

# Fifty Years for the *Huron*, Second Generation Ferry

## A Look at History

BY FRANK STRAUS

### Huron Ferry

December has come to the Straits of Mackinac. In the busy days of summer, three boat lines speed back and forth to Mackinac Island from two mainland ports. But when we hang out our wreaths and string our lights in the snowy December air, over the harbors of St. Ignace and Mackinac Island sounds the air horn of only one boat offering continued passenger service: the Arnold Line's *M/S Huron*.

The *Huron*, which celebrated its 50th birthday this year, is one of Arnold Line's second generation of ferryboats. In its first generation, the years before World War II, Arnold Transit Company operated coal-fired steamboats in the Straits of Mackinac. Arnold Line's second generation, which includes the *Huron*, were the diesel-powered motor vessels that served as the backbone of the line from the 1950s into the 1980s. Catamarans, the boxy speedboats that operate in warmer weather, are the Arnold Line's third generation.

As their name makes clear, the diesel engine was invented in Germany by engineer Rudolf Diesel. Strangely enough, during World War II, many more diesels were manufactured and used in the United States than in Germany, largely because of America's leading role in the global production of crude oil in those days. It was found that the diesel engine, like its cousin the gasoline engine, was exceptionally reliable and able to produce heavy mechanical power with relatively few employee operators. The Arnold Line's old favorite, the *Algomah II*, had required a full-time crew of 20 men to run it. The diesel boats require less than 10 people; the catamarans need four people.

This increase in employee productivity allowed the Arnold Line and its postwar competitors, such as the former Straits Line, to keep their costs down. The *Huron* and her sister boats did not offer a fast ride to and from Mackinac Island, but the fares were low. The United States continued to be the largest producer of crude oil in the world and the price of diesel fuel was reasonable by today's standards. A 1958 schedule printed by the Arnold Line shows the *Huron* together with many of her sister motor vessels in service from Mackinaw City and St. Ignace to Mackinac Island. The round-trip fare from Mackinaw City to Mackinac Island was only \$1.90, and the two-way fare from St. Ignace to Mackinac Island was only \$1.65. (Readers should keep in mind that in 1958 each quarter was made out of silver.)

With the building and opening in 1957 of the Mackinac Bridge, the startup of the historical restoration program at Fort Mackinac, and significant Moral Re-Armament activity at

Mission Point, passenger traffic boomed in the 1950s and 60s. There was plenty of work for the *Huron* and her sister vessels.

Up into the 1990s, the Arnold Line was one of the last full-service "package-freight" lines on the Great Lakes. "Package freight" refers to the old break-bulk system in which freight bound for one port or another was broken down into its individual packages for loading and unloading. Many of the Great Lakes' mightiest names, such as the Anchor Line, the Goodrich Line, Graham & Morton, and the Detroit & Cleveland, operated "package freight" vessels that carried both freight in the hold and passengers on upper decks.

The *Huron* commingles diesel-engine technology with the old package-freight paradigm. The boat contains a spacious, beamy lower deck from which freight can be carried on and off on individually rolled hand-trucks or carts. My fami-



The mighty *Huron*.

ly always used the Arnold Line when I was a boy, and we would carefully plan how to unload our heavily laden station wagon as it approached Mackinaw City or St. Ignace at the end of the long drive toward the Straits of Mackinac.

"Someone has to go get a truck," Mom would say, referring to those hand-trucks.

The *Huron* also carried commercial shipments of food-stuffs and hospitality supplies

from St. Ignace to Mackinac Island for many years. Starting in the 1990s, much of Mackinac Island's freight needs are taken care of by barge. One unusual item of freight reflects Mackinac Island's unique culture and economy. Live horses still go back and forth on the *Huron*. The vessel's spacious and well-ventilated lower deck offers the animals a safe and friendly way to travel over the water.

At the end of the 1960 summer season, with the retirement of the *Algomah II*, the Arnold

Line waved good-bye to its steamboat era. Today, in the 2000s, the role of the second-generation motor vessels to the Arnold Line has somewhat diminished. The line no longer routinely runs motor vessels back and forth to its dock in Mackinaw City. Motor vessels, renamed "classic ferries," go back and forth frequently in summer from St. Ignace to Mackinaw City, offering ferryboat riders a 30-minute ride and a graceful way to appreciate the beauties of the Straits of

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Leroy Allers, Arnold Transit captain in the 1950s and 1960s, peers from the pilot house of the *Huron* in this Otto Lang photograph. (Photograph courtesy of Tom Pfeiffelmann)

#### Island Businesses Open Year-Around

Alford's Drug Store  
Allied EMS  
Arnold Transit Company  
*weather permitting*  
Balsam Shops  
Bible Church  
Bogan Lane Bed & Breakfast  
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Carriage Tours  
*(by appointment)*  
City Government Offices  
Condos in the Stonecliffe Estate  
Condos on the Cliff  
Doud's Grocery  
First National Bank  
of St. Ignace  
Great Lakes Air  
Great Turtle Lodge  
Harbor Place Apartments

Harrisonville General Store  
Loon Feather  
Mackinac Island  
Tourism Bureau  
Mackinac Island Public Library  
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Mackinac Island Realty  
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Medical Center  
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