

Polymnia Street Goes to War

In New Orleans' Most Extreme Case of Spot Zoning, Heavy Manufacturing "Pops Up" on a Quiet Residential Street

by Richard Campanella *New Orleans Times-Picayune* InsideOut section, September 13, 2014

New Orleans is not an industrial town, we are told. True enough: manufacturing here never attained the levels of northern and midwestern cities. Nowadays, aside from petroleum and chemical processing, making things falls well behind shipping things and serving things in the ranking of economic sectors.

Thus it comes as something of a surprise to consider just how much manufacturing *did* exist in New Orleans. From the late 1800s to the mid-1900s, factories dotted the skyline, and New Orleanians did everything from assemble automobiles and process foods to produce aluminum, paint, furniture and ships.

The greatest chapter in local manufacturing history came courtesy Andrew Jackson Higgins' boat-building business, which employed tens of thousands of people and built as many vessels to, quite literally, help win World War II. If any one moment encapsulated that home-grown industrial miracle, it occurred in a little-known episode in June 1941 on, of all places, Polymnia Street.

Higgins, a Nebraska-born builder who specialized in shallow-draft vessels capable of navigating Louisiana's waters, contemplated a pressing tactical problem facing the Allies. How do you land millions of troops on two overrun continents when all deep-draft harbors are in enemy hands? Higgins

saw the answer in flat-bottomed landing craft dispersed along sparsely defended beachfronts, rather than concentrated dangerously at a port which first had to be captured.

Reading the tea leaves of world events, Higgins massively scaled up his operation even before the war began. With a mix of brilliant vision, dazzling managerial skills and lordly arrogance—"his presence is imperative, his gaze steady," reported *Fortune* in 1943; "he radiates belligerent authority...and swears beautifully and easily"—Higgins won over East Coast-inclined military bureaucrats ("s.o.b.'s," he called them) and landed lucrative contracts to build vessels in his adopted hometown of New Orleans.

Higgins' production line kicked into high gear with the fall of France in 1940 and Axis domination of Western Europe by 1941. President Roosevelt foresaw Hitler's next move as possibly aimed at the Portuguese Azores or, worse, French Martinique in the Caribbean, which would give the Germans stepping stones to the American mainland. With or without a declaration of war, the U.S. military was not about to let that happen, and planned to land heavy tanks on those atolls.

An operation like that needed a specialized craft, called a tank lighter.



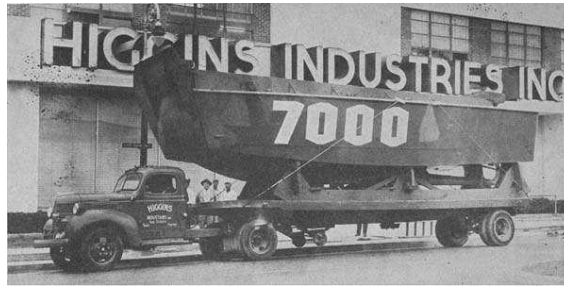
This wartime Shell Oil advertisement featured the June 1941 Polymnia Street story and may represent the only illustration of the episode. From the collection of the National WWII Museum, 2002.067.001; special thanks to Lindsey Barnes, Senior Archivist

On May 27, 1941, military contractors challenged Higgins to design a tank lighter within the impossibly short span of three days. Higgins, who liked designing by building rather than before building, promised instead to construct a working model.

The Navy doubted it could be done. “The hell it can’t,” Higgins growled; “you just be here in three days.”

According to historian Jerry E. Strahan, whose seminal biography of Higgins planted the seeds for our National World War II Museum, Higgins and his team got to work and “designed, built and put in the water [a] 45-foot tank lighter [within] sixty-one hours.” The craft passed all tests in Lake Pontchartrain, “climbing halfway up the concrete sea wall [and] riding over tree trunks,” according to *Fortune*.

Marine Corps and Navy brass were thrilled. They had their prototype. Now, on June 7, they wanted the full order — 50 tank lighters, nine of which were to be delivered combat-ready to Norfolk, Va. And they wanted them by June 21.



Higgins vessel heading to the front. Courtesy New Orleans Public Library.

Fifty new craft never before mass-produced — in two weeks? Plus delivery? A prudent man would have shaken his clients to their senses. But Higgins relished the challenge and jumped into action, resolving seemingly show-stopping obstacles with creative, bold and at times barely legal solutions.

Low on steel, he “chartered a fleet of trucks and armed plant guards,” wrote Strahan, “to persuade [a Baton Rouge] consignee to release the metal to Higgins Industries.” Requiring bronze shafting, he sent his men to raid a Texas depot, and arranged for complicit Louisiana police to placate livid Texas law enforcement as his trucks crossed the state line heading back to New Orleans. Needing more steel, Higgins begged and borrowed from a Birmingham plant, then sweet-talked Southern Railway officials into bending the rules to deliver the metal to New Orleans. “Never before or since,” wrote Strahan, “has a Southern Railway passenger train pulled freight cars.”

Higgins’ chief problem was where to build the 50 tank lighters. His makeshift headquarters at 1755 St. Charles Ave. could only handle modest civilian projects, and his big City Park plant, still under construction, was already fully tasked with other war deliverables.

Higgins cast his eyes down the avenue and found the answer. It was called Polymnia Street.

Never mind that 1600 Polymnia was residential, or that it was neither equipped nor positioned for heavy manufacturing. In an extreme example of spot zoning and “pop-up” enterprises, Higgins got Mayor Robert Maestri to permit the requisitioning of this public space for his private use and blew past any dissent.

Higgins’ workers roped off the street, strung lights and erected giant tarps to create an all-weather work yard and assembly line. Machinery, power supplies and construction took place in an old stable which Higgins had acquired. Because the ceiling was too low for a crane, “bull gangs” of the strongest men (depicted in the accompanying Shell Oil advertisement, the only known illustration of the project) were used to lift heavy sheets of metal into the stable.

For two weeks, a steady stream of trucks brought the Alabama steel, the Texas bronze, a forest's worth of plywood and other raw materials into the Carondelet end of 1600 Polymnia, and with 800 employees (possibly many more) working three shifts, 24 hours a day, finished tank lighters came out the St. Charles Avenue end.

All the bustle did not go without complaint. The United States was not yet at war, and a patriotic sense of sacrifice had not fully developed; besides, it wasn't as if Higgins was going broke on all these government contracts.

Neighbors protested about obstructed streets, blocked access to homes, interrupted garbage pick-up and loss of commerce. In one only-in-New-Orleans case, the irate madam of a Polymnia Street brothel "argued plausibly that the racket destroyed romance," and, according to the *Fortune* article, "threatened to take up the matter with the authorities."

The last of the vessels was completed right on time; next came rail delivery to Norfolk. According to historian Peter Neushul, "seven railroad bridge clearances had to be raised or strengthened in order to transport the craft."

By June 21, all the Polymnia Street tank lighters—"ugly but fast," Higgins proudly described them—were done and delivered, right on schedule. Navy bureaucrats who were oftentimes at the receiving end of Higgins' temerity now praised the man for his "zeal, efficiency and splendid cooperation."

The very next day, Hitler's war machine did indeed open a new front in the war—but it aimed eastward to attack the Soviet Union, not westward onto the Atlantic atolls.

Higgins' tank lighters proved unnecessary for their original purpose, but they would come in handy elsewhere. Within six months, the Japanese would attack Pearl Harbor, prompting the U.S. to enter a two-front war. Higgins Industries would have lots more work to do.

The company ended up producing 20,094 boats—most of the Navy fleet—and employing as many as 30,000 people, including African Americans and women, across seven gargantuan plants citywide.

Its most famous vessels included the Patrol-Torpedo (PT) Boat and the Landing Craft Vehicle-Personnel, or LCVPs, which deposited troops at Normandy on D-Day and elsewhere in both theaters of the war.

That fortnight on Polymnia Street in June 1941 portended the critically important manufacturing that would come, and it demonstrates that even a non-industrialized city like New Orleans can whip into action swiftly and efficiently if need be — oh, and perhaps bend a few rules in the process.



1600 Polymnia Street today, site of an incredible burst of heavy manufacturing in June 1941—to the delight of the Navy and dismay of neighbors. Photos by Richard Campanella.

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