

## *“Saratoga of the West”, 1865-1880*

After the Civil War, the tide of progress returned to Sparta, and the village went through a second period of sustained growth. This growth was steady and uniform in terms of population, agricultural prominence, commerce and industry. In this time period, renewed immigration, new agricultural markets, the rise of Sparta as a mineral Spring resort, and transportation improvements all contributed to Sparta's growth.

In addition to immigration, immediately after the Civil War, Sparta farmers experienced a localized and regional agriculture boom.

First hop growing fever hit Sparta. In only a few years after the War, over 300 acres within a mile of Sparta were set out in hops with Sparta hop dealers handling \$500,000 worth of hops annually. The hop craze in Sparta lasted for about ten years. Several Spartans prospered through this enterprise—many of whom were responsible for erecting new buildings in the community. However, by the 1880's, hop fever died out in Sparta because of growing competition from other states and because of insect problems. [Barney: 29; Unknown Newspapers “Sparta, Wisconsin: A Northern Town with a Western Feel of Pines and Bluffs”. N.D.; Sparta Herald 16 July 1951; “History of Sparta” installment 30; and Koehler, 1977: 61.]

In addition to immigration and a surge in agricultural production, Sparta also experienced growth from a most unique source in the region—the discovery of artesian mineral waters nearby.

The discovery of artesian mineral waters occurred indirectly. In 1859, Edwin L. Drake had successfully drilled for petroleum at Titusville, Pennsylvania, but a nationwide search for oil was postponed until the conclusion of the Civil War. After the War, people nationwide started looking in their backyards for oil, and Sparta was no different. By January, 1866, there were three oil companies in Sparta selling shares of stock for \$25.00. There were: Monroe County Petroleum Co., Kickapoo Valley Petroleum Co., and the Gem Petroleum Co. In the spring of 1866, oil fever swept the area, when the Gem Petroleum Co. showed signs of oil in the valley of the Kickapoo River in southern Monroe County. Many Spartans bought shares of stock in the “Gem Petroleum Company”. The oil rumor proved a fraud. Myth has it, that a member of the company's board of directors, A.C. Tichnor from Seneca, Wisconsin, such a barrel of oil in the ground to deceive people into believing there was oil nearby. Sometime after September 1866, Spartans uncovered Tichnor's chicanery. Supposedly, Tichnor vanished thereafter with their money. [Sparta Eagle 31 January, 11 July and 26 September 1866; “History of Sparta” installments 30-31; Koehler, 1977: 32-33; Richards: 271-272; and “Mineral Water of Artesian Wells Brought Health Resorts in Sparta”, Monroe County Historical Society Vol 23, No. 2 (September 1989: 3-8.)

Over the next few years, the resultant waters were found to be high in mineral content, and according to the statements of several Spartan citizens had cured them of specific ailments such as rheumatism, dyspepsia and chronic diarrhea. By 1869, pamphlets on the medicinal value of the artesian springs were being distributed, and in May, 1871, the Mineral Spring Water Cure and Hotel Association was formed to promote the healing affects of the artesian waters along with the local hotels. [No Author, Medicinal Artesian Spring, Sparta, Wisconsin (1869): Sparta Eagle 5 May 1871, and Beebe, DeWitt C., Sparta as a Resort for the Invalid (1873).]

With a little boosterism, this situation led to a tourist boom to Sparta, which was promoted as a watering spa and bath center. People from far off places came to drink from the water, because they believed the water possessed extraordinary “chalybeate and tonic properties”, and had a good effect on their illnesses. It was also said that the water was good for “anemia, bladder stones, dyspepsia, throat ailments, consumption, constipation, diarrhea, malaria and females diseases”. With success, additional wells were sunk in the town, and these artesian wells naturally fostered an increase in the growth in Sparta's commercial district. Before long Sparta obtained prominence as a resort for invalids and pleasure seekers with two major hotels that advertised mineral baths with the medicinal artesian waters. Here, one could receive Turkish, Russian, sitz, and plunge baths. [Map of Sparta: 1875; Sparta Herald 16 July 1951;

Barney: 30-31; Koehler, 1977: 34-35; Richards: 271-272; and Mineral Water of Artesian Wells Brought Health Resorts in Sparta”, Monroe County Historical Society Vol. 23, No. 2 (September 1989) : 3-8.]

Spartans took to calling their town the “Saratoga of the West”. They attributed their wide celebrity to the mineral waters and Turkish baths based on these waters. They also believed that in part the “beauty of the place and its surroundings together with its dry bracing air and its freedom from malaria” were also reasons for their thriving success. Promotion of Sparta as the “Saratoga of the West” lasted well into the 1880’s. People from all parts of the country, especially from the South, annually visited its “magnetic mineral Springs”. The health-resort business regained its popularity at the turn of the century, but eventually, “faded once again, apparently because of pressure for the artesian water flow faded”. [Ibid.]

Lastly, in 1873, the Chicago & Northwestern railway built a line through Sparta and onward to LaCrosse, which added to Sparta’s prosperity as a growing agricultural center and a mineral resort center. Sparta voted some \$50,000 in bonds to route the railroad through their community. [Barney: 33-34.]

Now at the junction of two major railroads, Sparta increased its advantages over nearby communities. The competition between the railroads gave Sparta unsurpassed shipping facilities with low rates for shipping. Sparta soon became the distribution center for a large agricultural region which constantly increased in extent and wealth as good roads connected it with other parts of the region. The Chicago & Northwestern and the Chicago, St. Paul and Milwaukee also advertised the celebrated “waters” at Sparta and stopped “long enough at the depot to allow passengers to partake of the mineral waters”. Sparta’s railroad facilities continued to expand after 1873. In 1879, the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul was extended by constructing the Viroqua branch, connecting Sparta with Vernon County, which reinforced Sparta’s regional importance. [Map of Sparta: 1875; N.A. Historical Atlas of Wisconsin: 1878: Monroe County Democrat July 20, 1933: Koehler, 1967: 53-54; Unknown Newspaper “Sparta, Wisconsin: A North Town with a ‘Western Feel’ of Pines and Bluffs” N.D.; Jones: 8; and Barney: 33-34.]

In addition to railroad facilities, Sparta also had several stagecoach lines which served the region. Besides lines to St. Paul established in the 1860’s, in 1870 a stage line from Chippewa Falls to Sparta began. By 1896, three stages per week were needed to handle the volume of traffic on the Chippewa Falls-Sparta line. [Koehler, 1967: 13-16.]

In the late 1870’s the development of rail links, and the fact that many farmers could not make a living from growing wheat, encouraged the growth of slaughterhouses in Sparta. Farmers began emphasizing the “raising of the sheep, pigs, and cattle for slaughter”. Eventually, “Sparta soon became the largest wholesale market for the buying and selling of pork in Wisconsin west of Milwaukee”. [Koehler, 1977: 62; and Jones: 7-8.]

Agricultural development, the “mineral water boom”, and new transportation links were important to the growth of the community, but other businesses balanced off Sparta’s growth so that Sparta did not suffer a bust cycle. In the 1860’s and 1870’s, several commercial and industrial businesses thrived in Sparta. During the time period, Sparta boasted several grist mills and grain elevators to serve the neighboring farm communities. The flour mills took advantage of Sparta’s location to water power sources such as Beaver Creek and the LaCrosse River. [Barney: 31, 34 and 40; “History of Sparta” installments 29-30; and Koehler, 1977: 43.]

Sparta also had a number of other important businesses, which gave their thriving town a diverse economy. A paper mill, (1868), a stave factory (1870), several glove and mitten factories (pre-1879), an iron foundry (1867), and later several lumber yards (1870’s) added to Sparta’s economic strength. In addition, an important carriage and wagon works in Sparta (1865) and several important agricultural implement dealerships also contributed to its economy. [Barney: 31, 34, and 40: “History of Sparta” installments 29-30; Koehler, 1977: 43; and Jones: 6-7.]

Because Sparta was the market distribution center and source of supplies to farmers in the adjoining valleys, many merchants established commercial businesses in Sparta. As a consequence, Sparta became a regional banking center with the growth of the Bank of Sparta in the community. [Barney: 31,34, and 40: "History of Sparta" installments 29-30; and Koehler, 1977: 43.]