

Autos Across Mackinac: The Former *Vacationland* Changes Hands Again

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pensive to operate. The Mackinac Transportation Company closed and she was taken over by the newly formed Eastern Upper Peninsula Transportation Authority. Shippers clamored for more economical service, and the Authority investigated converting the old *Vacationland* to carry rail cars at the Straits, to take the *Chief's* place as the icebreaker. The Authority even made a preliminary offer of \$1,587,000 million to the BC Government, and applied for and received a one-time permit to transit the Seaway with her widened guards that exceeded the waterway's width regulations. But the offer was withdrawn and the plans were dropped when engineers learned her 146-inch car deck clearance was not high enough for modern "high cube" railroad cars.

Meanwhile, BC Ferries experienced an equipment crunch and explored ways to return the *Sunshine Coast Queen* to economical operation. Cove and Dixon, Inc., a marine architectural firm in North Vancouver, was commissioned to design several plans to rebuild her with new engines, new rudders, or even Cort nozzles. Various configurations showed her as a double-decker and even a single-ender. They explored removing most of her superstructure and using her as a truck and oversized vehicle ferry. But there was no

Vancouver drydock for a refit in May, 1981, and then transferred to the Fraser River docks of the train ferry *Alaska*, which had also been purchased by the firm.

Titles were transferred to a new company, owned by many of the same principals. Canarctic Ventures, took control of both ships and began converting them for arctic use by Gulf Canada Resources, the Canadian oil exploration arm of the large multi-national petroleum company. Gulf Canada was in an oil exploration frenzy, owing to an Arab oil embargo which had dramatically increased gasoline prices worldwide, and the company signed a purchase option for the vessels. As an inducement, Canarctic president Barry Ferguson renamed the *Alaska*, *Gulf Kanalak*, and the *Sunshine Coast Queen* became the *Gulf Kanayak*. The latter was tied up outboard of the former, which was already under conversion in the ferry slip.

For access to the *Gulf Kanayak*, workers cut a wide doorway through her port stern side, slightly aft of where the original side-loading door had been. In line with one on the *Kanalak*, it allowed access so work could proceed on both vessels simultaneously. Crews removed furnishings, amenities, and even unneeded railings and stairways, which might collect ice in the frozen north. Parts were ordered to rebuild the *Kanayak's* Nordberg engines, and Bruce

the watchman was also discharged.

With no protection, vandals systematically stripped souvenirs, including pilothouse equipment, gauges, and anything else that wasn't nailed down. Windows were smashed and rust began to show through the once shiny paint.

With moorage fees of \$3,000 a month, Canarctic Ventures faced financial ruin. The company was reorganized as Consolidated Canarctic Industries in February 1985. Finally, in December, Ferguson sold the ferry to a group of three American investors, James Detro, Steven Johnson, and Doug Sapp, who hoped to realize a profit from their purchase. With Ferguson remaining as their agent in BC, they formed a numbered corporation, "301073 BC Limited." Ferguson wanted to convert her to a gambling cruise ship to Alaska, with Middle-Eastern backing. Others tried to revive the notion of a trailer ferry on the Great Lakes.

The most promising offer came from a Mexican firm that proposed using the *Gulf Kanayak* as a ferry to Baja, across the Gulf of California. Ferguson sent what drawings and photos he had of the ship, including several hours of film and video for their consideration. But the plans were derailed. Several of their investors were killed, and the reference materials were all lost when the company offices were destroyed in a huge 1985 Mexico City earthquake.



With hopes of restoration, the hull was moved to Kewaunee, Wisconsin, and tied up near the car ferry dock. But plans ground to a halt with the death of her owner, and the remains of *The Straits of Mackinac* were left to deteriorate in the elements. Finally, she was turned over to a scuba diving group who hoped to sink her as a diving attraction somewhere between Michigan's peninsulas, where she spent all her working life. (William Rieshel photograph, Christiansen collection)

She was then taken to the Seattle Duamish River yard of Marine Power and Equipment, where she was prepared for a long ocean voyage under tow.

Windows and porthole openings were plated over. Her bow and stern doors were welded tightly shut and braced to the car deck. Her winches, and some other mechanical equipment were removed for resale. Meanwhile, trying to stay out of the way of the shipyard workers, Chen and some of his own workers remove what gauges and pilothouse equipment had not already been stolen or damaged by vandals, to be sold at Chenco's retail store as nautical restaurant décor. The entire project was kept quietly under wraps for fear of public concern about doing business with the Chinese Communists.

With arrangements finalized by Seattle attorney Jonathan Platt, on Thanksgiving morning, November 26, 1987, the *Gulf Kanayak* was towed down the Duamish to Puget Sound. There she joined a former WWII freighter, *Rose Knott*, in a tow behind the Japanese ocean-going tug, *Hoshin No. 8*, under command of Captain Tatsuo Oda. The tow, guided by Puget Sound Pilot Denny Stensager, left about 8:30 a.m. and, by 3:30 the next morning, Stensager was dropped off at the end of the Strait of Juan de Fuca, off the Washington coast, and the tow entered the Pacific.

At first, *Hoshin* made about five knots, towing the *Rose Knott* first and then on a longer bridal, the *Gulf Kanayak*.

The former ferry was towed stern first, about 300 feet behind the freighter. Jimmy Chen projected the tow would reach its destination, the scrap yard at Nantong, China, sometime between Christmas and the New Year. But a deteriorating weather forecast by a private firm hired by Chenco forced Oda to alter course. The meteorologists suggested going southward toward Oregon, and a point about 300 miles off the Columbia River Bar.

At only five knots, the tow was too slow to escape and was caught in the full fury of the early-winter storm. 80 mile per hour winds whipped seas to 30 feet. The *Hoshin* and its tow were slammed mercilessly. That night, indicator lights showed the *Gulf Kanayak* had begun taking on water.

At daybreak, the crew could see the doors on the leading end had

been damaged, and swept away. Capt. Oda elected to return to port for repairs. But seas were running too high across the Columbia Bar, so he altered course back toward

the safety of the Strait of Juan de Fuca and Port Angeles, Washington. All morning the ferry continued to settle by the forward end,

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Finally, with no forthcoming plans to return the ferry to service, she was sold to Chenco, an American company charged with finding ships for scrapping in China, and she was towed out of the river. This view, taken from Vancouver's Lions Gate Bridge, shows the German container ship *Act 9* passing the tow in September 1987 while enroute to Nanaimo, on Vancouver Island, where her fuel tanks were drained. (Marc Piche photograph)

bypassing her broad, heavy, riveted and welded hull, and, ultimately, all those plans were also dropped.

Instead, the government offered her on bids in April 1981. Six were received, including one for only \$100, but just two were serious. The lower of the two was from Rivtow Straits, Ltd. of Vancouver, which wanted to convert the ferry into a log barge.

The higher, winning bid for \$1.3 million came from the Quesnel Redi-Mix Company of Quesnel, BC. Tom Scuffi, Quesnel's secretary/manager, said the company bought the ship as an investment and wanted to charter her for use in the Canadian Arctic.

"We were looking around for a tug and barge when the ferry became available," he said. "She's a unique boat, not just an icebreaker, but a double-ended icebreaker. We will probably negotiate a contract with an oil company doing arctic exploration work."

She was towed to a North

Dahling, an engineer from Port Coquitlam, BC, was hired to do the work. Ferguson asked him to do the starboard pair first, so instead of doing just one engine room, that's what he did. Parts to do the other pair were stored on the car deck until needed.

Work on the former *Alaska* was finished in 1984 and she was sent north. But by that time, the oil embargo had ended and the world was once again facing an oil glut. Prices fell overnight, and Gulf Canada declined the option on the former *Suzy Q*. Canarctic tried to market the ship to other buyers, and had the name "Canarctic Explorer" painted across her stern doors. But Ferguson's asking price of \$2 to \$3 million was way out of line for the stripped, laid-up vessel. With no money coming in, work on the ferry stopped. The *Kanayak* was moved into the ferry slip, the hole in her side was plated over, and with watchmen in a shack onshore for protection, the rest of the workmen were laid off. Soon,

With vandalism and tie-up fees mounting, in October 1986, the ferry was moved away from shore, to the Chief Dan George buoy, off Dollarton, above Vancouver's Second Narrows Bridge. But the vandalism continued, and moorage payments sent to Ferguson by the owners mysteriously disappeared. When the ship's legal problems and fines got to be too much, and when the owners were summoned to Federal Court in Ottawa, they'd had enough.

In September 1987, they sold the ship to Chenco, a Puyallup, Washington, firm owned by Shou "Jimmy" Chen, a salvage dealer working for the Communist Chinese government. Chen paid \$300,000, and the *Gulf Kanayak* was towed to Nanaimo, BC, where over the next three weeks, fuel, oil, and other materials were removed.



After several weeks of preparation, both in Canada and at a Seattle shipyard, the former *Vacationland* was hitched in a tow with the WWII freighter *Rose Knott*, bound for scrapping in China. This view, taken from the stern of the Japanese tug *Hoshin #8*, shows the tow as it left Puget Sound on Thanksgiving Day 1987. (Photograph by Tatsuo Oda)

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