

# Ann Arbor rode the waves to success

With more lake miles than track-miles, this Michigan road was unique

**T**he Ann Arbor Railroad was as much a steamship line as a railroad. Built from Toledo, Ohio, northwest across Michigan's lower peninsula to Frankfort, it existed for one reason—to move freight in carferries across Lake Michigan to bypass congested Chicago. From 1910 to 1968, “the Annie” operated 320 carferry route-miles versus 292 miles of railroad. AA was at the forefront of carferry design and innovation, from the first wooden-hulled vessels to the most advanced carferry to ever sail Lake Michigan.

During the 1940's, up to six ferries made the round trip from Boat Landing, as AA called its yard in Elberta on the south side of Frankfort harbor, to two Wisconsin and two Michigan Upper Peninsula ports. The boats ran year-round on a tight schedule, timed to match with three pairs of scheduled Toledo freights, where AA interchanged with five eastern trunk lines. Eight well-kept 2-8-2's powered those short, fast trains across AA's rolling profile until 1950, when 14 Alco FA2's took over.

My earliest memories include standing on the sidewalk at my grandparents' home in Clare, Mich., watching streamlined blue-and-gray diesels blasting black smoke as they mysteriously went back and forth. Chesapeake & Ohio's line from Saginaw to its Lake Michigan port of Ludington ran near the house, but it was Clare's other railroad that fascinated me. Maybe it was the infrequency of Annie's trains, by then only one each way a day, and behind GP's



John S. Ingles; collection of J. David Ingles

**At the joint C&O-Ann Arbor depot in Clare where author Warrick would watch trains, the engineer on northbound freight TF-1, behind two GP35's, reaches to pick up orders in May 1966.**

which had replaced the FA's in the mid-'60's. But you could get close with the daylight train, FT-2, which would roll in from the north every afternoon behind three or four orange diesels. Most days, it would stop to interchange with C&O, and the distinctive horn would send me flying onto my bike.

Perhaps even more it was Annie's people: the station agent who welcomed the kid into his world of train orders and waybills, or the train crews who would speak of foreign places like Owosso and Boat Landing. It was like a family, and I was being drawn into it.

As time went by, there came confusing talk of “deferred maintenance” and “bankruptcy.” I heard comments like, “The car decks don't hold as many of those longer cars,” and “Annie's an orphan again, kid!” I skipped school more than once to drive to public hearings on the abandonment of “my” railroad.

Ann Arbor was a latecomer. Conceived in 1868 to connect Toledo and Ann Arbor, 45 miles, to compete with Michigan Central, it accomplished only roadbed grading. Eventually the line was built, by James M. Ashley, a lawyer and ex-congressman whose vision went way beyond Ann Arbor. His dream was what evolved—to reach Lake Michigan, where he would establish the first cross-lake rail carferry service. Construction on the Toledo & Ann Arbor began in 1877 and reached Ann Arbor in 1878.

Construction continued as the Toledo, Ann Arbor & North Railroad, meeting near Thompsonville in late '89 with the Frankfort & South Eastern. Ashley leased it to reach the lake and merged it into TAA&N. In Ashley's haste to reach the lake, his line missed every major town and had no branches to feed it.

Although money had become tight in the early 1890's, loans were secured and two wooden ferries, *Ann Arbor No. 1* and *No. 2*, were built in 1892 by Craig Ship Building Co. The vessels were 260



Stanley H. Mailer

**Annie's *Viking*, the last word in Great Lakes carferries, lists a bit to port at GB&W's dock in Keewaunee, Wis., on July 6, 1974, during unloading or loading, which were careful balancing acts.**

feet long and could carry 24 freight cars. Their bows were designed to ride up on lake ice and crush it with their weight, a necessity for year-round navigation. The design was followed by all subsequent cross-lake carferries.

Ferry service began November 24, 1892, and the railroad enjoyed a brief success until a strike over wages in March 1893 by the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers financially wrecked it. The railroad was forced into bankruptcy in April, and Ashley lost control. The receiver put \$1 million into new equipment, facilities, and improvements, and the name was changed to Ann Arbor Railroad Co. on September 1, 1895.

Transformed from a dirt-track pike, the property emerged from bankruptcy July 1, 1897. Cross-lake traffic was growing, so a third ferry, the all-steel *Ann Arbor No. 3*, was added in fall 1898. The railroad had become increasingly dependent on its eastern connections and needed a friendly parent to survive. The newly formed Detroit, Toledo & Ironton Railway stepped up in 1905 and acquired AA stock control. Under DT&I, Annie's traffic grew, so 13 new 2-8-0's for freight and five new 4-4-2's for varnish were added.

Over-spending and poor financials doomed the relationship when DT&I entered bankruptcy in 1908. The purchase was invalidated by the bankruptcy court, leaving AA out in the cold until November 25, 1910, when a group of

investors bought it. For the next few years AA flourished, adding three more ferries plus railroad cars. Four passenger trains rambled between Toledo and Frankfort each way six days a week, with flagships 51-52 running daily. Yearly ridership topped 1 million; for economy, AA bought five McKen motor cars for locals. During World War I government control, USRA added four light 2-10-2's, and after the war, AA added the 2-8-2's

Wabash Railroad had kept an eye on the Ann Arbor since the late 1890's, as the dependable all-season carferry service fit into its expansion plans. On November 2, 1925, it took stock control, and soon, Wabash ordered the last ferry built for Annie, the *Wabash*. Launched March 19, 1926, she was the largest Great Lakes carferry to date—366 feet long with a capacity of 32 freight cars.

The relationship lasted 37 years. No new steam locomotives were added, but AA began to dieselize in 1941 with 44-ton Whitcomb No. 1, adding Alco S1's 2 and 3 in 1944. By fall 1951, steam was set aside as AA finished its roster with FA2's 50-56A, S3's 4-7, and two RS1's, 20-21. The latter were for Annie's passenger trains, but those ceased on July 19, 1950, never dieselized. The carferries continued to handle a limited number of passengers and autos until the end.

Annie's success was tied to the Wabash, whose colors AA's diesels wore: black for switchers and blue, gray, and white for road power. Wabash's traffic



Robert A. Hadley

AA's "flagship" train No. 52, behind 4-4-2 No. 1611, passes Owosso yard switcher No. 121, one of eight turn-of-the-century 4-6-0's, two weeks before the last passenger runs in July 1950.



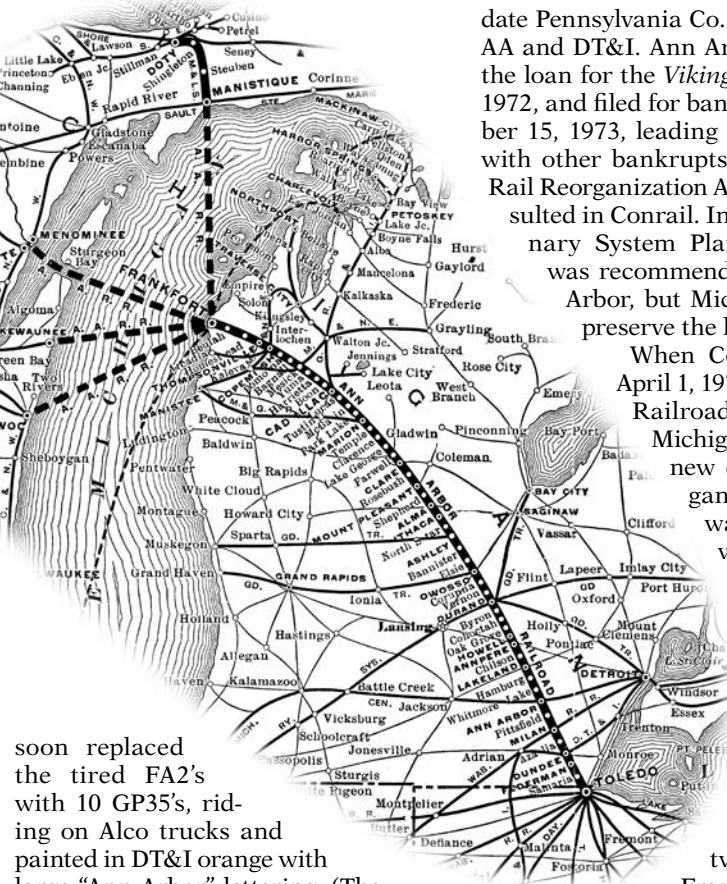
Photo, Russ Porter, collection of Pete Stonitsch; timetable: collection of Robert I. Warrick

**Ann Arbor, like Wabash, was inconsistent about gray versus white on cab-unit flanks, as on the two FA2's on train FT-2 at Durand, Mich., in fall 1960. The map is from a June 1920 timetable.**

department kept the ferries full, but they were getting old and losing capacity as freight cars got longer. To modernize, *Ann Arbor No. 6* was lengthened and repowered with two 2,750 h.p. Nordberg V-12 diesels; it returned to service in March 1959, named for Wabash President Arthur K. Atkinson. The *Wabash's* boilers were converted to oil-firing in 1962.

The eastern railroad mergers of the 1960's ultimately doomed the old Ann Arbor. As planning for the big Penn Central deal went on, the Norfolk & Western, wanting competitive expansion, merged with Wabash, Nickel Plate Road, and two smaller Class 1's in October 1964. PRR's Pennsylvania Company had a stake in N&W and controlled Wabash (87 percent) and DT&I. N&W wanted no part of the Ann Arbor and its costly ferries, so AA was foisted off on DT&I. Henry Ford had modernized the line after 1920 but was forced by the government to divest from railroading, selling DT&I to PRR's Pennroad Corp. in 1929. By the '60's, DT&I was profitable, carrying Ford and other Detroit auto traffic south to interchange with trunk lines across western Ohio.

With ICC approval, DT&I took over the Ann Arbor on August 31, 1963, and



soon replaced the tired FA2's with 10 GP35's, riding on Alco trucks and painted in DT&I orange with large "Ann Arbor" lettering. (The four FA's not traded to EMD went to Wabash briefly.) DT&I's GP's often mixed with the Annie's.

DT&I had ferry *Wabash* fitted with

experimental propellers for more speed and changed her name to *City of Green Bay*, and loaned AA \$2.5 million to rebuild *Ann Arbor No. 7*, done in 1963-65 by Fraser-Nelson Shipbuilding in Superior, Wis. She was lengthened, got four EMD 2,500 h.p. 567 diesels (identical to those in the GP35's), and re-entered service in spring as *M.V. Viking*. DT&I worked to add bridge traffic to and from Green Bay & Western at Kewaunee, Wis., but even with the bigger boats, capacity remained an issue as car sizes increased. AA was losing money. First the ferry route to Manistique, Mich. (and AA subsidiary Manistique & Lake Superior), was discontinued, then the one to Menominee, Mich.

Although Ann Arbor was not immediately sucked under in the June 21, 1970, Penn Central bankruptcy, its fate was sealed. A firm was hired to liquidate Pennsylvania Co. assets, including AA and DT&I. Ann Arbor defaulted on the loan for the *Viking* on November 1, 1972, and filed for bankruptcy on October 15, 1973, leading to AA's inclusion with other bankrupts in the Regional Rail Reorganization Act of 1973 that resulted in Conrail. In the first Preliminary System Plan, abandonment was recommended north of Ann Arbor, but Michigan wanted to preserve the line.

When Conrail began on April 1, 1976, the Ann Arbor Railroad ceased to exist.

Michigan arranged for a new company, Michigan Interstate Railway, to run it, which lasted from October 1, 1977, to September 30, 1982. MI cut back to just Toledo-Ann Arbor, while another new firm, Michigan Northern, ran the old AA between Alma and

Frankfort during October 1982-May 1984. The Alma-Ann Arbor portion became part of an expanded Tuscola & Saginaw Bay, which had begun on ex-PC lines east of



John S. Ingles; collection of J. David Ingles

**AA had 10 Wabash-built cabooses and seven International Car clones, including No. 2846.**

Saginaw. In May 1984, T&SB—“Tisbee,” for its reporting marks TSBY—took over north of Alma, too. The carferries quit in April 1982, and the track was eventually cut back to Yuma. On March 1, 2007, TSBY—having long spun off its original lines—changed its name to Great Lakes Central to better reflect its location. (GLC also operates ex-Michigan Northern, ex-Pennsylvania Railroad track north of Cadillac.)

Today, the last two AA carferries and the two RS1’s still exist [see “Second Section”], and the privately held Ann Arbor Railroad operates Toledo-Ann Arbor. I became a sales representative for the TSBY in 1985 and have worked in railroading since, but my heart will always belong to the Ann Arbor. ■

## ANN ARBOR FACT FILE

(Comparative figures are for 1945 and 1972)

**Rail route-miles:** 292; 300

**Locomotives:** 23; 16. **Carferries:** 6; 3

**Freight cars:** 1,173 (28 M&LS); 575

**Headquarters cities:** St. Louis, Mo. (1925-1963); Dearborn, Mich. (1963-1976)

**Special interest group:** Ann Arbor Railroad Technical & Historical Assoc., Box 1691, Holland, MI 49422; [www.trainweb.org/annarbor](http://www.trainweb.org/annarbor)

**Recommended reading:** *Ann Arbor Railroad in Color*, by Robert I. Warrick (Morning Sun Books, 2008); *Ann Arbor Railroad Company*, by Henry E. Riggs (AA, 1948; reprinted by AART&HA); *Great Lakes Car Ferries*, by George W. Hilton (Howell-North, 1962; reprinted by Montevallo Historical Press, 2003)

**Sources:** *Historical Guide to North American Railroads* (Kalmbach, 2000); *Official Railway Equipment Register*; author’s files