

Autos Across America: The *Vacationland* Is Sold, Renamed *Jack Dalton*

The opening of the Mackinac Bridge in 1957 brought to a close 34 years of auto ferry transportation across the Straits of Mackinac. To commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the bridge, the St. Ignace News is serializing Les Bagley's unpublished manuscript on the history of the Michigan State Ferry fleet. Once the bridge opened and the ferry service ended, the state spent years disposing of the docks and ferries. The story continues:

Part 58: More Ferries Sold By Les Bagley

With all the bickering about who would control the former ferry docks, the State of Michigan finally decided to end the squabble and just keep the docks in-house. On January 1, 1960, they were transferred to the Michigan State Waterways Commission, which planned to lease them out for revenue. Competitive bids for use of the dock facilities were opened March 8, with the Arnold Line and Straits Transit bidding against each other for spaces on Dock 1 and Dock 2 in St. Ignace. Part of Dock 2 was also leased to St. Ignace for parking and a marina, water taxi pier, and to develop some of the land as a park. Waterways allowed the city to use part of the former ferry administration building for park patrons.

The commission proposed to develop the 27.5 acres of land at Dock 3 as an industrial site, perhaps as a paper mill. That meant the closure of the Dock 3 scale house. With its closure, the state transferred the men working there to over-the-road weigh masters, over the objections of a number of local businesses.

About the same time, another weigh master retired. Former Ferry Captain Andy Monson started as a fireman on the ferries in 1936, rose to captain, and when the ferries ended, began weighing trucks at New Buffalo. At age 55, he returned to St. Ignace, where he and his wife also owned a motel.

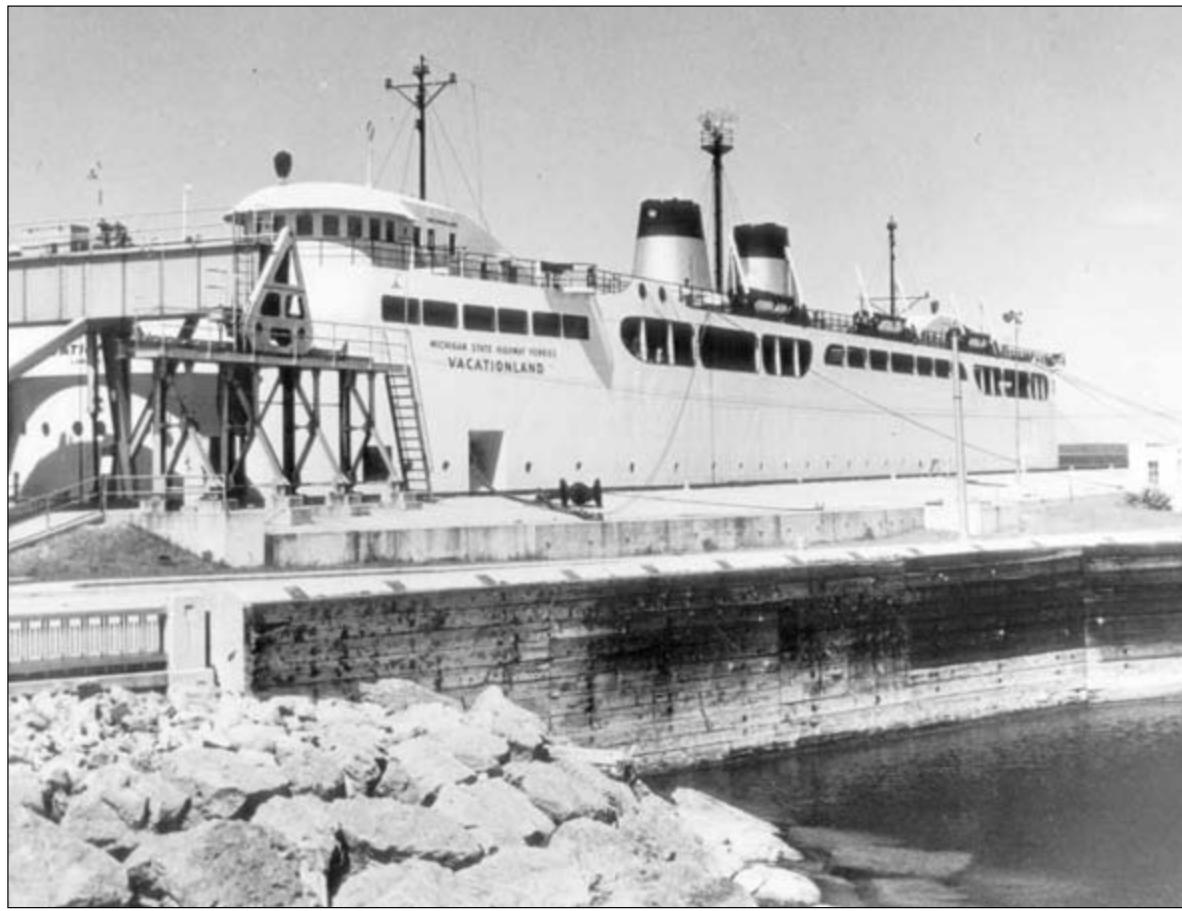
In Mackinaw City, Waterways leased the State Dock to Arnold and Straits Transit and to the Village of Mackinaw City to use as a paid parking area. Then the Waterways Commission decided that operating the docks themselves might be too difficult, so it leased the docks to St. Ignace and Mackinaw City, which then sub-let them to the existing tenants. By spring 1960, Governor G. Mennen Williams also sought \$36,370 for maintenance on the docks. But the state still had three ferryboats tied up at two of the docks.

Back in September 1959, K&K Trucking finally was invited to testify before the Interstate Commerce Commission to explain why their application to operate truck-trailer ferries across Lake Michigan was for the "public convenience and necessity." The firm presented a strong case, including testimony from former ferry crewmembers who traveled from the Straits to southwest Michigan, where the hearings were held, in the hope the run would begin and they would be employed by K&K soon. They came home with the belief the application would be quickly approved.

But they hadn't counted on opposition from both the Grand Trunk Railroad and the owners of the Milwaukee Clipper, both of which ran ferries on K&K's proposed route. The Grand Trunk ran a fleet of three railroad ferries in year-around freight service, while the Clipper carried tourists and their autos in the summer and ferried new cars from Michigan to the upper Midwest in the winter. Her owners also operated the *Highway 16*, a converted WWII landing craft, as a supplemental boat for tourist overflow and new car and freight traffic.

K&K also drew the wrath of the Teamsters Union, which was no more inclined to approve ferrying trucks across Lake Michigan in the 1950s and 1960s than it had been to the idea of ferrying trucks across Lake Erie in the dark days of WWII. The Interstate Commerce Commission took all testimony, and then closed the hearings to consider a decision, expected late in 1959.

Still, by early 1960, no word had been heard from the ICC, and the one-year option K&K had taken on the *Munising* and *Petoskey* was scheduled to run out March 3. Commissioner John Mackie wrote to the examiners on several occasions, asking when a decision might be expected. He received no firm



For nearly three years, *Vacationland* was an unmoving landmark on the Mackinaw City skyline, moored in her slip at the end of the State Dock. Finally, in early 1961, the state agreed to sell her to the Detroit-Atlantic Navigation Corporation (DANCO) and she left the Straits of Mackinac for the final time. (Michigan Department of Transportation)

reply, so, instead, he asked the State Administrative Board to extend K&K's purchase option for another six months. The two ships continued to lay idle at St. Ignace.

The city faced an economic shift. Since the ferries ended, more than \$2 million in annual crew payrolls disappeared. At least a dozen downtown businesses quietly closed their doors, including three auto agencies, a furniture store, barbershop, an oil distributor, and an insurance agency. In their place, motels, gas stations, restaurants, and souvenir shops sprouted on the edge of town to serve tourists and travelers crossing the Mackinac Bridge. The jobs were mostly minimum wage, but at least the city was beginning a rebound. Leaders looked to the new fuel terminal planned for spring construction in Moran Bay, allowing tanker ships to unload jet fuel at the Strategic Air Command base near Kinross.

The city also planned a series of business development workshops to be conducted by Northwestern Michigan College in Marquette. But it objected to Waterways plans to build concession buildings on the downtown docks. It felt that leasing space to charitable organizations, like handicapped workshops, to sell food and candy would be detrimental to already struggling downtown businesses.

Another business in St. Ignace threatened to change in March 1960. The Detroit, South Shore and Atlantic Railroad, for years a partner in the Mackinac Transportation Company, proposed to join a three-way rail merger. It would join the Wisconsin Central and Minneapolis, St. Paul and Sault Ste. Marie Railroads to become the Soo Line. The merger was proposed just after the Mackinac Transportation Company switched the *Chief Wawatam's* homeport to Mackinaw City to cut down early morning and late night deadhead trips to meet northbound freight trains. It was the first time the *Chief* had changed her base since she was constructed in 1911.

In March, the Detroit Atlantic Navigation Corporation was reorganized. The financial restructuring apparently took Troy Browning out of DANCO, and instead introduced Carson E. "Jack" Dalton, a former Detroit auto executive, as the new CEO, and Stanley Carter of the Detroit hardware firm as the apparent major financial backer. Dalton made a new offer of \$1.2 million, with \$150,000 down, and traveled to the Straits in March to begin recruiting a crew to move the *Vacationland* to dry-dock for inspection.

Tired of paying to baby-sit the big ferry, Commissioner Mackie recommended approving the sale.

"The ship's new service will be of direct benefit to the state from both short-range and long-range viewpoints," he said. "By helping provide economical package freight service in Michigan waters, I believe we will make a substantial contribution to the business climate of the state."

The State Administrative Board agreed, and in the second week of March 1960, the *Vacationland* was crewed, warmed up, and sailed from the Straits of Mackinac for the final time. She headed down Lake Huron,

battling ice all the way, bound for drydocking and inspection at a shipyard at Port Weller, Ontario, on the eastern end of the Welland Canal. It was the only shipyard available that early in the year. En route, she broke ice to free several stranded early-season freighters and became the first ship through the Welland for the 1960 sailing season.

The inspection satisfactorily completed, she sailed for Detroit in late March, where she tied up at a leased terminal at the foot of Junction. There, workmen laid cables along the lanes of her car deck to facilitate backing semi-trailers, and began the job of repainting the huge white ferry into a more worker-like gray scheme below her spar deck. The silver bands on her funnels were repainted a dark red, and a large white "D" for DANCO, adorned each stack.

On May 2, DANCO hosted a gala re-christening ceremony at the Revere Copper and Brass Company Dock on West Jefferson at the foot of Junction, her Detroit berth. The festivities included congratulatory speeches, promises of great things to come, and an onboard luncheon for civic and business leaders, the media, and invited guests. Then, Dalton's wife, Ruth, broke a bottle of champagne over the bow to rename the *Vacationland* the *Jack Dalton* after the famous old West outlaw and in honor of her corporate president's nickname.

The ship's namesake, Carson E. "Jack" Dalton, had been born in Manistique November 4, 1904. Educated at the University of Notre Dame, he earned a degree in foreign commerce and was graduated with a B.A. degree in 1927. He was soon hired to work in the International Division of Chrysler Corporation, serving until 1950, when he moved to the International Division of Ford Motor Company. In 1958, he was promoted to international vice-president of operations, based in Toronto, Ontario, but returned to Detroit the following year, before joining DANCO as its president.

Following the celebration in Detroit, the *Dalton*, under command of Captain H. J. Ostrander, sailed overnight for Cleveland with a maiden load of 23 truck trailers, slightly more than one-third of her estimated capacity. Her maiden Cleveland arrival was at about 6 a.m. at her leased terminal on the East 6th Street Pier, and crews immediately began unloading her cargo and preparing her for another grand celebration, this time to host Cleveland civic leaders, trucking company executives, and the media. Another gala luncheon was held in her forward lounge area, and Dalton, his son, Carson Jr., Ostrander, and other company officials and crewmembers took turns conducting guests on tours throughout the ship, docked just yards away from the much larger *Aquarama*.

Amid high hopes for a lucrative future, the *Dalton* sailed back to Detroit that afternoon, again with a less-than-capacity load. Her maiden cargos were about the largest shipments she ever carried. Though more than a dozen shippers had agreed to connect with the new service, over the next few weeks, one by

one, they canceled their contracts. By June, the *Dalton's* daily sailings had dwindled to weekly and, by July, they had been further reduced to none. Early that month her crew was laid off, with only her captain and two engineers, Chief William "Bill" Bengten, and his brother, Robert, both from the state ferry operation, kept onboard as watchmen. Robert soon took a new job at the Straits and returned home, leaving Bill there alone.

Carson Dalton noted the reason the ship was laid up as simply, "No business." What he didn't say was why.

DANCO had been formed in the mind of Troy Browning to recapture the business he anticipated with the Truckers Steamship Company in WWII. But that operation had not been successful. Looking back with the clarity of 20/20 hindsight, the new venture was probably doomed from the start.

Dalton's grandson, Carson III, did research into old DANCO records in the late 1980s. He rightfully believed the Teamsters Union was no more enthralled with the 1960 attempt at "fishy-back" service than before. But by the 1960s, the Teamsters were a much stronger and much feared force, with alleged connections to organized crime and violent labor actions against any person, business, or entity that worked contrary to their goals. Carson III believed the Teamsters mounted a

the Interstate System had sped travel times considerably. A truck driver could leave Cleveland with a fully-loaded trailer, arrive in Detroit, drop his load, pick up another, and be back in Cleveland, almost as fast as the *Jack Dalton* could be loaded, and travel one-way. The *Dalton's* full-time crew of 26 was paid a higher salary than the 26 truckers it took to move as many trailers. The *Dalton's* four Nordberg Diesels gulped as much fuel as a hundred semis, and without a nearly full load of 60 trailers each way, DANCO's service was practically doomed from the start.

When the first payment on the ship's mortgage was due in July, DANCO sent the interest, but not the \$37,500 of principal. The second payment to Lansing, due in October, never arrived at all. Michigan was now faced with what it had feared. On November 16, 1960, U.S. Marshals served a writ, seizing the vessel for non-payment, and the state began the long court process of reclaiming their "white elephant" ferry. Bill Bengten went back on the state payroll as watchman, supplemented during school breaks by his young son, Bill Jr., who recalls it was his responsibility to start the engines and run them once a week during the layup that ensued.

With the ferry's future once again uncertain, Michigan tried to decide whether to try to use her as an ice-breaker somewhere on the lakes or attempt to sell her again.

Even as the *Jack Dalton* was beginning her short-lived career serving Detroit and Cleveland, the Interstate Commerce Commission delayed the ruling on the application of K&K trucking for their route across Lake Michigan. Howard Hill contacted them again asking for their decision, so the *Petoskey* and *Munising* might finally be sold.

"The report promised in 30 days last February, has still not been received," he telegraphed May 9. "Request realistic date report will be served."

But while the boats still lay at Dock 2 in St. Ignace, there was some activity onboard. The Boy Scouts of America planned a June camp-o-ree on Otter Island in the Apostle Group in Lake Superior and asked to borrow 300 life jackets from the laid-up ferries so their campers could be legally transported to the island. The Duluth, Missabe and Iron Range Railroad Company put up a \$300 security deposit and the jackets were taken from the boats for the event. As the scouts went over and back without incident, the jackets were returned unused, and the deposit was refunded.

Later that year, the radio was removed from the *Petoskey* and installed on a lift bridge between Houghton and Hancock on the

expire on September 4, 1960, before the boats could again be sold. Director of Finance Alfred Lawrence wrote to Edward Anderson, "The *City of Munising* and the *City of Petoskey* are available if you are interested. The price is considerably higher than the *City of Cheboygan*, but is still only a fraction of their real value."

In July the Dolomite Corporation rented space on Dock 3 in St. Ignace to ship stone for highway construction from Drummond Island to the U.P. The Waterways Commission continued efforts to "peddle the dock on a more permanent basis."

On August 21 came word that David Bernard Steinman, the designer of the Mackinac Bridge, had died at the age of 73. In addition to his work on the "Mighty Mac," Steinman's firm had just concluded drawings for a new bridge to be built across the Soo Locks between the United States and Canada. Responsibility for completion of that bridge fell to Donald Dell, a local engineer hired by Steinman's organization.

By September, the state had again launched an all-out campaign to sell its three remaining ferries. The asking price for the two steamboats was pegged at \$100,000 each, while they still hoped to get \$1.2 to 1.5 million for the *Jack Dalton*. There were letters of inquiry from many quarters, but no offers to purchase. An interesting possibility came from Mrs. M. L. Murphy, District Passenger Agency for the Georgian Bay Line, which operated the North American and South American on Great Lakes passenger cruises. It turns out she wanted information for someone else. One letter writer even asked whether the state had any vessels available for scrapping.

"We wish to advise that we have no vessels or barges that are being offered for sale for salvage or scrap," Lawrence replied. Still, the large ice-breaker continued to sit, costing Michigan about \$330 a day to keep her.

In September, Straits Transit announced plans to sell securities to buy a new boat for the 1960-61 tourist season. Arnold Transit also planned a replacement for the aging *SS Algomah II*, which had replaced the original *Algomah* in the 1930s. Straits Transit also sued Arnold, Union Terminal Piers of Mackinac Island, and their owners to recover 4,000 shares of Straits Transit stock that had inadvertently been sold to them. Straits Transit's articles of incorporation required that no shareholder be in competition with the firm.

In November, the merger of the D,SS&A into the Soo Line was approved. As of December 30, the D,SS&A name faded into history



On her maiden arrival in Cleveland, DANCO hosted a gala reception for shipping leaders, the press, and one dyed-in-the-wool ferry fan, your author, age 10. (Author's collection)

not-so-subtle campaign to drive DANCO's business away, either by threats or coercion, to the point so few shippers remained that the service became unprofitable.

But DANCO also had the Interstate Highway system to contend with. When Browning first started Truckers Steamship in WWII, the preferred route from Cleveland to Detroit was via US-20, Ohio-2 and through or around Toledo, Maumee, and Sylvania to the Motor City. The trip by city streets and two-lane roads took about 10 hours each way.

By the 1960s, the Ohio Turnpike and the first completed portions of

Keweenaw Peninsula. High hills prevented the operator from seeing approaching ship traffic, which could now call for a bridge opening on the radio.

Finally, in May, the ICC ruled against K&K Trucking's application for operating authority. Apparently, the arguments by the Teamsters, the owners of the Milwaukee Clipper, and the Grand Trunk Railroad had persuaded the hearing examiner that the route would not be in the "public convenience and necessity." While Michigan expected K&K would no longer be interested in purchasing the two ferries, the state was now stuck waiting for their option to

and "Soo Line" diesels would switch the rail ferries when they landed in St. Ignace. Though traffic gained on the Mackinac Bridge, the authority raised tolls from \$3.25 to \$3.50 per passenger car in December to meet their bonding obligations. It would go up another 25 cents on May 1, 1961. And at the end of 1960, Commissioner Mackie urged Michigan to adopt a 75-mile-per-hour daytime speed limit on state freeways, and 65 mph at night.

Representatives of the state of Alaska toured the *Jack Dalton* early in 1961, looking for a vessel to use in a new Alaska Marine Highway

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