

Tom Lonnerberg

TOM My name is Tom Lonnerberg. I am the Curator of History at the Evansville Museum of Arts and Science in Evansville Indiana.

LINDA: What does a curator of history do?

TOM: Well a lot of things. I am responsible

LINDA: No the Curator of History....

TOM: The Curator of History is responsible for a myriad of projects at the Evansville Museum. I design, develop, budget the history exhibitions at the museum. I am also responsible for overseeing the permanent collection that deals with historical artifacts at the museum and when the public calls and wants to give items of historical nature to the museum I make an initial evaluation of whether those are things that are relevant to our collection and then the staff makes a determination further to determine whether that is something we actually need for our collection that is relevant to Southern Indiana and Evansville.

LINDA: So you actually turn things away?

TOM: We turn things away if they don't have a significant link to Evansville or their replication of what is already in the collection or something that is better suited to another museum. We aren't that greedy. We want the artifacts to be in the best location possible.

LINDA: Are there other museums in Evansville?

TOM: There are a couple of science, there is an angel's mound historic site here in Evansville which basically deals with Native American culture in the area. Then there is a home museum that writes home museum which deals specifically with a lumber baron that was here in Evansville in the latter part of the 19th century.

LINDA: What does the museum have regarding the shipyard, the Evansville shipyard.

TOM: The museum's primary collection consists of 9,000 Viet – sorry

LINDA: Do and say the collection for the shipyard

TOM: The Evansville Museum shipyard collection primarily consists of some 9,000 photographs that were taken at the time of the shipyards existence from 1942-1945, taken by a gentleman by the name of Jack Rouche and Don Fallawell also was his assistant and they document every aspect of the shipyard's operation from the building of the site itself to the launching of the ship to the persons involved with the ships and also the collection also focuses on Evansville itself. Some of the other war plants were documented in the shipyard collection also. The

Museum is also fortunate to possess a 7 foot model of an LST. The LST 542. This is actually on loan to us from the United States Navy and it is an architectural model built by Gibbs and Cox who did some of the design for the initial LST construction before the war actually or before we were actually involved using the LST's during the war.

And the shipyard also has navigational pieces on loan from the Navy as part of our collection. We have gathered other memorabilia from the shipyard specifically since the 50th anniversary as World War II occurred and since then uniforms from LST sailors, some flags that flew on LSTs, documentation such as letters, personal letters, official letters that were related to the shipyard and its existence so we have an every growing collection of shipyard memorabilia and we hope to really make this a center for research on Evansville shipyard specifically and we are fortunate that LST sailors and former workers have been generous in donating these items to the Evansville Museum.

LINDA: What do you particularly know or remember or have read about the 534.

TOM: The LST 534 from the Evansville Shipyard is one of the many – well I don't really know that much about it actually.

LINDA: That's okay. It was born here and was one of the ships that....

TOM: Okay. The LST 534 took its place among the other 167 LSTs that were built here in Evansville as one of the ones that were really primary to defeating the Axis during World War II. It along with the many other LSTs built here and elsewhere were used in beaching operations both in Europe and in Asia. I know the 534 participated in the most historic event that LSTs participated in – that was the Normandy Beach invasion of France when the fortress of Hitler is being overthrown and the LSTs played a really primary role in that and the 534 was one of 25 LSTs from Evansville to participate in that particular landing.

LINDA: Have you ever been on an LST?

TOM: I have never been on an LST. I wish I could have. I know there is an ongoing effort to bring one back from Greece to serve as a floating museum and whether that happens or not I guess is still in limbo. But if it does certainly I would like to take that opportunity to board an LST and see what it was like to be on one of those ships which was built here and was so a vital part of the US war effort.

LINDA: Is the shipyard one of the things that interest you most? I mean it was really part of, a big part of Evansville's history.

TOM: The Evansville shipyard greatly interests me. When I came to the museum in 1988 it was one of the early exhibitions that I focused on, creating something that would recall the shipyard itself and since that time my interest and knowledge of the shipyard has grown considerably. It is just amazing that some 19,200 people converged on that site to build these LSTs and it is the largest producer, the largest employer that has ever existed in Evansville and I assume will ever

exist in the city's history and is something probably unparalleled in the history of our city. Now our largest employer is around 3,000 folks here in the city and it is amazing to think that all those people were involved in one specific effort and it grew to be a city within itself with sports leagues, a newspaper that published itself, so it is something that continues to play a really big role in the city's history. Now some 70,000 different people worked at the shipyard at one point or another during the war. There are families that still have a lot of ties to the shipyard, either worked there themselves or their relatives worked there or they had friends that worked there so something I think for years to come will be of great interest in that we were the largest producers of LSTs in the country and that they played such a vital role in defeating the Axis is something that I think that we can be proud of and something that we want to commemorate and remember here in Evansville.

LINDA: Is that true that Evansville Shipyard was the largest producers of LSTs?

TOM: Yes. The Evansville Shipyard was the largest producers of LSTs in the country. There were other shipyards producing them even as close as Jeffersonville, Indiana, just up river, but we were the largest which is I think quite a compliment as this was a shipyard that was built out of war time necessity. Other shipyards already existed and then converted to building LSTs. But we literally just grew along the banks of the Ohio River here in Evansville and something that was new. Missouri Valley Bridge, an iron company who is a lead contractor had some limited ship building knowledge through building barges but an LST is a lot different animal and it is pretty amazing that we did become the largest producer with this limited knowledge of the contractors that were involved here in Evansville.

LINDA: Let's go back in time and it is 1940 and you're Tom Lonnberg and you're 19 years old or you're 20 years old, what was life like?

TOM: Well in 1940 before the war began things in Evansville were better than they had been perhaps during the depths of the depression but obviously were still in part of the depression. The city is at a point where were perhaps moving out of the depression, but yet there is trouble in Europe, we're not sure where the war is going to head, whether we are going to head, whether we are going to be involved. There are more and more rumors that we might be involved with the continuing aggression of Hitler in Europe and problems with the Japanese in Asia so it is a time where it is a matter of where the country will head. There is still a lot of opposition of entering the war by the isolationists here in the United State and in Evansville itself it is a time period where industry is working to recover from the depression but yet we are not still fully out of the grips of that great economic crisis.

LINDA: Okay, it is 1941.

TOM: Well in 1941 obviously, especially after December 7, 1941 our course is fairly well chartered in Evansville as far as what is going to happen. People in the city, industrialists, political leaders, after the attack on Pearl Harbor almost immediately begin envisioning ways that Evansville can contribute to the war time effort and obviously some existing companies are hoping to benefit economically from what will evolve as the production of the United States will take on

and in late 1941 early 1942 people such as Walter G. Cook who was the person who persuaded the US Bureau of Ships to locate a shipyard here in Evansville, already making the efforts, their overtures to the government, to locate here. To use Evansville as a war time center. We are inland obviously and that provides safety from perceived threats from Japan or the Germans. Also Evansville is linked to a waterway and this gives us the ability to go down the Ohio River to the Mississippi River with war time material no matter what it might be. And also Evansville was tied fairly closely to railroads. The Louisville and Nashville Railroad, the New York Central, Chicago and North Western Railroad. Other railroads through Evansville and so it was a facility where we could move product in and out on a fairly rapid basis.

So Evansville is in a position by late 1941 early 1942 to really promote itself as a producer of war time materials. And there is a strong industrial workforce here with the experience in heavy industry, the furniture industry, other industries had been here so there is a fairly strong workforce here and at that point a good relationship between labor and management had existed here in the city.

LINDA: So I understand Mr. Lonnerberg working in the mayor's office. What are you hearing every day? What is going on.

TOM: In the mayor's office in Evansville, the mayor at that point is William Dress and he is working towards helping industrials bring war time plants here to the city. He is wanting to obviously have as much production occur here as possible. The primary goal obviously to provide materials to defeat the Nazis to beat the Japanese and the Italians but also you have to be aware that we are coming out of the depression and you want to provide jobs, good jobs, high paying jobs for people if it is possible. So if you are the mayor, if you are William Dress in Evansville you want to be able to promote the city as well as possible to bring industry here to help your people in the city to have the best jobs possible. And Evansville was fortunate that that is actually what happens. The shipyard employs again over 19,000 people. Other industries employ vast amounts here also. Early 1942 Republic Aviation comes to Evansville to build P47 fighter planes. Chrysler is producing ammunition here in Evansville. Other plants are opening in Evansville. The shipyard is real the lead as far as size and its war time emphasis during that period but there were others here also contributing to the great revolution that takes place here in Evansville during the war time period.

LINDA: So the shipyard is built, and it is 24 by 7, 365 days a year and you are running around the streets. What kind of mood are you in. What is the mood at that time.

TOM: In Evansville during World War II, the mood is one of optimism I believe. The shipyard itself is operating 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The west side of Evansville is lit up through the lights that are lighting the shipyard, the welding torches that are burning 24 hours a day and the city is bustling. There are people coming in from all parts of the country either to ship out or to work here. People from all over the mid-west are coming to work at the shipyard. Another war industry. Little shanties are popping up because there is a great housing shortage in Evansville. The term hotbeds becomes a part of the lexicon as people are literally sleeping in shifts in the beds that are available. Somebody will work for 8 hours, somebody else will come and sleep

in the bed and then work for 8 hours. So it is a time where there are a lot of enthusiasm but still there is the perception that we have to work hard to make this all come together. The city itself is lively. The club Trocadero one of the famous gambling resorts here in Evansville I should perhaps say resort but gambling locations here in Evansville actually known as no mans land between Indiana and and Kentucky is thriving. Other nightclubs such as the LST Bar are becoming quite prominent down at Franklin street. But it is a time of a lot of enthusiasm, a lot of hard work going on and obviously there is a lot of money being made by people coming out of the depression that they had not seen before. Of course a lot of that is rather pent up because there is not a lot of product to buy during the war time rationing but yet people, women especially are making wages that they had never seen before and roles they had never been involved with before so it is a time in Evansville where if you are walking the streets there is a lot going on. Main street is bustling. The whole city is bustling and people are enthusiastic about the war effort but of course apprehensive about what their family, their sons are facing, what their husbands are facing overseas, so although there is this spirit of getting it done, they also have to have in the back of their mind what is happening overseas and the hardships that their sons and fathers and husbands are facing as they are fighting the war even though we here in Evansville are benefiting to a great extent from places such as the Evansville shipyard and the economic opportunities provided there.

LINDA: So young Tom Lonnberg sees an LST for the first time, what did he think?

TOM: The LST was a different type of ship. Crew members that I have talked to that saw the LSTs some of them thought oh my gosh it is not a battleship why am I going to get on that little tub for. That is not something I necessarily want to be involved with. It is not a cruiser, it is not an aircraft carrier, it not a glamorous thing we talked about when we have been in training to go into the Navy. But when you see an LST and you think about its use, I think the more enthusiasm grows. The idea that we can now land on beaches safely. Get men and material directly on the beaches is something that is a great evolution in the war time effort. Much of this necessity growing out of the experience at Dunkirk when it was impossible to evacuate the British and the French troops from that particular beach front when the Nazis were closing in on them and after it was developed by the British and the Americans and if you have an understanding of that, maybe you don't at that point depending on your background as a sailor what the LST's role will be certainly something that will be exciting during the war time. The LST was a good ship and I think that the men that served on the LSTs and the longer they served on them the more they came to appreciate the role in the real important part they played in the war itself. Talking to LST sailors today I think that idea has stayed with them and certainly they are proud of the ships and the role they play but an LST by initial appearance certainly although by Evansville standards was quite exciting and by the standards of a Naval person might have seen like gosh not the most exciting thing to look at but as they spent more time with them I think the crew members really came to appreciate and be proud of the ships they served on.

LINDA: Was there a difference in terms of a sailor going, the camaraderie and the spirit on an LST versus the camaraderie on a destroyer or an air craft carrier which are more glamorous.

TOM: On an LST I think the spirit of the camaraderie was very good. The sailors I have spoken

to speak about a really more relaxed atmosphere on an LST. Not that they didn't know what they were doing or that they weren't prepared to do what was necessary, but there wasn't the spit polish clean attitude perhaps that prevailed on a larger ship, a battle ship, or an aircraft carrier where everything had to be strictly by the book and everything had to be polished to the T everyday that they perhaps had a little more relaxed atmosphere and more of a homogeneous family attitude on the ships themselves because they were a smaller crew they came to know each other and they knew the job would get done but they didn't have to perhaps be go by the rules to the T every particular moment of the day. that they perhaps could wear something a little more casual. Their T-shirts on deck and perhaps have a little better time on the ship when they weren't actually involved in a war time effort.

LINDA: Okay, in 1943 the 157 was launched?

TOM: October, 42.

LINDA: Okay it is October 1942 and the 157, the first ship is going to be launched. What kind of day was it? What was happening here?

TOM: On October 31st, 1942 Evansville launched its first ship the LST 157 which is a really an exciting moment for the yard. The 157 had been in construction for several months as actually much of the shipyard site was on a parallel basis. By October the 157 was ready. Thousands of people gathered for this invitation only event on the banks of the Ohio River. The Governor of Indiana, the Mayor of the City were there to help launch the ship and it was a most exciting moment.

The shipyard band played with the Band Miller directing the shipyard band playing the appropriate song Anchors Away as they played at other launchings and it was just one of those times that is captured in people's memories perhaps in Evansville the first launching of an LST as it was launched sideways into the Ohio River which might have been different than other people's perceptions of ships which had the traditional Bow first launching but the draft or the depth of the Ohio River was rather low so they went sideways and they actually took about 20 minutes to an hour to launch depending on the depth of the River. But people there, the thousands of people that gathered it was a great moment. The shipyard had accomplished initially what it had set out to do. Build and launch an LST to help in the wartime effort against the Axis. As the 157 was launched people realized yet we have done this. This is a great thing but yet it was only the beginning of a really massive effort at the Evansville shipyard and as the 157 left port and continued its way down after it was outfitted and then later sent down to, down through the Mississippi River people here at the shipyard then had another vast amount had a lot – I am sorry, had a huge task ahead of them as far as completing what they felt was their role in the war to continue to produce the LSTs for the US Navy.

LINDA: What, I understand that the Ohio River was used by the shipyards north of us, so what is happening they are seeing these other LSTs going down the river, did that say hey, were they counting them, was there a little board where they were doing slash marks?

TOM: In Evansville, it was point where we were the shipyard on the Ohio River furthest down river and there were other ships coming down. There were a couple of shipyards in Pennsylvania, one in Jeffersonville, so it was a parade of LSTs leaving the city itself and the people in Evansville obviously saw these going by and there was always a fair amount of competition that the shipyard needed to be the largest producer which we turned out to be of LSTs. Even among the crews themselves when they got on the river there was a thought gosh we want to beat the next crew down to New Orleans and the 157 our first ship launched was not our first ship to reach New Orleans. The 158 which was launched shortly thereafter, and after outfitting and pre-commissioning ceremonies in here Evansville, it decided it wanted to have the honor of being the first ship to reach New Orleans from Evansville and while the 157 stopped at night, the 158 went both night and day and reached New Orleans before the 157 passing it one night. So there was competition among the sailors themselves to achieve the honor or being the first Evansville LST to reach New Orleans and then points beyond that. And so in Evansville it was a time where if you were sitting along the river banks you obviously had paddle ships up and down the Ohio River for years and barges up and down the river years so river traffic was nothing new. But this particular type of wartime ship certainly was something different to see on the Ohio River. A few gunboats had passed during the Civil War but that was way beyond the memory of people here in Evansville or up and down the Ohio River so to see these hundreds of LSTs going up and down the river provided the view that people that saw them still remember fondly today or certainly left an impression on them to see wartime ships passing up and down this inland part of out country.

LINDA: You were a young man and you were at that first launching, and you saw that LST going around down that bend, what was in your mind.

TOM: As the first Evansville LST went down the bend of the river, it is just amazing that Evansville has done this. Now we are sending out a ship to go to war and Evansville is going to be a part of history, part of this mass effort to defeat the Germans, defeat the Japanese, to defeat the Italians and the fact that the blood and sweat of Evansville citizens has gone aboard this ship is something that is truly amazing. The men and women of the city had pulled together; the men and women of the mid-west had pulled together to produce a ship, the 157 and then 166 others to be a part of this massive effort. You had to feel a little bit of everybody whether they were janitor, whether they worked in the offices, whether they actually were welders, was a part of that ship in part of the effort that would eventually wind up at Normandy, Okinawa, other points in the vital war effort and I think it is something that the people of Evansville were really proud of. And the spirit remains there today. That yes, a little bit of all of us that worked in the ship yard went out to sea and played a role in this wartime effort.

LINDA: You know quality was an important issue and I understood that the Evansville Shipyard got a couple of commendations for quality. The Evansville Shipyard was an organization that produced a quality ship and the government recognized them for that. The Evansville Shipyard received a, the Army/Navy E-Flag.

The Evansville Shipyard received the Army/Navy E-Flag which signified excellence in wartime production. This was something that was given across the country but really a very

small percentage of industries, companies, had received this, which signified that they had achieved high quality in wartime effort as far as producing what they had been assigned to do. The Shipyard received that and was also renewed twice when they received basically a flag that said Army/Navy E. Then if they continued the production at a high level for the following six months, they would receive a white star to add to the flag and that was done twice here in Evansville. So, it was really something to be proud of. The shipyard produced a quality ship. Something the ship crews could be confident of and no Evansville LSTs were lost due to structural defects or anything other than attacks directly by the enemy. So this Army/Navy E-Flag was very well deserved. Obviously the shipyard as any industry does, had various problems with getting the right amount of material here and the right amount of people here, but overall it was very commendable the effort they made in the amount of ships they were able to produce in a very pressurized situation.

We have an E-Flag. It is not from the shipyard. It is from another wartime manufacturer.

LINDA: Do you have pictures of it?

TOM: Yes, we do have a picture of the E-Flag being presented to the – yes. It is when the white star was presented I think it was when either Henry Morgenthau or the Secretary of the Navy was here.

LINDA: I was in a bar one day and I was with the bar waitress and you were in there having a drink in 1943 and you bumped into Roman Ritzer and you were talking to him. How did the conversation go?

TOM: Well Roman Ritzer the Chief Hull Inspector for the Evansville Shipyard is a great guy but Roman Ritzer wants the job done right, he wants it done when it has to be done and nothing is going to go out if it is not done right.

Ritz as Chief Hull Inspector of the shipyard, responsibility was to be sure that all the ships went out, the welding seams were correct, that everything was done up to standard and on a timely basis but yet quality was the first thing. If the ships weren't being put together properly Ritz would stop production and he would make sure it was done correctly before he would release them. So Ritz was a person that worked hard and was sure that everybody else around him did work hard. Roman Ritzer is still with us today at the age of 94. He is still a walking memory of the Evansville Shipyard and it's through the intuition of himself and the hard work of himself and others that made it possible for the shipyard to maintain the high standards that it did throughout the war. Roman Ritzer took pride in his work as did I think many of the people at the Evansville Shipyard and they were not only taking pride in their work but they were also quite adaptable to the period of time that they were working in.

Ritzer and his supervisors for one thing realized that it was going to be impossible to maintain more time production without making some type of provision to replace them in that we are going overseas such as in the area of welding. Ritz has related to me on many instances how they needed to bring in women welders and he was quite confident of their ability to do the

job which they did do quite admirably. He often has related to me that his best welders were the women that he thought they did the highest quality job and see that type of innovation and other innovations that Roman Ritzer as Chief Hall Inspector and others at the shipyard in their roles were able to produce a ship that was not only safe but it was something the crews could be proud of and be confident in their ability to do whatever they might demand of it whether it was to go through a typhoon or to attack Okinawa to go onto the Normandy beach heads, they could be sure that the Evansville Shipyard had given them a ship that would basically do what they demanded of it.

LINDA: The construction and the design of it was kind of unique in terms of being flat bottomed and..

TOM: The LSTs themselves were flat bottomed ships which is different from most naval ships obviously to get onto beaches it had to be flat bottomed. If you had a normal bottomed ship you would not get close to the beach head. That is something that was developed so it could actually crawl up onto the sand beaches when its' anchor was put down and it could release men and material right onto a dry surface only to leave shallow water. Now the drawback to that as I have spoken to LST sailors was that when you are out in rough sea you are basically on a barge and you hit a typhoon, it is just a horrible experience. Some of them saying even worse than being bombed by the Japanese, at least they would go away eventually but a typhoon seemed to last forever particularly in the Pacific theater and that it was just a churning real cauldron that would get caught in but they made it through but some LSTs didn't make it through the typhoons. Some were scuttled or lost during typhoon season in the Pacific theater. So that was something they feared also along with the enemy and the Pacific Theater the typhoon could also be an equally impressive foe.

LINDA: And sometimes even more frightening than the real enemy.

TOM: Yes, the typhoons could be more frightening than the enemy. You had no control. You had no support. You know your fighter planes could come in and help you against the typhoon. You couldn't get support from a battle ship during a typhoon. You just had to ride it out and often times LSTs couldn't ride it out such as LSTs here from Evansville, some of them that were lost, were lost due to typhoons just because they could not ride out those rough waves of the Pacific Ocean.

LINDA: What are you thinking about as a young person in 1943 about all of these men who were coming into your city, you know waiting to get on board these ships, taking over the area, I mean did you talk to any of them? Did you find out about those people coming from New York or California and they are here in Evansville, Indiana.

TOM: In Evansville the LST crew members and wait to board the ship. Sometimes they would bring the full crew down, sometimes they would bring a skeleton to get it down to New Orleans that would also be accompanied by a ferry river crew and when the full crew came out obviously they would see the sea and they would perhaps only be here for a few days, the full crew. Other parts of the crew would be here for longer prepping the ship and getting themselves familiar with

the ship but they would often enjoy the hotels and the recreations of the city. Evidently at one point in Evansville history the Navy became a little bit concerned about some of the more illicit recreation here in the city as prostitution and venereal disease was part of the outlook in the city itself. Evansville had a famous red light district for years and at one point the Navy feared that they wouldn't be able to put together a full crew because of venereal disease attacking their sailors as they dealt with the prostitutes here in the city. The Navy decided it would be better to start housing them at Crane Navy Base north of here until just prior to boarding the LSTs here in the city. So some of that changed a little bit during the war and the Navy actually came in and shut down the red light in Evansville just so that didn't hinder the war effort.