

Cape Ice Capades

Aboard the carferry *Viking* on a fast-freezing lake that wouldn't let go



Chessie's S.S. *Badger* to the rescue! Stuck in the ice not far off Kewaunee, the author's boat, the former Ann Arbor M.V. *Viking*, needs the help of her sister carferry to break free of the windrows on Lake Michigan in 1979.

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY JEFFREY MAST

In the late 1970s, I had the good fortune to witness the final struggle between the old Ann Arbor Lake Michigan carferries and the ice that had caused so many problems as they crossed. My experience started on a February 1979 evening in Frankfort, the community on the northwest side of Michigan's lower peninsula that had been the northern terminus of the former Ann Arbor Railroad and home port to its Lake Michigan carferry services. By this time, the ser-

vice had shrunk from four routes to just one, to Kewaunee, Wis., and a connection with Green Bay & Western. The state of Michigan was subsidizing the former AA operations under the flag of a new operator, Michigan Interstate Railway.

There was much to see at Frankfort. A new addition to the carferry fleet was on hand, the *City of Milwaukee*, which the state had leased from Grand Trunk Western. The *City* was a gem, being unaltered from her 1931 construction at Manitowoc (Wis.) Shipbuilding Corp., as an oil burner with triple expansion steam engines providing 2,700 horsepower.

The other vessel in use was the *Viking*, repowered from steam-driven *Ann Arbor No. 7* to diesel at Fraser Shipbuilding in Superior, Wis., in 1964. Four EMD 16-567 engines, the same ones that went into locomotives of the period, replaced her boilers.

While the conversion did not improve her looks, as she got a square pilothouse and a single, streamlined stack, it did improve her speed, to 21 knots, up from 14 to 16 in steam.

On the day of my visit, both boats arrived one after another about sunset. Lake Michigan was frozen for the first time in almost 15 years, and the ferries were trying to run in pairs, with the *Viking* breaking for the *City*.

The *Viking* was the first to arrive, and her purser came ashore with a handful of waybills for the yard switcher's crew. Passengers were still carried, and I asked if I could get a round trip; he told me to go aboard. I grabbed my bag and walked across the apron and onto the deck as the first cut of freight cars was being pulled off. I climbed the narrow stairway to the cabin deck and found the main cabin — and warmth! After about 15 minutes I walked out on the deck and watched the unloading.

The captain approached, and I introduced myself. His name was Larry Riker, and he invited me to the pilothouse, where he said he was concerned about the worsening ice conditions. Temperatures in the prior week hadn't gotten out of the teens, and the ice at mid-lake was about 6 to 10 inches thick and growing.

Although the lake was frozen over, small patches of open water formed as the ice moved. As large floes worked into each other, the resulting forces created mountains of ice piled up as pressure ridges, or windrows. Some piles were small, while others grew 2 to 6 feet tall. The worst became 10 to 20 feet high. "Plow into one of those, and you'll have to get help to get you out," Riker said. His words would come back to me as a prophecy. Because the ice was always moving, the boats could never follow the same track as the previous trip, so they were constantly breaking a new trail on each crossing.

The crew advised the captain that

the vessel had been unloaded, and that a full load would be coming on in about 10 minutes. The *City of Milwaukee* was entering the harbor when the *Viking's* radio blared a report that the *Badger*, a Chesapeake & Ohio Lake Michigan carferry, would be departing Ludington, a port to our south, in 30 minutes, also bound for Kewaunee.

Riker cursed the report. "Now I will have to wait out in that ice-choked lake while she unloads and loads," he said, with the knowledge that icy conditions in Kewaunee harbor limited operations to one slip. He looked at the *City* turning beside us, and thought aloud: "That's not going to happen."

Then he grabbed the handset and called to the first mate, "Hold the load! Get everyone on board. We are going light!"

I asked the captain if he wanted to beat the *Badger* across the lake, and a smile spread across his face. Picking up the marine radio microphone, Riker announced: "Security! Security! Motor Vessel *Viking* departing Frankfort in 20 minutes."

The wheelsman entered the pilothouse and said, "Going light, huh captain?" "Yes," he replied. "We won't be waiting in the windrows off Kewaunee in the dark; the *City* can take our load and follow our track."

We left about

20 minutes later and followed the track the *City of Milwaukee* had made on its eastbound trip, then turned north into the lake and virgin ice. The captain turned on a huge light mounted atop the pilothouse. With a control arm, he aimed the beam a quarter mile ahead of us, looking for windrows. "If they look too large we will sail around them. Using radar is useless because they will not show up."

About 10 p.m., I went below to hit the sack. As I walked down to the main lobby, I stepped outside into the bone-chilling cold and listened as the hull blasted through the ice at almost 17 knots. Looking straight down from the bow as the ice shattered, I could see huge chunks flying into the air, landing on the untouched ice, and shattering into pieces.

I awoke around 3 a.m. to loading noises in Kewaunee, but soon fell asleep again. Near dawn, I peeked out the window to see a small open area of water, and I could feel the vibrations of wide-open diesels. A short while later I looked out again. We hadn't moved — something was wrong. I dressed, walked onto the deck, and saw why we were stopped. About 3 to 5 miles out of Kewaunee, we had run into a large windrow, which was now about mid-ship. The engines were running full astern and had washed ice away from the boat up to the windrow. Standing on the bow, and looking east, I could see the *City of Milwaukee* also stopped, about a mile from us.

Large windrows were around us everywhere, like a giant minefield. In the pilothouse, the captain slid open a side window and yelled out that the *City* was also stuck and that both vessels were waiting for the *Badger* to finish loading and come to free


us. About 20 minutes later, the *Badger* arrived, following what was left of our track, charging like a mad bull, leaving a smoke screen a Navy destroyer would envy. About an eighth of a mile behind us, the *Badger* swung left of our track and ran alongside. She went by and cut through a smaller area of the windrow as if it were not there. Then she cut power and swung in front of us.

The *Badger's* captain looked like the captain of the *Titanic* as he walked into the rear pilothouse in a dark blue, double-breasted, brass-button coat. He glanced at the ice between us and rang up "full astern." As the *Badger* neared us at a quickening pace, he rang "full forward." The water boiled into a churning fury as the *Badger* tore into the ice and washed it away in large chunks. The *Badger's* captain repeated the process several times, working into the windrow. The *Viking* began to back up, free of the grasp of the windrow.

The captain of the *Badger* stopped power, looked toward our pilothouse, and waved to Riker. Then the *Badger's* captain rang "full ahead," turned, and walked forward as she smoked it up toward Ludington. We sailed toward the stuck *City*, which had yet to dock in Kewaunee. Traveling through and around the maze of windrows, the *Viking* repeated the same procedure the *Badger* had performed to free us. Soon we were leading the *City* westward toward Kewaunee, and once the *City* was clear, we turned for Frankfort.

The following week, ice conditions worsened to the point that both Frankfort-based carferries required the assistance of Coast Guard ice-breakers to get free of the ice off the Michigan port. Only a few years later, the ex-AA carferries would cease operation, and such Lake Michigan spectacles would fade into the icy mist of history. **I**

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Leased GT Lake Michigan carferry *City of Milwaukee* follows the icy path being made for her by the *Viking* as the two carferries make for Kewaunee on an icy day in February 1979.