

Joseph J. Sprague "Uncle Joe"



Joe Sprague was born in Illinois, September 17, 1859, but spent 74 of his years as one of Sarcoxie's most colorful personalities, exhibiting many talents. His parents moved to Springfield, Mo., when he was around 10 years of age. They soon moved to Marionville in Lawrence County. He attended the common schools and engaged in farming. He was the first student to attend the Marionville Collegiate Institute. He attended from 1871-1876 but quit college to begin learning the printing trade. He apprenticed in the office of the *South Missourian* for approximately two years. After spending a year in Colorado, he returned to Missouri. In 1881, he came to Sarcoxie and married Lora Boyd, daughter of Josiah P. Boyd, owner of Victor Mill. He worked for his father-in-law for seven years and was promoted to head miller.

It was while Sprague held the head miller position that Sarcoxie saw its first electric lights. In 1887 at the mill, Joe invented a dynamo and sent it to Thomas Edison. Upon receipt of the dynamo, Edison, a friend, sent him the first incandescent light-16 candlepower. Sprague installed 10 incandescent lamps at the mill. They made a sensation, being the first electric lights seen in southwest Missouri, if not the whole state. In the spring of 1888, people were drawn to the mill to see the phenomena. The next year Joe built a 25-light dynamo for the Carthage machine shops and took out a patent on a lathe that turned iron and steel by electricity.

Sprague achieved many firsts. He began taking photographs in 1883 with his first camera. His first camera was made from a cigar box with a lens from a microscope. The picture was a tintype photograph of the old Oakland Methodist Church. He opened his first photography studio in Sarcoxie in 1897. He was the first to make paper photograph prints and to have driven the first electric trolley car between Webb City and Joplin. Around 1900 he was instrumental in forming the first local band, becoming Sarcoxie's first bandleader. He was identified with Sarcoxie bands for 25 years. He designed the first bandstand located in the center of the square where numerous concerts and events have been held over the years. In 1914, he opened and managed the first opera house in Sarcoxie called the Star.

Sprague was always eager for a new adventure. He was on the first train that crossed the Great Salt Lake, taking pictures of his journey. J.J. rode the first "Columbia" bicycle in southwest Missouri. The "Columbia" had a front wheel as high as a man's head and a small back wheel. In 1923, Sprague, his son, Edison and his father in law installed a radio station in Sprague's studio. Sometime around 1930, he and his son, Edison, invented an ingenious device to prevent gasoline fires that occur during automobile accidents. A patent for this device was received in November 1932. Uncle Joe was an extremely talented painter and photographer. He regularly supplied the Post-Dispatch and other newspapers and magazines with photos taken of various locations and events. His only impediment was a total hearing loss. However, he never allowed this to interfere with his ventures.

After suffering a fall in 1954, he died at the age of 95. Sprague may well have been the oldest continuously operating photographer in Missouri at his passing. His countless photos of the area throughout his life have been of great historical value. His avid zeal as the local photographer chronicled Sarcoxie's rich history.