

## *Steadfast Prosperity, 1880-1900*

The decades of the 1880's and 1890's witnessed steadfast prosperity in Sparta. Some economic mainstays disappeared, such as the growing of hops and for a time the resort status of Sparta's mineral baths. Other economic pursuits in the vicinity simply tapered off, such as wheat production. Spartans made little from the sale of crops such as wheat because they could not compete with the grain fields of the Great Plains. [Koehler, 1977: 61-62.]

However, new agricultural economic pursuits replaced them. From the late 1870's to 1890's, Sparta farmers shifted to dairying and dairy products to make a living. The dairy industry in western Wisconsin expanded considerably after 1880. In that year, Sparta was able to boast that it had a new cheese factory. From 1879 to 1904, the number of milking cows in the County had become part of a new butter region in western Wisconsin, annually producing a million pounds of creamery butter. In the 1890's, Spartans responded by opening several dairy cooperatives. For instance, in 1896, the Sparta Cooperative Creamery opened for business with 107 patrons. [Koehler, 1977: 61-62, and 64: and Cultural Resource Management, Volume 2, section 11-5.]

In addition to switching from wheat growing to dairying, many Spartan Farmers also began to experiment and participate in small fruit production, such as strawberries, blackberries, and raspberries. By the turn of the century, Sparta became the center of Wisconsin's small fruit belt, reportedly shipping more berries than any other city within the same territory. In the 1890's, other farmers even moved to growing tobacco and vegetables on a commercial basis. In response to this situation, in 1899, the H.J. Heinz Company of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania opened a pickle salting house in Sparta to take advantage of vegetable growing in the region, and in 1901, the American Cigar Company opened a tobacco processing plant in Sparta. [Koehler, 1977: 61-62; Jones: 10; and Richards: 279.]

There were many other mainstays in Sparta's economy in the 1890's and early 1900's. For a short period, the lumber industry was an important factor in Sparta's economy with several lumberyards successfully operating along South Water and East Oak Streets. [Standard Atlas of Monroe County, Wisconsin: 1897 and Atlas of Monroe County, Wisconsin: 1915.]

Besides dairying, fruit, vegetable and tobacco farming, and lumber marketing, Sparta acquired a new and different asset to the community. In 1885, by legislative act, Sparta became the home of the Wisconsin State School for Dependant Children, a large facility which housed dependent and neglected children and trained them in domestic science, manual training, music, and arts and crafts. Throughout most of the twentieth century, this school added significantly to Sparta's economy.

The 1890's continued as a decade of growth and building in Sparta. During this decade, Sparta bettered its municipal and utility improvements, streets were paved, electricity and telephone systems were developed and improved, and a city water works was installed using a large reservoir on Hollow Bluff. [Jones: 13/14.]

In the decade of the 1890's, the year 1896 marked the "greatest growth that Sparta has ever enjoyed". In this banner year, \$115,400 was put into the construction of new business, residential, civic and church buildings or the improvement of standing structures. For instance, the commercial district was greatly altered with the construction of the W.G.

**Williams Block, 1896  
125 South Water Street**



(Photo by T. Keiser, 2001)

Williams Building (M035/8) (\$8,000, Hoffman Building (\$3,000), E.E. Olin (M034/8) (\$6,000), C.E. Rich Building (M036/11) (\$1,500), and the Roelston & Rosing Building (not extant) (\$3,800). In this same year, the Monroe County Courthouse (M036/28) was completed. [Richards: 277.]

Although the 90's was a memorable decade in Sparta's past, at the end of the decade Sparta did suffer a setback. In 1899, two of Sparta's most devastating floods hit the community in the same year. In these floods, both Beaver Creek and the LaCrosse River overflowed their banks wiping out several bridges and "Bacon's" dam on Beaver Creek. Fortunately, only one city building, the Conover Building (not extant) on the shoreline of Beaver Creek was damaged beyond repair. After the flood, Sparta constructed new iron bridges over Beaver Creek and the LaCrosse River, but Beaver Creek dam was not replaced. [Richards: 279 and Jones: 12/13.]

Despite the flood, Spartans felt good about their community and its future. At the turn of the century, Sparta citizens wrote:

In the last few years the city has made wonderful progress. Her enterprising and Public-spirited citizens have all pulled together, and the upbuilding of Sparta has been the burden of all their songs, and they have left no stone unturned that would in any way tend to advance the interests of the city and show to the world that Sparta is a wide-awake, progressive and up-to-date city, where the citizens are cultured, intelligent, enterprising, and public-spirited, and where there are golden opportunities for the manufacturer to locate, the capitalist to make investments, and the home-seeker to find a healthful place and amid some of the most delightful natural scenery which lies out of doors, with a people who are educated, refined and hospitable...[Monroe County Democrat "Sparta Up-to-Date" 30 June 1899: 4-5.]



**Chicago N.W. R.R. Station**  
**South Water / Milwaukee Street**  
(Photo by T. Keiser, 2001)

In summary, Sparta advertised several advantages, including: water power, cheap fuel, fertile and productive soil for the growing of small fruit and lands adapted to dairying, stock raising and sheep husbandry as every section of Monroe and adjacent counties, two main railroads, (Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul and the Chicago & Northwestern) and a trunk line to Viroqua. By 1900, Sparta had 150 businesses and mercantile houses and an excellent system of water works, telegraph, and telephones connecting it to all parts of the world. It was also the seat of the State School for Dependent Children. [Sparta Herald 16 July 1951: Sparta Driving and Agricultural Association (1900).]