

The General who helped put City of Sparta on the Map

During the city's first 100 years, no person had a greater impact on Sparta than Major General Robert Bruce McCoy.



McCoy was 58 years old when he died in 1926. Yet he distinguished himself as a soldier, a lawyer, a county judge and a politician. And shortly after his death, the War Department named the military reservation Camp McCoy, now Fort McCoy, in his honor.

McCoy a descendent of an American Revolution soldier, was born in Kenosha in 1867 and grew up in Sparta. His father operated a mill in the township of Lafayette that was wiped out by an 1876 Spring freshet. The family then moved to Sparta and resumed the milling business.

Young Robert McCoy, then known as Bob, graduated from Sparta High School in 1887. He was a debater, an athlete and the business manager of the first high school newspaper.

Following his graduation, McCoy enrolled in the College of Letters and Science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He played varsity baseball as a freshman and was elected class president during his sophomore year.

McCoy played semi-professional baseball in 1890 for an Ashland team, returning to the university to captain the Badger baseball team. He received a law degree from the university in 1891.

Before opening a law office in Sparta in 1894, he published the Monroe County Democrat and served as assistant secretary of the Board of World Fair Managers in Chicago.

During the early days of his law career, McCoy was twice a Democratic candidate for Monroe County district attorney. In 1897, he was elected county judge and subsequently served 16 years on the bench. As judge he also found time to serve two terms as clerk of the Sparta Board of Education.

In addition, McCoy was a right-of-way agent for the Chicago Northwestern Railroad. He negotiated the entire right-of-way for a Northwestern line linking Sparta with Milwaukee via Wyeville.

However, his most lasting impact on the City was convincing the Army to establish a military reservation near Sparta. McCoy believed the sandy plains and jack pine hills northeast of Sparta were suitable as an artillery range. After examining the abstracts, McCoy sold 14,106 acres of Monroe County land to the Federal Government.

For a man who entered the Wisconsin National Guard as a private, McCoy enjoyed a brilliant military career. He enlisted in 1895 and became captain of Company L, Third Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry a year later. His company fought at Abonita Pass in Puerto Rico during the Spanish-American War, and McCoy's hearing was damaged when a shell burst near his ear.

After the war, he reorganized the company and resumed his law career. He returned to active duty in 1916, serving as a brigade adjutant and assistant chief of staff in San Antonio during border skirmishes with Mexico. As Europe awaited the United States' entry into World War I, then-Major McCoy brought the Fourth Wisconsin Infantry Regiment up to full strength. He exceeded his enlistment quota by more than 1,000 men and the Army placed him in command of the regiment with the rank of colonel.

McCoy's unit was sent to France when America joined the fight against Germany. For a time he was in command of trains and military police but soon was promoted to general and assigned as commander of the 125th Infantry.

The new assignment put McCoy at the front line in command of soldiers from Michigan. They fought at Chateau Thierry, Juvigny and the Argonne. McCoy commanded the 128th Infantry for a time and was placed in charge of "Rhine control" after the war.

He returned to the United States in 1919 after serving 15 months overseas. The French government awarded McCoy with the Croix de Guerre with Palm and Silver for his leadership in the Aisne-Marne offensive (July 26, 1918 to August 7, 1918), the Oise-Aisne offensive (August 26 to September 6) and the Meuse-Argonne offensive (September 26 to October 29). The general had to be evacuated from the latter campaign because of high fever.

For capturing Romagne in the Argonne, McCoy received the distinguished service medal. After the war, he was commissioned a brigadier general commanding the 64th Infantry Brigade of the Wisconsin National Guard. In 1924, he was promoted to the rank of major general of the 32nd Division of the Wisconsin and Michigan national Guard.

McCoy also re-entered politics after the war. He was elected mayor of Sparta in 1920. Later that year he was drafted as the Democratic nominee for governor of Wisconsin.

According to the La Crosse Tribune and Leader Press in 1926, McCoy "polled a surprisingly large vote" against Republican incumbent John J. Blaine. G.W. Garlock, editor of the Nonpareil Journal of West Salem, wrote that he supported McCoy without regret. "With a vote of over 200,000 he gave John J. Blaine the hardest fight he has ever had for office," Garlock said.

Having lost his bid for the governorship, McCoy again became active in military affairs. The effects of the campaigns, both military and political, took a great toll on the general's health. The Sparta Herald wrote: "He never recovered from the physical strain of his (gubernatorial) campaign undertaken at a time when he had not fully recovered from the effects of his sickness in France and his operation at Camp Grant in 1919."

McCoy's health gradually deteriorated. He was re-elected mayor of Sparta in 1922 while a patient at the Mayo Hospital in Rochester, Minnesota. He suffered from pernicious anemia and died in Madison on January 5, 1926. At the time of his death he still was commander of the 32nd division.

Three-thousand mourners, including Governor Blaine, attended McCoy's funeral at Woodlawn Cemetery in Sparta. Sparta businesses closed that afternoon and the schools were dismissed early to allow students to view the funeral cortege. A caisson drawn by seven cavalry horses bore the body to the grave.

General McCoy's own horse, led by an orderly, was covered by a black pall. His saber hung on the saddle and his boots were placed in the stirrups with toes to the rear.

National Guard companies from Sparta, Tomah, Viroqua and La Crosse were assigned as funeral escorts. The defunct Wisconsin News wrote: "The Sparta American Legion band and the military escort led the way to the cemetery, through streets banked with townspeople, the band with muffled drums playing a funeral dirge."

Thirteen cannons fired an artillery salvo as the cortege left the Sparta Armory for the Cemetery. After a brief graveside service, the artillery fired a second salvo instead of the usual rifle volleys.

General McCoy was the father of six sons and a daughter. He married Lillian Riege of Platteville in 1893. She died in an automobile accident in 1910. In 1920, McCoy married Mae B. Oswald of Minneapolis.

Five sons and a nephew served as pallbearers at McCoy's funeral. They were Capt. Bruce R. McCoy, Robert McCoy, Douglas McCoy, Harold McCoy, Stuart McCoy and nephew Alex Gibbon. The eldest son, Lt. Malcolm McCoy, died at Vancouver Barracks, Washington, in 1917.

He also was survived by his daughter, Lillian. McCoy outlived his father by less than a year. Bruce E. McCoy, a Civil War veteran, died in his sleep at 96.