

A HISTORY OF THE IRONTON FERRY

Including

THE VILLAGE AND IRON WORKS

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PART I: THE VILLAGE AND IRON WORKS

PART II: THE FERRY

By

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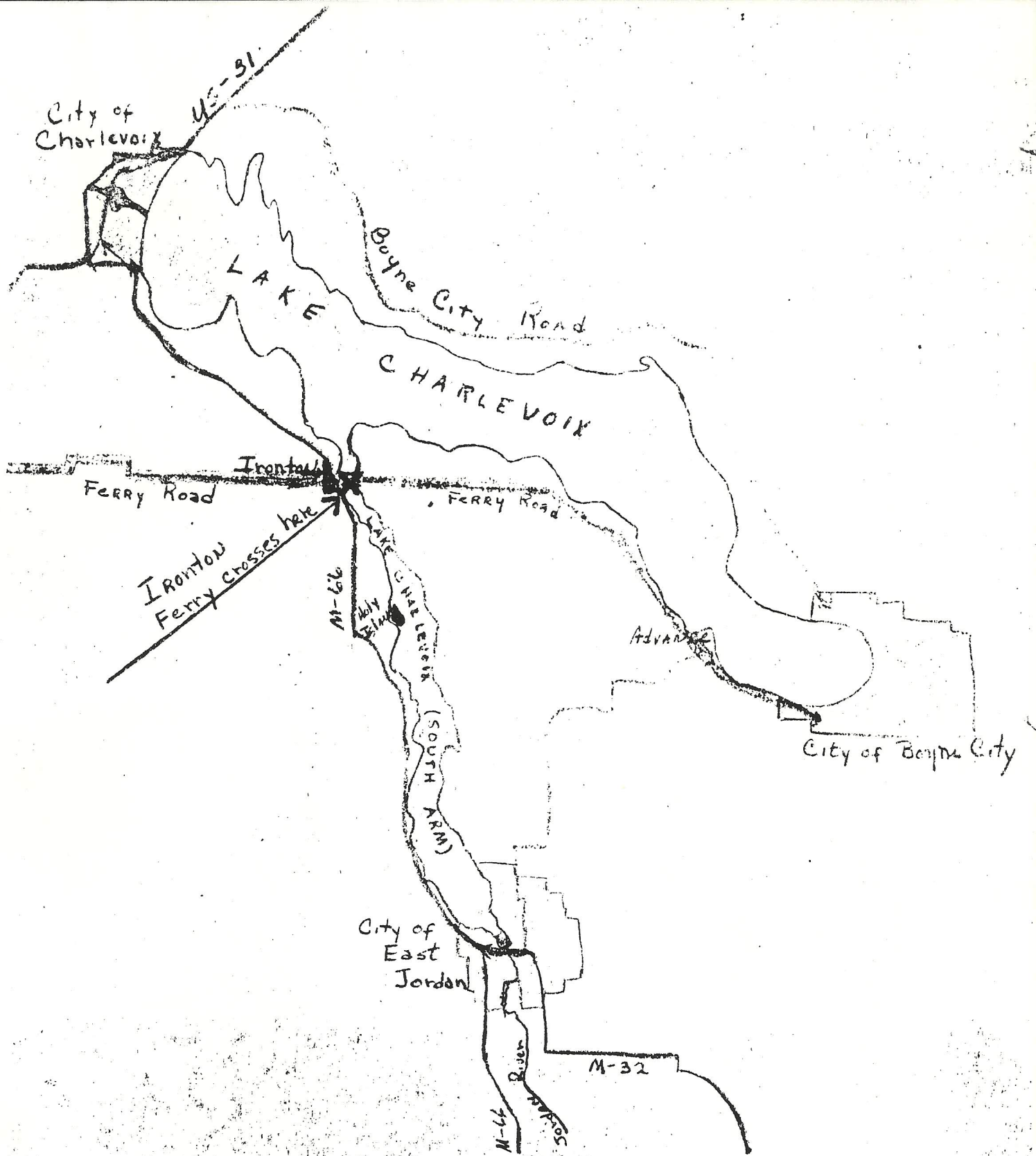
For

History 591  
Mr. Dain

May, 1975

Central Michigan University

(A Copy)



PART I

IRONTON: The Village and The Iron Works

The village of Ironton is situated upon the west shore of the South Arm of Lake Charlevoix, (formerly known as Pine Lake) a short distance beyond the point at which the arm branches from the lake. It is located between the towns of Charlevoix and East Jordan. It is about six miles south of Charlevoix and eight miles north of East Jordan on highway M-66.

Today, the tiny community of Ironton consists of a village of residents, having only one small grocery store, a church, a school, and at the ferry dock a boat livery business which includes a snack bar, small grocery section, and gas station. As in former years, much of the surrounding area is inhabited by summer residents, who own cottages or homes along the lakeshore. In recent years it is becoming more and more common for these summer people to stay and become permanent residents.

In the early years of its history, Ironton consisted of several streets with wooden sidewalks on the hill and by the lake. Some of the early developments and developers were as follows: Robert N. Cherrie, who was instrumental

in establishing an iron works at Ironton in 1879, which was not only important to the growth of the community, but to Charlevoix County as well. Along with the industry, he built a company store. A company post office was established in 1880. In 1881 a saw mill was owned by Aaron Box. John G. Peterson, a native of Sweden, came to Ironton in 1880. He first worked in the Iron Works, then in 1882 he built a general store and became a successful merchant in the community. One of Michigan's early pioneers, (coming to Michigan in 1830) A. B. Noyes came to Ironton in 1880, and kept the first boarding house in the village. In 1882 he built the Pioneer House, the only hotel in the village. Also, in that same year, a school building was built, and the Methodist Society built a church.<sup>1</sup>

There were also two saloons, one near the lake next to the ferry house where there were known to have been some long remembered brawls. One Iron Company worker was killed as a result of a bloody battle.<sup>2</sup>

"Ironton was settled at first by a few woodcutters, and some scattered homesteaders. The settlers built log cabin homes and cleared their land. Ironton grew slowly as a community until the arrival of R. N. Cherrie, who came from Chicago in the late 1870's."<sup>3</sup> This site was

particularly well adapted to the necessities of his business, being in a heavily wooded section, and also upon the line of navigation.

Mr. Cherrie quickly recognized that the stands of hardwood on Holy Island, and along the shores of Pine Lake (now Lake Charlevoix) would produce an abundance of charcoal necessary to manufacture cast iron. He purchased the acreage, and by 1879 hired woodcutters, who began felling and cutting the trees into cordwood.

The woodsmen hauled the cordwood to the shores of Pine Lake and piled the wood upon scows. A tug, captained by "One-eyed" Dick Williams, pulled the loaded scows to Ironton. The cordwood was removed from the scows and piled on flat cars which were pulled over a tram to the woodyard.

While the cordwood was being stacked and cured, Mr. Cherrie built a series of twenty-two kilns and an iron furnace. They were arranged in two rows and resembled beehives in shape. The tram from the lake to the woodyard ran between the two rows of kilns. The kilns burned the wood into charcoal, and the charcoal produced the intense heat needed to melt the iron ore. By 1881 Cherrie's Pine Lake Iron Co. was manufacturing cast iron.

The operation of the kilns was rather simple. The cordwood filled flat cars were pushed over the tram from the wood yard to the kilns. Workmen dropped anywhere from fifteen to twenty cords of wood into each kiln from an opening near the top.

After the kiln was charged, a fire was started on the floor of the kiln with wood shavings and soft-wood. Then a sheet iron door was closed tightly. Around the bottom of the kiln were removable bricks. The workmen would pull bricks out to gain more draft or a hotter fire. If the wood began to burn too fast, kiln operators replaced the bricks in order to choke down, or smother, the fire. It took seven days to burn the wood and cool the charcoal before they could open the sheet iron door and shovel it out. The kilns consumed thirty-six thousand cords of wood yearly while producing one and one-quarter million bushels of charcoal. Manufactured charcoal was shoveled into buggies and wheeled to the Pine Lake Iron Company's furnace near the lake.

Along the shore of the lake and close to the dock was a massive pile of iron ore. The iron ore was brought in by schooners from Escanaba. Approximately thirty thousand tons were delivered every year to the Pine Lake Iron Company. The charcoal and iron ore were poured down the throat of the furnace stack by means of a conveyer system. The stack was charged with alternate layers of charcoal and iron ore up to the top. When the furnace was charged, the bottom layer of charcoal was ignited. As the fire burned its way up to the other layers of charcoal, the iron ore was melted. Then the iron ore had liquified and the door at the mouth of the blast furnace was opened and the molten iron ran out of the furnace and into the casting room. In the smoky casting room the steaming iron flowed

down on a network of sand-made channels into beds, or molds, formed out of sand, to cool. As the iron cooled workmen called "sandhogs" went into the casting room with sledgehammers and broke the solidified pig iron into manageable sized bars weighing approximately one hundred pounds each.

After the "pigs", as the blocks of iron were called, cooled, they were loaded on four wheeled buggies and pushed to the pig yard where they would await shipment. When their ship arrived, the pigs were loaded on the buggies again and pushed over the track to the dock. The pigs were then loaded onto the schooner. Where they were shipped is uncertain, but it is known that highgrade cast iron manufactured at the Pine Lake Iron Co. was especially good for making stoves and ranges.<sup>4</sup>

The iron from Ironton was recognized as superior quality on the market and the firm boasted of that fact. Some of this iron went to build rails for the Union Pacific Railway.

The plant consisted of a casting room which was a large wooden structure, a machine shop, and an office in the front. Cherrie employed between two and three hundred people in the plant and in the woods.

Cherrie brought in a few experts, knowledgeable in this industry, but most of the workers were local people. One of these experts was James Otis who came from New York in 1883. He was the first member of the company to

reside in Ironton. In February, 1884 a tragic accident occurred and he was crushed by the fall of a heavy weight and died within a few weeks.<sup>5</sup>

"Occasionally, some of the employees turned out to be drifters--who worked only long enough to collect a paycheck and then depart. Consequently, Cherrie, who had built a general store north of the Iron Works, decided to pay his workers in script. In the store he stocked all the goods needed by his employees and required them to trade at the 'company store'. The result was that many a drifter stayed longer than he anticipated. Provisions for the store came by way of schooner. There was no road between Charlevoix and Ironton at this time, except for a sandy trail."<sup>6</sup>

Cherrie's Pine Lake Iron Company had been responsible for making Ironton a boomtown. Ironton had grown from a small settlement to a thriving community of about twelve hundred people. Then a sudden turn of events changed all this.

"Everything was working fine in boomtown until the presidential year of 1893. In that year there resulted labor troubles and strikes that began to get nationwide attention. It was one of the most controversial election years in history. Cherrie was a staunch Republican and said if the Democrats won the election he would shut down



the furnace and go out of business. This is exactly what happened. Grover Cleveland won the election, and when the returns came through, Cherrie kept his word. He not only closed the furnace, but he blew it up with dynamite, and then returned to Chicago. Cherrie had recently had a railroad constructed between Charlevoix and Ironton, and he had that torn up and discontinued. Ironically, only one train had ever arrived on it."<sup>7</sup> Chances are the panic of 1893 had some bearing on Cherrie's decision. This was the year of a depression and the price of pig iron dropped drastically.

With industry gone, people left in search of employment. The community declined, and even some of the houses were moved to East Jordan. Because of its location, Ironton did thrive as a resort community in the summer.

"A resort called Sweet Briar Farms, and consisting of cottages rented mainly to resorters from Chicago, existed at Ironton. Eva Adams, who was a neice of R. N. Cherrie, stayed on in Ironton, and managed the general store and Sweet Briar Farms for thirty-seven years. Guests came on the train to Charlevoix, then booked passage on the Hum, the local passenger boat to Ironton."<sup>8</sup>

"Professor and Mrs. J. Rawleigh Nelson of Ann Arbor were the first guests and eventually bought one of the

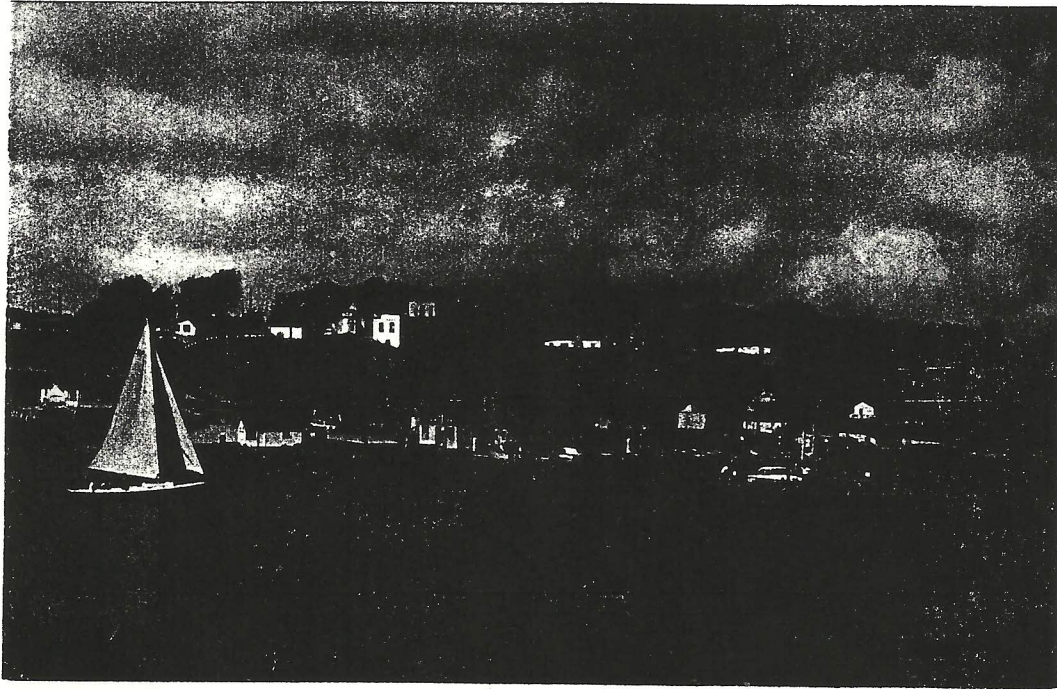
homes there. Other prominent guests who became known as 'Ironton's summer people' were: Mr. and Mrs. Robert Wilson and family of Akron, Ohio, who was vice president of the Goodyear Tire Company; Edward Holden and sister Margaret of Chicago; and Clara Clemens, Mark Twain's daughter. A local resident named Henry Webb owned a Model-T Ford and would take them to Charlevoix shopping. Holden always said that a corner looked to Webb like a red flag to a mad bull, as he always speeded up when he came to one!"<sup>9</sup>

"In 1929 Miss Adams sold the Sweet Briar Farms property to Louis Ryman of Ann Arbor. On these grounds Ryman operated Camp Charlevoix until he decided to move the camp to Oyster Bay. Later on a mysterious fire broke out and consumed all the homes except that of Professor Nelson's." <sup>10</sup>

Although summers were full of action and activity with the summer residents coming in, winters meant isolation and loneliness to those who stayed all year in Ironton, as people were scarce and snow drifts buried one for weeks on end. Such was the plight of a northern Michigan resort town in the early 1900's.

Boomtown, resort town, or just plain small rural community, many people enjoy the tranquility of Ironton as it sits proudly on the calm water at the neck of the South Arm of Lake Charlevoix.

PART II: THE IRONTON FERRY



An active link between Michigan's past and present, the Ironton ferry creates a picturesque scene as it operates across the neck of the South Arm of Lake Charlevoix today as it did almost a century ago. It completes the Charlevoix County road link between Ironton and Boyne City by transporting motor vehicles across the 575 foot span of water. Guided by two steel cables, the ferry makes the narrow crossing in a matter of minutes. It opens for operation April first and continues to run

through December (weather permitting). Dates of opening and closing vary with the weather each year.

The origin of the Ironton ferry dates back to around 1876 when a man named Robert Bedwin first took people back and forth across the narrow channel in a rowboat. Bedwin, who lived on the east approach, charged only a nickel a trip.<sup>11</sup>

A ferry was constructed as a comparatively inexpensive means of transporting market-bound farmers and their horses and wagons between Charlevoix and Eveline townships. Also, with the coming of the new Iron Works industry to Ironton, the need for a ferry grew.

A man named Arden Sheldon built an eighteen by twenty-four foot wooden scow and appointed himself ferryman. It was large enough to accommodate a team and wagon. Many times frightened horses had to be blindfolded with bags to make the crossing. The scow was dragged along a single half inch cable by hand. The hand power was provided by the ferryman and all his passengers.<sup>12</sup>

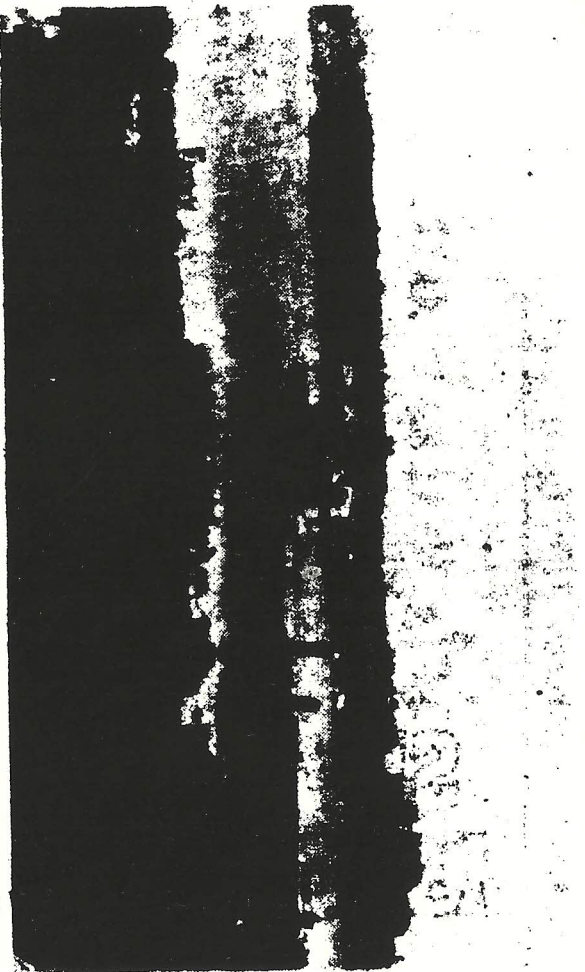
"Those were the days, when if the barge happened to be on one side, and a team came along on the other, it just had to wait until someone came along from the other way to help haul the barge across. One man couldn't operate it alone. But then, folks had lots of time in those days."<sup>13</sup>

"By 1883 the Charlevoix County Board of Supervisors decided that someone should assume the responsibility for a public ferry so Henry Sheldon was licensed and bonded to operate the ferry and was permitted to charge a toll fee. In 1885 the state authorized the supervisors to operate the ferry and it 1886 it was bought from Sheldon. It was operated toll free.

"Robert Miller, Eveline Township clerk, was the first county-hired ferryman and was paid \$1.25 a day in wages."<sup>14</sup>

"In the spring of 1877 politics and scarce money resulted in low bidding for the job of ferry operator. A man named Joe Tuttle was awarded the position for sixty cents a day.

For fourteen years Tuttle and his passengers pulled the cable that operated the vessel's passage from shore to shore. To the passenger's relief, in 1891, a rather crude one-cylinder gasoline engine was built by Theodore Ericson of Charlevoix and was installed to provide the ferry's power."<sup>15</sup>



HERE IS ONE of the early Ironton Ferry boats used to cross the South Arm of Lake Charlevoix.

Around 1900 Sam Alexander, of Ironton, was hired to operate the ferry. Mr. Alexander was highway commissioner, but so much of his time was taken up with the ferry, that the township decided to turn the job over to him permanently.<sup>16</sup> "Captain Sam", as he was called, served as skipper on the ferry longer than any other ferryman-- for about a half a century.

"Sam Alexander was born in Quincy, Kentucky and came to Ironton in 1888. Upon his arrival he gained employment at the Iron Works. At Ironton he met and married Harriet Williams, who was born and raised in Canada."<sup>17</sup>

Sam Alexander operated the Sheldon ferry for around twelve years, then with the coming of the automobile it was deemed necessary to acquire a larger ferry. A man named Waterman, from East Jordan, who owned a sawmill, was contracted to build the scow around 1912. The new Waterman ferry was powered by a fifteen horsepower, two cylinder Galenberg gasoline engine. The ferry had a propeller at each end; one pulled and one pushed. This ferry was guided across the lake with two cables.<sup>18</sup> This was to prevent it from drifting away from the line of crossing.

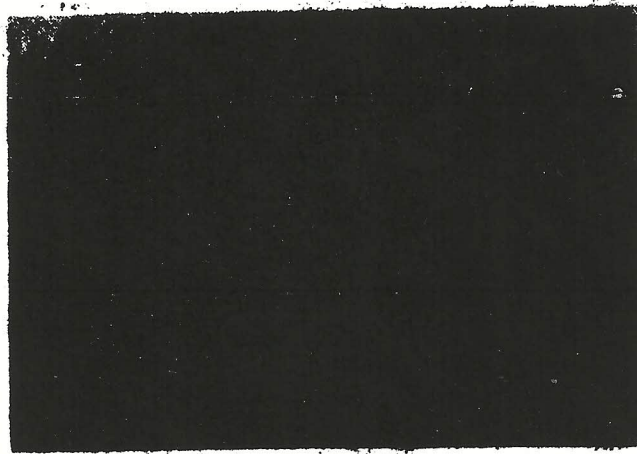
Sam Alexander's son, Ross, worked on the ferry with his father for twelve years. Ross and his wife, Hilda, still live at Ironton. Ross recalls many of the memories

and interesting happenings on the Ironton ferry. One of the stories he likes to tell is how Captain Sam, as a challenge, kept the ferry running all winter. Some nights he had to go out two or three times on an ice breaking mission, to keep the channel open.<sup>19</sup>

Normally the ferry is closed in the winter as the channel freezes solid with ice. Some winters in past years the ice has been so solid that cars drove across it from one shore to the other. Although this has not been the case in recent years, there is snow machine traffic across it today.

"With the advent of the auto, some terrifying events occurred. Ross Alexander recalls one time when the Bradshaw family of East Jordan drove onto the ferry, the car broke through the log-chain barrier, rolled off the ferry and sank. Bradshaw had managed to jump out before the car hit the water, but his wife, her father and their two small children were in the sinking car. As they came up one at a time, Alexander pulled them in with a ring buoy, except for Mrs. Bradshaw. Leaning over the side, Alexander saw Mrs. Bradshaw on the bottom of the lake. Reaching into the water with a long pike pole he hooked her coat and thus pulled her to the surface. Fortunately, she was revived with artificial respiration."<sup>20</sup>

Another incident was when Frank Taylor from Chicago drove off the ferry. His foot slipped off the clutch. He reacted quickly to pull the emergency brake, but instead pulled the throttle and sped overboard. Taylor was rescued with a buoy and his car was salvaged several days later. It was no wonder the state required the ferry to carry a rowboat along side during Model-T days.



One of the early ferries with the rowboat at the side--about 1915.


"In 1926 the wooden ferry that Waterman had built was discarded. A man named Rowe from Harbor Springs who had a piledriver bought the old Waterman ferry for an auxiliary scow."<sup>21</sup>

The new ferry that took its place is the present steel vessel. It was built to the specifications of Sam Alexander and cost \$12,000. Ross Alexander, of Ironton, and



Sam Rose, of Charlevoix, went to Ferrysburg (up the Grand River from Grand Haven) to bring the new ferry back to Ironton. They brought it up Lake Michigan, then down through Lake Charlevoix to the neck of the South Arm at Ironton. It took five days and the trip was a rough one due to stormy weather.<sup>22</sup>

**BELIEVE IT OR NOT**  
By RIPLEY



*Don't Fail to Cross the*  
**SOUTH ARM**  
*of Beautiful*  
**Lake Charlevoix**  
*With Capt. Sam Alexander*  
*on the*  
**IRONTON FERRY**  
*Operated Free by Charlevoix County*

**SAM ALEXANDER**  
FERRY BOAT OPERATOR  
HAS TRAVELED 15,000 MILES  
AND WAS NEVER FARTHER THAN 1000 FEET  
FROM HIS HOME!

*And...*  
*Made Famous by Ripley's "Believe It Or Not"*

Courtesy Print, Charlevoix, Michigan

"This ferry acquired nationwide fame in 1936<sup>\*</sup> when the creator of Ripley's Believe It Or Not came to Ironton, crossed on the ferry, and used it for one of his famous

\* There is a difference of opinion on this date; Morgridge states it was 1936. Hilda Alexander states it was 1928.

illustrated columns. The legend read: 'Sam Alexander, ferryboat operator, has traveled 15,000 miles and was never farther than 1,000 feet from his home.' The wide circulation of the article brought immediate fame to Captain Sam and the Ironton ferry. Sam received letters from all over the world, and sightseers came by the thousands to ride the famous ferry."<sup>23</sup>

"Countless notables, governors, and other public officials, artists, writers, and stars of the stage and screen have visited the quaint old system of transportation. Amos 'n Andy, famous black-face comedians of radio, were among them."<sup>24</sup>

The ferry that was made famous is the one still in service. This ferry was christened the "Charlevoix". It is a four-car ferry; a fifty foot scow powered by a three cylinder, fifty horsepower diesel engine. It weighs forty-three tons. It is a licensed craft, meeting Coast Guard regulations, and is annually inspected by the U. S. Coast Guard. Also its operators must be licensed by the Coast Guard. Technically it is listed with the Coast Guard as having the home port of Muskegon, where, ironically, it has never docked.<sup>25</sup>

Two ferry operators that ran the ferry at different times after Sam Alexander retired were Albert 'Pete' Bennett, and Walter 'Turk' Jarvis. Jarvis and Bennett were licensed Great Lakes pilots and between them had more than thirty-eight years of service on the Charlevoix. Bennett worked on the Charlevoix for twelve years from 1928. He then left and sailed the Great Lakes for a number of years, but returned to the ferry in 1956. In the summer of 1964 Jarvis and Bennett worked on the Charlevoix together, with Jarvis as captain and Bennett as crewman. Another crewman who worked with Jarvis was an Adrian College senior from Boyne City, George Bradley, who spent his summer vacation on the Charlevoix. The three men worked alternate shifts. Bradley worked seven days a week.<sup>26</sup>

Walter Jarvis retired in December, 1972 and James Gallagher took over as ferry operator in 1973. Gallagher died suddenly in January, 1975. Robert Baker, who worked with Gallagher, will continue with Norman Ramsdell, new operator for the 1975 season.

The Ironton ferry was known for many years as a free ferry. In 1949 Charlevoix County took over operation, and for the first time in sixty-nine years a fee was charged for passage. The first few years the fee was

10¢, then was raised to 15¢, 25¢, 35¢ and recently to 50¢. This is for vehicles; pedestrians ride free. Many Charlevoix County residents use the ferry regularly, as some people find it necessary to make the crossing every day to go to work. For those a book of tickets is available at a lower rate.<sup>27</sup>

Although the Ironton ferry continues to be a good tourist attraction, at different times the Charlevoix County Supervisors have been divided over the need for it. A former operator states, "The north road around the lake has lessened the need for the ferry, but this across-water route is shorter and the road is better."<sup>28</sup> One main reason the supervisors are skeptical of its continuing operation is that in spite of charging fees for crossing, the ferry fails to make enough revenue to cover the cost to maintain and operate it each year. Up until 1975 the operating deficit was shared by the Charlevoix County Board of Commissioners and the Charlevoix County Road Commission. Starting in 1975, the deficit will be picked up solely by the Charlevoix County Board of Commissioners.<sup>29</sup>

Originally the Ironton ferry was operated by Eveline Township and subsidized by Charlevoix County. Presently the ferry is owned by the Charlevoix County Board of Com-

missioners, and operated by the Charlevoix County Road Commission.<sup>30</sup>

To show how much use the ferry actually gets, some interesting changes show up in traffic figures over the years. In 1936 the ferry transported an average of 20,000 automobiles, of which nearly 80% were tourists. By 1963 that figure had more than doubled to 41,000. In 1967 the ferry traffic was somewhat less, at 38,000 vehicles, but gradually rose to 52,000 in 1971. This was a record figure for traffic across the ferry in any one year. In 1972 it became necessary to close the ferry at different times because of rising waters in Lake Charlevoix which made it impossible to use the approach ramps to the ferry. Consequently the traffic figures showed this by dropping considerably in 1972 to 43,500, and in 1973 to 31,000. In 1974 the ferry opening date was delayed until July 15 (about three months) because of construction on the approaches. Traffic figures again dropped--this time lower than they had been in many years--to 28,700.<sup>31</sup>

In the last few years the rising waters of Lake Charlevoix posed a problem for the docking of the ferry, as the old entrance ramps were not adjustable to the changing water level. Therefore, the task of installing

new approach ramps and modifying the ferry for electronic controls for the operation of the gates and ramps became necessary. In 1974 the new ramps were installed by the Porter Construction Company of East Jordan. This operation was started in January, 1974 and completed in July of that year. The ramps installed were formerly used to load the car ferries at the Straits of Mackinac, before the building of the Mackinac Bridge. The new ramps raise and lower to accomodate the ferry at any water level. The cost of the project was around \$100,000.

There are those who see a great possibility in a bridge that would span the Ironton narrows and replace the ferry. While this is a possibility, it is not an immediate probability due to the lack of funds such a project would require. One main factor contributing to the exhorbitantly high cost of a bridge at Ironton is that Lake Charlevoix, which connects with Lake Michigan, is used by lake freighters, and its waters are subject to federal regulations. Therefore a bridge would have to meet federal specifications. It would have to be either a high arch, or a type of bridge that could retract, or open, to let ships pass through to the South Arm. Such a structure would amount to a multi-million dollar project. Since the county could not possibly

come close to funds of this amount, it would depend on federal funding. At this time that does not look likely.

The Ironton ferry is the last cable operated ferry connecting a county road in existence in this country. While some may think the idea of a bridge would be more modern and convenient, there are those who staunchly oppose changing a historical way of life.<sup>32</sup>

While the controversy of ferry versus bridge goes on, a voyage across the south arm of Lake Charlevoix on the Ironton Ferry can still be enjoyed as a unique and peaceful experience, especially appreciated in today's fast paced life.

# Prefer the ferry

BY MIKE READY

Last week Charlevoix County Planner William Mercer called for the construction of a bridge to span the Ironton narrows and replace the Ironton Ferry.

He drew up a formal request for funds from the US Economic Development Administration to initiate a "feasibility study" for the proposed bridge. His request will now go through the channels of the Charlevoix County Planning Commission, the Charlevoix County Board of Commissioners, and the Northwest Michigan Regional Planning and Development Commission, before being presented to the feds unless it's stopped somewhere along the line.

In his presentation, Mercer contends that the proposed bridge will "unify the county, increase job opportunities, expand the commercial market, decrease travel time for police and ambulance runs, and generally make transportation more convenient."

I don't think any of these concerns are necessarily valid. "unify" is a vague term, and "increase" is a relative degree. But city residents themselves already have direct roadways to each other town in the county. The only County residents who might be "isolated" are those in other parts of the county, and the residents (by 1970 census) of Ironton Township.

And I don't think that increases and expansions are always desirable anyway.

The bridge, in Mercer's own words less than a year ago, would have to be extremely high, or trestle, or

in order to allow boat passage down the South Arm, and consequently would be a multi-million dollar project.

Mercer also says the bridge "would help unify the communities of Charlevoix, Boyne City, and East Jordan, and reduce the inherent competitiveness among the cities, which are now isolated from each other . . ."

I have no idea how a bridge could possibly "reduce the inherent competitiveness" of the county's three cities. Generally speaking, the closer the shopping area (or whatever market), the more competitive they are. Supermarkets three miles from each other are necessarily more competitive than markets 20 miles away.

And I'm not sure that such degrees of competitiveness isn't a good thing anyway.

And even if a bridge would meet all the good intentions outlined by Mercer, I don't think that everyone is so glibly jumping on board for a bridge. The development of any

of Charlevoix County residents had a bridge across the narrows, I think that would be a very good thing. But it would be worth the expense, and investment in the "federal grant" which it would be on the county, they probably paying for other bridges needed bridges in Charlevoix or Leelanau right now.

Besides my skepticism about the potential benefits of a bridge, and besides my apprehensions about the cost of such a project, I don't think that I

Ironton

bridge

nixed

Plans to construct a multi-million dollar bridge across the Ironton Straits on Lake Charlevoix were all but abandoned recently when the Charlevoix County Planning Department learned that their request for federal funding for a "feasibility study" were turned down.

County Planner Bill Mercer says he was notified last November by Joe Coffey, grant administrator for the US Economic Development Administration, that no funds will be available.

Last summer Mercer drew up a formal request for a federally financed feasibility study, arguing that a bridge, in place of the existing eight month ferry service, would "unify the county, increase job opportunities, expand the commercial market, decrease travel time for police and ambulance runs, and generally make transportation more convenient."



## NOTES

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- Donald Graham, East Jordan, Charlevoix County Road  
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