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## **SS Badger: The last of Lake Michigan's car EDUCATION (<https://www.greatlakesnow.org/educational-resources/>) ferries**

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By **Melissa Walsh**  
(<https://www.greatlakesnow.org/author/mwalsh/>)

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🕒 August 14, 2019

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Prominent in Michigan's port of Ludington harbor sits the SS Badger — the last of Lake Michigan's car ferries and the last coal-fired passenger steamship in the United States. ^

The 410-foot ship weighing 6,650 tons was built in 1953 and designated a National Historic Landmark by the U.S. Department of the Interior in 2016.

The ship provides a 4-hour-long transport across Lake Michigan from Ludington, Michigan, to Manitowoc, Wisconsin.



(<https://d2j02ha532z66v.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/The-SS-Badger-At-Manitowoc-Wisconsin-With-Oversize-Cargo.jpg>)

The SS Badger At Manitowoc Wisconsin With Oversize Cargo,  
Photo by Joe Haupt via flickr.com cc 2.0

“The Badger is the last of the Ludington car ferries,” said Eric Harmsen, site manager of the Port of Ludington Maritime Museum, “which was this huge industry here in Ludington and a large part of Ludington’s maritime history and heritage, and Lake Michigan maritime history.”

Harmsen said during the 1920s, early 1930s, Ludington hosted the

largest car ferry fleet in the world.

“The Badger is the last of that legacy. It’s a connection to Ludington’s maritime past,” he added.

Two years after the 1873 incorporation of the city of Ludington, the Pere Marquette Railroad arrived and added cross-lake steamer service between Ludington and Sheboygan, Wisconsin, using small wooden-hulled ships known as “breakbulk” freighters. The vessels transported cargo across the lake to Wisconsin, where dockworkers unloaded the cargo onto trains.

“Pretty quickly they realized that that was a very time-consuming, labor-intensive process, and by the late 1800s, they were experiencing quite a few delays.” Harmsen said.



shallow bodies of water.



(<https://d2j02ha532z66v.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Pere-Marquette-the-first-of-the-Ludington-carferries-1.jpg>)

Harmsen said a wooden car ferry in Frankfort, operated by the Ann Arbor Railroad, had a major impact on Martin's vision for Ludington's transport service.

Pere Marquette, the first of the Ludington carferries,  
Photo by Mason County Historical Society

"Captain Martin saw that boat and some of the other car ferries around the country and thought that that design could be improved on," said Harmsen. "So he got together with a naval architect named Robert Logan and together they created the design for the first steel open-water car ferry on the Great Lakes."

In 1897, the steel-hulled Pere Marquette entered service, which was equipped with four sets of railroad tracks on deck to transport loaded rail cars. By mid-1900, the Pere Marquette Railway Company entered 10 additional ferry ships.

The SS Badger and its twin, the SS Spartan, were built in 1953. The Spartan rests in Port Ludington, while the Badger remains in service.

“At that time they were still carrying train cars for the railroad,” Harmsen said. “That was the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad... By that time, they were already carrying passengers and automobiles as well as the train cars.”

The use of railcar transfer across Lake Michigan, beginning in the 1890s and continuing into the 1980s, was commerce driven. Today the S.S. Badger continues to support commercial transport while also providing tourist transport service. A trailer-transfer program enables companies to load semi-trailers in one port and have them unloaded at port across Lake Michigan.



(<https://d2j02ha532z66v.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Unloading-A-Wind-Turbine-Base-From-The-SS-Badger-Ferry-Ship-At-Manitowoc-Wisconsin.jpg>)

Unloading A Wind Turbine Base From The SS Badger Ferry Ship  
At Manitowoc Wisconsin, Photo by Joe Haupt via flickr.com cc  
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Ludington-based Michigan Wisconsin Transportation Company continued operating car ferries for industrial and commercial transport. In 1990, ferry service ended, negatively impacting the community's economy.

In 1992, Ludington resident Charles Conrad invested in putting the ferries back into service as Lake Michigan Carferry.

“I think it was at this time Ludington started to transition to more tourism,” Harmsen said. The Port of Ludington Maritime Museum has a recreation of the captain's cabin of the 1920s-era Pere Marquette 22 visitors can explore as well as a car ferry pilot simulator.

“Although we're predominantly leisure-passenger driven, on any given sailing you can see everything from standard semi-trucks, over-dimensional loads, large farm implements, etc.,” said S.S. Badger Customer Service and Public Relations Manager John Merchant.

When the railroad ended ferry service in the mid-80s, the

In 2012, the company faced complaints by environmentalists that the SS Badger



discharged more than 500 tons of coal ash into Lake Michigan

([https://d2j02ha532z66v.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Carferries\\_in\\_the\\_iceon](https://d2j02ha532z66v.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Carferries_in_the_iceon)

each season. In a 2013 compliance agreement

Carferries in the ice on Lake Michigan in 1920, Photo by Mason

with the U.S. Environmental

County Historical Society

Protection Agency, the

company spent more than \$2.4 million on controls and equipment to collect coal ash from the ship's boilers, according to a 2015 Detroit Free Press

(<https://www.freep.com/story/news/local/2015/05/15/badger-ship-sails/27376385/>).

In 2015, EPA regulators announced the ship was in compliance.

6 Comments 2 Likes

Each year, the SS Badger is at work from early May through the end of October. The ship rests in its home port of Ludington over the winter.

“During our sailing season, we arrive in Manitowoc, stay in port for two hours and return to Ludington,” Merchant explained. “The cycle is very similar in Michigan. During our “single” sailing season, the Badger stays

in Ludington over winter after returning from the 2100-mile departure in Manitowoc. In ‘doubles,’ we sail back and forth across Lake Michigan 24 hours a day.”

The ship’s “single” season falls from early May to mid-June and early September to mid-October. The “double” season is mid-June to the end of August.

For schedule and fare information, visit [www.ssbadger.com](http://www.ssbadger.com) (<https://www.ssbadger.com/schedule-fares/>)

Featured Image: S.S. Badger being launched at Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin in 1952, Photo by Mason County Historical Society (<https://masoncountyhistoricalsociety.com/>)



## About Melissa Walsh



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**Marvin D VanHaitsma** ⌚ 3 years ago

Lest we forget, The City of Saginaw & The City of Midland...

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**Matt** ⌚ 3 years ago

Not the last car ferry but, nice write up.

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**Greg** ⌚ 3 years ago

The title was misleading, but it got cleared up in the body.

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**Jack** ⌚ 3 years ago

It's a little pricey but it beats going thru Chicago during rush hour

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**Josh** ⌚ 3 years ago

There's a carferry in manistee mi, just north of ludington, maybe a 20 to 30 minute drive depending on traffic. The name of carferry is the SS City of Milwaukee and she's the last carferry in her original condition. She's 88 years old this year. She's a historic landmark also. And as Museum.

 Reply

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**Les Bagley** ⌚ 3 years ago

The photo captioned "The Pere Marquette" is not the original Ludington carferry. It's actually a picture of the "City of Midland 41" which was the Spartan and Badger's immediate predecessor. She was launched in 1941 and was cut down to a barge just a few years ago. She continues to sail as "Pere Marquette 41" carrying bulk cargos and pushed by a tugboat.


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