

World War II and Post-War Sparta

In the second half of the twentieth century, the economy of Sparta moved from one based solely on serving regional agriculture needs and one based on state and federal institutions, such as the State School for Dependent Children and Camp McCoy, to one increasingly becoming dependent on light industry for economic growth.

There is no mistake that dairying was and continues today to be an important mainstay of Sparta's economy. In the 1950's, the Pet Milk company continued as major employer in Sparta. By 1953, the Pet Milk Co. employed 100 people in Sparta with a fleet of 12 trucks to bring milk products in from the surrounding farms. In 1956, the Pet Milk Co. erected a three-story plant on East Wisconsin Street to increase its production of instant milk products. However, in 1961, the Pet Milk Co. closed this plant, which caused some economic dislocation. Despite the closing, Sparta continued to have a solid base in the surrounding dairy country of Monroe County in the 1950's. though dairy remained strong, the community needed to diversify its economy. [Sparta Herald 8 March 1953; and Sparta Centennial: 44.]

Diversification of the city's economy became even a clearer priority, when two other problems arose in different sectors of Sparta's economy.

The first problem arose in regard to Camp McCoy. During World War II, Camp McCoy expanded considerably. Soldiers patronized the Sparta's entertainment outlets, which offered an economic boost to Sparta. In addition, in 1943, the federal government also constructed a U.S.O Center (M025/28) in Sparta. However, after World War II, when most of the veterans were separated from the service, training activities at Camp McCoy ceased



almost entirely. By 1947, the Camp was placed on the inactive status and by 1953, Camp McCoy was completely deactivated. This was a serious blow to the City of Sparta and the immediate area, affecting the employment of some 2,000 civilians. Nevertheless, slowly over time, Camp McCoy regained its Army Reserve and Wisconsin National Guard units. In 1968, the Finance and Civilian Personnel and Data Processing unit from Minneapolis was brought to Camp McCoy, which improved employment in the city. Finally in 1974, Camp McCoy was officially designated Fort McCoy. However, Fort McCoy never fully regained the critical role that it played in Sparta's economy during World War II. ["Fort McCoy, Wisconsin: Circa 1905-1981" Monroe County Historical Society Vol. III, No. 11 (August 1981): 1-4; Sparta Herald 8 March 1953; and Sparta Centennial: 25.]

The second problem in Sparta's economy arose in regard to the Wisconsin State School for Dependent Children (1885). After World War II, this school changed its name to the Wisconsin Child Center to improve its image. Nevertheless, the school eventually lost its usefulness and slowly declined. After 89 years of service, the facility closed in 1974. The state of Wisconsin eventually sold the center back to Sparta. [Sparta Centennial: 31.]

Sparta survived these community setbacks for several reasons. First, Sparta continued to be a transportation hub for the region with two railroads serving it and the principal Milwaukee-Twin Cities highway (Highway 16 and later Interstate 90) passing nearby. It also survived because it started to diversify its economy with light manufacturing. [Sparta Herald 8 March 1953]

Starting in the 1950's, several important light industries gradually began to grow up in Sparta. They included: The Hemstock Brothers Concrete Products, which in 1952 produced one million cement blocks, and the Ken-Way Corporation, which made sewer cleaning machinery. In 1957, M.O. and William J. Holtan founded the Sparta Manufacturing Co., which specialized in manufacturing 'cast iron cylinder liners (sleeves) for the small engine industry". The Sparta Manufacturing Co. contributed greatly to the payroll of Sparta. ["Ex-Host to Soldiers Seeks New Horizons". Milwaukee Sentinel 8 March 1953; and Sparta Centennial: 43.]

In the 1960's, dairying was still important to Sparta's economy. Among the important dairy concerns operating at that time were Hiawatha Valley Dairies Co-Operative, Lakeland Egg Co-Operative and Beaver Creek Dairy, which altogether employed approximately 100 persons.

However, manufacturing also was important and it continued to grow in Sparta. In 1961, Decomet, Inc., now Northern Engraving Co., erected a large, modern one-story plant in Sparta. Northern Engraving Co. built its reputation in LaCrosse, Wisconsin after World War II, when it produced cartridge cases for the armed forces and dials for military instruments. In Sparta, Northern Engraving Co. made name plates and decorative metals for national and export markets and employed about 600 to 700 person, becoming Sparta's major employer. Eventually the plant expanded its operations. Northern Engraving Co. built new general offices and their research headquarters in the city. In 1983, 750 people were employed by the company. [Sparta Centennial: 56-57.]

In the decade of the 60's and 70's, the Sparta Manufacturing Co. was the other larger manufacturer in Sparta. It employed approximately 50 persons. In these decades, several firms in Sparta employed about 10 to 30 persons. They included: Hemstock Brothers (concrete), Sparta Brush Co. (a manufacturer of industrial and institutional brushes), Spartek, Inc. (plastics and metal finishing), Poly-Thermatics, Inc. (plastics), Monroe County Publishers, Sun-Drop Bottling Inc., Sparta Gas Co., Northern States Power Co., Equity Cooperative Livestock Sales, and the Wilbert Vault Co. [Unknown Newspapers "Sparta is Largest Monroe county City, Hub of Railroads, Highways" circa 1964; "Bogus Oil Deal Sparked Sparta" St. Paul Pioneer Press 3 April 1960; and Sparta Centennial: 56-57.]

As Sparta drew light industry to the community, the city's population grew at much the same pace as it did during most of the nineteenth and twentieth century. The following chart indicated the steady population growth of Sparta from its status as "Pioneer Anglo Community" to Saratoga of the West" to the "Gem City of the Western Wisconsin". [Barney: 3 and 42-44; and Wisconsin Bluebooks, 1860-1930.]

Decade	Population	Decade	Population
1851	28	1900	3,555
1855	382	1910	3,973
1860	1,284	1920	4,466
1862	1,897	1930	4,949
1866	2,738	1940	5,820
1871	3,461	1950	5,893
1876	3,750	1960	6,080
1885	3,842	1970	6,258
1890	3,791	1980	6,934
		1990	8,049

In summary, the history of Sparta is one with a few major population disruptions or major economic dislocations of the community. Sparta has never experienced such a thing as a boom. Instead, it has enjoyed a steady and remarkable healthy growth pattern. Historically, Sparta's existence has been one of steadfast adaptability to the economic, social and political demands of each decade in time it faced.