

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

A Temporary Shelter for
Six Children Under 12:
St. Joseph's Orphanage

Page 10

Spring, 2002

Volume 37, Number 1

'The Best School in the City,' 1896–1916

Mechanic Arts High School: Its First 20 Years

—Page 4



The first Mechanic Arts High School building, right, shares the site at Central and Park Avenues with the old Madison School, left, where grade school pupils are playing. This spectacular 1911 photo by Charles P. Gibson also reveals a long-vanished neighborhood in downtown St. Paul. Minnesota Historical Society collections. See article beginning on page 4.

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

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A Message from the Editorial Board

In this issue historian John Larson takes us back to the turn of the twentieth century to the founding and early years of one of St. Paul's best known educational institutions: Mechanic Arts High School. Founded in 1896, Mechanic Arts High School exemplified the educational philosophy that identified vocational education and training is a prerequisite for the citizens of a nation that was rapidly undergoing industrialization. Using materials such as the high school's own student publications, Larson chronicles the first two decades of the school's history, its years under the leadership of Principal George Weitbrecht, who was an extraordinary educator.

Janet Postlewaite Sands shifts our attention to another kind of institution in a memoir of her months living at St. Joseph's Orphan Home in 1945-46. Although she was only seven at the time, Janet Postlewaite's recall of the events in her family's life that forced her and her brothers and sisters to take up temporary refuge at the orphanage is both clear and vivid. Paul Nelson follows Janet Sands's memoir with a brief essay that provides the background and history of St. Joseph's Catholic Orphan Home. In light of current newspaper headlines that raise probing questions about the function and value of orphanages today, Janet Sands's family story asks us to consider these issues in a broader context and complexity than we might first have thought necessary.

Newspaper headlines and world events are a theme that's present in Ray Barton's account of how he reacted to the news of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. As Barton explains, the events in New York, Washington D.C., and western Pennsylvania on September 11, 2001, helped bring back his own recollections of his youthful years between 1941 and 1945 when the United States was fully committed to war with its Axis foes.

John M. Lindley, Chair, Editorial Board

'The Best School in the City,' 1896–1916

Mechanic Arts High School: Its First Twenty Years

John W. Larson

Four generations of St. Paul youth attended Mechanic Arts High School in the eighty years between its origin in 1896 and its final class in 1976. Graduates, and some not yet graduated, fought in all the country's wars beginning with the Spanish American War in 1898, the First and Second World Wars, Korea, and Vietnam.

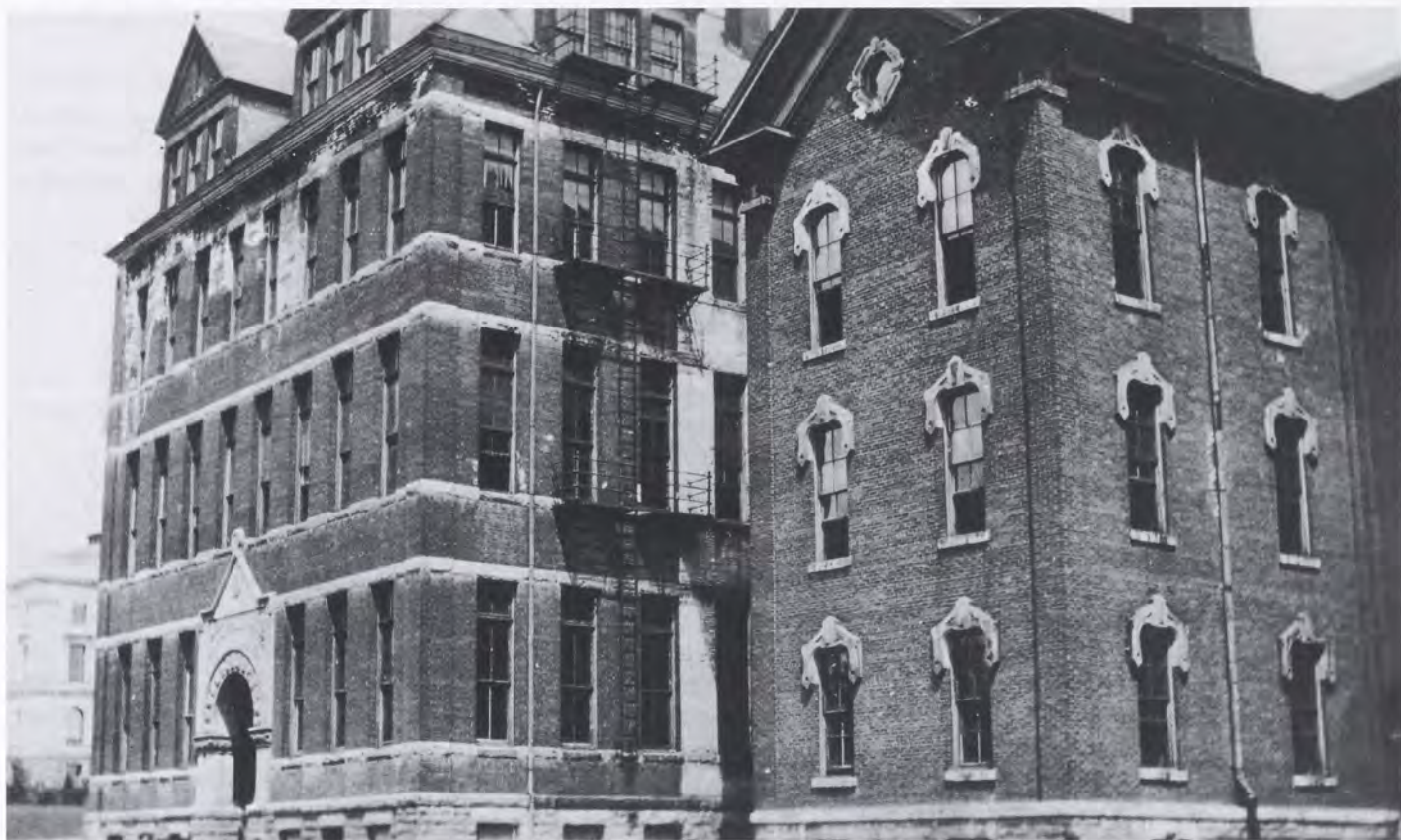
Through it all, Mechanic Arts graduates remained remarkably loyal, even after the school closed in 1976 and, in 1987, was torn down. The school's "M" Club, for example, possibly the nation's oldest lettermen's organization, still meets annually. After more than sixty years, remnants of my 1941 class also meet each year.

In his autobiography, *Standing Fast*,

Civil Rights leader Roy Wilkins, a 1919 graduate, called Mechanic Arts "... the best school in the city." United States Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun, who graduated from Mechanic Arts in 1925, praised the diversity of its student body and the excellence of its faculty. Less famous graduates have insisted the school was different, perhaps unique.

It was indeed unique, particularly in

its response to the need across the country to train students for work in a rapidly industrializing United States. During its early years, from 1896 to 1916, with George Weitbrecht as principal, the school was the first high school in the Upper Midwest to combine manual training with traditional academic curricula. Nothing similar was to appear on a national scale until after 1917 when the Smith-Hughes vocational education act began to provide federal funds to support high school programs that developed skills for useful employment upon graduation.



Another view. The first Mechanic Arts High School, built in 1889, is shown here on the left as it looked about 1908. The Madison School, right, was built about 1877. St. Paul Dispatch-Pioneer Press photograph from the Minnesota Historical Society.



St. Paul Art School class with Mechanic Arts student Paul Manship, center right (in profile). This was an evening class that met in the attic of the Metropolitan Opera House. The photo is dated 1893 but more likely was taken about ten years later. Manship left school around 1900 at the age of fifteen and became the renowned sculptor whose works included "Indian Boy," the centerpiece at Cochran Park at Summit and Western Avenues. Minnesota Historical Society photograph.

What we students called "Mechanics" or "M.A.H.S.," was officially known as the "George Weitbrecht Mechanic Arts High School," after 1917. However, its origins actually can be traced back to 1887 and to a modest manual training program for boys held in a basement room of the old Central High School at Tenth and Minnesota Streets in downtown St. Paul. It was equipped with twelve benches for woodwork, a lathe, a circular saw, a small jigsaw, and a grindstone. Boys who elected shop work came to classes twice a week, but only after the close of the regular school day. When some of the girls complained about being left out of the program, they were permitted to meet once a week and to make "small boxes and little wood carvings."

Traditionally, Central High School prepared aspiring professionals, students who hoped to become doctors, lawyers, or ministers, for college. The manual training program in the school's basement was a controversial innovation. The

St. Paul Board of Education was uncertain about this addition to the high school curriculum and finally concluded that there should be no connection between the high school and manual training.

In January, 1889, when Central High's manual training program was moved into a building of its own on Park and Central Avenues, next to the Madison School, it became the first "Manual Training School" in the Upper Midwest. A dedication ceremony was held on Friday, January 18th. Principal Charles Bennett welcomed visitors and interested members of the press. On the following day, one newspaper spoke of the event as "an epoch in local education history."

Because of its small enrollment, the Manual Training School had comparatively high per capita expenses. Municipal poverty led to cost-cutting measures following a nation-wide Panic in 1893. For several years, the school was abolished in the spring, only to be reestablished in the fall, but by 1896, the school had been re-

duced to eight teachers, 150 students, and some indifferent shop equipment. Then the St. Paul Board of Education asked George Weitbrecht, a kindly chemistry teacher at Central High School, if he would accept appointment as the school's new principal. Weitbrecht said he would, provided academic classes were added to the curriculum and the school's name changed to "Mechanic Arts High School." The board agreed.

Weitbrecht thus was the real founder of Mechanic Arts High School. He'd had no experience at teaching when he arrived in St. Paul in the fall of 1875. He had just completed a year of study at Harvard University after having graduated from Antioch College in Silver Springs, Ohio, in 1874. Where and when he picked up his innovative ideas concerning an academic education for artisans is uncertain. Such ideas may have sprung from religious convictions. Weitbrecht was a Unitarian.

Someone has said that the Unitarian Church was tolerant of everything but intolerance. Before the Civil War its members advocated the abolition of slavery and in the early years of the twentieth century they fought for the right of



George Weitbrecht, the kindly chemistry teacher who was Mechanic Arts principal from 1896 to 1916. Photo from the author.

women to vote. Within the school, Weitbrecht kept his strictly religious ideas to himself, but his conviction that each individual should be encouraged to develop to his or her full potential was everywhere present.

Weitbrecht believed that students learning a craft should be broadly educated. To accomplish this, he established special courses of study, one leading to a Mechanic Arts Degree for boys, another to an Arts Degree for girls. In addition to shop, modeling, free-hand and mechanical drawing classes, a Mechanic Arts Diploma required all the academic courses of a regular high school. These included eight semesters of English, eight in a classic or foreign language, eight in mathematics, and four semesters each in history and science. Earning an Arts Diploma was similarly vigorous. Both programs required talent, dedication, and hard work. They were unique to Mechanic Arts, and not for everyone.

* * *

While still in grade school in the 1890s, the future sculptor, young Paul Manship, stood out as a remarkable artist. Drawing came easily to him. He began to draw before he was seven. He admired and copied his talented older sister, Addie, but then Addie died. There remained an older brother, Luther, who loved to paint, and who earned his living as an engraver. Art came naturally to the Manship family.

The Manships lived at 304 Nelson Avenue, (later Marshall Avenue), near the eventual site of the St. Paul Cathedral. It was a half-mile downhill walk from there to Park Avenue and the original Mechanic Arts High School. He was not yet fourteen when he entered Mechanics in the fall of 1899. In addition to academic studies, he enrolled in free-hand drawing, mechanical drawing, and clay modeling classes. Clay modeling was important to the young artist because it suggested a career as a sculptor, a possibility he had not yet considered.

Paul's parents encouraged his passion for art. They enrolled him in evening courses at the St. Paul School of Art. He earned spending money by lettering and drawing advertisements posted in the



Dietrich Lange, who succeeded George Weitbrecht as principal in 1916. Photo from the author.

city's streetcars. He was not lazy, but in 1903, during his junior year at Mechanics, his casual approach to academic studies caught up with him. He flunked his German language course and was told he must make it up or leave school. He left school.

At seventeen, Paul was determined to make his way as a freelance artist. He continued his evening art classes where, after realizing he was color blind, he turned away from painting and concentrated on modeling. He opened an office at 268½ Robert Street where he accepted illustrating and designing jobs. In two years, by 1905, he had saved enough money to travel east, to New York, eventually to go on to Philadelphia, to Rome, to Paris, London and a world of work and travel beyond the imagination of family and friends who stayed behind.

* * *

Mechanic's woodworking and metal shops were under the direction of practical men well experienced in their trades. The overall goal was to produce useful objects. In woodworking each student built a Morris chair, bookcase, table or similar object on his own while the class worked together on a larger project, such as a rolltop desk. The woodshop also built patterns for the casting of metal parts used in metal shop projects. Metal shop students built dynamos, small steam engines, and wood turning lathes. Wood lathes were built in quantity, with interchangeable parts. Production of interchangeable parts required precise measurements and careful manufacture.

Freehand drawing classes helped students create original designs for work in metal or wood, and facilitated free use of the imagination. For example, students developed simple harmony, rather than Victorian clutter for home interior deco-

ration. Impressed by what was being done at Mechanic Arts, the supervisor of the Minnesota Building at the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis asked the school to develop a color scheme, design and sew draperies, and design and make furniture for the building's interior.

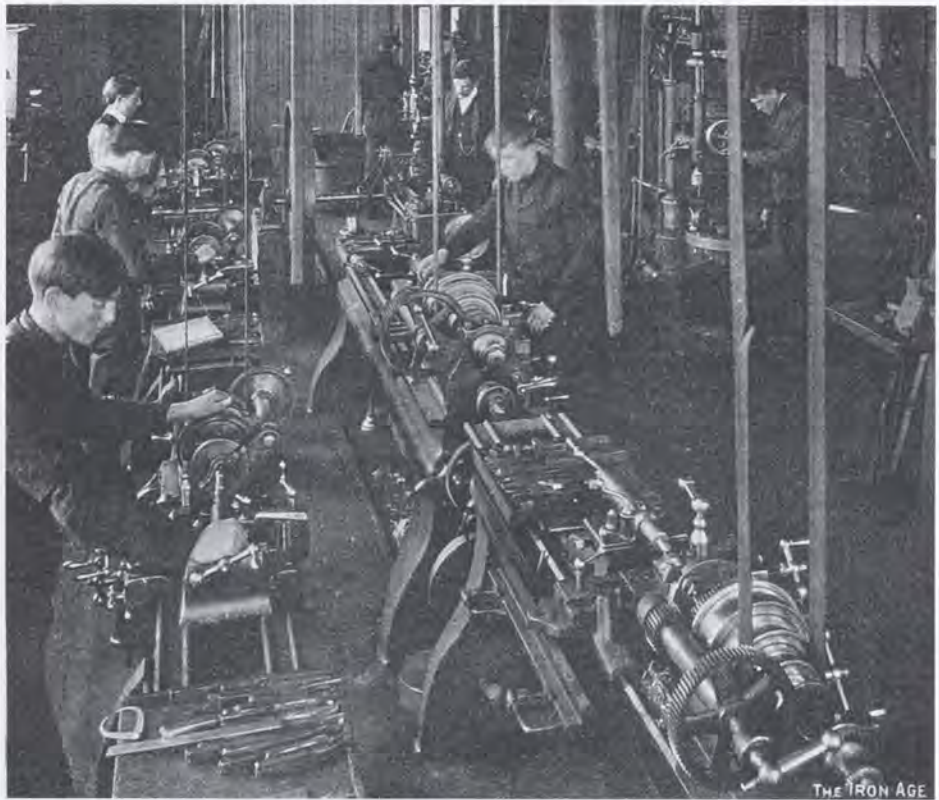
At the fair, the art critic and journalist M. Baumfeld wrote, "Whoever finds pleasure in original conceptions should not fail to look up the Minnesota Building." "The whole," Baumfeld added, "is well worth seeing, even by the foreign critic." What is more, an exhibit of Mechanic's machine shop work displayed in the education section of the fair was awarded a gold medal.

In 1905 a representative of *Iron Age*, a monthly publication dedicated to the iron and steel industries world-wide, visited the school. Afterwards he commented both on the high quality of the work produced in its metal shops and on the school's successful combination of academic studies and manual training. He attributed these achievements to Weitbrecht, who "... when leading one through the school unconsciously indicates the secret of the school's success, namely his own enthusiasm and energy." Praise from *Iron Age* and elsewhere fostered the notion that Mechanic Arts was unique, certainly the best high school in the city, and perhaps the best anywhere.

* * *

Weitbrecht encouraged a robust school spirit. Under his benign oversight, the entire school community, principal, teachers, and students acted together on all-school matters. So it was in 1897 that blue and white were chosen as the school's colors, and in 1900 that the cogwheel became the school symbol.

Later, school spirit would focus on athletic competition. However, the building on Park Avenue had no gymnasium and, at first, there were no regular coaches. Still, in 1910 the school's baseball team began a three-year stretch as city champions. That year also, the football team acquired its first coach and finally beat Central High's team, a first in a rivalry that was to last for the life of the school. After 1911, thanks to a new school building and the gymnasium (later



The Machine Shop at the old Mechanic Arts High School with students at work about 1905. Photo from the author and reproduced from *The Iron Age*, Vol. LXXV, January-June, 1905.

the lunchroom) on its ground floor, Mechanics could form a basketball team. In 1912 the team won first place in city-wide competition.

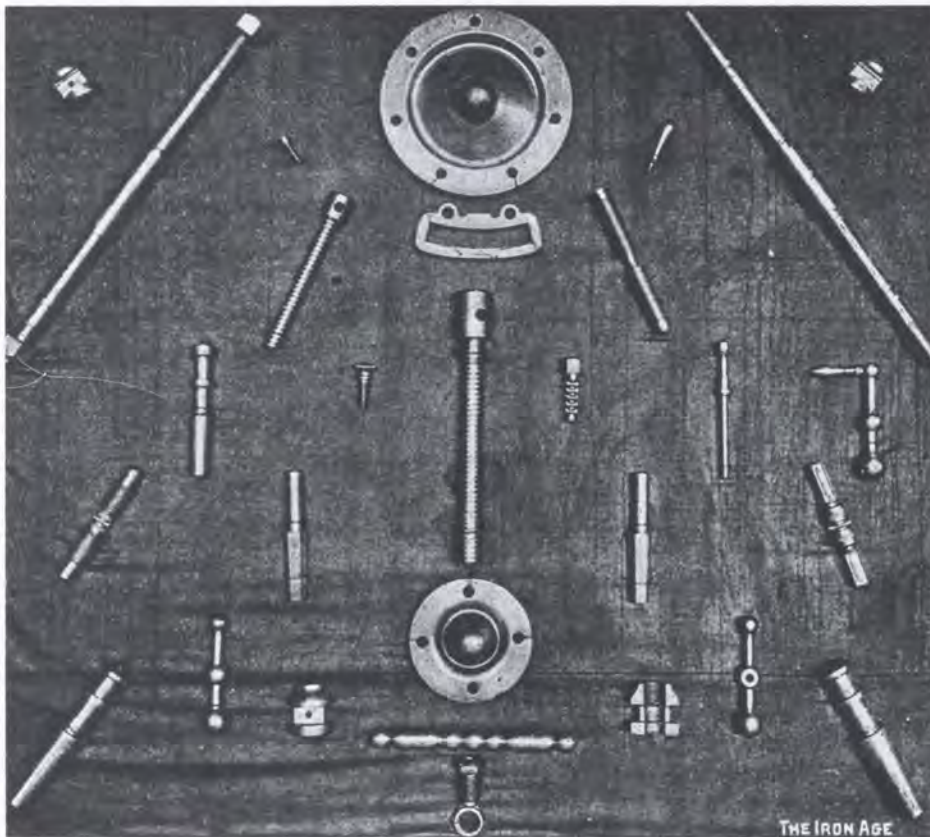
George Weitbrecht cheered from the sidelines at all sports events and no "M" club annual banquet was the same without his lively presence. He was, however, more actively involved in such cultural matters, as art, drama, literature, and music. The tradition of senior class plays, for example, began in 1897 when the graduating class presented Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*. It was an ambitious choice, but consistent with Weitbrecht's preference for the best in all such matters.

Earlier the school had formed a boys Glee Club under the direction of Grace O'Hair. A girls Glee Club soon followed and an orchestra was planned. In the new school's auditorium, in the fall of 1912, St. Paul's Schubert Club sponsored a week-long music appreciation program. A Miss Kay from Macalester College explained music for an upcoming concert with the help of a Victrola. When the Glee

Club, supported by the newly-formed orchestra, gave the concert in November, the program was a surprise to many, "especially to students and teachers who did not seem to expect much." Later, under the direction of "Doc" Raymond, the Mechanic Arts choir, orchestra, and band would become the pride of the school.

* * *

By 1909, Mechanic Arts had grown beyond the capacity of its Park Avenue home. The building was too small, not well adapted to the school's many functions, and poorly lighted. In November, construction began at the corner of Central Avenue (now Constitution) and Robert Street for a new school building, one designed to accommodate 1,220 students. Architects would call the five-story stone and red brick structure "Collegiate Gothic." No matter, it was not distinctive, not the school Weitbrecht would have wished for, but it resembled most other high schools of its period.



Specimens of machine work by Mechanic Arts students, also reproduced by the author from The Iron Age.

Weitbrecht doubted that Mechanic Arts would survive the move from the intimate atmosphere of the Park Avenue school to the cold expanse of this new building. He needn't have worried. When the move began in early April, 1911, students helped carry furniture and piles of books from Park Avenue to the new building. After the school opened on April 17th, students went to work earning funds to buy a piano and a stage curtain, finding pictures with which to decorate the bare walls and, in general, creating new traditions while hanging onto the old.

A Literary Society founded in the fall of 1912 was open to any student with passing grades. It soon had sixty members. In January, 1913, the Society published the first "M," predecessor of the MAHS yearbook. It contained a selection of student literary efforts, alumni news, sports news, a record of school happenings, and photos of mid-term graduates.

It was conceived as a periodical, almost a newspaper, to be published several times a year. In June, 1913, the second "M" appeared with photos of seventy-two spring graduates. Of these, twenty-two had completed the demanding Mechanic Arts Course, six the Arts Course, and forty-four had been enrolled in General Studies, an alternate introduced in 1911.

* * *

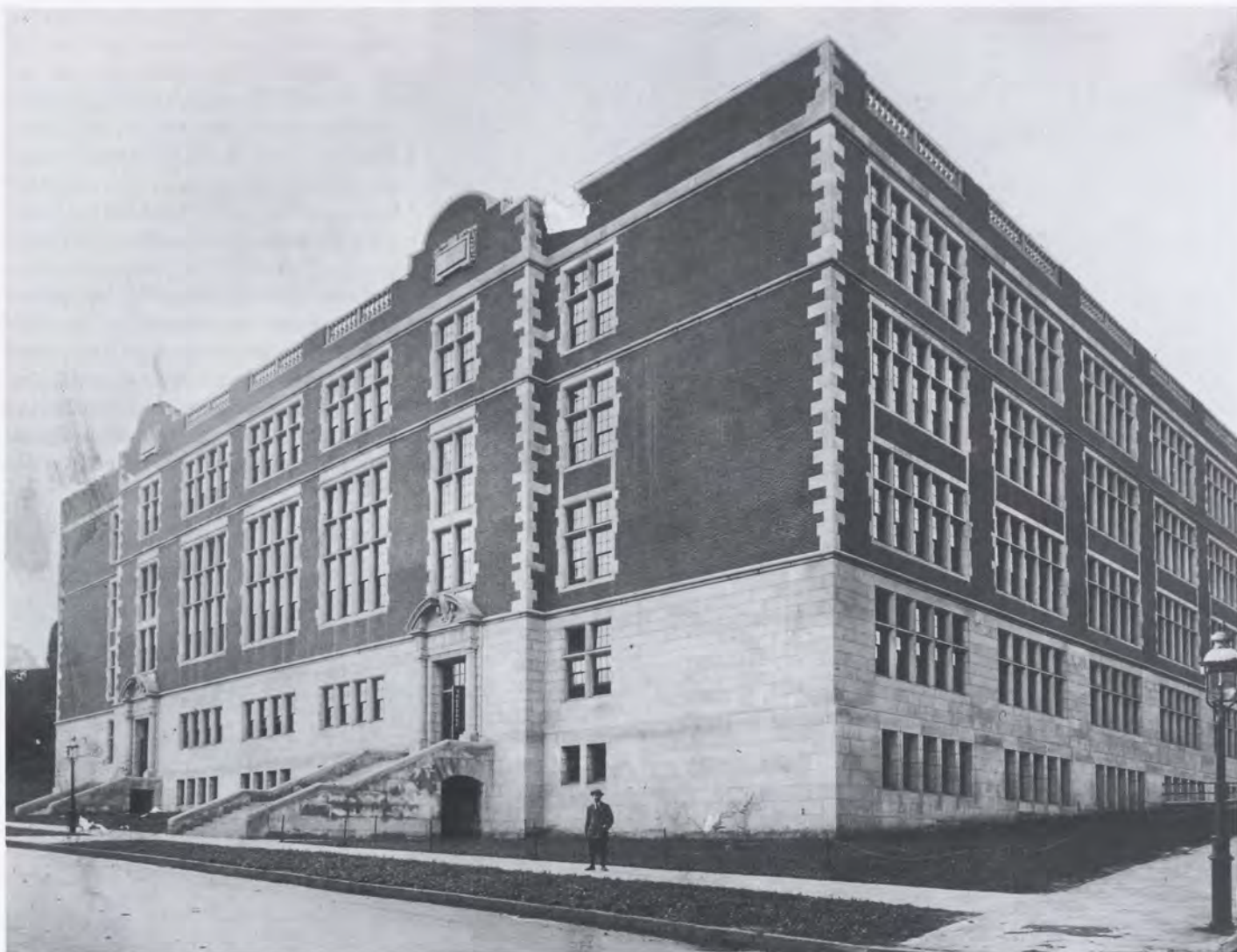
When school closed for summer vacation in June of 1913, Mechanic Arts was a viable institution with a secure future. George Weitbrecht turned to personal and family matters. He would be sixty-three in September. His wife of some thirty-plus years, Mary Beals, already was sixty-five, and ailing. That summer, the Weitbrechts, along with their twenty-nine-year-old son Robert and his family, established a home in the City of Orange, Orange County, California.

Weitbrecht did not abandon Mechanic Arts. He commuted twice a year between the school in St. Paul and Orange where he spent the long summer and Christmas vacations with his family. When he returned to St. Paul in September, 1915, friends found him worn and troubled. He seemed his old self by Thanksgiving and after a Christmas holiday with his family in California he came back in January in better health than he had enjoyed for years, or so his St. Paul friends chose to believe. Then, after an especially serene and happy month, he died early one Sunday morning in February 1916.

Early Monday morning papers carried the news of his sudden death, adding that school would commence at the usual time. When the assembly bell sounded that morning, some 900 shocked students quietly gathered in the school auditorium. Superintendent of Schools Dietrich Lange told the students that the funeral services for Weitbrecht would be held in the auditorium that afternoon, that they should disperse but remain ready to help, if needed, in the preparations.

The auditorium stage was decorated with a forest scene used for plays in the old school. The Glee Clubs sat behind these props. Tiny live fir trees were placed around the edges of the platform. Larger fir trees banked the corners. The piano that students and alumni had given to the school stood off to one side. In the center below the platform stood the open casket heaped with blue and white flowers. More flowers were attached to the edge of the platform. Four boys, two at the head and two at the foot of the casket, stood as a guard of honor throughout the service. Teacher Mabel Colter recalled that the odor of fir trees mingled with the scent of flowers were enough to "... waft one to a dream land and added to a sense of unreality."

The Glee Clubs opened the service with "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty." The Reverend John Reed of the Unitarian Church read from the Scriptures. The Glee Clubs followed with "It Singeth Low in Every Heart" to the tune of "Auld Lang Syne." The sermon by Rabbi Isaac Rypins of Mount Zion Temple characterized "... our departed friend in one word 'sincerity.' He hated



The new Mechanic Arts High School which opened in 1916 at 97 East Central Avenue. The building was demolished in the 1970s to make way for the expansion of the nearby Minnesota Historical Society into a building to house the Minnesota Supreme Court. Minnesota Historical Society photograph.

sham and cant. He hated anything that was false and worshiped the truth wherever he found it." Before closing, Rabbi Rypins suggested that "... this school be henceforth known as the George Weitbrecht Mechanic Arts High School." Once suggested, the idea caught fire and was made official in June, 1917.

As the service ended two boys removed the flowers and draped a blue and white flag emblazoned with MAHS over the lower end of the casket. A piano recessional, Handel's "Largo," played softly while row after row of boys and girls walked quietly past the casket and each student dropped in a flower. The seemingly endless line kept coming and coming. Once outside the auditorium

boys and girls gathered five and six deep on both sides of the halls where the casket would pass. Then, "Borne by those who loved him, our dear 'Whitey' went down the long hall toward his office, down the stairs, back down the long hall and out the door, between the silent ranks of his sorrowing children."

Sources

No adequate history of Mechanic Arts under the tutorship of George Weitbrecht exists. I have relied heavily on issues of the "*M*" which was first published in January, 1913, by the Mechanic Arts Literary Society. A special issue published in April, 1916, "To honor the memory of George Weitbrecht" provided much of

the material for this article. An additional source of early MAHS history is "A course book for High Schools of St. Paul, Minnesota" published in 1913 by the St. Paul Department of Education.

The background and career of Paul Manship is candidly told by his son, John Manship, in the richly illustrated volume, *Paul Manship*, that appeared in 1989. Volume LXXV, January-June 1905, pages 1146-1147 of *Iron Age* provide an independent evaluation of Weitbrecht's manual training program. Quite a different source, *Art and Life on the Upper Mississippi, 1890-1915*, edited by Michael Conforti, 1994, pp. 125-126, briefly examines Weitbrecht's program in the context of the Arts and Crafts movement.



Fredrick McGhee, family and friends on the porch of the McGhee home at 665 University Avenue, St. Paul, around 1910. Minnesota Historical Society photograph. See "Doing History in Ramsey County and St. Paul" on page 20 and a review of Paul Nelson's biography of McGhee on page 24.

R.C.H.S.
RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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