

“Gem City of Western Wisconsin”, 1900-1945

By 1900, Sparta no longer saw itself as the “Saratoga of the West”, but not saw itself as the “Gem City of Western Wisconsin”. Though many of the older citizens still thought of themselves as “settlers” and not as “residents”, by 1900 Sparta had grown out of its nineteenth century pioneer past to meet the twentieth century as a front rank Wisconsin City.

In the first half of twentieth century, Sparta’s economic strength depended on it being the center of dairy production and small fruit production. Sparta enjoyed a course of steadfast growth based on these economic factors. For instance, Ernest DeWitt’s Beaver Creek Dairy (founded 1916) soon became one of many dairies which contributed to the economy of Sparta. Their plant delivered milk to places as far as Fort McCoy. [Sparta Centennial: 42.]

At the turn of the century, besides dairying, the City of Sparta also had several lines of manufacturing, including a foundry and machine shops, which made special lines of well-drilling apparatus and furnaces, as well as planing and wood-working mill, and a marble works. By 1909, flourishing factories in Sparta were the Sparta Brush Company (1905), the Pitcher and Paulsen Shoe Company, and numerous smaller operations. At this time, Sparta also had five good hotels (Lewis Hotel was the best known), which drew visitors to the community. There were also department stores such as the Dodge and Davis Department Store, Evenson Clothing Co., and the Fair Store opposite the Hotel Lewis. These department stores and other commercial establishments in Sparta served the surrounding rural region. However, these commercial interests and light industries were not as important as regional dairying and agricultural pursuits and those new industries related to agriculture, such as the American Cigar Company and the Jefferson Tobacco Company (1909). These tobacco warehouses were major employers of seasonal help in Sparta throughout the first half of the twentieth century. [Unknown Newspaper “Sparta is Like a Southern City”; Richard: 284; and Monroe County Democrat July 20, 1933.]

Contributions to Sparta’s growth in the twentieth century also came from another direction, which should be discussed in short detail. The establishment of Camp Robinson was an important development to Sparta’s future development.

The history of Camp Robinson (Camp McCoy) was one of incremental growth, when in 1905 an artillery battalion from Fort Snelling, Minnesota first used the 4,000 acre McCoy ranch for artillery target practice. This exercise proved a success. Four years later, the Army became interested in the area because land prices near Camp Douglas to the east were too high. On June 18, 1909, the U.S. Army bought the option to 14,206 acres of land in the vicinity of Sparta for “use in artillery practice and military maneuvers by troops of the regular army and the National Guard”. The unofficial designation of this reservation was the “Sparta Maneuver Tract” or the “Sparta Reservation”. Eventually, the camp was called “Camp Robinson”, in honor of W.W. Robinson, a Sparta resident who served with distinction during the civil War. [Unknown Newspaper “Sparta, Wisconsin: A Northern Town with a ‘Western Feel’ of Pines and Bluffs” N.D.; Richards: 269; Gregory, Vol. 2: 716-718; “Fort McCoy, Wisconsin: Circa 1905-1981” Monroe County Historical Society Vol. III, No. 11 (August 1981): 1-4; and Sparta Centennial: 25.]

Prior to World War I, when the “Sparta Reservation” became important, Sparta grew at a steady pace. As it did, the city added a number of civic and municipal improvements, which made the city a better place to do business in and to live. For instance, in 1902, the Sparta Free Library (a Carnegie library) (M036/31) was built on West Main Street. By 1908, a centralized sewer system had been installed in Sparta, and by 1915, a new federal post office (M024/8) had been constructed on West Main Street across from the Sparta Free Library. Both the new library and post office enhanced the area of the Courthouse district. By the time World War I approached, Sparta was a well-developed flourishing city.

During World War I, Spartans demonstrated their patriotism as well as any other community in western Wisconsin. Many Sparta men and women served during World War I. Many did not return from the "war to end all wars". In memorial to their service for their country, Sparta constructed two wooden peace arches that spanned the intersections of South Water and Oak Streets sometime after World War II, the arches were dismantled. [Richards: 281 and 283-285; and Sparta Centennial: 51.]

World War I stimulated the growth of nearby Camp Robinson. From 1919 to 1923, Camp Robinson grew to more than 100-square miles in the area, and it became known as the "Sparta Ordnance Depot". Its mission was to "handle, store and ship the large amounts of material stored in portable magazines erected throughout the area. In 1926, the name of the camp was changed to Camp McCoy. It was renamed after Col Robert B. McCoy, who was the prime owner of the lands that were sold to the government in 1909. McCoy had also served with distinction during the Spanish-American War and World War I. He was mayor of Sparta (1920-1924) before his death in 1926. [Gregory, Vol. 2: 716-718; "fort McCoy, Wisconsin: Circa 1905-1981" Monroe County Historical Society Vol. III, No. 11 (August 1981): 1-4; and Sparta Centennial: 25 and 48.]

The growth of Camp McCoy stimulated Sparta's economy, but Sparta was not totally tied to this fort for its growth. With the close of World War I, the country tributary to Sparta continued to be largely devoted to farming and dairying. Many local industries in Sparta reflected this fact. For instance, by the 1920's, the dairy industry had developed to a high state of perfection. In 1925, the Pet Milk company bought Danish Pride plant (begun ca. 1918) and expanded the milk market in the area. Thereafter, for the next twenty-seven years, the Pet Milk plant produced Pet Evaporated Milk in Sparta. The Pet Milk Company was a major payroll for the city and a major source of milk checks for farmers in five counties. [Unknown Newspaper "Sparta, Wisconsin: A Northern town with a 'Western Feel' of Pines and Bluffs" N.D.; and Sparta Centennial: 44.]

By 1933, the main industries in Sparta continued to be tied to the regions agricultural base. During the depression, principle industries in Sparta included: the Sparta Co-Operative Creamery, the Condensary of the Pet Milk Company, the American Suppliers Tobacco Warehouse, the Jefferson Leaf Tobacco Company, and other industries affiliated with the farming and the dairying industry. [Monroe County Democrat July 20, 1933.]