

Autos Across Mackinac: *The Straits of Mackinac* Is Sunk Near Chicago

For the past year, the St. Ignace News has serialized Les Bagley's unpublished manuscript, "Autos Across Mackinac ; A History of Michigan State Ferries." The series, which began in January 2007, traced the history of the ships that carried automobiles, freight, and travelers between Michigan's peninsulas before the Mackinac Bridge opened more than 50 years ago. In this final installment, he traces the disposition of the remaining ferries and the facilities that played such an important role in the history of our area.

PART 62: Conclusions

JOINING HER FLEETMATE By Les Bagley

In the late 1990s, the City of Keweenaw, Wisconsin, planned a waterfront renewal. Railroad car ferries from Michigan had served the port for more than 100 years, but the Michigan Department of Transportation withdrew operating subsidies from the Ann Arbor Railroad in the 1980s. The Chessie System withdrew under the Keweenaw Plan, which phased out Lake Michigan car ferries over several years, ending in 1984.

That year, a savior appeared. The Michigan-Wisconsin Transportation Company, owned by Ludington businessmen Glenn Bowden and George Towne, bought the Chessie's fleet for \$1 a boat, and with a guaranteed operating subsidy from the railroad, began operating from Ludington to Keweenaw. Their operation was short lived. Plagued by mismanagement and poor funding, Towne dropped out. Bowden lasted until 1988, when he, too, threw in the towel and declared bankruptcy.

The M-WTs assets were sold to Charles Conrad, who formed the Lake Michigan Carferry Company. But instead of carrying rail cars to Keweenaw, he arranged to carry tourists and their automobiles to Manitowoc only in the summer season.

With waterfront renewal now possible, Keweenaw wanted the hulk of *The Strait of Mackinac* removed.

Despite several underfunded and misguided attempts to purchase the remains, the ferry continued to rest on the Keweenaw mud bank until, finally, in 2000, a Green Bay diving group called Neptune's Nimrods purchased the hull with plans to sink it as a Lake Michigan instructional and recreational dive site. Under the leadership of several members, including Jeff Rogers, volunteers began preparing the hull for sinking, while others sought locations where the remains could be sunk. Still others began the thankless task of applying for government permits and approvals so the sinking could be done. The club progressed by fits and starts for several years, trying as best it could to preserve the historic integrity of the ship, including the fittings, which still remained largely untouched below the car deck.

But Keweenaw's city fathers were impatient. In early 2002, the area was sold to become a marina, and as a condition of the sale, the remains of *The Straits* had to be moved. The new owners gave the Nimrods an ultimatum: Either move the ship within 30 days or it would be scrapped on the spot at their expense.

With no means of moving the ship in the allotted time frame, the Nimrods explored other options, including sinking the ship somewhere near her namesake waters in a recently dedicated underwater preserve. But their letters looking for support went unanswered, so



In the summer of 2005, 77 years after she was launched in Detroit, the remains of the very last Michigan State Ferry still afloat, *The Straits of Mackinac*, were intentionally sunk about 14 miles off Chicago's Navy Pier to become a scuba diving attraction. Today she rests in about 80 feet of water and is visited by divers from throughout the world. (Patrick Hammer photograph)

after much discussion, the Nimrods reluctantly passed title on to a dive club in Chicago.

Communication between the new club and the marina owners was sometimes strained, but the ship stayed put while the club raised funds, and at last, in July 2002, *The Straits of Mackinac* was towed to a donated berth on the Calumet River where the process of preparation and permitting began anew. Environmental concerns required removal of asbestos from the hull and machinery spaces, so welders cut away much of the cowl around the engine cylinders and coverings over the boilers. Wooden overhead was sawed out to reach the ancient insulating material. In the process, much of the woodwork, including the mahogany galley sideboard, was seriously damaged or destroyed. Sparks from a welding torch accidentally ignited a small fire in a coal bin, but it was extinguished with little further damage. To allow the ship to be scuttled and safely visited by divers, a series of holes were cut into the car deck.

But all this work was expensive. The divers formed a non-profit organization, The Mackinac Project, with a goal of raising \$95,000 to pay for the move and the work the Environmental Protection Agency required. Sponsorships were offered, wherein advertising would be affixed to various areas of the ship, visible to the divers who explored her. Only a few sponsorships were sold. The club also tried selling artifacts, including her 10 diameter propeller on e-Bay, the Internet auction site. Only some of the smaller items sold. But despite tight finances and frequently conflicting government regulations and requirements, at last everything was in place for a sinking to take place in the fall of 2002. Everything was in place, that is, except the weather, which didn't cooperate at all.

To safely sink the hull on an even keel so that it would settle smoothly to the bottom of Lake Michigan, salvage experts told the divers they would need a day with very little wind and nearly calm seas, with waves of no more than three feet in height. But as October turned to November, the weather grew worse instead of better. The sinking was postponed until the spring of 2003.

When at last spring weather arrived in Chicago, a date was picked, press releases were mailed, and a tug was hired to tow *The Straits* to a point above her projected final resting place, about 10 miles northeast of Chicago's Navy Pier. On the Internet Web site, "Boatnerd.com," reporter Dave Foss said that the location was chosen, "because it was the only

one that met the various regulatory requirements. It is not in a major shipping lane, it is at least five miles from a water intake crib, and it is deep enough that the smokestack is sufficiently submerged."

Foss described the ferry's final moments like this: "Riddled with holes and loaded with seven truckloads of concrete, the 1928 steamship that once linked Michigan's Upper and Lower peninsulas stubbornly hovered above the surface for more than an hour before

of 23 dedicated Chicago area diving sites, and one of the largest complete man-made structures ever intentionally sunk in Lake Michigan.

THE FIRST BECAME THE LAST

Of all the large ferries that carried vehicles across the Straits of Mackinac, the one that did it first, incredibly, lasted the longest. Built in 1911 by the Mackinac Trans-



The hull of the very first ferry to transport autos across the Straits remains afloat to this day. Built in 1911, the *Chief Wawatam* carried the first autos across Mackinac in 1917. Sold and stripped of her engines and superstructure in 1989, she works today as a barge home-ported at the Canadian Soo, under her original name. She is owned by Purvis Marine and still occasionally visits the Straits of Mackinac. (Skip Natzner photograph)

finally plunging with a flourish 80 feet to the bottom. Twenty-foot geysers spurted up, wood splintered off, and the ship gurgled helplessly for five minutes after it vanished from sight. 'Oh, that is awesome,' Eileen Campagne, coordinator for the Mackinac Project, said with a gasp as she watched intently from a nearby pleasure boat. We couldn't have asked for a more perfect planned sinking."

The Straits settled to the bottom, where she rests today as one

portation Company, the *Chief Wawatam* continued to shuttle railroad cars across the Straits long after the Mackinac Bridge opened, and the other ferries that once carried autos at the Straits were either scrapped or sold. Increasing government regulations for safety and pollution made her survival difficult. Improved rail connections through Chicago and larger, longer freight cars made her more inefficient, still.

The board of the Mackinac

Transportation Company first heard reports that converting her to oil firing or diesel propulsion would cut manpower costs. Instead, on November 5, 1963, they voted not to repair her at all and filed to abandon cross-straits service. When the matter came before the Interstate Commerce Commission, however, there were so many protests, the petition for abandonment was denied.

But MTC kept filing, and finally, when the petition was ultimately granted in 1976, the State of Michigan stepped in, subsidizing the ferry's continued operation through a company called the Straits Corporation. Traffic on the ferry became sporadic, and occasionally she only made one trip a week.

Over the years, several attempts were made to replace her with a tug and barge, but with no better results than experienced by the Algoma/Betsy combination in winter operations a century before. Like a cat with nine lives, the *Chief* survived, including a near brush with calamity when a fire destroyed another ferry at the Manitowoc Shipyard while the *Chief* was in for her five year inspection. The two had been side-by-side until just half an hour before the blaze broke out. Fortuitously, the *Chief* had just been moved.

In 1979, Michigan contracted with the Detroit and Mackinac

Frances D. Burgtorf.

Her captain at the time, Roderick "Rod" Graham, described the mechanics of taking the hand-bomber across the straits in layman terms: "You go down in the basement," he said, "grab a shovel, and throw as much coal as you can into the furnace. Then you run like hell up to the steering wheel and try to get across the straits before it all goes up the chimney!"

The *Chief* continued operating, and smoking up the region, until August 21, 1984, when a dock wall collapsed as she approached her slip in St. Ignace. The narrowed area made it impossible for her to land, and she returned with her cargo to Mackinaw City. There, she sat while the state tried to decide what to do.

The decision was finally made for the state by the Soo Line railroad. After waiting two years for activity, in 1986 the railroad could ill afford to maintain the roadbed to St. Ignace without a reason to run trains. There were no major shippers or receivers in town, except for the ferry itself. So, taking matters into its own hands, the rail line filed for partial abandonment and tore up the tracks leading to St. Ignace and the ferry dock.

Without a rail connection, there was no need for the ferry, and soon the tracks to Mackinaw City from the south were removed as well. The *Chief* was laid up at her Mackinaw City dock until 1988, and was then taken to Sault Ste. Marie. Preservationists pleaded to save her, but citing existing efforts to preserve the *City of Milwaukee* and the *Milwaukee Clipper*, both of which were, at that time, marginal at best, the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) refused. Instead, for \$110,000, they

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