

Autos Across Mackinac: *Vacationland* Returns to Michigan; Sold to Canada

For the past year, the St. Ignace News has been serializing Les Bagley's manuscript, "Autos Across Mackinac," a history of the Michigan State Ferries, which carried automobiles across the Straits before the Mackinac Bridge opened in 1957. Following the bridge opening, the ferries were sold or scrapped. The largest in the fleet, the icebreaker *Vacationland*, was first sold to transport truck trailers between Detroit and Cleveland. But that venture, under the presidency of Carson E. "Jack" Dalton, failed, and Michigan repossessed the ship. The story of the huge ferry continues:



In October 2000, more than 40 former *Pere Nouvel* crewmembers gathered in Rimouski, Quebec, for a ship's reunion, spearheaded by the late Roland Lavoie (front row, left,) the ship's first Canadian chief engineer. Lavoie was the author's primary source of information when researching this chapter in ferry history, and it was his contact with other crewmembers while attempting to answer the author's questions that resulted in the reunion. (Photograph by the author)

for a distant battle, the Girardin brothers renounced their French citizenship and registered as Canadians. But that didn't keep them from the war. Drafted instead into the Canadian forces, Artistic joined the marine services while his brother became an airman. The elder brother was soon assigned to Toronto, the jumping off point for sailors heading to the European Front. For the remainder of the conflict, he saw his wife on only the occasional weekend pass, all the while fearing that he would be shipped out, and that that weekend would be their last.

When the war ended, Art was still in North America. Once discharged, he sought employment, and quickly discovered he had a natural bent for salesmanship, and particularly for selling cars. But it galled him to work for others, so he used his meager savings to open his own Ford dealership in a small community about an hour outside of Montreal. The residents were not familiar with the newcomer, however, and continued to patronize only the long-established Dodge garage in town.

Yet the bold entrepreneur's efforts had been noticed. The Ford dealer in Montreal sold cars to the entire Gaspé Peninsula, and in 1951 hired Art to handle the entire territory, from a base in Rimouski, on the South Bank near the mouth of the St. Lawrence River. Art moved his wife, and by now two sons, and the family quickly worked its way into the fabric of local community life.

While the boys attended school, Gabby busied herself with her favorite hobby, studying local history. When he wasn't working, Art worked to further community causes, being active in the local Chamber of Commerce and fraternal organizations. While it also helped to sell cars, the Girardins truly loved and wanted to help their adopted town. By the end of the decade, they were fully accepted as friends, and leaders of the business and social community. They also had financially prospered, as had many throughout the region.

Improved post-war transportation meant economic development along both sides of the St. Lawrence. By the late 1950s, hydropower had brought industrial growth. In North Shore harbor towns such as Forestville and Baie Comeau, new industrial and manufacturing plants producing aluminum and steel products began to replace timber-based industries of earlier eras. Starved for

workers, the new firms recruited help across Quebec and from as far as Ontario to the west and New Brunswick and Maine to the south and east.

Yet east of Quebec City there was no formal river crossing. Workers returning to the South Bank and beyond had to drive more than 100 miles west before they could even begin to travel south, and back to the east. The long drive to a crossing made quick weekend visits home much more difficult, if not impossible. In winter, when the river froze, and Quebec City's ferries could not operate, the backtrack was even farther.

Girardin and other Rimouski leaders recognized the need for a new ferry route closer to the rivers mouth and, beginning in the mid-1950s, worked tirelessly to explore and promote the idea for a Rimouski-based crossing. But in a community of fewer than 25,000, there was little money to build a boat, improve docks, hire crews, and promote the service. While the interest was great, or even greater across the river, the communities there were also struggling to keep up with increased demands for infrastructure and services occasioned by their industrial growth. There was no extra money for a ferry line from that side, either.

That's when Girardin turned to Romeo Crevier, a local Rimouski businessman and self-made millionaire. Crevier had cornered the regional market for industrial tractors and earth moving equipment, and as the Caterpillar distributor for most of eastern Canada, had taken personal advantage of the recent building boom to further his business and personal fortunes. He also owned a large stake in Rimouski Air, a local airline. With a sharp, legal mind and no patience for foolishness, Romeo made sure his assets continued to grow and prosper. While he heard Girardin out, he foresaw no immediate profit from a ferry, though it might allow his business better access to new territories. Unless Rimouski leaders could show him he'd make serious money quickly, he saw no reason to invest in such a scheme.

Yet Girardin had an ace up his sleeve. Through his friendships with political officials, provincial bureaucrats, and government leaders in both parties, Girardin promoted the economic benefits of such a route in both Quebec City, seat of the provincial government, and Ottawa, the national capitol. Once again he made use of his natural talents, selling the concept to anyone who would listen. By 1960, more and more people did. Girardin ultimately was able to convince Ottawa politicians to approve \$5 million in federal grants to subsidize the first five years of any such ferry operation.

It was a start, but to design and build an icebreaking ferry capable of crossing the St. Lawrence River



The former Michigan State Ferry *Vacationland* was sold again by Michigan, this time becoming the St. Lawrence River Ferry *Pere Nouvel*. Towed from layup in Detroit to a shipyard in Canada for installation of a snack bar, gift shop, and lounge/bar, her new French-Canadian crew found themselves hopping over the fence to gather fruit from an orchard next door. (Al Hart collection)

all year would cost much, much more. A decade before, the mighty *Vacationland*, the largest icebreaking ferry in the world, had cost nearly that much before inflation. Michigan had spent even more to improve docks and facilities for a crossing that was already there. To establish a new crossing from scratch would be almost impossible. While Girardin searched for additional funding, the summer of 1960 wore on.

But the prospect of \$5 million over five years was a carrot too enticing for Crevier to pass up. If Girardin could find a boat at a reasonable price, Crevier and a few minor investors agreed to bankroll the balance of the package. So, with Crevier as the primary stockholder and President of the newly formed Compagnie de Navigation, Nord-Sud, Limited, (North-South Navigation Company, Limited) and with Girardin as his front man, Vice-president, and chief operating officer, the search for a boat began in earnest.

Girardin, the outgoing, friendly representative of the Rimouski Chamber of Commerce, did most of the work, talking by phone and traveling for weeks on end to follow up on leads and make inspections. Crevier apparently sat back, counted his pennies, and played the roll of financial angel to help the community achieve its goal.

Surprisingly, through Girardin's hard work, continuous travels, and extreme good fortune, the search did not take long. In early summer 1961, a broker called offering a ferry the new company might be able to afford. The now-idle *Jack Dalton* was available at a "fire-sale" price. Stuck again with the laid-up "white elephant," Michigan made it known it would accept offers well below the fair market value for their repossessed ship.

Knowing little about icebreakers, he contacted Michael Moyle, the engineering instructor at the local maritime academy, and the Marine Safety Inspector for the local office of Transport Canada. They quickly journeyed to Detroit for an inspection tour. Finding the ship to either meet or exceed everything he'd hoped for in a St. Lawrence River ferry, Girardin made a series of hurried telephone calls, and with Crevier's approval, confirmed a \$1.2 million dollar offer with a deposit, the balance to be paid when the ship's title was transferred. It was the same amount DANCO had paid for the ship the year before.

Michigan accepted, and now the race began. By the time Girardin had made all the arrangements, fall was quickly turning to winter. To get the *Jack Dalton* to Quebec and have her ready to start ferrying soon, she would have to be moved before the Welland Canal and St. Lawrence Seaway closed for the season. Girardin returned to Rimouski to find a crew, and asked Michigan to round up what sailors from her past

might be available for the delivery voyage.

The *Dalton* almost appeared ready to go on her own. In a late night squall just after the sale was announced, the ship parted her bow lines and swung dangerously out into the Detroit River current, held only at her stern. Engineer/watchman Bill Bentgen was sleeping on board and heard the line part with a bang. Knowing the weather and realizing what must have happened, he quickly ran forward and dropped the anchor, preventing the bow from swinging further into the stream, and possibly blocking other river traffic, or worse, breaking her other moorings and setting the undermanned ferry adrift. Serious damage or full disaster was narrowly averted, help was called, and the ship was soon resecured to the pier.

Unfortunately, time did not allow a full crew to be assembled to move her to Canada. Michigan, happy to again be shed of the ship they'd stored for nearly four years, readily granted Capt. Frank Nelson a leave from his Lansing desk job to take command of the vessel for the delivery voyage, and for as long as N-S Navigation wanted him. Bill Bentgen also signed on to help train the new Canadian crew, which was being recruited even as the ferry left Detroit for the final time. Still lacking a full crew, she left in late September, bound for the Welland Canal, on a towline behind a tugboat chartered for the occasion. Her full crew compliment would join her at the Port Weller Shipyard in Ste. Catherine.

At age 27, Quebec City's Roland Lavoie was already a veteran of three tours aboard Canadian icebreakers. In an effort to get his First Class engineers ticket, he received a special grant from Transport Canada, and transferred from the icebreaker *John A. MacDonald* to the marine school in Rimouski. One day that summer, his instructor, Michael Moyle, mentioned he had recently visited a beautiful ship in Detroit that a local company wanted to put in service as a ferry. Later, Moyle asked Lavoie, if he passed his exams and got his certificate, would he be interested in becoming the ship's new Chief Engineer?

It was a tough choice. Roland already had a steady job with Transport Canada, including full benefits and a pension plan. But by the end of July, he'd earned his certificate, and he still had four months remaining on his leave. That fall he figured he might as well go see what all the fuss was about.

Sometime at the end of September or early October 1961, Lavoie joined Aristide Girardin and Romeo Crevier, along with several others aboard a private Rimouski Air flight to Detroit. Looking down on the ship as they circled over the Detroit River, Lavoie was impressed with her size and grace. Once on board, he was impressed with Bill Bentgen and the incredible array of machinery in two engine rooms. He decided to help move the ship to Canada.

The skeleton crew manning the ferry had few comforts at the end of the towline. The weather on Lake Erie was hot and muggy. There were a lot of bugs. The only power on board was from the main generator to run the winches, maintain running lights, and brew a pot of coffee. There was no daytime air conditioning, no heat at night, no power to cook, and no water for showers or



North-South Navigation's letterhead featured the former *Vacationland*, renamed *Pere Nouvel*, sailing through a life ring. Brochures, tickets, and other information were printed in both English and French, although the crew spoke nearly all French while on board. (Author's collection)

toilet flushing. The entire stock of provisions consisted of a cooler full of sandwiches and some warm soda pop someone brought aboard just before they sailed. Captain Nelson at once made a big show to let everyone know he was in command. Lavoie recalled, "He was a tall man, with a loud voice, gruff, but underneath, he had a heart of gold."

The *Jack Dalton* spent at least three weeks at the Port Weller shipyard. As the *Vacationland*, she had been built to American Bureau of Shipping (ABS) standards, but for some reason, Girardin decided to have her re-inspected as a Lloyd's Class vessel, perhaps because there were more Lloyd's surveyors there. As an American vessel, she had to be completely re-inspected to enter Canadian registry. Her hull construction, machinery, fire fighting gear, insulation, life saving equipment, stability, passenger ship load line, tonnage measurements, navigation and radio electronics, and certification for personnel (crew) for Canadian Inland Waters all had to be approved. Some machinery had to be disassembled for inspection. The thickness of her hull had to be re-measured.

While all this went on, more Canadians arrived to fill the crew compliment. Everyone worked hard to facilitate the inspections. But in off times, there was little to do. The shipyard was some distance from town, and no one had any transportation. Each evening, some of the men climbed the fence to steal peaches and pears from the orchard next door. The fruit was a sweet and welcome diversion from the meager supplies onboard, even after the galley opened.

In addition to the inspections and safety tests, the shipyard performed a few modifications. Outside, she was repainted. The yard left the red bands on her funnels, but replaced the white "Ds" with an "N" on the forward and an "S" on the after stack, when read left to right on either side. The main body of the superstructure was repainted white, but the hull and anchor pocket were painted black, down to the waterline. The underwater hull was painted with a red anti-fouling compound.

Inside, a bar was installed on one side of the forward observation lounge. A snack-bar/restaurant was installed on the other side of the room for food and beverage service, much appreciated on what was anticipated to be a 3.5 to 4 hour one-way crossing to Baie Comeau.

The work done to rectify the

*Please turn to page 11

DELIGHTFULLY DELICIOUS SEAFOOD DINNERS

Now through Lent

Dimmers Starting at \$7.99



All-You-Can-Eat Friday Night Seafood Buffet

Available During Dinner Hours Only

\$11.99

FREE Wireless Internet

West US-2, St. Ignace 643-1555

Open Daily 7 a.m. to 9 p.m.

· A Family Owned and Managed Bank for Five Generations ·

Commercial Loan Need?

Call me today!

Family ownership means quick answers and flexible business financing.



Randy Powers
Vice President
Cheboygan Office
231-627-7700

Cheboygan · Harbor Springs · Petoskey · Traverse City
Since 1906 www.firstcb.com



YOUR BANK FOR BUSINESS