

Jefferson Quick, Timely Reads

Ted Sprague: *From Freeport to Carnegie Mellon New Orleans, D-Day, and Back*

By David Frew
July 2020

Dr. David Frew, a prolific writer, author, and speaker, grew up on Erie's lower west side as a proud "Bay Rat," joining neighborhood kids playing and marauding along the west bayfront. He has written for years about his beloved Presque Isle and his adventures on the Great Lakes. In a new series of articles for the Jefferson, the retired professor takes note of life in and around the water.



Ted Sprague works in the Higgins engineering lab in about 1943.

Theodore “Ted” Sprague IV was born in 1917 and grew up in the village of Freeport in North East Township, about 16 miles east of Erie. Freeport is older than Erie. Judah Colt established a shipping port there on 16-Mile Creek shortly after Pennsylvania extended its borders north to Lake Erie, but he subsequently shifted his operations west toward Erie.

The Sprague Family moved there from upstate New York in 1874, attracted by the relatively inexpensive lakeside property. More than two generations prior to Ted Sprague, family members farmed the land and developed a thriving hospitality business. Beginning with a typical 19th century tourist home, they expanded by building a three-story, 25-room hotel in 1900. The tourist home and hotel attracted a community of artists as well as other vacationers. Sprague's "Lakedale Hotel" was opulent for its time, featuring tennis courts, landscaped grounds, a delightful creekside location, and paths that led to beautiful sandy beaches. Prior to the opening of Presque Isle State Park, Freeport's Lake Erie location provided one of the region's best beach-vacation destinations. Lakedale Hotel guests were largely from Pittsburgh, which was relatively easy to reach via Route 89 and Route 8.



The Sprague Lakedale Hotel complex is shown in about 1920. The brick building at right is the original 1835 house and tourist home while the larger structure at left is the 11,000-square-foot hotel.

Ted Sprague was academically encouraged by his parents, who were Colgate and Mt. Holyoke alumni – two of America's finest colleges at the time. He did quite well in school, graduating from North East High School as valedictorian in 1934. Since the Great Depression was raging, Ted was reluctant to go to college, but his father tricked him into trying it out by recruiting him to do heavy manual farm labor the summer after he completed high school. When fall finally came, he left home for Carnegie Mellon (Carnegie Institute of Technology in those days) with enough money for his first semester. The choice of Carnegie Mellon was influenced by the large number of summer residents from Pittsburgh. Ted Sprague loved college and did well, graduating as a management-engineer in 1938. Carnegie's management-engineer program produced hybrid engineers who were problem solvers, classical engineers, and process designers, somewhat like the industrial and manufacturing engineering curricula that rose to prominence after World War II.



Ted Sprague arrives at New Orleans and ties up with two boys from Buffalo who he met along the way.

Bad timing? The Great Depression was still not over and there were no jobs when he graduated so Ted Sprague decided to build a small sailboat and head south, partly for adventure and to look for work. Roommates had expressed an interest in going along but in the end they did not, so he packed his 14-foot sailboat with clothing and supplies (30 cans of beans and soup), launched it in the Allegheny River near campus, and sailed to New Orleans. How hard could that possibly be? Experienced river men predicted that he would never make it.

Notes From Ted's Trip Log:

"Ripped the keel off the bottom of the boat near Mt. Vernon, Ind. Drifted south to Cairo, Ill. and repaired it."

"Boat leaking badly. Stopped on a sandbar, turned the boat over and caulked the bottom with clothes line."

"The Mississippi River was not as dangerous as its reputation. Met two boys from Buffalo who are paddling to New Orleans in a canoe."

The 1,952-mile trip took 60 days with Ted stopping at river towns to work and earn money. Having grown up on Lake Erie with the skills and work ethic of a farm boy, he was confident he would find day-labor on the New Orleans waterfront. And he did, eventually catching on with the Higgins Boatyard. Owner Andrew Higgins was pleased to hire the ambitious youngster from Pennsylvania and kept him busy in the yard.



The wooden Higgins Landing Craft, LCVP

With the runup to World War II and several government contracts in hand, Andrew Higgins, who knew that one of his hard-working yard hands was actually an engineering graduate, brought Ted into the office and promoted him to “designer.” The Higgins Company became best known for the 23,000 wooden landing craft they supplied for the war. The company had a head start on the design since it had been producing a shallow-draft swamp boat called the “Eureka Boat” with its propeller protected inside of a depression in the hull. The Eureka, which was designed for logging in the swamps of Louisiana and had a reputation for being indestructible, became the basis for the Higgins Landing Craft that stormed the D-Day beaches in June 1944. There was some reluctance to using Andrew Higgins’ proposed design but in the end the United States Marines lobbied for it and won over the objections of Navy bureaucrats who worried about contracting with a “hillbilly” from the South. The Higgins Boat, which was officially designated “LCVP” (Landing Craft Vehicles and Personnel), could make 12 knots and operate in only 18 inches of water.

General Dwight Eisenhower once said:

“Andrew Higgins and his company actually won the war. Had it not been for their landing crafts, Allied forces could not have stormed the beaches.”

From Ted’s Letters Home

“I am supposed to move into the office and possibly become a naval architect. The pay is only \$.30 per hour but I don’t mind if it leads someplace.

“Bought a suit today at a hock-shop for \$3.70. Not so bad! Added leather shoes.”

The Higgins Company is a fairly young outfit and growing fast. I am in hopes that it will get a lot bigger and that I will grow along with it.

“What do you think of Carnegie’s football team this year? If they keep on I’m apt to see them play here at the Sugar Bowl.”

Between 1939 and 1946, the company grew from a modest, single location waterfront business, employing 75 people, to a seven-site conglomerate with more than 20,000 employees. Higgins contributed 60 different products to the United States war effort, including PT boats, helicopters, and an airborne lifeboat. Sprague began his tenure at Higgins, designing PT (patrol torpedo) boats, and there were several editions of the popular, floating rocket ship. While his signature was on almost all of the PT designs, one of his favorites was the “Hellcat,” a smaller, more nimble version of the standard design. The Hellcat was clocked at 46 knots and could reverse its course in nine seconds.

Of all the projects that Sprague worked on, his favorite and the boat that he was essentially in charge of, was the “A-1 Higgins Flying Lifeboat.” The A-1 was a 3,300-pound, 27-foot boat with two small engines, a short mast and sails. It was designed to be carried beneath a B-17 and dropped to men who had been forced into the water from a downed aircraft or a ship. A persistent problem for ocean-stranded airmen and sailors was being set adrift in rubber liferafts, which could not be propelled by their small oars to a safe haven. Hundreds of stranded men made it into lifeboats only to perish from exposure on the open sea or be carried into enemy waters by contrary currents.

There had been a few attempts to design air-dropped rescue craft but most had serious problems. Primary among the flaws was the damage typically done when these boats were dropped into the sea. After consulting with the Army Air Force, Higgins sent Sprague to Wright Field in Ohio to examine a recovered British flying lifeboat that had been damaged during an attempted rescue drop. Sprague returned with a list of obvious flaws that he had observed when inspecting the British boat, the general design plan for an improved lifeboat, and an idea for manufacturing. Sprague’s plan was to fabricate a laminated, multilayered wooden boat that would be strong enough to survive the drop, and to equip it with several waterproof chambers. Two small engines helped it to motor for several miles, and a short mast and sails allowed it to travel almost indefinitely. A compass, charts, first aid supplies, fishing equipment, water, and food were tucked into the waterproof compartments with charts suggesting the best course to follow to safety.

The most complicated aspect of the engineering was the “dropping” technology. The A-1 was fitted with a neoprene gasket that connected it to the standard bombing mechanism of the B-17 aircraft that carried it. It was dropped from 1,500 feet by activating the standard bombing levers. Three parachutes were immediately deployed to slow the descent. The boat dropped, bow-down and was equipped with a spring-loaded air chamber that released compressed air to make the boat pop to the surface in the upright position. The parachutes fell in the water and acted as sea anchors, keeping

the boat from floating away too rapidly. Higgins built 600 flying lifeboats. Another flying lifeboat called the A-3 was developed (EDO Corporation) as a successor to the Higgins A-1. Approximately 200 were built and sold to the Coast Guard, beginning in 1947.

When the A-1 went into production, Sprague's education and training in manufacturing (the management side of the Carnegie management-engineering degree) became useful. He was able to create an efficient process that began with a giant autoclave used to laminate and strengthen the alternate layers of wood that made up the hull. Before the A-1 went into production, Sprague tested it by sailing one from Biloxi, Miss. to Tampa, Fla. with a crew of six.



The Higgins A-1 Lifeboat is shown attached to a rescue B-17.

Sprague remained with Higgins as a designer for 13 years and created a life in New Orleans. He met and married his wife, Jean, had a baby, built a modest home outside of town, and later began the construction of a large, modern house in a suburban development. With the war over, Higgins hoped to shift its production to pleasure boats, taking the best of their wartime designs and translating them to recreational watercraft. They planned to use their PT boat expertise to produce a line of motor yachts, their multilayered hull lamination skills to create strong, lightweight canoes and duck boats, and their A-1 designs to serve as the foundation for a line of sailboats.

But the excitement of the war was gone. Mr. Higgins, who had become a second father to Sprague, was withdrawing from the business, and Sprague was missing Freeport. Eventually, the allure of Freeport called Sprague and his young family home, a decision that was accelerated by the reality that Andrew Higgins would be passing the business on to his four sons. With company management changing – Higgins passed away in 1952 – Sprague left New Orleans in 1951, saying that he wanted his young daughter to grow up as he had, in a small town on the shore of Lake Erie.

During his years in New Orleans, Sprague had used his salary to buy property in Freeport, thinking that he would eventually return. So, when he came home, he already owned several cottages, a large home, and farmland. Sprague, the engineer-entrepreneur, shifted his focus from boat design to land development. Liquidating his

properties in New Orleans, he invested in more lakefront land at Freeport and became a property investor, landlord, and farmer, replanting land that his family had owned for decades.

When Sprague arrived, he found the old family businesses outdated. The war had effectively ended the summer cottage-rentals as well as the glory days of the hotel, although the building was still in excellent structural condition. But Sprague was not discouraged. He began rebuilding cottages and created a new business on the beach, the Freeport Yacht Club, which opened in 1957 with 25 members. Instead of building an opulent club, Sprague used his beach property to house mostly small fishing boats that could be launched from the beach with a system of custom-designed boat carts. Sprague built the carts to conform to the hull shapes of the boats that were launched from the club. He also provided a few “universal carts” that members could use to launch and retrieve the club’s smaller boats. Sprague’s carts were so efficient that he developed a business of selling them to other boaters who lived along the lake shore.

Sprague’s timing was exquisite since fishermen were interested in easy access to the lake for blue pike, walleye, and perch fishing. By focusing on small boats, Sprague was able to attract even more members to his new operation, which was enhanced by regular picnics and dinners on the beach. He considered restoring the hotel but it had been rented to a Pittsburgh physician and his family who had a long-term lease. By the time the rental expired in 1955, Sprague had decided that the 11,100-square-foot building was too big to restore or repurpose. For one summer, Sprague and his family lived in the old hotel.

During long Freeport winters, Sprague became interested in iceboating, which became a passion that consumed the rest of his life. He began building DN-Class iceboats in the mid-1950s and, as might have been expected, he was able to translate his engineering and design skills to the creation of “hard water” boats and sails that turned out to be among the fastest in the world. Sprague built the first DN in the region and helped to popularize the class. He would regularly take advantage of the cold Lake Erie winters to launch DNs from the beach at Freeport and sail to distant ports, including Erie and Conneaut, Ohio; adventures that became legendary among regional ice boaters. Recruiting his daughter, Susan, to travel with him, he would make long pilgrimages (DNs can sail at speeds of 50 miles per hour). On trips to Erie he would sail past Presque Isle Bay Channel, carry his DN across the base of Presque Isle, and then sail down the bay to the Erie Yacht Club. Once there, he would have a few beers in the clubhouse and regale everyone with descriptions of his long-distance travels. Most of those trips were made in less time than a person could travel in a car. Sprague would inevitably call home and convince his wife, Jean, to pick him up after the long-distance trips, rather than sailing back home.

Sprague became obsessed with racing and traveled to dozens of locations to compete. He would search for the very best ice conditions during the week and then travel with his DN to race on weekends. His daughter, Susan, often accompanied him after she had

completed her architectural training in 1964, as did acclaimed sailmaker Dave Bierig. Sprague's favorite venues included Bay City (Michigan), Detroit (Michigan), Indianapolis (Indiana), Lake Geneva (Wisconsin), Lake St. Clair (Michigan), Hamilton (Ontario), Red Banks (New Jersey), and Sandusky (Ohio). Sprague became a champion racer, taking advantage of the exceptionally fast boats that he built, and eventually his shelves were lined with trophies from all over the county. Ultimately, he traveled to Europe (Germany and Sweden) with his daughter, Susan, to participate in match racing, where he was also successful (ice boating has always been popular in northern Europe).



Sprague is on his ice boat at Sandusky, Ohio in 1972.

Given the pace of events during and shortly after the war, Higgins A-1 sailing lifeboats were not carefully preserved. Many were dropped into places where they were never found or used. Those that were sailed were almost always abandoned after they had served their rescue purposes. By the 1950s, it had become clear that the next generation of air-sea rescues would use helicopters that could lower baskets to men who were adrift. Eventually, the Army Air Force declared its remaining post-war supply of A-1s to be surplus and destroyed almost all that remained. By an unimaginable miracle, however, two A-1s were donated to the Farragut Naval Academy in New England with the stipulation that they should either be used for training or destroyed.

After a few years, the decision was made to burn them but a German immigrant, Helmut Vlies, understood their historic value and decided to try to save them. He found a friend and the two men financially sponsored the boats for six years, temporarily saving them from the scrap fire. When the sponsorships had expired, each man took one of the boats and began to sail it.

In 2000, Sprague's son-in-law, Dave Bierig, and his wife, Susan Sprague (Ted's daughter), learned that Helmut Vlies was selling his A-1. When Helmut discovered the connection to Ted Sprague, he happily sold it to Susan and Dave Bierig. They restored it, put it back into sailing condition, and regularly launched it from the beach at the Freeport Yacht Club. The Bierig-Sprague restored A-1 was rigged as a top-sail schooner, which is not how it would have been sailed during the war. The second surviving lifeboat was found in the Chesapeake Bay a few years later by the Bierigs' son-in-law. It had been "modified" almost to the point of being unrecognizable, but the stern shape

gave it away. The Bierigs purchased it, donated to the D-Day (now the World War II) Museum in New Orleans, and personally hauled it there.



The Restored Bierig-Sprague A-1 sails in Lake Erie. The H 263 designation on the foresail indicates that it is hull number 263 of 600, and the logo on the mainsail shows three parachutes dropping the boat, bow-first.

It is fitting testament to the quality of Ted Sprague's A-1 flying lifeboats that when the miraculously surviving boats were located more than 60 years after they had been built, the hulls were intact and seaworthy. There are not many modern boats that could stand that test of time.



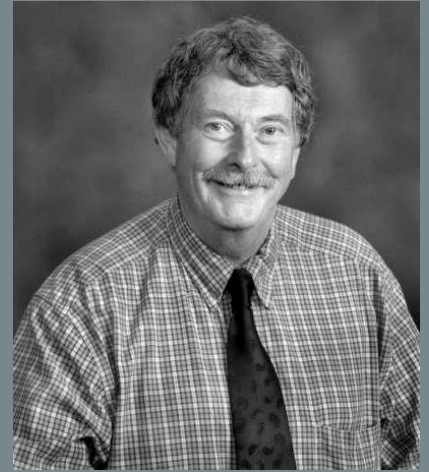
The sun sets behind the Freeport Yacht Club in January 2020

The main hotel building was taken down in 1983, but the original barn north of the old hotel is still standing. Jean Sprague, passed away in 1997 and Ted died a few years later in Florida in 2001. But his influence continues at the World War II Museum in New Orleans as well as in Freeport, where his daughter, Susan, has taken over the operations of the Freeport Yacht Club, which continues to flourish.

(Generous contributions of stories, photographs, and archival materials by Susan Sprague and Dave Bierig made this article possible. Anna McCartney assisted with the images.)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is an emeritus professor at Gannon University, where he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.



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