

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
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*Primitive Simplicity and
Great Truths:*

Peoples Church,
the Reverend Samuel G. Smith,
and St. Paul

Philip J. Ramstad

—Page 13

William T. Francis, at Home and Abroad

Paul D. Nelson, page 3



The monument for the Francis family in Greenwood Cemetery, Nashville, Tennessee. In the left foreground is the grave marker for William T. (1870–1929) and on the right is the marker for Nellie G. (1874–1929). Photo by Robert Orr Jr.

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RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 51, Number 4

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THE MISSION STATEMENT OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS ON JANUARY 25, 2016:

Preserving our past, informing our present, inspiring our future

CONTENTS

- 3 William T. Francis, at Home and Abroad
Paul D. Nelson
- 13 *Primitive Simplicity and Great Truths:*
Peoples Church, the Reverend Samuel G. Smith,
and St. Paul
Philip J. Ramstad
- 20 “*The West Point of the Sky*”
The U.S. Army’s Air Service Mechanics School
in St. Paul’s Midway, 1917–1918
Roger Bergerson
- 27 Book Review

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A Message from the Editorial Board

Ramsey County history has yielded some fascinating lives, and in this issue Paul Nelson looks closely at one: William T. Francis. Francis, a pioneering African American lawyer, had a successful career in St. Paul before he departed as consul to Liberia in 1927. While there, he investigated conditions of forced labor before he died tragically of yellow fever. His wife, Nellie, once spoke at the Peoples Church, a monumental landmark near the Cathedral of St. Paul that is now gone, is the focus of another article here. Philip J. Ramstad traces the history of that congregation, which welcomed other speakers as well-known as Mark Twain and Winston Churchill. On the other side of the city, the former Willys-Overland building at present-day Highway 280 and University Avenue housed a massive training program for the army’s air service mechanics during World War I. Roger Bergerson details the operation that taught 3,000 students before it shut down after the Armistice. Finally, as a reminder, because RCHS has now moved to a different fiscal year, its Annual Report will be included in the upcoming Summer 2017 issue.

Anne Cowie
Chair, Editorial Board

“The West Point of the Sky”

The U.S. Army’s Air Service Mechanics School in St. Paul’s Midway, 1917–1918

Roger Bergerson

In early 1918, a military post sprouted on the western edge of St. Paul, a training facility for ground personnel to support America’s fledgling air force in the “War to End All Wars.” Residents in the area may have had qualms, but St. Paul businessmen were enthused about this Air Service Mechanics School, out of patriotism surely, but also because the 3,500 men to be stationed there would need supplies, lots of supplies.

The headquarters of the new installation was the Willys-Overland Building on University Avenue at Eustis Street, today the Court International Building just off Highway 280. Six months went by and supporters saw promising signs that the school would develop into a permanent base and eventually triple in size. The giant Illinois Steel Warehouse across the avenue had been leased to expand training space. Barracks were under construction, residences commandeered for officers’ quarters and a drill/athletic/flying field was being built at nearby Desnoyer Park.

At an October 1918 luncheon in the brand new Athletic Club downtown, members of the St. Paul Association, a forerunner of the Chamber of Commerce, unanimously endorsed raising \$40,000 to build a “coliseum” or recreation hall at the school.¹

“There is no question about the aviation school being a permanent institution in St. Paul,” Lieutenant M. F. Halliday, its assistant executive officer and athletic director, assured the assemblage while showing a plat map of the expansion underway. “But it is always possible for the government to move a post and the providing of this gymnasium and theater is a clinching argument in favor of keeping it here,” he added. With the flair of modern-day civic boosters, association officials predicted that the school would pump \$3 million annually into the local economy.

The city’s newspapers were on board in a big way, with the *St. Paul Daily News*

trumpeting that the school would become “the West Point of the sky.” But then all the grandiose plans came crashing down. The Armistice was declared on November 11, 1918, which itself was no surprise, but with it came the shocking news that the school was to be closed.

Willys-Overland Building Becomes a Landmark

Initially, the papers were aghast. This amounted to a government betrayal, given the support the business community (and, for that matter, they themselves) had given the school and previous assurances

about its future. However, by the time the Willys-Overland Building reverted to the control of its carmaker owner two months later, the future looked bright again. The *St. Paul Pioneer Press* hailed “the re-opening in St. Paul of the Northwest’s greatest automobile center” at “what was once the largest Air Service Mechanics’ school in the world.”²

The Willys-Overland Company was a Toledo, Ohio-based manufacturer in the early years of the U.S. automotive industry and briefly was second only to Ford as the nation’s largest car-maker. As early as 1912, local newspapers speculated that the company would build an assembly plant in the Twin Cities. And in 1915, the company did indeed begin construction of a four-story facility in what was known as St. Paul’s Transfer District because of its proximity to the Minnesota Transfer Railroad. In late March of the following



In this view facing St. Paul’s University Avenue, the Willys-Overland Building had been converted to the headquarters of the Air Service Mechanics School. A neighborhood boy apparently joined the sentries. All photos in this article are from *The Propeller*, the school’s newspaper, courtesy of the Minnesota Aviation Hall of Fame.

year, the \$1 million Willys-Overland Building opened with a weeklong open house. It was described, again by the local press, as “probably the most modern and most completely equipped automobile factory branch in the United States.”³

“What we want in the Twin Cities,” said company owner John North Willys in a prepared statement, “is a branch which will be able to furnish parts, tools and machinery and expert men for immediate service for any Overland car, new or old.” The building also served as a warehouse—it was said there was room for 7,000 cars—and a distribution center for the company’s growing network of dealers selling Overland and Willys-Knight cars. It seems clear, despite assertions elsewhere, that autos were never assembled there. It is also doubtful that there were ever 7,000 cars in the building at one time. Three hundred Willys-Knight models was a more typical inventory, in addition to the stock of other car companies that rented space.

The massive four-story structure, with nearly a half-million feet of floor space, quickly became a landmark in the Midway. A large water tank tower rose above the center of the building’s eastern wall. A loading platform extended along the east side of the building, adjacent to a pair of spurs from the Minnesota Transfer Railway that entered the property from the south. Signs with “Overland” in script letters were displayed on both sides of the northeast corner of the building and lit at night.

The area surrounding the Willys-Overland Building was a mix of industrial sites on and close to University Avenue, as well as residential blocks immediately west and south of the building. Most of the homes were as new as the edifice in their midst and neither it nor the 175 men employed within probably had much of an impact on the homeowners’ daily lives. But they had no idea of what was to come.

Buying Aircraft and Training Mechanics

The United States declared war on Germany in April 1917 and at the urging of the French, President Woodrow Wilson agreed that America would develop an air armada to end German domination of the skies. In hindsight, this was



Major Walter Weaver, seated, and his executive staff. He was to become known for his management skills and by World War II was a major general, leading the 500,000 men of the Army Air Forces Technical Training Command.

breathtakingly optimistic. At that point, the Aviation Section of the U.S. Army Signal Corps had 35 qualified military pilots and a few hundred obsolete planes, some of them recently used to chase Pancho Villa in Mexico.⁴

Rallying to the cause, Congress approved \$640 million for aviation, possibly its largest single appropriation ever to that point. Following House approval, the *New York Sun* editorialized, “The House of Representatives has set the pace for its construction of a fleet of airships adequate to crush the Prussian air service and blind the Prussian armies.”⁵ President Wilson signed the bill in July 1917. About half the \$640 million would go for airplane manufacturing, including the development of the Liberty engine, the motor that would power the thousands of planes to be produced.

Contracts quickly were awarded to plane makers and related industries. Pilot training also began in earnest. But it was some months before much thought was given to the ground personnel who would be needed to keep the planes flying, 10 to 15 such staff for every pilot, by one estimate. That fall, the U.S. Army (the air force was part of the army until 1947) established an air mechanics school at the new Kelly Field in San Antonio, Texas. Authorities also sought assistance in Minnesota, where the William Hood

Dunwoody Institute in Minneapolis already was conducting naval air training.

On January 1, 1918, 300 apprentice army mechanics arrived at Dunwoody from Kelly Field, accompanied by the disquieting news—in terms of the trade school’s limited physical capacity—that many more were to come. In the meantime, Twin Cities businessmen had an avid interest in getting a share of the money flowing from Congress and a St. Paul War Industries Board was formed to seek government contracts. Although business leaders returning from lobbying in Washington, D.C., supplied the local newspapers with optimistic statements about how such contracts would benefit St. Paul’s factories, foundries and machine shops, there was no hint that something big was in the offing. But as subsequent events would show, plans obviously were afoot at the War Department.

Out of the blue, so to speak, on February 14 front-page headlines blared: “Biggest Aviation Mechanics’ School Opens in St. Paul” (*St. Paul Daily News*) and “St. Paul To Be Site of Great Aviation School” (*St. Paul Dispatch*). Upping the ante the next day, the *Pioneer Press* weighed in with “St. Paul to Train 9,000 Fliers and Mechanics.”

Major Walter Weaver was the man assigned to organize and command the school. Weaver, 33, was a West Point



Students learned to tear down and repair aircraft engines, including the Liberty, the engine specifically developed to power the American air fleet.

graduate and most recently commandant of flying cadets at Wilbur Wright Field, in Dayton, Ohio. He was already familiar with the Twin Cities, having served at Fort Snelling a decade earlier. Weaver was developing a reputation for organizational prowess that he would need in the days and weeks ahead. His immediate challenge was to find a facility in which to house another 1,000 soldiers due to arrive in early March.

The Willys-Overland Building already was providing billets for several hundred troops from overtaxed Dunwoody and when Weaver arrived in St. Paul on February 12, he decided he wanted the whole building. A huge auto show and industrial exposition had closed only three days earlier and Fred Coats, the building manager, protested that he had just moved hundreds of Willys-Overland cars back into the facility. Weaver contacted John North Willys directly and on February 13 signed a one-year lease for the sizable sum of \$105,000.

Even at this early stage, one newspaper speculated that the building might be taken over permanently. For the time being, Willys-Overland would move its cars elsewhere and transfer its local headquarters to the retail outlet in downtown Minneapolis. Coats would complain later

about false rumors being spread to the effect that Willys-Overland had taken advantage of the situation. "Though we have sacrificed more, I believe, than any other one concern in the Twin Cities, in assisting the government in the prosecution of the war, we have, nevertheless, suffered more than any other company from rumors of weakness and profiteering," he said.⁶

Setting up the School

Representatives of the St. Paul Association pitched in to help set up the school. The chief purchasing agent of the Great Northern Railroad organized the purchasing department and a restaurant owner and representative of a large produce company helped with the commissary. The next several months were a blur of activity: the 1,000 students who arrived on March 5 were billeted with others on the second and third floors of the building. The mess hall was in the basement. Civilian employees of Dunwoody formed the initial instructional staff and additional teachers were recruited from high school shop classes and private industry. The property was fenced and an entrance point established on the University Avenue side, where

visitors were searched before being allowed admittance.

In May, Weaver gave 60 businessmen a tour of the facility. These included John Field and Frank Schlick of Field-Schlick, a leading downtown department store, William Hamm, brewery owner, Charles Bigelow, president, Farwell, Ozmun Kirk & Co., John G. Ordway, manager, Crane and Ordway Co., John Seeger, president of Seeger Refrigerator Co. and banker Otto Bremer. (Major Weaver apparently socialized with the "millionaire brewer," as the newspapers invariably referred to Hamm, because the two were cited by game wardens for illegal hunting near Savage, Minnesota the following fall.)

A *St. Paul Pioneer Press* reporter accompanying the businessmen during their visit couldn't have been more enthusiastic about what he saw. "War may be tough in spots," he wrote, "but for twenty-eight days at least, which is the average life of the student in the aviation school, there is positively nothing wrong with it. It is the merriest, cleanest, healthiest, thrillingest sport in the world and the wives, mothers and sweethearts of the boys now receiving instruction there can go to sleep at night with the fullest assurance that the boys are having a mighty good time."

Readers were provided with what was said to be a typical day's menu and told that the soldiers could have as much as they wanted to eat:

Breakfast: oranges, a bottle of milk, link pork sausage, Lyonnaise potatoes, bread, and coffee.

Lunch: roast pork with apple sauce, mashed potatoes, succotash bread, assorted pies, and lemonade.

Supper: assorted cold meats, spaghetti and cheese, sliced onions, pear sauce, bread, and a bottle of milk.

In addition, the school band played at meal times.

"One of the many wonderful things about the school is the cleanliness that prevails." The story continued, "Talk about your Spotless Town! Every man is happy, officers and students. They like Major Weaver; Major Weaver likes them and . . . when these several thousand young men

get into real service the Germans will know they are in no child's game."⁷

In a memoir many years later, one former student presented a slightly different view of the experience. Pete DePaolo enlisted in New York City and was sent to the Aviation Mechanics School, where he recalled "having to wear my civilian summer clothes in cold Minnesota for several weeks." He continued, ". . . there I experienced the rigors of soldiering under a hard-boiled sergeant, thin blankets and cold mess.

"Our course," recalled DePaolo, "included tearing down and rebuilding all the various aircraft engines, Curtiss OX, Hall Scott, Hispano Suiza, Gnome, LeRohne and, of course, later on the Liberty. This course gave us a thorough schooling in the principles of internal-combustion engines, ignition, carburetion, the use of precision instruments and forge and machine shop practices. In looking back over the years I realize the tremendous value this training was to me."⁸

That was one thing upon which everyone seemed to agree, that the training that the school offered was first-rate. Originally set for a month in duration, by mid-year the curriculum was extended to three months. Soldiers trained as carpenters, electricians, vulcanizers, copper-smiths, sheet metal and fabric workers and engine mechanics. (They were all called mechanics, whether directly responsible for the maintenance of a plane or not, motorcyclists and chauffeurs included.)

Some of the technologies were new to American workers and since training texts weren't available, the staff developed a series of instruction manuals that proved valuable for years afterward. Concurrently with mechanics training, the soldiers received daily instruction in close order drill and related subjects. For off-duty time, each soldier was issued a conduct card that rated his overall performance and defined the privileges for which he qualified.

There was a post exchange, a three-story building on University Avenue with a 15-chair barbershop, restaurant, soda fountain, general sundries store, tailor shop and pool hall. To divert the men from some of the less-savory diversions avail-



The Air Service didn't take long to fill the Willys-Overland Building to capacity and both barracks and training facilities were moved outside in the warmer months.

able off post, movies were shown nightly, actors and actresses came from downtown theatres to perform, boxing and wrestling matches were staged, and a baseball team was organized. Religious services were conducted on site and the nearby Church of St. Cecilia held a special Sunday mass each week that was attended by up to 500 men. The school was growing in the same kind of exponential way as the rest of the Air Service, which had been moved out from under the Signal Corps and made an independent branch of the U.S. Army. By mid-summer, several thousand men were stationed at the Willys-Overland Building, many sleeping in tents on the grounds. Tents were also erected to house the planes that were used for instructional purposes.

On-the-Job Training

To provide some practical experience, in early July 1918 the school began trucking 50 to 75 students a day to a makeshift flying field at the Earle Brown Farm in Brooklyn Center Village, northwest of Minneapolis. The farm had been donated for government use for the duration of the war. There the apprentice mechanics accompanied pilots aloft. "It has been found there are some kinds of engine trouble which can best be studied while the machine is in flight," noted one newspaper.

In a commemorative edition of *The Propeller*, the school newspaper, a writer noted that, "The actual flying experience tended to give these men an added sense of responsibility and an increased interest in their work." He added, "The equipment was composed entirely of old, worn-out machines which had been condemned for flying and sent to the school

as exhibits," he continued. "With a good wing from one specimen and a serviceable strut from here and there, a fleet of efficient planes was contrived."⁹

The flying field also was acknowledged to be very rough and was abandoned shortly after the Armistice. In mid-August, a 10-acre field just south of the school in Desnoyer Park, probably now buried beneath I-94, was turned over to the government by its owners. Weaver promptly put several thousand troops to work, clearing the land for a drill grounds and athletic field. As the long-range prospects for the school grew brighter and brighter, it also was suggested that the site soon could become a flying field.

To help the public better understand what was going on at the Willys-Overland Building, as well as bolster recruiting, the school sponsored a major exhibit at the Minnesota State Fair, September 2 to 7, 1918. Students demonstrated all of the crafts being taught and a "big war plane" was assembled and disassembled each day. The display was in the Steel Machinery Building on Machinery Hill, next to the Allied War Exposition ("Thousands and thousands of big guns, shells, mines, torpedoes and other war relics and war trophies captured from the Germans by the Allies in four years of war."). The two were part of the "War Exhibit," the fair's major attraction that year.

A Bright Future

In the weeks that followed, there appeared a barrage of newspaper stories about the bright future of the Air Service Mechanics School, with the *St. Paul Daily News* the most enthusiastic drummer.

In mid-September, its Washington, D.C., correspondent was informed by Major General William Kenly, head of the division of military aeronautics, that \$300,000 had been allotted for the facility. "This means," the reporter explained, "St. Paul will not only have added flying facilities for teaching aviators and mechanics during the war, but after the war will continue as an aviation post and will be a 'West Point of the sky.'"

And he was just getting warmed up: "The announcement from Washington presages the day when St. Paul will be the mecca of youths seeking to join the flying service after the war and the city will attract thousands annually to take the course, or accompanying those who will do so."¹⁰ (Increased government funding was also flowing to Kelly Field in San Antonio, Texas, which had become the largest aviation training base in the country, although its mechanics program was slightly smaller than St. Paul's.)

Expectations only grew as September turned to October. Fourth District Congressman Carl Van Dyke said he had government assurances that the school would nearly double in size to 5,000 men, increasing later to 10,000.

Back when the Air Service Mechanics School opened, the Minneapolis newspapers were quite supportive and covered related developments, no doubt because of the involvement of the Dunwoody Institute and the closely aligned Minneapolis Aero Club. But as the school's St. Paul identity solidified, parochialism kicked in and that interest evaporated. When General Kenly arrived in St. Paul for a whirlwind inspection, it rated extensive front page coverage in the *St. Paul Daily News*, but only an inside paragraph in the *Minneapolis Journal*.

A construction company was awarded a \$1.3 million contract to remodel and build the structures necessary for the school's expansion. Entering into a series of lease agreements, the War Department took over the giant Illinois Steel warehouse directly across University Avenue from the school (training and drilling), the Twin City Four Wheel Drive Co. plant at University and Pelham Boulevard (billeting for 600 men), the Northland Press building, 2429 University Avenue (chart,



Planes of the era were composed of a great deal of fabric and wood and students at the school became experienced working with both materials.

map, and photograph department) and the M. Burg & Sons furniture plant at 2402–2414 University Avenue (officers school).

In addition, a block of residences near the school was slated for officers' quarters. City officials agreed to vacate Eustis Street, which the *St. Paul Dispatch* noted "eventually will be used as a driveway to the athletic, drill and flying field at Desnoyer Park."

Influenza Takes Over

The epidemic of Spanish flu that was sweeping the country had reached Minnesota and the air school was put under quarantine on September 30. By mid-October, public gathering places, such as schools, churches, theaters, and dance and pool halls, were closed. Department stores were prohibited from advertising sales that would encourage people to congregate.

The school had a medical department staffed by 100 personnel, including medical corpsmen and officers, dentists, and nurses. The emphasis on hygiene and control of contagion was apparently effective and in a few weeks the quarantine was lifted. This allowed the school's football team to resume an abbreviated season, including a scrimmage with the University of Minnesota in which it received a pummeling.

Weaver, the post commandant, observed that the expansion required that

the post have a hall adequate to serve as a general assembly area, gymnasium, and recreation center. He suggested that it would clearly demonstrate local support for the base as a permanent installation if the citizenry were to provide the funds for the new building. The St. Paul Association heartily agreed and by the end of October it was announced that \$40,000 of the necessary \$50,000 had been raised for the project.¹¹

In early November, the expansion activities continued apace. Two of the billet buildings had been constructed and 13 more authorized. A steam shovel was borrowed from city public works to level the ground. Planning was well underway for a welding course building, medical corps barracks and mess hall, 97-bed hospital, nurses' residence, supply buildings for the quartermaster corps, a rotary motor test building, military police barracks and guardhouse. On several occasions, planes dropped recruiting leaflets over the Twin Cities, targeting men between the ages of 18 and 45 who signed up in the September draft and had mechanical aptitude. They were told they would learn a trade that could be valuable after the war. The "air recruiting" was credited with increasing enlistments at the school from the previous 10 to 60 a day.

The Armistice Halts Everything

Then, on November 11, the long-expected Armistice was declared. The following day came the order from Washington to stop construction at the Air Service Mechanics School. Weaver said the future of the facility was under review, something that “comes as a most complete and disagreeable surprise,” commented the *Daily News*. (Of course, similar War Department construction projects were being cancelled all over the United States.)

Within days there were strong indications that the school would close and its personnel and equipment would be moved to Kelly Field. Local interests weren't prepared to give up without a fight, however. The Minneapolis Civic and Commerce Association joined with the St. Paul Association in pointing out the support that had been provided by the business community. The St. Paul group argued that it would cost the government more to close the school and move it than to keep it operating for several more years. This ignored the fact that there was now a glut of airplane mechanics and there would be no rent to pay at Kelly Field.

While it's not clear what it hoped to accomplish, the St. Paul Association took a vote of the men at the school and only one of the 3,000-plus soldiers preferred to relocate to Texas. And doubt was cast on the objectivity of the sole dissident because “it was learned that he is a resident of San Antonio.” In a final attempt to salvage something, a delegation traveled to Washington to propose that the facility be turned into a vocational school with some type of affiliation with the University of Minnesota. (Such a school, a reporter noted brightly, “would serve excellently to permit men formerly in the army to be inducted into vocations of peace.”)¹²

The group included Adjutant General Walter Rhinow, commander of the Minnesota National Guard, representing Gov. Joseph A.A. Burnquist; Charles Sommers, regent, University of Minnesota; Lotus Coffman, dean of the College of Education and soon to be president of the university; William F. Brooks, president, Minneapolis Aero Club, and several officials of the St. Paul Association. They succeeded in



The closing of the school was marked by a daylong festival at Christmastime 1918, led off by a lavish luncheon for the students.

meeting with Secretary of War Newton D. Baker and air service officials, but it all came to naught.

Closing the School

The order to close the school came and instruction ceased on December 10. At that point, there were 3,400 enlisted men and 100 officers on site. Most were to be discharged as soon as possible, a process that began at the rate of several hundred troops per day. Leases on the buildings slated to be part of the post's expansion were cancelled and donors to the coliseum fund were promised their money would be returned. The students and staff at the Air Service Mechanics School were determined to do more than just gradually fade away, however, and by hosting “the biggest party ever held in the Twin Cities,” even earned accolades from the *Minneapolis Tribune*.

It was a “farewell open house, military dance and Christmas carnival” that attracted a crowd of 10,000 to 12,000 Twin Citians to the Willys-Overland Building on December 20, including Mayors Laurence Hodgson and Thomas Van Lear of St. Paul and Minneapolis, respectively, and a host of dignitaries. Two 40-piece orchestras played in halls draped in the colors of the allied nations and the school's own green and black. “Sunday best uniforms and Sunday best frocks,

brightly colored lanterns and myriad-colored lights made one vast revel hall” of the former barracks. Circus clowns, singers, professional dancers and entertainers performed all evening. A plane was displayed in the middle of the dance hall and dining and dancing went on until midnight.¹³ Diplomas were awarded to 2,000 students.

Where did the money come from to pay for this elaborate event? It turns out that the Post Exchange was collecting gross receipts of \$35,000 to \$40,000 a month, enough to fund a library, athletic department, and the Christmas Party.¹⁴

Once the party was over, the work to clean out the building began in earnest. Heavy equipment and carpentry tools were shipped to Kelly Field. A salvage company bought structural steel, plumbing material, electrical supplies and lumber intended for the Illinois Steel Warehouse remodeling for 50 cents on the dollar.

In mid-January 1919, several public auctions of equipment were held, including 12 airplanes “in flying condition” and 150 airplane engines. (At least two of the planes were purchased by Clarence Hinck, a pioneer aviator who had trained at Dunwoody in the naval pilot program. He and colleagues subsequently founded the Federated Fliers Flying Circus at Fridley,

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The order to close the school came and instruction ceased on December 10. At that point, there were 3,400 enlisted men and 100 officers on site. Most were to be discharged as soon as possible, a process that began at the rate of several hundred troops per day. Leases on the buildings slated to be part of the post's expansion were cancelled and donors to the coliseum fund were promised their money would be returned. The students and staff at the Air Service Mechanics School were determined to do more than just gradually fade away, however, and by hosting “the biggest party ever held in the Twin Cities,” even earned accolades from the *Minneapolis Tribune*.

It was a “farewell open house, military dance and Christmas carnival” that attracted a crowd of 10,000 to 12,000 Twin Citians to the Willys-Overland Building on December 20, including Mayors Laurence Hodgson and Thomas Van Lear of St. Paul and Minneapolis, respectively, and a host of dignitaries. Two 40-piece orchestras played in halls draped in the colors of the allied nations and the school's own green and black. “Sunday best uniforms and Sunday best frocks,

brightly colored lanterns and myriad-colored lights made one vast revel hall” of the former barracks. Circus clowns, singers, professional dancers and entertainers performed all evening. A plane was displayed in the middle of the dance hall and dining and dancing went on until midnight.¹³ Diplomas were awarded to 2,000 students.

Where did the money come from to pay for this elaborate event? It turns out that the Post Exchange was collecting gross receipts of \$35,000 to \$40,000 a month, enough to fund a library, athletic department, and the Christmas Party.¹⁴

Once the party was over, the work to clean out the building began in earnest. Heavy equipment and carpentry tools were shipped to Kelly Field. A salvage company bought structural steel, plumbing material, electrical supplies and lumber intended for the Illinois Steel Warehouse remodeling for 50 cents on the dollar.

In mid-January 1919, several public auctions of equipment were held, including 12 airplanes “in flying condition” and 150 airplane engines. (At least two of the planes were purchased by Clarence Hinck, a pioneer aviator who had trained at Dunwoody in the naval pilot program. He and colleagues subsequently founded the Federated Fliers Flying Circus at Fridley,

Minnesota, and staged thrill shows across the Midwest for many years.)¹⁵

After the final sale on January 20, the dismantling intensified. Several hundred civilians were hired for the work, many of them former soldiers. Prisoners from the guardhouse and patients from the hospital were transferred to Fort Snelling. Major Weaver was ordered to Washington and the remaining staff relocated to a U.S. Army building in downtown St. Paul. At midnight, January 27, the keys to the building were handed over to a representative of Willys-Overland, who then turned the large rooftop electric sign on for the first time in nearly a year.

It was too late for the 1919 auto show, but the building hosted subsequent shows for much of the 1920s. The Willys-Overland showroom facing University Avenue reopened, as did the service center and wholesale sales department and cars were once again shipped in from Toledo for distribution to dealers across Minnesota.

Willys-Overland went through hard times during the largely forgotten depression of 1920–21, gradually selling off assets to pay debts. (Emerging from bankruptcy in the 1930s, the company developed the military Jeep for World War II and a civilian version afterwards.) The building in the Midway was one such asset, sold to the International Harvester Company in 1928. For the better part of the next 50 years that company used it for truck, tractor, and power unit sales and distribution. By the 1980s the building had been converted to offices and renamed Court International.

After the Air Service Mechanics School closed, most of the men dispersed to civilian pursuits around the country. The few officers and enlisted men who remained in the army were reassigned to Kelly Field or elsewhere. Major Walter Weaver was a career soldier and during the following two decades served in a succession of command assignments, highly regarded for his organizational gifts. By World War II, he had risen to the rank of major general, leading the half-million strong Army Air Forces Technical Training Command.¹⁶

Pete DePaolo, the recruit from New York, completed his training at the school

and was slated to move on to a state-side flying field when the Armistice was signed. His Uncle Ralph had promised him a job if he completed the course, so he joined famed auto racer Ralph DePalma as a riding mechanic. DePaolo himself went on to a successful racing career, winning the 1925 Indianapolis 500.¹⁷

Conclusion

In the final analysis, what did the Air Service Mechanics School accomplish? Viewed strictly in the context of its primary mission, probably not a lot. At the closing, Captain John Ryan, who had been head of instruction, stated that 6,000 men had graduated from the school and a large proportion of them were sent overseas, with “many” seeing active service.¹⁸

Perhaps. We know that 2,000 soldiers received their diplomas at Christmas, more than a month after the Armistice. And DePaolo and hundreds of other graduates never made it to their domestic assignments, much less Europe. Further, the mid-year change in curriculum length from one to three months would have slowed the completion of training. It is unlikely that a soldier who started the course much later than mid-summer would have finished in time for deployment.

Those mechanics reaching the front may have found it difficult to apply their skills. It was mid-September 1918 before American-built planes were present in numbers for the first time in battle, part of an allied force under the command of Colonel Billy Mitchell, future air power advocate.¹⁹ When all fighting ceased less than two months later, there were fewer than 200 Liberty-powered aircraft assigned to active combat units. This was a far cry from the thousands promised by the president 18 months earlier and a tiny fraction of what Congress probably expected for an expenditure of several hundred million dollars.²⁰

On another level, however, the school was a resounding success. Thousands of men acquired specific skills that would serve them well in the nascent aircraft industry, as well as in the shops and factories back home. The esprit de corps at the Air Service Mechanics School appears to have been remarkably high and despite its

brief existence, those assigned there took pride in what had been accomplished.

As the editor of *The Propeller* put it in the last edition: The school “has set new standards of mechanical efficiency, aroused new ambitions in the men who learned the way to success through their training here, and above all it has worked out from the mass theories surrounding the upkeep of airplanes, a sound set of sane principles which will stand the test of time.

“Physically this Post has ceased to exist, but in spirit it will go on forever.”²¹

Roger Bergerson lives in St. Paul and writes frequently about local history. This is his fourth article in this magazine.

Endnotes

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When the United States entered World War I, it pledged to develop an air armada that would sweep German planes from the skies over Europe. Aircraft manufacture and pilot training began immediately after the U.S. entered the war; only later was thought given to the support personnel who would be needed. For more on the training of U.S. Army aviation mechanics, see Roger Bergerson's article on page 20. Poster courtesy of the Library of Congress.