mackie was legally qualified for his new job. The court said he was.

And there were other worries about the new commissioner. Old timers remembered Democratic purges that decimated the Highway Department under Murray Van Wagoner in the 1930s, and the ferries in particular. With Ziegler and Foster out of the picture, the highest-ranking remaining ferry official was Superintendent

George Lloyd, and many thought his job was in jeopardy. While he wasn't particularly well-liked in the fleet, most admitted Lloyd did know how things were run at the Straits. With only a few months to go, a new superintendent seemed



As part of the opening ceremonies for the bridge, the City of St. Ignace sponsored a closing ceremony for the ferries. Hundreds gathered around the flagpole at Dock 3 to honor ferry crews and longtime employees. Meanwhile V.I.P. autos, lead by the Governor's sedan, lined up for the final crossing of the Straits by a Michigan State Ferry, aboard the *Vacationland* in the slip to the right. (L.L. Cook postcard. Author's collection)

impractical.

Former Employee Committee member William B. Johnson even wrote to Civil Service commissioners requesting Lloyd be retained.

"If such a dismissal or resignation can be forced due to a change of administration, then no one with a Civil Service position can afford to feel secure." He added, "In my dealings with Capt. Lloyd, I have found him to be an honest and very competent Superintendent."

The commission agreed, and while Mackie may have briefly considered replacing Lloyd, with only four months of ferry service left, he decided against making any changes, and Lloyd remained to the close of the operation.

Still, as Independence Day 1957 approached, the ferries looked nowhere near closing. Summer tourists came in earnest, crowding to see the bridge they'd read about in papers and national magazines. People also wanted to take one last ferry ride. Parents brought children for the "once in a lifetime" experience. Seniors returned to reminisce while they could. Warm summer weather spurred travel, and the ferry docks filled from morning until night. Over the holiday, the Straits State Park in St. Ignace registered double the visitors of the previous year.

The Grand Hotel marked its 70th anniversary with just a few special guests, including Governor and Mrs. Williams. Manager Stewart Woodfill said he'd planned a gala celebration, but had so many requests the event was canceled, rather than offend anyone crowded off the invitation list. At a convention on the island, newspapermen learned the Ford Motor Company planned to spend more than ever before to introduce a brand new automobile called the Edsel. And on Lake Erie, a new ferry and cruise ship started service between Detroit and Cleveland. A WWII freighter, the *Marine Star*, was revamped for the run and remodeled into the *S. S. Aquarama*, a luxury day and overnight ferry liner.

That summer, Prentiss Brown released the tolls proposed by the Mackinac Bridge Authority. Autos would pay a flat rate of \$3.25 per crossing. While that was 50¢ more than the ferry fare, auto passengers would cross free, meaning, on average, most drivers would pay 7% less to cross. Some trucks would pay more than on the boats, while others would pay less.

The authority chairman proclaimed, "Our object is to serve enough traffic so we can reduce all rates as soon as possible."

As part of that plan, Brown also announced that the bridge would issue no free passes to anyone, as legislation prohibited them. The ferry system was rampant with pass holders, not to mention family and friends of crewmembers, who usually either walked or drove on while official heads turned the other way.

As July came to a close, so did the gap across the Straits of Mackinac, when the final steel truss was raised into place to connect Michigan's peninsulas with bridgework, not just cables. The bridge now needed only a roadway and finishing touches for comple-



The Highway Department printed special invitations for guests on the last sailing, one kind for automobiles, and another for walk-on passengers. Most people ignored the invitations and showed up anyway, and some even got on. While newspapers said the big boat carried only 84 autos, the crew found themselves hard-pressed to keep souvenir hunters from taking home equipment from the ferry. (Author's collection)

tion, scheduled for November 1, 1957.

But leery of bad November weather, members of four local chambers of commerce conferred and decided to postpone any major opening celebrations until better weather the following year. Instead of a gala Grand Opening festival in November, they scheduled three-and-a-half days of festivities for the third week of June 1958, with only a ribbon ceremony and dedication on the bridge's opening day.

Meanwhile, civic officials from all over the north met with Commissioner Mackie at the U.P. Highway Conference in Marquette. In addition to outlining local highway needs, St. Ignace representatives pressed for title to the state docks once the ferries stopped running. Mackie assured them he would do his best to help them get the properties.

But once again, Mackie found his plans to redo Michigan roads in his own image were stymied by things his predecessor had done. Attorney General Thomas Kavanagh ruled that Mackie could not divert bond money raised for limited access expressways by Ziegler to any other purpose. The expressways Republican Ziegler's staff had worked so hard to design a decade before would ultimately be built by the Democratic administration of John C. Mackie. Republicans noted, "If Mackie just connects all the expressways started by Ziegler, he'll have nothing much to do during the three years of his term."

In August, it looked like a lot of expressways might be needed. Tourist traffic continued to build at a rate that thrilled bridge builders, but taxed the ferries to their limits. On Saturday, August 10, more than seven miles of cars lined up outside Mackinaw City. A large convoy of Army trucks carrying National Guardsmen to Camp Grayling may have contributed to the backup. Meanwhile, 5th Army Headquarters in Chicago was told to survey the Army's need for maintaining ferry service at the Straits as a defense measure, should the new bridge be damaged by war or natural disaster.

Milton Bachmann, the executive secretary of the State Bar Association, also noted that terrorists would pay dearly if they tried to damage the bridge.

Mackinaw City once her service came to an end on November 1.

But before tying up, St. Ignace and the Highway Department planned one last ferry celebration. Mayor Al Phillips met with Deputy Commissioner Sid Woolner to create a ceremony including open house-style tours of the boats, some to be tied up on each side for the day, and speeches, presentations to ferry crews and dock workers, and one last observance to commemorate how much had changed in the 40 years since automobiles had first been ferried across the Straits.

He also had an ulterior motive. The U. S. Coast Guard was searching for another homeport outside of Cheboygan and had made overtures to St. Ignace for one of the State Docks. Mayor Phillips, members of the Chamber of Commerce, the City Council, and even the Upper Peninsula Development Bureau tried to impress Woolner with how having the Coast Guard in town would benefit post-bridge development, especially with so many ferry workers to be unemployed.

Woolner noted another overture by citizens wanting a ferry route from Frankfort to Menominee. He cautioned that projected costs were prohibitive. He didn't mention the opinion by the Michigan Attorney General that legislation authorizing the bridge prohibited the state from running ferries between the peninsulas, not only at the Straits, but everywhere. It was that opinion which ultimately doomed the idea.

Commissioner Mackie visited the ferry office in St. Ignace to assure employees he'd do everything he could to help them find other employment. He also introduced Robert Howard, a management consultant, and Alexander Potter, placement consultant for the Michigan Employment Security Administration, who had been assigned full-time to help the employees find work.

Meanwhile, two new green and ivory transit buses, purchased used from the Detroit Street Railway, arrived at the bridge headquarters, ready to ferry "walk-on" passengers across the span for 50¢ per passenger. With no ferries running, the buses would be the only way for pedestrians to get across the Straits.

The four remaining boats of the state fleet continued to shuttle as excitement for the bridge grew by the hour. During October, the ferries carried 64,942 cars, an increase of 5.4% over 1956. Traffic in 1957 grew by 6%. Still, days before November 1, motorists camped out on the bridge approach roads hoping to be one of the first to cross.

And then it ended.

More than 200 delegates attended the Upper Peninsula Development Bureau conference in St. Ignace beginning October 31. It was the highest attendance in the organization's history. George Bishop, secretary of the organization for so many years, announced his retirement. Keynote speaker, Governor G. Mennen Williams, then appointed him to the Michigan Tourist Council. But the big excitement was planned for Friday, November 1.

Almost shirt-sleeved weather greeted the throngs who jammed the bridge approaches. A light haze with dappled sunlight greeted the official dedication party, and the sun broke through just at high noon, when Governor Williams, Commissioner Mackie, Bridge Designer David Steinman, Prentiss Brown and members of the Bridge Authority, and hundreds of other VIPs, reporters, and invited guests drove to the middle of the Mackinac Bridge for speeches, photo opportunities, and an official inspection.

As a helicopter flew overhead and ships saluted with their horns and steam whistles, shutters snapped, movie cameras rolled, and pennies were dropped through the road grating. Former Governor Murray Van Wagoner was asked, "What do you think of your folly now?"

He replied, "Well, we can't use it for fishing anymore!"

It was a day for the Democrats to bask in glory. The bridge they'd fought for was finished on their watch. Noticeably absent was former Republican Highway Com-

missioner Charles M. Ziegler. Books on Mackinac Bridge history would soon paint him as the villain in the bridge story. That was a matter of perspective. This was a day for only heroes.

The inspection group returned for a luncheon in Mackinaw City before making the first official drive across the length of the bridge. Mindful of the no-pass policy, Governor Williams searched for change. Larry Rubin saved the day when he suggested the Governor write a ceremonial check for the first toll. (The bridge wasn't really set up to take checks from the public, but he was the governor, after all.) The check was presented to Prentiss Brown promptly at 2 p.m., and with that the bridge officially opened for business. In the first hour, 830 vehicles crossed.

The VIP entourage then moved to St. Ignace Dock 3 where a small stand had been erected near the flagpole. With St. Ignace Mayor Phillips presiding, the mayors of the communities for which the ferries were named presented the captains of each boat with certificates of appreciation and scrolls to be "logged" on each vessel. Though he'd already left for a desk job in with the state Administrative Services Department in Lansing, Capt. Lloyd returned and joined Capt. Aaron "Mickey" Sweeney to accept the *Vacationland's* honors. Sweeney had already made one round trip with the icebreaker that day. After the noon ceremony on the bridge, he'd brought her northbound again, this time doing something the *Vacationland* rarely did. When she left Mackinaw City at 1:17 p.m., he backed her out and turned her around.

Besides the ships masters, several other employees were cited that day for their long careers with the fleet. Eugene Paquin, the only employee remaining on the staff since the beginning in 1923, and Charles P. Rhodes, who'd been with the fleet for 28 years, received special recognition. Altogether, 36 employees had more than 20 years of service, including Milton Hall, who'd been there for 33 years, four with 29 years, and two others marking 28 years.

Speakers voiced pride mixed with regret at the demise of the ferries, but Munising City Attorney George S. Baldwin best expressed the feeling of everyone: "We all knew we'd eventually have a bridge, but we'll always miss the ferries."

Mayor Chester A. Crago of Petoskey praised the highway department for operating the ferries for nearly 35 years. Governor Williams thanked the workers for their years of loyal service to Michigan. Commissioner Mackie thanked them on behalf of the Highway Department.

"The State Highway Ferry service has played a vital role in the development of Northern Michigan and the Upper Peninsula," he said. "From the day the department purchased and placed the *Ariel* into operation, this highway over water, operated by the members of this ferry service, has grown in importance along with traffic between the two peninsulas."

"In transporting some 12 million vehicles and 30 million passengers, ferry workers have provided Michigan with a vital tie which has contributed to the state's prosperity and advancement," Mackie added. "Today, we are saluting a new and great highway achievement in the opening of the Mackinac Bridge. The colorful chapter of the Michigan State Highway Ferry Service in over three decades of achievement comes to an end. But the contribution made by the members of this service will not be soon forgotten."

Led by the Governor's sedan, a procession of 84 automobiles then drove aboard the *Vacationland* for the ceremonial last crossing of the Straits of Mackinac by a Michigan State Ferry. More than 600 invitations had been issued by the Highway Department for the voyage, and hundreds more tried to get aboard. At about 4:36 p.m., *Vacationland* cast off from Dock 3, and the huge white ferry disappeared into a bright white fog bank, obscuring the bridge that put her out to pasture. While Captain Lloyd hobnobbed with the invited

*Please turn to page 11