Segment Summaries

The First Eau Claire

At the confluence of the Eau Claire and Chippewa Rivers lies the city of Eau Claire. With a dense pine forest to the north and prairie lands to the south and west, Native Americans found the area rich in resources. Because of fighting between the Sioux and Ojibwe, the Eau Claire area became known as “The Road of War.”

Europeans came in a rush that began in the 1850s, and peaked with the production of lumber in the mid-1880s. With the best log-holding pond on the Chippewa River and easy navigation to the Mississippi River, lumbering became the business of the town. “Yankees and Yorkers” from logged-out areas in the East came to Eau Claire and built mills. Large numbers of immigrant workers supplied the labor force for the mills and lumber camps in the woods. A dam on the Chippewa River created another large holding pond, and a flume carried the logs to a canal and through a tunnel to Half Moon Lake. Lumbering lasted only a few decades, but remains a part of the city’s identity today.

Old Abe

Shortly after Lincoln called for 70,000 volunteers to fight in the Civil War, Chief Big Sky of the Lac du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa captured an eagle from its nest. He sold it to a trader who then sold the eagle to the Captain of Eau Claire’s Company C as a mascot.

As part of the color guard, Old Abe took part in 34 battles. James T. Lewis, Wisconsin’s governor, declared the bird an official war relic, and gave Old Abe two rooms in the basement of the state capitol.

The eagle began a second career as a morale-booster for soldiers and a fundraiser for the war, and later became a nationally recognized symbol of the Union’s effort in winning the war. After a fire in the capitol Old Abe died of smoke inhalation, but remains a part of Eau Claire’s identity today.

The Second Eau Claire

As logs became scarcer, a quarter of Eau Claire’s population left town. Although still large enough to carry on as a rail hub and a retail center, Eau Claire needed to diversify its economy.

It began small with the lumber-related industries it already had. Some new industries also took hold, like a concrete machinery company that later switched to producing pressure cookers. Hospitals were established, along with the future University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Eau Claire also became the site of the Gillette Tire Company, which grew to become the city’s biggest industry.

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Flying Eagles

Ski jumping has a long history in Eau Claire, beginning with Norwegian immigrants who brought the sport in the 1880s. Clubs formed, and Eau Claire became one of the ski-jumping centers of the Midwest.

An Eau Claire jumper named Lemoine Batson competed in the first winter Olympics in 1924. Later, a group of elementary school students organized the Flying Eagle Ski Club during the Great Depression in the 1930s. Access to the many smaller jumps in the city led to several more Eau Claire Olympians, and a community of volunteers carried the sport on to the next generations. Eau Claire’s female athletes played a big part in bringing acceptance of women’s ski jumping as an Olympic sport.

Breaking Barriers

After Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in baseball, major league teams began recruiting black players from the Negro Leagues. Controversy ensued in Eau Claire when the major league Braves were about to send black ball players to their minor league team, the Eau Claire Bears. The change in baseball signaled the beginning of a new Civil Rights movement.

Because of Jackie Robinson’s accomplishment, a young Henry Aaron could dream of playing in the major leagues. First recruited by a Negro League team, Aaron’s hitting drew the attention of the Braves, who recruited him and sent him to Eau Claire. His experience in Eau Claire enabled him to go on to a Hall of Fame career.

Improvisation

Eau Claire’s once vibrant downtown area fell on hard times with the building of new shopping malls after World War II. The closing of the Uniroyal tire plant added to the dismay of downtown merchants. City leaders tried but failed to revive the historic city center.

One answer came with a renewal of the local arts center and other local arts organizations. Local band Bon Iver won two Grammy Awards and the Eaux Claires Music and Arts Festival brought the city national and international attention as an arts destination. The University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire’s jazz studies program resulted in unintended benefits for the city as it influenced the local music scene. A graduate of the program also began a successful software company.

In addition, the decision by Royal Credit Union to locate at the confluence of the Eau Claire and Chippewa Rivers triggered a series of improvements that also brought more people downtown.