

# Autos Across Mackinac: With the Bridge Open, the Ferries Sit in Storage

To commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the Mackinac Bridge, the St. Ignace News has been publishing Les Bagley's manuscript on the history of Michigan State Ferries, which carried cars across the Straits of Mackinac for 34 years before the bridge opened to traffic in 1957. In the last installment, he related how the bridge opened, ending the service, and making the fleet of five ferries surplus. But with traffic now humming across on the bridge, the ferries remained at the Straits in storage.

Her design was even older; modeled after the *Ariel*, rebuilt in 1923, and the *Mackinaw City* and *Sainte Ignace*, both built in 1917 and remodeled in 1924. She was a hand-bombed (hand stoked) coal burner, a technology quickly falling out of favor worldwide. No one yet knew it, but the last coal-fired passenger ships on the lakes had already been built four years before. The C&O twin rail ferries *Spartan* and *Badger* had modern Skinner Uniflow steam engines and automatic stokers, but they would be the last of their kind.

The ownership of the docks took a back seat to the dedication of the bridge in late June. The third weekend of the month saw what many described as the greatest celebration in the nation, with parades, fireworks, speeches, contests, and just about something for everyone, except good weather. While the opening day had been nearly pleasant in November, the celebration weekend was cloudy and cold.



After November 1, 1957, Michigan State Ferries steamboats were tied up at Dock 2 in St. Ignace, awaiting buyers. At first, former crewmembers were kept on the payroll as watchmen aboard each ship, but after more than a year with no ferries being sold, the Michigan Highway Department decided to economize, and eliminated their positions. The ferries remained at Dock 2, but without watchmen aboard. This view is from a 1957 postcard published by the L.L. Cook Company of Milwaukee, and is entitled "Faithful Ferryboats." (Author's collection)

The same antique propulsion worked against the remaining fleet. Even older than *The Straits*, the *City of Cheboygan*, *City of Munising*, and *City of Petoskey* had been passed their prime when sold to Michigan two decades before. Now, with modified bows, they were less worthy for open lake running, and they were much slower than any of the railroad ferries still operating. While there was hope they might find use in a private auto ferry service somewhere, they carried no great value.

Still, the state police massed the largest event force in their history to control crowds. To accommodate all the officers and set up a headquarters, the patrol took over crew quarters and lounges on the *Vacationland*, tied up in her Mackinaw City slip. The dock also was used for displays, as was Dock 3 in St. Ignace.

Railroad Dock to keep operating, while the city laid claim to the dock by way of a deed dating from 1882. Meanwhile, the Highway Department refused to accede to the city's demands.

The previous November as watchmen, protecting the laid-up vessels. After Labor Day, Assistant Ferry Superintendent F. Phillips Case accepted a job with the Highway Department Right of Way Division and moved from St. Ignace to Lansing. Still, none of the ferries moved.

Nearly everyone was surprised by who bought it, and old salts and landlubbers alike shuddered when they heard Edward Anderson, described as a "Chicago potato merchant," planned to rip out the interior and use the hull to store potatoes.

## PART 57: Selling The Fleet

By Les Bagley

With a cost of \$15,000 a month to keep the ferry fleet in mothballs, Highway Commissioner John C. Mackie was confronted with disposing of the ferries quickly, to recoup some of the state's \$6,600,000 investment.

"We do not intend to sacrifice the fleet to affect an immediate sale," he said. "But we do intend to get the wheels in motion to offer them for public bid, and regain funds from the sale for highway construction purposes."

Mackie also noted that the state had \$4,600,000 invested in ferry dock facilities.

As 1957 came to a close, Mackinaw City and St. Ignace learned no docks would be coming their way soon. St. Ignace Mayor Al Phillips feared the state might move the Arnold Line from Dock 1 to Dock 3, removing even more tourist traffic from downtown. But the state decided to use Dock 3 for a maintenance and highway garage. A weigh station was also installed there to monitor bridge-bound truck traffic. Dock 1 was already leased to the Arnold Line, while Dock 2 could not be sold until the fleet moored there was gone. The *Vacationland* still occupied the large slip in Mackinaw City, although that city hoped part of the holding area could be used for a public parking lot.

So far, there had been no apparent activity to sell the ferries. Highways estimated their value to be above \$6 million. The bulk of that was the *Vacationland*, which had cost the state more than \$4 million less than six years before. Built to fill a particular need at a particular place, in 1957 she was still the largest double-ended ferry in the world, and her potential uses on the Great Lakes were very limited. She didn't have enough overhead clearance to handle rail cars like the *Chief Wawatam* or cross-Lake Michigan ferries. She was too large to serve the various Lake Erie or Lake Michigan islands, and she was too heavy, with her overbuilt ice-breaking hull, to operate many long-distance cruises. Besides, with her blunt bows and wide opening bow doors, she would need major reconstruction for open lake running. Lastly, her width precluded her immediate use off the lakes. Like the *Mackinaw*, *Vacationland* would be locked in mid-America until the St. Lawrence Seaway opened.

The second newest boat in the fleet was *The Straits of Mackinac*. The smallest, she had much better potential for short auto and passenger runs. But she was nearly 30 years old, middle-aged for auto fer-

ries. Her design was even older; modeled after the *Ariel*, rebuilt in 1923, and the *Mackinaw City* and *Sainte Ignace*, both built in 1917 and remodeled in 1924. She was a hand-bombed (hand stoked) coal burner, a technology quickly falling out of favor worldwide. No one yet knew it, but the last coal-fired passenger ships on the lakes had already been built four years before. The C&O twin rail ferries *Spartan* and *Badger* had modern Skinner Uniflow steam engines and automatic stokers, but they would be the last of their kind.

Other bids rejected included Lakes Seaway Lines' offer of \$456,000 for the *Vacationland*, and Henry Mareks bid of \$6,000 for *The Straits*, \$8,000 for the *Cheboygan*, and \$10,000 each for the *Munising* and *Petoskey*.

The state also rejected a request by St. Ignace that the city be given use of Docks 1 and 2, and the parks in between them for parking, along with the three largest steamboats to use as a breakwater off the harbor in the summer, and as small craft storage warehouses in the winter. Deputy Commissioner Sid Woolner said he looked favorably on the parking area proposal, but that the Arnold Line had asked to continue using Dock 1, much the same as they already were.

About the only major change was that the Highway Department lost the distinction of being the only one in the country to operate navigation lights. The familiar lights on the ferry docks that had guided the ships to port were dimmed for the final time. The Coast Guard also announced plans to turn off the Old Mackinac Point lighthouse, just west of the bridge.

State legislators proposed a bill to give the ferry docks to their local

communities for \$1, and in early June even held public hearings toward that proposal. In addition to requests from both St. Ignace and Mackinaw City, the Mackinac Island State Park Commission asked for control of the docks, Mackinac County asked for them, and some even proposed a three-way "port commission" to oversee their control. The legislators took the matter under advisement.

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Bridge traffic was 45% above ferry numbers the year before. And heavy travel continued, despite two days of rain 4th of July weekend. The holiday was saddened by news of the death of 80-year-old Albert D. Murray, one of the first pursers on the *Ariel* back in 1923.

Just after the holiday, John C. Welsh of Mackinaw City tried to take the dock issue into his own hands. He had Judge Edward Fenlon issued an injunction barring Captain George Lloyd from letting Arnold Transit use the state dock in Mackinaw City. Claiming the part of the dock Arnold used was community property, and the state was denying the community of its rightful revenue, Welsh had the injunction served on Capt. Lloyd in St. Ignace and the Arnold Line on Mackinaw Island. Ingham County Circuit Judge Louis W. Coash later denied the request for the injunction, making Welsh show cause why it should be enforced. A hearing was set for August 8.

But the village wasn't to be denied. Officials requested a second order from Judge Fenlon, and barred Arnold from landing there by posting an armed policeman and lining the dock with snow fence. Arnold temporarily moved to the

Arnold bid \$2,500 to use the dock," Deputy Commissioner Woolner said. "They also paid \$1,250 to use Dock 1 in St. Ignace." Woolner refused to turn the dock over to the city, saying, "I couldn't do so even if I wanted to," and "Any income from the docking facilities should accrue to the state, and not to Mackinaw City."

The Mackinac Bridge continued to break traffic records all that summer. By August, officials were looking forward to showering a grab bag of gifts on the driver of the 1 millionth car to use it. The Bridge Authority predicted as many as 50,000 cars might cross during Labor Day, 85,000 more during hunting season. Volume rose by 45% to 65% every month over what the ferries had carried the year before.

The ferry office continued to note interest in the mothballed fleet. In August, several firms came and inspected the ships, but left without submitting bids. In September, the Highway Department laid off the dozen men who had worked since

alone costs \$1000 a year." Nearly everyone was surprised by who bought it, and old salts and landlubbers alike shuddered when they heard Edward Anderson, described as a "Chicago potato merchant," planned to rip out the interior and use the hull to store potatoes.

Edward H. Anderson was born and reared on Washington Island, a land dotted with small potato farms, off the tip of Wisconsin's Door Peninsula. He sought his fortune in Chicago at age 14, wheeled an ore boat in WWII, and somehow made a small fortune when he sold a truckload of island potatoes his

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