

LIFE ON THE OHIO  
Switzerland County Historical Society  
Dan Back

**THE OHIO RIVER AND THE WORLD WARS**

With Memorial Day approaching I hope you each take time to reflect on the sacrifices the men and women of this country made to keep us free. Even if they did not see combat they took time out of their lives to protect and defend us.

Have you ever wondered what role the Ohio River played in the defense of our country during the world wars?

During both world wars the rivers were seen as both a lifeline and a possible way of attacking the U.S. Because of this the mouths of all of the rivers leading to the sea were fortified. For example: In the early 1800's forts were built at the entrance to the major rivers to protect against foreign invasion. During the world wars Fort Morgan, built in 1834, and Fort Gaines built in 1853 were heavily fortified to guard the entrance of Mobile Bay. Fort Jackson, built in 1822, protected the Mississippi River.

#### WW I

World War I was primarily a ground war thus it was a very tough time for the river industry. There was a lot of shipping of war materials but few commodities. Few boats were built during this time as most of the boat yards sat idle because of a lack of raw materials.

#### WW II

World war II was a different war. Unlike WW I, which was fought mostly on the ground, WW II saw an increased number of sea battles along with the new aircraft wars.

The major coastal shipyards were busy building war ships. Also, enemy subs were often sited off the coasts of the United States. Because of this the decision was made to manufacture a significant number of small boats on the inland rivers. The boat yards of the Ohio were busy turning out LST and LCT landing craft, PT boats, submarines, and sub chasers. A significant number of these craft were built in Jeffersonville and Evansville Indiana. There was a constant stream of these boats heading down the river, about 4000 in total. Many of the experienced boat builders were off to war so farmers, house painters and everyday American men and women staffed the boat yards.

The Navy trained their young pilots to operate the vessels in "blue water" (ocean) thus they were unfamiliar with "brown water" (river) navigation. The Navy recruited experienced river pilots to take the vessels from the shipyards to the Gulf. These old river pilots became known as the "Catfish Navy".

The vessels constructed on the inland rivers were very well made. One of the 1940's era Landing Ship Tank (LST-325) was still in use in Greece in 2000.

The Landing Ship Tank 325, known as LST-325, made more than 30 trips across the English Channel between Britain and France during and after the invasion of Normandy. Before that, it played a role in the massive effort by Gen. George S. Patton's Seventh Army to invade Sicily.

The boat and its crew braved waters beset by mines, submarines and violent storms to deliver payload after payload of soldiers, tanks and trucks to the front lines. The 325 transported wounded soldiers and prisoners back from the beachheads to friendly areas, unloaded them and then took another capacity load back out to dangerous seas.

A group of former LST crewmembers wanted to bring LST-325 back to the United States and make a traveling memorial out of her. They requested help from both the Navy and Coast Guard to bring the boat back. They were turned down. The group assembled a crew of former LST crewmembers and went to Greece to sail the boat back themselves. Most of the crew were in their 70's and 80's. Angered at the group for going ahead and getting the boat, the Coast Guard denied them permission to bring the boat into United States territorial waters. There was so much publicity about the boat returning that the Coast Guard had to back down. The 1942 LST-325 arrived in Mobile January 2001. After receiving some repairs her first stop was Jeffersonville Indiana, the birthplace of many of the LST's.

Many of the LST's were made in Evansville Indiana so it was decided that Evansville would become the permanent home of LST-325. The boat was delayed leaving Mobile because of hurricanes Katrina and Rita. The boat finally arrived in October of 2005. Waiting was a beautiful new marina that Evansville had constructed for her. The boat is open for tours. LST-325 visited Tall Stacks last year and was one of the most popular attractions. It was a beautiful sight seeing her pass Patriot under her own power.

The town of Patriot is developing a Memorial Park to honor those who have served our country. The park will be dedicated as a part of Patriots 4<sup>th</sup> of July celebration. Everyone is invited to Patriot to participate in the parade, park dedication and picnic.

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Ohio River Mile 519.4