

Special Articles

THE GARY PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM

By GERALDINE S. BELL

On the southernmost shore of Lake Michigan, at a distance of about 30 miles southeast of Chicago, is the city of Gary, Indiana. The United States Steel Corporation selected this place as the site of one of its greatest manufacturing enterprises, and named it Gary in honor of one of the chief officials of the company. Eight years ago this locality was a waste of shifting sand dunes, dotted here and there with clumps of scrub-oak trees, and broken in places by swamps. Today Gary is a city of 45,000 inhabitants, with all the features and utilities of a modern city. The industrial development of the city has been rapid, and Gary bids fair to become one of the most important industrial centres of the United States.

It is by no means an unusual thing to find the population of many of the great manufacturing cities of this continent made up principally of foreigners. Gary can rival cities many times its size in the cosmopolitan character of its populace, about 30 nationalities being represented. The bulk of the laboring class is unskilled, large numbers are illiterate; many of them are recent immigrants, and hence are ignorant of the English language. There is, however, a great number of skilled workmen, officials, and scientific specialists connected with the various industries, and these make up a well educated and important part of the population.

The mushroom growth of Gary rivals that of any of our Western Canadian cities, and this rapid growth, combined with the composite character of the people, presented a problem of uncommon difficulty in providing adequate and suitable educational facilities. Provision for these, however, was a first

consideration of the city officials, and while keeping pace with the increase in population, there has been evolved in this city a unique and ingenious synthesis of educational influences, which I shall endeavor to describe from what I saw during a visit to the schools of Gary.

It seems almost necessary at the outset to mention the name of Superintendent Wirts, the originator of the Gary system of public schools. Mr. Wirts came to Gary on the invitation of the Steel Corporation to undertake the direction of the city's educational work.

The first school building in Gary was erected by the Steel Company according to the plans of a traditional school-house. Mr. Wirts set to work to design a type of building to meet the special requirements of his system. The Emerson School has five acres of ground, the Froebel School has ten acres, and two other schools now planned or under construction have fifteen and twenty acres respectively. All of the grades, from the kindergarten to the end of the high school are under one roof. This is no accident. The arrangement is intentional, and is valuable both from the economic and educational standpoints. From the economic point of view it is decidedly cheaper to have a few fully equipped school centres than to duplicate this equipment in several times that number of centres. From an educational point of view it removes the gap between the elementary grades and the high school—that is, there is removed from the thought of the pupil the conception of the high school as a separate and distinct institution to be “entered” and “graduated” from, and