



ASC HISTORY NEWSLETTER

Volume II, Issue 4

15 January 2012

Sylvan Island and Republic Steel

On the south central shore of Arsenal Island is the RIA power dam. The dam anchors on one end of Arsenal Island. The other end rests on Sylvan Island. This part of Arsenal Island is a visible connection to the draw of water power in establishing the arsenal here and an example of the expansion of early industrial production in the Quad Cities. Most people are aware of John Deere; others know of the Bettendorf Brothers, Weyerhaeuser, or Velie industries. But the role of Sylvan Island and the Republic Steel Company is largely forgotten.

Development of water power to drive the Rock Island Arsenal was a critical aspect of General Rodman's 1865 plan when he envisioned a national arsenal to supply all the Army's needs. Without water power the machinery could not operate due to the inability to efficiently distribute electricity. Industrial might re-

quired a dam that would drive wheels and leather straps away from the river, up and into the shops, and finally a power transfer to the manufacturing machines. John Deere had moved to Moline in 1848, and the Sears family was active in the area before that. Each had harnessed water power by building dams on the Mississippi. Rodman's plans were grander and required even more power. His plan evolved into the dam across the slough between the island and Illinois shore. The dam would cross the entire river and steal power from other companies in Moline. The US government hammered out agreements with the Moline Power Company that required the Arsenal to create the proper bypass, known as a tail race, so Moline and Rock Island could still capture water power. The channel, over 2,000 feet long and 200 feet wide, was begun in 1871 and completed in

1872. Workers blasted down into the bedrock and hauled out the rubble. The result was not only a tail race but also the creation of Sylvan Island separate from the Illinois mainland. In addition, the rubble was used to build not only Arsenal buildings, but also new buildings in Moline and Rock Island. Local labor was widely employed in this and other arsenal construction projects.

Sylvan Island was used immediately by the Illinois population as a home for immigrants, vegetable gardens, and a stone quarry. In 1894 the Sylvan Steel Company began production. The Republic Steel Company would later operate its facilities on the island until 1956. Eventually the steel firms built a huge plant, apartment buildings for workers, rail spurs, and bridges. At the same time the Arsenal was producing rolled steel for the agricultural

implements industry in the local area. Republic Steel went out of business in 1956 and, essentially, abandoned the plant. Nature soon took it back over. In the 1990s, locals cleared some of the land for walking trails and it remains in use today as a recreation area. Visitors cross one of the workers bridges and can walk into and through the foundations and loading docks of the steel plant. Some melt/pour caldrons can still be seen.

Sylvan Island and the Republic Steel plant is another example of the interaction between government and local community that is an integral aspect of local history since the establishment of Fort Armstrong in 1816. 2012 marks the 150th Anniversary of Rock Island Arsenal and throughout the year there will be events celebrating that history, to include more articles in this history newsletter.

RIA in Spanish American War

With the declaration of war against Spain in 1898, the US Government recognized the need to produce the necessary supplies for war. On 9 March 1898, the Chief of Ordnance sent an urgent message to RIA, stating that, "work (should) be pushed (at RIA) on all existing orders as rapidly as possible, and extra shifts of workmen (should) be employed."

While the Arsenal soon commenced work to meet the urgent demand for military supplies, the Army was not prepared for war in 1898. It operated primarily with Civil War era technology and supplies, and was severely undermanned. A small workforce of approximately 500 men and boys were employed in the Rock Island Arsenal shops at the beginning of the Spanish-American War, many of whom were only temporary employees.

Requests soon streamed in for supplies produced by the Arsenal. Blanket bags manufactured by

RIA were used by soldiers as a type of duffel bag to carry personal belongings. Other items produced at the Arsenal for the soldiers' personal use were haversacks for carrying rations; canteens fashioned from sheet tin; meat cans used by soldiers as frying pans; and plates, tin cups, eating utensils, and bayonet scabbards. The Arsenal also produced a variety of cavalry and horse equipment. These included items such as wooden saddle frames of saddle trees, and an assortment of rings, hooks, straps, and other equipment used for carrying cavalry articles. In addition, the Arsenal functioned as a depot during the Spanish-American War for ammunition and small arms.

Throughout the War, the Arsenal's labor force operated two ten-hour shifts, six to seven days a week. By 16 June 1898, the demand for equipment became so critical that the Army had to order RIA to procure an addi-

tional 10,000 complete outfits of cavalry and horse equipment from private contractors. As the demand for orders grew, so did the number of items procured from private firms. By July 1898, over 130 private contractors were working in conjunction with the Arsenal to produce or provide the supplies needed for troops in the field. The Spanish-American War was the RIA's first major test of its capabilities to meet emergency wartime production. The Arsenal performed well, although the production potential was barely tapped. Only the equivalent of one and a half of the ten stone industrial shops (Buildings 104 and 106) contained

machines for manufacturing.

By the time the war ended, the Arsenal employed 2,900, an increase of six times its prewar figure, and turned out 6,000 complete outfits of infantry equipment per day. The War would leave an indelible mark on RIA as new equipment and processes emerged that would serve as the foundation for future Arsenal production.



The Spanish American War also caused a shift in focus to artillery at the Rock Island Arsenal

This MONTH in military history...

1781: Mutiny of the Pennsylvania Line

1847: Mexican rebels kill governor of New Mexico

1863: Union forces capture Confederate stronghold in AR

1877: Crazy Horse fights last battle

1893: Americans overthrow Hawaiian monarchy

1918: Wilson delivers Fourteen Points speech

1923: US troops depart Germany

1942: Thailand declares war on the US and UK

1943: US bombs Germany for first time in WWII

1953: Truman announces US has developed hydrogen bomb

1968: Battle for Khe Sanh begins

1980: US-Russia détente ends

