

# Michigan Every Day

## By Patrick Sullivan and Carole Eberely

Sept. 22, 1989  
Yugo plunges over Mackinac Bridge

The Yugo, a Yugoslavian-made car was appealing to some American drivers in the 1980s because it delivered great mileage, due to its light weight and aerodynamic design. Those facts, combined with high winds, created a tragic situation for a motorist crossing the Mackinac Bridge on Sept. 22, 1989.

On that day, a bridge worker called the U.S. Coast Guard in St. Ignace at around 6:45 p.m. to report something terrifying he had witnessed. It appeared that a small car attempting to cross the bridge was battered by high winds and was finally swept off, plunging 170 feet to the water below. A cold front from Canada was blamed for the howling winds, which also stirred up the water around the Straits of Mackinac so an immediate rescue attempt was cancelled. Leslie Pluhar, a 31-year-old waitress from Royal Oak was alone and headed north in her blue 1987 Yugo when it flipped over the outer guardrail. It took police and rescuers days to figure out who went over the bridge and recover the vehicle. She en route to the Upper Peninsula to meet her boyfriend and investigators said they believed her car struck and inner guardrail before spinning and flipping over the outer guardrail. Pluhar's family sued then state, arguing that the guardrail, at just over three feet tall, was too short to prevent a car from plummeting off of the bridge.

The lawsuit was settled in 1994.

In 1997, a second vehicle plummeted from the bridge. Richard Allen Daraban, 25, of Macomb County's Shelby Township, died after he lost control of his Ford Bronco while passing a truck. The Bronco skidded along the guardrail, spun over the side of the bridge and into the frozen straits below. At the time, the Michigan Department of Transportation assured the public that there was no cause for alarm. While two vehicles had been lost from the bridge in its 40-year history, the odds of getting across safely were pretty good – 94 million vehicles had crossed the bridge since it opened in 1957.

Many motorists approach the Big Mac with trepidation. Because of this, the bridge authority offers drivers for people who are afraid to drive across the bridge themselves. On days of extreme wind, drivers are only allowed to cross with escorts – large trucks that drive on the outside lane to act as wind breakers for cars on the inside lane.