

# Area Celebrates First 50 Years of Bridge With Parades, Fireworks

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pasties, and fudge, and basked in the beautiful summer weather of the Straits of Mackinac to celebrate the first 50 years of the bridge and to honor those who built and now maintain the structure.

Former ironworkers rode on floats in each parade. State and local dignitaries and parade queens crossed the bridge in the convertibles, including Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm and former governors James Blanchard and William G. Milliken. Also riding in a convertible was Miss Michigan 2007, Kirsten Haglund, and in a horse-drawn carriage was Miss Michigan 1957, Valerie Strong Agresta.

Some of the participants appeared in both parades, while marching bands and local groups marched only in Mackinaw City or St. Ignace parades. Each parade contained approximately 90 entrants, including members of Mackinac Bridge Authority, and all the politicians representing the communities on both sides of the Straits: U.S. Senators Carl Levin and Debbie Stabenow, U.S. Congressman Bart Stupak, State Senator Jason Allen, State Representatives Kevin Elsenheimer (105th District representing Cheboygan County) and Gary McDowell (107th District representing Mackinac and Emmet counties), St. Ignace Mayor Paul Grondin, Mackinaw City Village President Robert Heilman, and Mackinac Island Mayor Margaret Doud. Also appearing were honorary committee members William Cochran, the only living member of the Mackinac Bridge Authority from 1957, Prentiss M. Brown, Jr. and Larry Rubin, the first executive secretary of the Authority. Don and Carl Andress led the parade on horseback, dressed in Native American regalia, and marching bands from St. Ignace, Mackinaw City, Indian River, Traverse City, Holland, and Boyne City joined the festivities, as did Fort Michilimackinac soldiers, the Wheelmen vintage bicyclists, Shriners, Portage

Players puppets from Curtis, wooden boats from the Les Cheneaux Islands, St. Ignace Fire Department clowns, Mackinac Island cheerleaders, and the Cedarville boys basketball state championship team.

From Friday through Sunday, 5,442 more vehicles crossed the bridge than over the same period last year, about an 8.5% increase, said Bob Sweeney, executive secretary for the Mackinac Bridge Authority (MBA). The greatest number of travelers were on Friday, and over the three-day period, 69,510 crossed the Mighty Mac, compared to 64,068 vehicles in 2006.

Crowds gathered along beaches on both the north and south shores of the Straits to view evening fireworks, which burst above the road at both sides. The normally quiet Boulevard Drive in St. Ignace was lined with vehicles, which honked horns in approval of each favorite fireworks shot from the MBA property just east of the bridge. From Straits State Park to Lakeside Cemetery and all the way to the point, people filled the shoreline.

Bridge traffic was halted during the fireworks displays, as it was for the jet fly-over at 10:30 that morning.

Mackinac Island sent its own fireworks salute, which ended just as the twin Mackinac Bridge displays began.

Mackinaw City, Mackinac Island, and St. Ignace reported heavy visitor traffic over the weekend.

"I saw 'sorry' and 'no vacancy' signs everywhere I went," said Lynne Piippo, executive director of the St. Ignace Visitors Bureau.

Of the bridge celebration, Cheryl Schlehuber, St. Ignace Chamber of Commerce board president, said, "I live here, and I got chills. It was better than you could possibly imagine. What a great tribute to the visionaries who brought it here, to the ironworkers who built it, to the crews that maintain it, and the people who cross it."

"Anyone who was here for the weekend, how could they not want to come back?" Mrs.



**Mackinac Island cheerleaders participated in the Mackinac Bridge 50th anniversary celebration parade Saturday, July 28. The team, headed by Donna Killips, includes Mackenzie Bean, Kyra Kolatski, Hailey Armstrong, Jessica Beaune, Sierra Kompasi, Adrienne Rilenge, Amelia Roe, Hailey Bean, and Zhan'e Nash. Lilac Queen Kristi Kamphius and Lilac Princess Dana Roguska, also an Island cheerleader, were part of the parade, as well.**



**A member of the High 5 Guys stilt-walking group makes a big impression on children at the St. Ignace parade. Following close behind are the Portage Players from Curtis.**

Schlehuber asked.

Eileen Evers, administrative assistant at the Chamber, agreed.

"The weather was gorgeous and people were ready for a good time," she said. "I think we gave it to them."

Approximately 30 volunteers helped with parade details in St. Ignace Saturday, she said, and 40 additional volunteers worked at the marina for the city's inaugural Fish Feast.

"There were a lot of volunteers, who worked very, very hard and gave up their whole day," said Mrs. Evers. "The events couldn't have happened without their help. It was great."

**At left: Crossing the Mighty Mac Saturday, July 28, are 50 years of convertibles, seen from the south tower looking toward St. Ignace. The parade was similar to the 1958 celebration parade, which had 50 white Oldsmobile convertibles. The cars took part in parades in St. Ignace and Mackinaw City. Riding in them were dignitaries and queens.** (Photograph courtesy of the Michigan Department of Transportation)

Mackinaw City was packed with people, reported Greg Hokans, chief of Development and Marketing for Mackinac State Historic Parks, and Marilyn McFarland, executive director for the Mackinaw Area Visitors Bureau.

About 1,500 people paid to watch the fireworks from in front of Colonial Michilimackinac and along the beach. He estimated 10 times that number stood outside the park area.

"It was a huge amount of people, a very appreciative crowd, and a safe event," he said of the Mackinaw City display. "It was well organized by the MBA and Mackinaw City police."

The fireworks were a success and he hopes this will develop a relationship with out-of-town visitors who now will want to return to the area.

"Everyone was just delighted with the display and the beautiful night," said Mr. Hokans. "It was a great family event."

Ms. McFarland agreed.

"The parade exceeded my expectations, and the weather could not have been prettier," she said.

From a Friday night banquet in St. Ignace to the parade, fireworks, and other events, Ms. McFarland said the MBA and

the events committee did a great job.

"It was just a class act all the way," she said. "It was fabulous."

The celebration added to the area economy by bringing in visitors, said Ms. McFarland.

"It was Labor Day all over again," she said. "It came early this year."

Mackinaw City hotels were full and the Visitors Bureau received calls from people telling them all campgrounds were full north of Alpena.

"We were just bursting at the seams," she said, adding that it was about 2 a.m. before traffic cleared and most people were able to leave Mackinaw City after the fireworks.

Community cooperation helped to ensure the success of the weekend, said Bob Felt, from the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) office of communications.

"MDOT worked very closely with local communities and the MBA, and indications point to an event that exceeded our expectations," he said. On a personal note, he added, "It was the best fireworks show I've ever seen."

Concerned that more people were going to attend the events than initially expected as area hotels filled rooms and with limited parking at Bridge View Park, the MBA set up a last minute shuttle service of school buses to reduce congestion at the Bridge View Park activities area. Off-site parking was made available from Little Bear East Arena and Convention Center in St. Ignace. The MBA also uses school buses during the Labor Day bridge walk. About 155 people took advantage of the service.

The MBA also made the toll booth canopy available to Bridge View Park visitors walking from St. Ignace and the Straits State Park. The canopy allows passage over I-75. Others parked near Bridge View Park and along Boulevard Drive.

Events began early in the week, when the Budweiser Clydesdales arrived in preparation for leading the St. Ignace parade Saturday. Informational talks about the bridge by Chief Engineer Kim Nowack were held at the St. Ignace Library and

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