



# LOOKING BACK A CENTURY:

## Fort McCoy was new installation during World War I years

**BY SCOTT T. STURKOL**  
Public Affairs Staff

As the clock strikes 11 a.m. Nov. 11, 2018, it marks the 100th anniversary of the end of World War I when an armistice was signed to end the “war to end all wars” — World War I.

When that armistice was signed, it's anyone's guess how the Soldiers stationed at Camp Robinson or Camp McCoy on the Sparta Maneuver Tract — the original camp names of what is now Fort McCoy — reacted to the news. Maybe there was joy and elation. Maybe there was sadness. Maybe there was both.

By the end of the war, an estimated nine million to 13 million people had perished in the conflict that began in 1914.

The United States entered the war later than other allies on April 6, 1917, after declaring war on Germany. The United States also later declared war on German ally Austria-Hungary on Dec. 7, 1917.

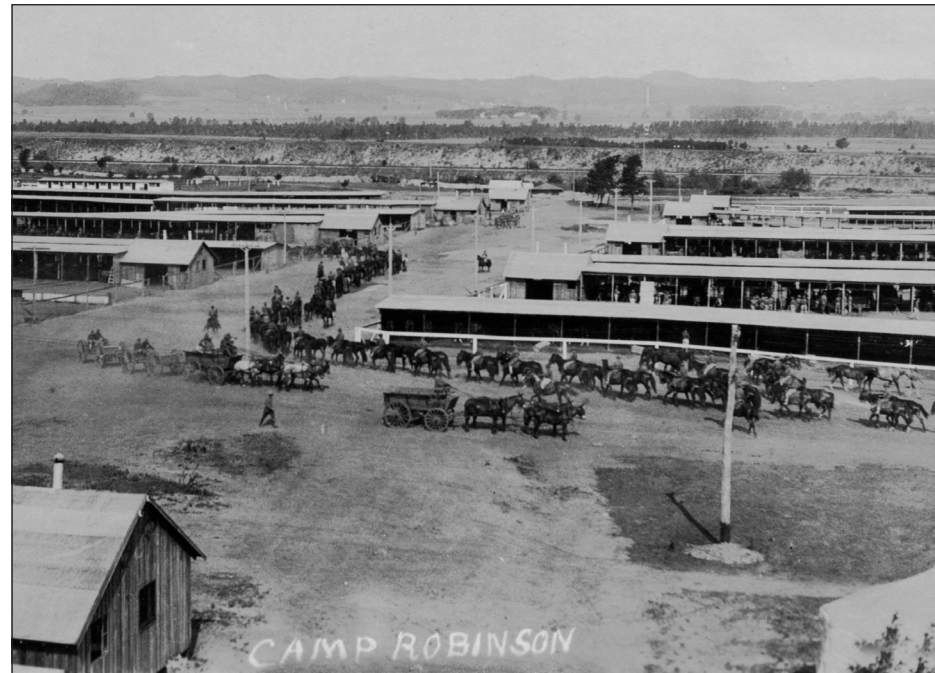
During the 19 months the U.S. was in World War I, plenty of action was taking place in Wisconsin. Soldiers processing and training to go overseas in the war with the Wisconsin National Guard mainly trained at nearby Camp Douglas, located less than 25 miles from Fort McCoy.

In the 2018 book, “Letters from the Boys, Wisconsin World War I Soldiers Write Home” by Carrie A. Meyer, it states, “The National Guard was called into service on Sunday, July 15 (1917). On that day, about 12,000 Wisconsin men reported to the armories of their local company to be sent to Camp Douglas, the state military reservation.”

Plenty of activity also happened at the Sparta Maneuver Tract, which had been in operation less than a decade when the war started.

“When the United States entered World War I, the camp was further expanded, with seven blocks of barracks, mess halls, warehouses, and stables being erected,” wrote former Fort McCoy Public Affairs Officer Linda M. Fournier in the 2008 book “Images of America, Fort McCoy.” “The buildings were simple wooden structures, unfinished and hurriedly assembled, intended for temporary use and removal following the end of the war.

“Field artillery and infantry units used the camp until 1918 when the armistice was signed,” the book states. “After World War I, the camp's barracks and mess halls were dismantled, and the reservation began a 20-



A scene from Camp Robinson, part of modern-day Fort McCoy, is shown in 1917.

year period as a summer training site for regular U.S. Army artillery units, U.S. Army Reserve troops, and U.S. National Guard detachments from the western Great Lakes area.”

The Army of the early 20th century also was not anything like the mechanized force of today's Army. Use of horses and mounted infantry were common, and conditions were austere, especially on the war front in France.

Pvt. Charles B. Meyers, a Norwalk, Wis., native with Battery A, 341st Field Artillery of the American Expeditionary Force in France, wrote to his mother, Nettie Meyers, continuously during the war. It's not known whether Meyers completed any training at Fort McCoy, but letters donated to the Fort McCoy History Center by his family provide some insight about the conditions he faced.

“I have to go on guard from 9 to 10 o'clock tonight but it will be nice as the moon is shining bright — the moon is so full,” Meyers wrote in a letter dated Oct. 18, 1918, from “over there (France).” “We are busy building a mess hall and are using parts and lumber of German buildings. Would soon be too cold to eat outdoors as we have been doing.”

In the same letter, Meyers noted how they were taking care of each other.

“The last few days one of the fellows has been bringing free Red Cross cigarettes, cookies, cigars, and gum,” Meyers wrote. “They issue a little every night and everyone gets the same amount, except the officers. As I understand it, they help themselves. (But) I just heard that they did not take any more than the rest.”

And in a letter just days from the end of the war, dated Nov. 4, 1918, from “Somewhere in France,” Meyers wrote about being on the lines.

“Nothing to do except walk around and keep an eye on the horses and a nose for gas,” Meyers wrote. “Usually it is real quiet. ... Have not picked up anything for souvenirs. They are rather scarce as many have already covered this ground. I could have had some but did not know of any way to send them and I have enough to carry now. If we were to move, I don't know where we would put it all.

“Candles also are rather scarce. We get about half a candle every second night. But we are lucky as we have a lantern and a little kerosene to (provide light).”

And back in Wisconsin, local newspaper excerpts provide a look at what was going on in and around the Sparta Maneuver Tract

at Camp Robinson and newly named Camp McCoy in 1918.

Camp McCoy was renamed after Capt. Bruce E. McCoy, father of Fort McCoy founder Maj. Gen. Robert Bruce McCoy. Capt. McCoy was a Civil War veteran. In 1926, the overall training area of the Sparta Maneuver Tract, including Camp Robinson and Camp McCoy, was renamed to Camp McCoy in honor of Maj. Gen. McCoy, who also served as a district attorney, county judge, and city mayor in Sparta.

• *From a June 1918 story in the Sparta Herald:* “For several days the local post office force was swamped with a large quantity of incoming and outgoing Soldiers' mail. A post office has now been established at Camp Robinson with John P. Doyle, Jr. in charge, assisted by a clerk from the local office.”

• *From a March 22, 1918, news story in the Tomah Monitor-Herald:* “Indications point to a big camp of Soldiers at Camp Robinson and Camp McCoy this summer. It is stated in Sparta that there will be about 35,000 men in the two camps.”

• *From an Aug. 4, 1918, news story in the La Crosse Tribune:* “Soldiers from Camp Robinson, Wis., enjoyed a Sunday river outing at La Crosse today, compliments of the city's motorboat owners.”

• *From an Aug. 31, 1918, news story in the La Crosse Tribune:* “Two saloonkeepers from Melvina, Wis., have been arrested for providing liquor to a Camp Robinson, Wis., Soldier recently killed by a train while intoxicated.”

• *From an Oct. 4, 1918, article in the Tomah Monitor-Herald:* “Two broncos escaped from the 8th Field Artillery when they went into Camp Robinson in 1917, and one horse got away from the 333rd this spring. The horses have run wild on the government range ever since, until captured last Thursday by members of the 167th.”

In the 100 years since the end of World War I, Fort McCoy has continued to support service members training for operations around the world, from World War II to the war on terrorism.

And as the world remembers World War I and all who sacrificed, words from a front-lines letter by McCoy himself should remind everyone to never forget what happened.

“War is hell. You become calloused,” McCoy wrote Oct. 18, 1918, to a friend in Sparta. “The work must go on when men fall. It is (my) duty to put others in.”



# Pre-WWI, period artifacts find home at post's History Center

**BY AIMEE MALONE**  
Public Affairs Staff

Fort McCoy's Commemorative Area has an array of artifacts and training aids from its 109-year history, including several artifacts predating World War I in 1917-18.

While the installation was not used for training or deployment specifically for World War I, it was used for training leading up to the war. The Sparta Maneuver Track, as Fort McCoy was then known, was split into two parts: Camp Emory Upton, used for maneuver training, and Camp Robinson, used for artillery training.

U.S. forces went into World War I expecting to use the types of maneuvers that were used in previous conflicts, according to Kenneth Hamburger in "Learning Lessons in the American Expeditionary Forces," available through the U.S. Army Center of Military History at <https://history.army.mil/html/books/024/24-1/index.html>. Artillery and maneuver training techniques taught at Fort McCoy prior to World War I would have been the same as those used in the beginning of the war, though the conditions in Europe quickly forced U.S. troops to change tactics, techniques, and procedures.

Some of the early artifacts in the Fort McCoy History Center were used by Soldiers who likely fought in World War I, such as those recovered from the 1910 occupation of Camp Emory Upton. Discovered during a 2013 dig on South Post, the artifacts include a three-in-one oil bottle, glass bottle stoppers, key openers for food cans, a milk glass cold-cream jar, and a brass uniform insignia for the 28th Infantry Regiment.

More than 10,000 artifacts were found during the dig. "A lot of what we found out (there was) personal artifacts, military effects, or food remains," said Alexander Woods, Ph.D., an archaeologist with Colorado State University's Center for Environmental Management of Military Lands under contract with Fort McCoy. Many of the artifacts were cattle bones, glass bottles and shards, and food-tin fragments.

Remnants of early training at Fort McCoy are relatively rare. Only one pre-World War I building, a storage building constructed in 1911, remains standing today. The training sites have remained in nearly continuous use throughout the past 106 years.

"(The site) shows us a lot about diet and how Soldiers were getting supplies, as well as a few fun little glimpses into their personal lives," Woods said. The cold-cream jar, which was found while archaeologists were digging up a privy, was a good example.

Woods said he thought the cold cream was used to treat saddle or marching sores. "It would be a smart thing for someone to have, but maybe a ... 'throw it in the latrine when you're done with it' kind of thing," he said.

"Archaeologists really like trash," Woods said. "It tells us a lot about people's lives, and people don't really write much about this kind of stuff. They certainly don't write about cold cream."

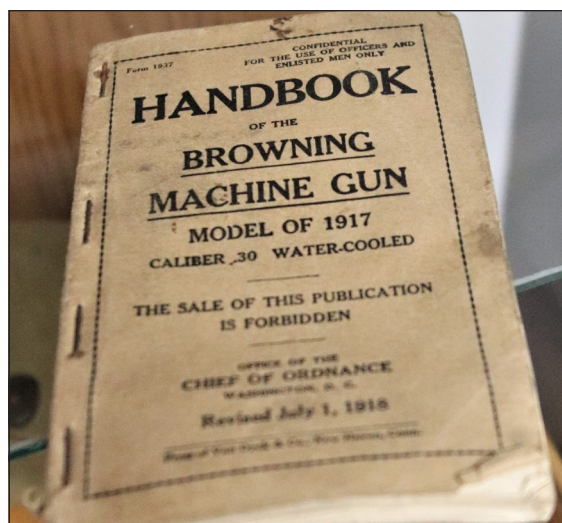
A number of factors helped date the site to 1910. A brass uniform insignia for the 28th Infantry Regiment was a primary clue in dating the camp, Woods said. The 28th Infantry Regiment, then based at Fort Snelling, Minn., is known to have trained at Camp Emory Upton in 1909 and 1910, according to the 1910 Unit Returns for the 28th Infantry Regiment.

Ammunition casings discovered at the site are dated between 1904 and 1908. The three-in-one oil bottles were marked with "3-IN-ONE" in raised letters and designed for cork stoppers. The lubricating oil still is used today, but this type of bottle only was manufactured from 1905-1910.

The cattle bones even helped date the site, Woods said. When the bones were examined, it was determined the 1910 "Manual for Army Cooks" was used to divvy up the meat. The previous edition, the 1896 manual, called for a very different method of preparing sides of beef, Woods said. The manual would change again in 1916.

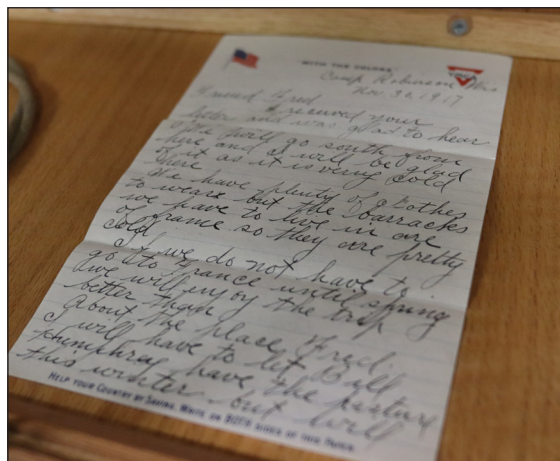
The dig was conducted as part of a project to survey known historical sites on the installation to evaluate their eligibility for the National Register of Historic Places. Archaeological assessments are required on sites where federal funds will be used for construction, and Fort McCoy has been surveying all of its land to both protect history and aid in future maintenance and project planning.

Any artifacts spotted while on Fort McCoy or other federal properties should be left alone and reported to post officials. It is illegal to dig for or remove artifacts from federally



Photos by Scott T. Sturkol

**A handbook for how to operate a Browning machine gun is one of many World War I era artifacts at the Fort McCoy History Center.**



**A 1917 letter by a Soldier at Camp Robinson also is on display.**



**A World War I-era enlisted Soldier uniform is shown in a display case in the center.**



**Shown are several artifacts found during a past archaeological dig at Fort McCoy in a location where Camp Emory Upton was once located. The artifacts date to around 1910.**

owned land without permission.

For more information about archaeological digs or to report

found artifacts at Fort McCoy, call the Directorate of Public Works Natural Resource Branch at 608-388-

4793. For more information about the History Center, call the Public Affairs Office at 608-388-2407.



# Installation's founder, Col. Robert B. McCoy, sends a World War I battlefield letter home

*Letter from Col. R.B. McCoy  
to Dr. S. D. Beebe, Sparta, Wis.*

*Headquarters 128th Infantry*

*In the front lines — in a concrete dug-out (by candle light), 6:45 p.m., Oct. 18, 1918*

*My Dear Doctor:*

*Through shell fire my runners brought in mail tonight to my post of command — and your long, kindly, chatty letter. You may readily perceive how welcome it is when you know that for twenty-six days I've been in this third battle without a bath or change of clothing; sleeping (when I can) in a dug-out or in the open (we bailed out our dug-out for three hours this a.m.), and how welcome your letter is after the killing of Arnold and Cole and the terrific losses each day.*

*Starting with 3,300 men and 92 officers, my strength report this morning showed 31 officers and 1,183 men. Had two Majors killed and two Captains (acting battalion commanders) wounded in last two days.*

*About one hundred men are evacuated daily, but my regiment broke the German main line and General Pershing three miles in the rear sent special words of commendation. I wish I could picture this scene to you now. Telephonic communication each of my three battalions; with Brigade and with Division Headquarters; also with runners. Constant calls and orders and all under shrieking shells of our own and bursting shells of the Boche.*

*Today I witnessed a battle in the air — seventy-five planes over our heads, with burning balloons, etc. War is hell. You become calloused. The work must go on when men fall. It is duty to put others in. But we are slowly driving them back.*

*The 128th took 168 prisoners day before yesterday and a few every day. Orville Arnold and Glen Cole were together and both killed by the same shell with six others and nine wounded. Bruce has gone to Corps Hq., Alex Gibbon is Lieutenant with another division. Robert is with Co. C, Ammunition Train.*

*I am perfectly well and surprised that I can stand the strain and hardship when others*



A portrait of Col. Robert B. McCoy taken in 1918.

Fort McCoy historical photo

*go under. I am the senior Wisconsin officer now actively on duty, tho this regiment has few Wisconsin men left. I thank you for the kindly remembrance and the spirit of your letter and trust I may return, but my time may come at any*

*moment. Please remember me to any inquiring friends.*

*Very sincerely,  
R. B. McCoy*



# EARLY SCENES OF FORT McCOY: 1910-1918



### Fort McCoy historical photos

Workers build a concrete storehouse in 1911 on what is today's South Post at Fort McCoy. It is the oldest standing building currently at Fort McCoy. The building was once next to the southern spur of the joint Chicago and northwestern-Chicago, Milwaukee, and Saint Paul railways that went through the area. Also known as the Ordnance Magazine, it served as a storehouse for targets and equipment for the adjoining small-arms range on the installation's South Post.



A Fort McCoy training scene from around 1913.



Signal detail Soliders participate in a photo session at Camp Emory Upton in 1910.



**Roll of honor poster from Camp Robinson in 1918.**