Pioneer Anglo Community, 1851-1859

The history of the "pioneer Anglo community" of Sparta really begins in 1849 with the construction of a military or state road by the United States Army from Prarie du Chein to Hudson or Lake St. Croix. Two years later, in 1851, another rough road was constructed through Sparta running between Portage City and LaCrosse, Wisconsin. Both of these routes were well-worn Indian trails. The later path led Indians to LaCrosse River and then onward to the Mississippi River. Later this path became a regular stage road and a main artery of communication for west central Wisconsin. [Koehler, 1967: 8; Barney: 5; and McMillan: 389.]

During the years 1849-1850, the General Land Office (GLO) surveyed the Sparta area. With the California gold rush occurring and state inducements to provide cheap land in Wisconsin to potential settlers (i.e. 1849 Wisconsin Preemption Act), it's not surprising that settlement soon followed in the Sparta area.

The first permanent settlers to make land claims in Sparta were the Pettit (a.k.a. Pettit) family. In 1849-1850, Frank Petit built a cabin near Castle Rock, but reportedly was forced to leave this site because of "troublesome" Indians. A year later, his brother, William Petit arrived with their father & mother and bought a claim of 160 acres of land near the crossing of the two state rods. In July 1851, the Petit family completed a log cabin on the west bank of Beaver Creek at the northeast corner of North Court and West Main Streets in the present city of Sparta. It is believed that the location of their one-room log cabin was the same as the present day location of the Sparta Free Library (Mo36/31). Later, the Petit family converted their cabin into a tavern to serve traffic which was bound to grow at this important transportation interchange. [Koehler, 1977: 4-6; Sparta Herald; 16 July 1951; Unknown Newspaper "Sparta Library Has Unique Background", N.D.; Monroe county Democrat 17 September 1975; Richards: 246; and Sparta Centennial: 5.]

From this nucleus, a small settlement grew. The settlement received its name from "Grandma" Petit who was given the honor of naming the community. Her exact reason for naming the village Sparta is unknown. The story is told that she was great reader and was well informed in history. She thought the pioneers who came to their new settlement were as brave and suffered just as many hardships with fortitude as did the ancient Spartans of Greece—and so named the new village Sparta. [Monroe county Democrat July 20, 1933; and Monroe County Democrat 17 September 1975.]

Before the railroads were constructed, many of the first settlers coming to Sparta came by way of the Mississippi River to the town of LaCrosse on River. Other settlers to Sparta came by packet boat along the Erie Canal to Buffalo, New York. From there, they boated across the Great Lakes to Milwaukee and then overland to Sparta. ["Early Welsh Settlers", Monroe County Historical Society (June 1989): 5-7.]

These early settlers were mostly farmers. Besides the Petit's, they included: R.S. Kingman and his two brothers Alvardo and Rosalvo, Nelson Carrier, E. Shaw, Reverend Frederick Walrath and his son Edward Walrath, Richard Casselman (a.k.a. Castleman), William Kerrigan, J.D. Dammon, Lyman Andrews, A.H. Blake, Russell Hill, G.H. Ledyard, Daniel Fisk and his family, including sons George and William, and several others. [Monroe County Democrat 17 September 1975; Richards: 247-248; Sparta Centennial: 5; and Unknown Newspapers "Sparta is Largest Monroe County City, Hub of Railroads, Highways" N.D.]

Between 1853 and 1855, a large group of settlers (some 250 or so) arrived in the burgeoning community of Sparta from Cattaraugus County, New arrived in the burgeoning community of Sparta from Cattaraugus County, New York. There were largely Welsh in national origin and also sought the area for farming purposes. They included many of the forebearers of noted Sparta families, including the McClures, Dalabas, Blytons, Burrows, and Fishers. Eventually some of them made up the core of small-time merchants in the community's earliest days. Hotels, sawmills, hardware and furniture stores, as well as grocery stores, were all started by this New York contingent. Sparta soon became the center of a large trade area, reaching from

Black River Falls to Viroqua. Its population grew rapidly from 28 persons in 1851 to 382 persons by 1855. [Koehler, 1977: 3, 17-19 and 30; Monroe County Democrat July 20, 1933 and "Early Welsh Settlers", Monroe County Historical Society (June 1989): 5-7]

The influx of settlers into Winnebago Territory caused what one historian termed a "miniature" Indian War. The Winnebago Indians made their claim clear to the new settlers—that Sparta and the surrounding territory had been theirs prior to the coming of the white people. An incident soon occurred that provoked both parties. In 1853, at Big Creek (four miles from Sparta), a Winnebago harassed a settler in an incident over food. The settler immediately complained to authorities in Sparta about the incident. In reaction, the people of Sparta formed a volunteer company of twenty-five men for the purpose of punishing the Indian. They found the "offending' Indian in the Winnebago camp a few miles from the settler's home. Though the Winnebagos outnumbered the settlers, they did not resist. Instead, they gave up the perpetrator for punishment. Afterwards, the Spartans supposedly admonished the Winnebagos to "stay away and never be seen in that part of the country again". The Winnebagos ignored this hollowed threat. [Richards: 254-255.]

The threat of neighboring Indians did not halt Sparta's growth. However, it was slowed because of the panic of 1857. The 1857 Panic caused agricultural prices to drop and some Spartan settlers moved on to other parts of the country, probably to escape from their debts. However, in the same year, Sparta received a stimulus to the community. In 1857, surveyors laid out the line for the railroad between Milwaukee and LaCrosse—Sparta's first. [Monroe county Democrat July 20, 1933.]

In 1858, the LaCrosse and Milwaukee (later renamed the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul) railroad arrived in Sparta. The railroad was finished by this time, except for an incomplete tunnel under a mountain ridge (Tunnel City, Wisconsin) over which passengers had to scrambe by foot. On July 22, 1858, the first depot in Sparta was opened for traffic with a boxcar serving as office, passenger and freight depot. [Barney: 16-17; Unknown Newspaper "Sparta, Wisconsin; A Northern Town with a 'Western Feel' of Pines and Bluffs", N.D.; Monroe county Democrat, July 20, 1933: and Sparta herald 16 July 1951.]

The completion of the LaCrosse and Milwaukee railroad gave impetus to greater immigration and business in Sparta. Within three months after the railroad's completion, many new businesses opened and the population grew. The population of Sparta had more than tripled from 382 persons in 1855 to 1,284 in 1860. It should be noted that only ten percent of this population were foreign-born. [Koehler, 1977: 30-31 and 65.]

While Sparta was growing rapidly out of its frontier status, it had not escaped its Native American past. Prior to the Civil War and for sometime thereafter, Winnebagos frequently camped along the LaCrosse River near Sparta. From Castle Rock, and Indian trail went southward and across North Water Street to the banks of the LaCrosse River. Winnebagos used the trail every fall in order to reach their campgrounds along the LaCrosse River. Apparently, the tribal members spent the fall and winter near Sparta. While in the Sparta area, they traded buckskin bead-trimmed moccasins and other items for eggs, bread and a variety of foods. According to on historian, settlers also "attempted to enlist their aid at times in moving, building, and crop harvesting projects; however, coaxing, hiring, and forcing the Winnebagos to comply with Spartan wishes all proved unsuccessful". When spring arrived they went north. [Sparta Herald 6 July 1951; McMillan: 387-388; Barney: 10; and Koehler, 1977: 22-23.]

Nevertheless, by the 1860's, Sparta boasted much progress from its early pioneer days. By this time, several stage lines passed through the village. With the advent of the Black River Falls-Sparta stage line, and the St. Paul-Sparta stage line (Western Enterprise line), Sparta improved its trade ties to northern Wisconsin. [Koehler, 1967; 13-16.]

Prior to the Civil War, the village of Sparta had several comfortable hotels and taverns for the weary traveler getting off the stage or the railroad, a bank, many merchants, a local newspaper, a sash, door and blind factory, and a grist mill. However, Sparta had not reached its heyday yet. According to one historian, the community's growth continued to be gradual and "paralleled the development of nearby communities like Viroqua, Richland Center, and Reedsburg". [Gregory, Vol. 2: 709-710; Koehler, 1977: 30-31; and "The Tavern and Stages of Early Wisconsin", Monroe County Historical Society (February 1989): 5-7.]