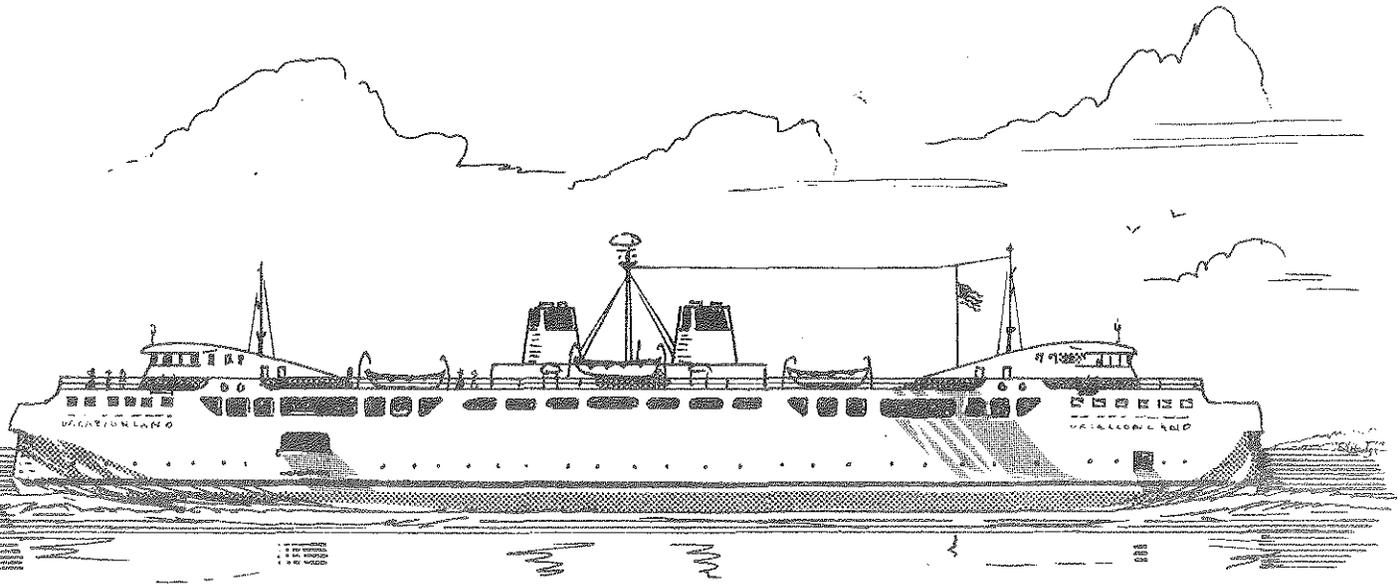
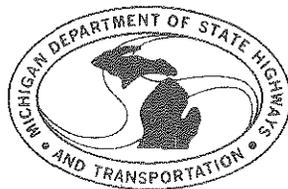


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History of the Michigan State Ferries



MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF STATE HIGHWAYS
AND TRANSPORTATION



Public Information Office, Lansing, Michigan 48904

HISTORY
of
MICHIGAN STATE FERRIES

Opening of the Mackinac Bridge in November, 1957, brought to a close the romantic chapter of the Michigan state ferries, one that played a prominent part in the history and development of Michigan's Upper Peninsula. In 34 years of service, the ferries operated by the Department of State Highways carried some 12 million vehicles and more than 30 million passengers across the Straits of Mackinac that separate Michigan's two peninsulas.

Most travelers, including many who made regular crossings, viewed the passing of the state ferries with mixed emotions. The new \$100 million bridge came as a blessing and a necessity, boosting tourist traffic in the Upper Peninsula and helping economic development. Driving by auto high above the blue waters of the Straits is a memorable experience. But the leisurely five-mile ferry trip was a thrill of its own. And for many passengers, it was their only experience aboard a ship.

The majestic panorama of the Straits, with Mackinac Island in the background, is one that few who stood on the decks of the ferries will forget. Even more exciting were the winter crossings aboard the icebreaker Vacationland as it crunched through massive ice floes as if they were paper boxes.

There are other lingering memories. Though service rarely was suspended because of bad weather, there were times when strong winds jammed ice into dock areas, trapping even the big Vacationland. When that happened, passengers were forced to wait for the U. S. Coast Guard cutter Mackinaw to break loose the imprisoned ferry.

There were other delays when auto traffic got heavy. In the November deer hunting season, thousands of hunters jammed the docks and the adjoining highway while they waited to board the ferries. Patient veterans of the straits crossing would calmly munch hot pasties sold by car-to-car vendors and feed the ever-present sea gulls. Newcomers, eager to get to the deer country in the Upper Peninsula, were more likely to pace the docks as they waited their turn to board the busy ferries. Long delays were infrequent, however, and service went on day after day and year after year with few interruptions.

The state ferries operation, in effect a highway over water, was unique in being the only service of its kind operated by a state highway department. It came into being through an act of the State Legislature, which reacted to public displeasure with the infrequent and expensive ferry service for motor vehicles provided by railroad boats.

The Highway Department opened the service July 31, 1923, with the little Ariel, a river boat which had plied the Detroit River between Walkerville, Ontario and Detroit. She cost the state \$10,000 and it took another \$9,000 to fit her out to pass marine inspection.

The Department bought a dock at St. Ignace for \$10,000 and rented another at Mackinaw City from the Michigan Central railroad. Soon after, the Department bought a dock site at Mackinaw City for \$550 and began building its own dock, later to be rebuilt and enlarged.

Before ice stopped the Ariel on Nov. 21, 1923, she had hauled 10,351 cars across the straits, many more than the railroad boats, with their irregular schedules, would have carried.

Recognizing it had started a service the public needed and wanted, the Highway Department lost no time enlarging the ferry fleet. Late in 1923 it bought The Colonel Pond and The Colonel Card from the Federal government, brought both boats from the east coast to Detroit and had them lengthened from 130 to 180 feet so they could carry 40 cars each. The "colonels," renamed the City of St. Ignace and the City of Mackinaw City, went into service in the summer of 1924. The Ariel, which accommodated only 20 cars, was sold, later to be put into service between Port Huron and Sarnia, Ont., on the St. Clair River.

Business at the Straits nearly quadrupled in the second year, with more than 38,000 vehicles making the crossing. A third boat, the Straits of Mackinac, joined the fleet in 1928.

Winter service began in 1931 when the Highway Department arranged with the Mackinaw Transportation Co. to carry cars across the Straits on a railroad icebreaker during the cold months. The company was paid the difference between its charges and the lower tolls the state collected on its boats in the summer. This arrangement turned out to be poor business for the State, so in 1936 the Department leased the railroad icebreaker Sainte Marie for winter operations on a regular schedule.

The ferry business kept growing. In 1937, the Highway Department bought the City of Cheboygan, a converted Lake Michigan car ferry. Then came two larger rebuilt car ferries, the City of Munising in 1938 and the City of Petoskey in 1940. The smaller St. Ignace and Mackinaw City were resold to the Federal government for service on the Atlantic coast.

In the winter of 1952, the Highway Department acquired the 10,000-horsepower Vacationland. Built at the Great Lakes Engineering Works in River Rouge, Mich., it cost \$4,745,000 and, with a 75-foot beam and a 350-foot length, became the queen of the fleet. The Vacationland and the Coast Guard cutter Mackinaw were the two most powerful ships on the Great Lakes.

The Vacationland carried nearly 150 cars and trucks and the Munising and Petoskey 105 each. The Cheboygan carried 85 vehicles and the Straits of Mackinac about 55, giving the five-vessel fleet a capacity of about 500 vehicles.

Except for the early 1940's, the years of World War II when gas rationing sharply curtailed travel, the ferry business rose year after year. Vehicles carried by the fleet topped 900,000 for the first time in 1955. The record was broken again in the first 10 months of 1957.

The bridge was opened to traffic Nov. 1, 1957, and the ferry fleet, no longer needed, went out of service forever.

What happened to the boats and the men who ran them?

Nearly 400 Highway Department employes were working aboard the ferries, on the docks and in the ferry service office and warehouse when the fleet went out of business. Most employes who wanted to stay with the Department were placed, although many preferred resigning or retiring rather than having to move from the Straits area.

Though the fleet is a fading memory, four of the five vessels in service in 1957 are still afloat. The Straits of Mackinac carried passengers between Mackinaw City and Mackinac Island until 1968. It was part of a fleet owned by Straits Transit, Inc., formed by a group of former ferry employes in 1959.

The vessel was sold to Peterson Builders, Inc., of Sturgeon Bay, Wis. There it was converted into a floating hotel of sorts for Navy men sent for training and shakedown cruises aboard ships built by the Peterson company.

The City of Munising and City of Cheboygan moved to less glamorous duty at Washington Island, off the tip of Wisconsin's Door Peninsula in Lake Michigan. Edward H. Anderson, one of the Midwest's major potato growers and dealers, stores his island-grown crop in the two ferries, then has both vessels towed to Benton Harbor, Mich., where the potatoes are processed for market during the winter. Anderson named the Cheboygan after himself. The Munising is simply referred to as No. 2.

The City of Petoskey no longer exists. It was sold in 1961, towed into Lake Erie and scrapped.

The Vacationland, pride of the fleet, was sold for \$1.2 million in 1961 to Compagni De Navigation Nord-Sud Ltee., of Rimouski, Quebec. For several years, as the Pere Nouvel, it churned back and forth across the Gulf of St. Lawrence between Pointe-Au-Pere and Baie Comeau. It was kept busy, the nearest bridge being 185 miles to the west.

The Department of Transportation of the Dominion of British Columbia bought the vessel in 1967 and re-christened it the Sunshine Coast Queen. It was towed to the Pacific Coast, spruced up and enlarged by a \$600,000 alteration job. Its capacity now is 220 cars.

Far from its home in the Great Lakes, the Sunshine Coast Queen went into service in Pacific waters in the spring of 1968, carrying cars and passengers along British Columbia's Sechelt Peninsula.

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