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The Spirit of the Springfield Armory

Stanislaus J. Skarzynski

Photographs from the exhibit of the same name which was held at Springfield Technical Community College from April 7 to May 11, 1984. All photographs in this collection are from the Springfield Armory National Historic Site.

A predecessor of the Springfield Armory was first established in 1777 as a depot for the storage of arms and ammunition of the Continental Army. It continued to serve this function under the Confederation government, when it was the scene of one of the "battles" of Shays' Rebellion in 1787. In 1794 the Federal government established a manufactory of weapons on the site. For the next 174 years until it was closed in 1968, the arms factory on the hill influenced the development and fortunes of the city of Springfield and played a large part in the evolving "American System" of manufacturing. It also earned a worldwide reputation for the quality of its products. Such an institution conferred prestige upon those who worked there, and instilled a deep sense of pride in their work. Such pride is evident, reinforced perhaps by a knowledge of a job well done in this photograph of workmen from the Armory celebrating Armistice Day in 1918.

Photograph on the following page courtesy of Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Springfield Armory National Historic Site.



America's conflicts of the early and mid twentieth century saw a new force of laborers working in the shops at the Springfield Armory—women. During World War I, women constituted about twelve percent of the work force, doing a variety of light production tasks. As it became evident that the United States would be involved in the Second World War, the Armory leadership admitted in 1940 that they might employ some women on the production lines. However, they doubted that they would match the numbers employed during the previous war, as there were more unemployed men available during the depression and because heavy modern machinery made it more difficult for women to perform the jobs. The Armory leadership, however, proved to be better at overseeing production than at predicting the future.

In 1940, the Armory was turning out about five hundred M-1 Garand rifles a day. By the end of the war, production had at times reached 4,000 weapons daily. This was done with the help of the Women Ordnance Workers who consti-



Photograph courtesy of Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Springfield Armory National Historic Site.

tuted 45.5 percent of the workforce as guards, supervisors, mechanics, heavy lathe operators, and drop forgers in addition to performing the light tasks of the previous war. At the end of the war they were all dismissed. The above photograph shows women working at the filing bench.

At the dawn of the Cold War, military planners were troubled by the possibility of a "hot" war in the Arctic. In 1950, these men braved temperatures of minus seventy degrees Fahrenheit at the Armory's new climatic room to test the effects of such an environment on the Army's weapons. The climatic room was but a part of a long and extensive research and development program at the Springfield Armory. The Armory was responsible for the development of most of the shoulder weapons adopted by the U.S. Army. A list of these weapons would include items like the rifled musket of the Civil War period, or the "Trapdoor" the first production breechloading rifle as well as the later M-1 and M-14 rifles.



Photograph courtesy of Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Springfield Armory National Historic Site.

To carry out this task, the Armory maintained many testing facilities, first in the Hillshops and Watershops complexes and later, as weapons became noisier and more powerful, at more remote facilities such as the Borden Brook or Quabbin reservoirs or at a new underground range located in an industrial area of Springfield. The Armory was also fortunate in attracting talented people, such as John Garand who could utilize these resources to design weapons renowned for their accuracy and durability.

Although the Armory performed an important role, the workers did not devote twenty-four hours a day to their chores. Aside from the establishments where a tired armorer could quench his thirst, there were other activities to engage his attentions after work. Clambakes at Riverside Park were popular and the Armory baseball team could be found locked in struggle with such archrivals as Chapman Valve or Smith & Wesson. Later, the great American office Christmas party made its debut. In the Great Depression, bands sponsored by the WPA continued the tradition started during the First World War, giving noontime concerts at the Armory.



Photograph courtesy of Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Springfield Armory National Historic Site.

During the Second World War, many social activities at the Armory were connected to the war effort. Scrap drives, War Bond rallies and Army/Navy “E” Day were combined with parades to keep morale high. An “On to Victory” dance was held, featuring two “big bands,” a beauty contest, a jitterbug contest, and government War Bonds as door prizes. The photo of Benny Goodman, Gene Krupa and the Coca-Cola Spotlight Band was taken during a concert on the Armory grounds that was part of the Third War Loan drive.



Photograph courtesy of Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Springfield Armory National Historic Site.

In this 1957 photograph we see (then) Senator John Fitzgerald Kennedy and Representative Edward Boland conferring with the Commanding Officer of the Armory. The Armory attracted much attention in its 174 years of operation. George Washington toured the Armory while visiting the New England states after the Revolution. *Harper's* published an article describing the Armory and its operations. Impressed by the dichotomy between the peaceful and orderly

atmosphere of the institution and the chaos that its products implied, Longfellow wrote a poem about it. During the Civil War two Southern sympathizers placed a bomb in the tower of the main arsenal. Fortunately, the bomb failed to explode. In the 1870s the Armory began an exhibit of weapons based on the collection at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition of 1876. This was the start of what was to become one of the nation's largest collections of small arms. During the early part of this century Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Marshall Ferdinand Foch paid visits to the Armory.

In the mid 1960s the Armory attracted the unwelcome attention of Defense Department officials who wanted to close the Armory as an economy measure. This set off a long and bitter struggle with local authorities who did not wish to lose an institution which was so important to the local economy. In 1968 the Armory was closed and today the site is utilized by private industry and a community college. The National Park Service maintains a museum in the building which housed the main arsenal.