

SAUGATUCK'S Historic Chain Ferry



In the early days, Saugatuck people relied on boats as their means of crossing the Kalamazoo River from the village on the east side to the west shore pathways that led north to the lighthouse, the fishing settlements of Fishtown and Shriver's Bend, and south toward Douglas—and Chicago.

In 1856 the drawbridge (1845) at Mary Street crashed into the river, falling victim to relentless battering by logs being pushed downriver and by the brisk traffic of passing schooners and steamships. The following year (1857) the Village of Saugatuck established a chain ferry.

The original chain ferry was a flat, barge-type boat called a "scow"—large enough to transport a wagon and team of horses, passengers, and eventually automobiles. An underwater chain connected the ferry to its east and west bank landings. The chain, when passed through the ferry's handcranked winch mechanism, drew the ferry from shore to shore. Although the ferryman presided over the operation, it was usually a boy called the "cranker" who supplied the muscle to power the ferry to the other side.

The ferry was (and remains) one of the most photographed scenes in the Village. By 1900 one of Saugatuck's most popular outings was a ferry ride across to the west shore, often for a short walk to the foot of Mt. Baldhead for a picnic or a hike to the top of West Michigan's best-loved sand dune. While the ferry site remains where it always was, the current vessel, with its white "gingerbread" ornamentation, was introduced by R. J. Peterson in 1965.

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