

# Mackinac Bridge Doesn't Swing Over to Island

## A Look at History

BY FRANK STRAUS

### Mackinac Bridge



"When does the bridge swing over?" When I was a docent in the Mackinac Island Convention Bureau's kiosk on Main Street, and later a full-time interpreter in the State Park's Visitor Center, that was a question I would sometimes be asked. A rumor told for decades by long-time Islanders to new summer people is that the Mackinac Bridge is attached to pivots and sometimes "swings over" to Mackinac Island.

In reality, of course, the bridge never swings. Good thing, in the eyes of those defending our unique car-free environment, however, the Mackinac Bridge is closely connected with the history of Mackinac Island. As the bridge prepares to celebrate its 50th birthday Friday, July 27, and Saturday, July 28, our Island is preparing to join in the celebration.

Sharp increases in tourist travel to the Straits of Mackinac came in the late 1870s, soon after the Mackinac Island-born Senator William Ferry elevated the Fort Mackinac military reservation into Mackinac National Park (1875). Only nine years later, in 1884, residents of Mackinaw City and St. Ignace began to push for the construction of a bridge to connect the two towns. In 1888, the railroad CEO Cornelius Vanderbilt II, chairing the first meeting of the board of directors of Mackinac Island's Grand Hotel, called for the construction of a bridge across the Straits of Mackinac. Instead of Vanderbilt's bridge, however, his railroad collaborated to create a car ferry line to shuttle railroad cars, and that was where matters would rest for almost 70 years.

When bridge work swung into action in the 1950s, Mackinac Island played a role in helping to "sell" the bridge to investors. The bridge itself cost almost \$100 million to build, at a time when each U.S. dollar

was made up of silver coins. The bonds used to build the bridge were sold in 1953 through investment banks in New York, including several Wall Street houses led by men who might well not have known of northern Michigan except for the active presence of Mackinac Island and its nationwide resort reputation. Incidentally, these were not State of Michigan bonds; they were bonds of the Mackinac Bridge Authority, backed by nothing but the bridge. The last Bridge Authority bonds were paid off and retired in 1986.

As the new bridge rose, sight lines granted Mackinac Island a unique perspective on the work, which could be seen framed by Michigan's Upper and Lower Peninsulas. The bridge's construction night lights visibly spanned the Straits. The lights are actually older than the completed bridge, as they were first strung on the bridge's cables when they were under construction in 1955-57 to enable ironworkers and bridge builders to work around the clock, every day. The bridge's cable lighting was originally a temporary electrical circuit that would have been disconnected upon completion of the construction work on the bridge.

The completion of the Mackinac Bridge played a major role in changing and re-balancing the ferryboat market to and from Mackinac Island. Up to and including the last pre-bridge summer season in 1957, almost all casual visitors to Mackinac Island took the boat from Mackinaw City. The boats to St. Ignace were used primarily by the Islanders themselves for shopping and business in the county seat. The opening of the Mackinac Bridge made it possible for a substantial number of travelers to use St. Ignace as their base of operations, and the ferry lines began to sell round-trip tickets to day trippers from St. Ignace to Mackinac Island.



The Mackinac Island Chamber of Commerce float was pulled by a team of horses driven by Bob Gillespie in the 1958 Mackinac Bridge parade in St. Ignace. Standing on the back of the float (from left) are Morton Pero, Francis "Skeesic" LaPine, and Herb Pfeiffelmann. A band in the parade began to play, startling the horses, which bolted, taking the float with them. Tom Pfeiffelmann said, "When my dad asked Bob were they were headed, he yelled, 'Epoufette.'" (Photograph courtesy of Tom Pfeiffelmann)

Both the Mackinaw City and St. Ignace boats run to and from Mackinac Island much more frequently than they did in 1957, with several different lines operating boats from both ports every half-hour during the height of the season.

One of Mackinac Island's best-loved ferryboat lines traces its ancestry to the upheaval in local life caused by the construction of the bridge. Before the bridge was built, the state of Michigan operated a year-around ferryboat service across the Straits of Mackinac to keep a fragile link alive between the two peninsulas. The construction of the bridge forced the state to offer these boats for sale, and lay off their seamen. Local ferryboat workers purchased one of the surplus boats, *The Straits of Mackinac*, and with it founded the Straits Transit in 1958, which would become one of Mackinac Island's ferryboat lines for more than two decades.

The Mackinac Bridge helped

to destroy, as well as create. With motor vehicle traffic triumphant, local railroads ended their remaining passenger train service to and from the Straits of Mackinac almost immediately

upon the completion of the bridge. Only 10 years after the bridge opened, the last U.S.-flag Great Lakes passenger liner, the *S.S. South American*, sailed away from Mackinac Island for the last time in 1967. For passenger safety reasons, the *South American* had been ordered to retire and its owners, who would have liked to charter or build a new liner, were financially unable to do so.

Meanwhile in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the face of tourism on Mackinac Island was changing fast. Soaring headcounts of day trippers, many of them families from the Midwest on motor vehicle summer vacations, demanded new services from Mackinac Island's Main Street and paid for new exhibits and interpreters at Fort Mackinac and other State Park historic sites.

This trend has continued to the present day. Today, many of the younger travelers and families who visit Mackinac Island are on a trip that also includes a drive over the Mackinac Bridge, and Island souvenir stores routinely carry postcards and other memorabilia of the bridge.

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### "Moonlit Majesty"

by Island Artist

**John Manikoff**

John's work is being exhibited in the Mackinac Island Public Library for the month of July.

Mr. Manikoff is a graduate of Platt College of Design in Los Angeles, and is a graphic designer, artist and Illustrator. His oil paintings capture the beauty that is Mackinac Island. The original oil painting of "Moonlit Majesty" is available as well as limited edition giclee prints.

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