The S.S. La Crosse Victory was just one specimen representing a remarkable manufacturing achievement by the home front during World War II.
The far-flung battlefields of World War II, separated from the United States by two vast oceans, required enormous quantities of men and supplies to travel by ship. For example, it took 15 cargo ships just to transport the vehicles, equipment, and supplies for one armored division to Europe. Additional ships were required for the men. Convoy routes spanned 2,000 to 8,000 miles across the Atlantic and Pacific.¹

Both sides expended great effort towards disrupting supply lines, and this meant ships were being attacked by aircraft and submarines. The United States lost 538 cargo ships during the war; Great Britain 2,570; other Allies 1,172. Shipbuilders had to make up for these losses, and more, to keep supplies flowing to the front lines.²

Liberty ships were prefabricated cargo ships that could be constructed quickly. American shipbuilders churned out 2,700 Liberty ships alone during the war.³ Without adequate shipping, the island nation of Great Britain would be starved of sustenance. British shipyards could not keep up with their losses during the war, so Liberty ships filled a critical gap for them.⁴ The Liberty ships were mass-produced in the United States and provided to Great Britain through Lend-Lease. By 1944, Liberty ships had resolved the British shortage of shipping.⁵

Liberty ships were originally a British design. President Franklin D. Roosevelt dubbed them “Liberty” ships that would help restore liberty to Europe.⁶
The first Liberty ship was launched on September 27, 1941, a couple of months before the United States entered World War II. One year later, there were more than 60 shipyards in the United States, using materials from more than 700 industrial plants, creating an ocean-worthy cargo ship in 70 days from start to finish. Three new Liberty ships were being launched every day.\textsuperscript{7}

Depending on the shipbuilder, each Liberty ship cost $1,508,000 to $7,161,000 to build.\textsuperscript{8}

The genius behind mass production of cargo ships during World War II was Henry Kaiser. Born the son of German immigrants in upstate New York, Kaiser dropped out of school after the eighth grade and got a job as a store clerk. He created a succession of careers for himself in photography supplies and studios, wholesale hardware, road construction, dam construction, and cement manufacturing. In 1940, he constructed a shipyard in Richmond, California to build cargo ships for the British. Four years later, the Richmond shipyard employed almost 100,000 workers fulfilling government contracts for cargo ships. Kaiser built another shipyard in the Portland area. His shipyards constructed 1,490 ships, among them fifty small aircraft carriers and one-third of all the cargo ships built in the United States.\textsuperscript{9}

The traditional way of building a ship was to lay the keel and then rivet steel plates up and around it. Henry Kaiser, who had been in a shipyard only once before he started building ships, had the innovative idea to prefabricate pieces of a ship and weld them together. This greatly speeded up the construction process. One of his shipyards built and launched a Liberty ship in just 80 hours and 30 minutes. When his seven shipyards ran short of steel, Kaiser borrowed millions of dollars from the government to build his own steel mill in California.\textsuperscript{10}

Called “Ugly Ducklings”\textsuperscript{11} by some, the Liberty ships proved their worth by conveying over 5,000,000 tons of cargo from the United States to all parts of the world by June 1943.\textsuperscript{12}

Liberty ships were small and slow, so a new line of “Victory” ships replaced them.\textsuperscript{13} Victory ships were built to higher specifications with an eye toward post-war commerce.\textsuperscript{14} The first Victory ship was launched on January 12, 1944. Because the new ships were capable of traveling at a higher speed, convoys could move faster and were more difficult targets for enemy submarines. After the war, Victory ships carried many soldiers back home to the United States.\textsuperscript{15}
The S. S. La Crosse Victory was one of the new Victory ship class. Haley Gagliano of the La Crosse County Historical Society thoroughly documented the lifespan of the La Crosse Victory just two months ago. See her article here: https://lacrossetribune.com/news/local/things-that-matter-s-s-la-crosse-victory-christening-bottle/article_0f428829-559e-5b95-b058-4d8f8805c653.html.

The February 25, 1945 edition of the La Crosse Tribune includes a letter from a sailor on the S. S. La Crosse Victory thanking the citizens of La Crosse for funding the purchase of books for the ship’s library.
Librarians and citizens held a ceremony to launch the S.S. La Crosse Victory on December 25, 1944. The ship was built to replace merchant ships lost to enemy action. A plaque was presented to the city of La Crosse by the American Merchant Marine Library Association. The plaque was purchased with funds contributed by the library association and the town of La Crosse.

Seaman Aboard SS La Crosse

Thanks Residents For Library

"Dear Citizens of La Crosse:"

It gives me great pleasure to thank you for the wonderful library that your city contributed to the SS La Crosse Victory ship. Your choice of books are of the highest quality. We have known that our unannounced hours throughout the day and night both at sea and in restricted ports, will pass more rapidly due to the excellent reading material. Just to mention a few: "The Sun is My Undoing," "The Keys of the Kingdom," "Gone With the Wind," and many others. I now forget the complete works of Shakespeare.

Perhaps you often wondered what a real merchant ship looks like. What it does and who are the people who man her. Merchant ships vary in size anywhere from a hundred to a thousand feet in length. However, I can't tell you the exact length of the La Crosse Victory. However, I can tell you that she is in the neighborhood of 500 feet. Some merchant ships are very ugly and others are as streamlined as all things are becoming in this century. So our gun girl Ironton La Crosse is one of the pin-up girls of the merchant fleet.

She is very trim and gentle, although at times, when Father Neptune proves that all seas are under his jurisdiction, I suppose that our girl Ironton La Crosse may act up. But regardless of her actions, we shall try and picture her during her moments of distress. After all, she is a lady.

"The men who man her are from all over these United States. Most of us are from the eastern seaboard. I am sure that the men on this vessel will uphold the name of La Crosse Victory and also to those utilized to see that she gets her campaign. We are all of the fighting front. Too, I believe, that she will wear her part in this, our fight for freedom and peace."

Would Enjoy Exploring

We have been able to take each and every one of you through the different departments of this vessel. I am sure that you would enjoy exploring the depths of the La Crosse, but due to wartime restrictions, I can't even give you any details on paper. Perhaps in the very near future when such information will not cause the restricted list, I will be able to give you some details about the La Crosse Victory."

"In closing I wish to extend my kindest thanks for the wonderful books. One of these days a native son of your city may have the good fortune to become a member of this ship and I'm sure he will be proud of your contribution."

I checked the crew list and found that none of the members had been from your state."
American shipbuilding prowess did more than help win World War II. Because of its massive shipbuilding program undertaken during the war, including ships like the S. S. La Crosse Victory, the United States supplanted Great Britain as the world’s leading maritime power after World War II.\(^{16}\)

Jeff Rand  
Adult Services Librarian  
La Crosse Public Library

**Sources & Notes:**

11. President Franklin Roosevelt was the source of this nickname. “Liberty Ships and Victory Ships, America’s Lifeline in War,” National Park Service, accessed 2020 February 22,  