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Pech, Ethel G.

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MANITOWOC COUNTY  
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## THE HISTORY OF MANITOWOC, WISCONSIN'S KINDERGARTENS

by Ethel G. Pech  
Manitowoc, Wisconsin

### About the Author:

Ethel Pech was born in Manitowoc and attended the Manitowoc Public Schools starting with kindergarten at the Luling (later McKinley) school. She graduated from Milwaukee Teachers College with a B.S. degree in Kindergarten and Primary teaching. She taught kindergarten in Waukesha for two years, before coming to Manitowoc, and then taught kindergarten at Jefferson, Roosevelt, McKinley, Garfield, Andrew Jackson. Since retirement she has been active in the work of the Manitowoc County Day Care Assn., Inc. Three state-licensed Day Care Centers have been established in Manitowoc County to date.

Miss Pech considers it a special privilege to have been the first teacher for several thousand little children as each one took his first step away from home into a public school.

### THE HISTORY OF MANITOWOC, WISCONSIN KINDERGARTENS

In this, the International Year of the Child, it is fitting to consider in retrospect what has been done for four and five year old children in Manitowoc, in the past. The Manitowoc Public School System can well be proud of the fact that they were first in the state to start a public school kindergarten and probably "a first" in the nation. St Louis, MO claims that their public school, opened in 1873 was the first. It is known that Manitowoc had a kindergarten then also, so we must indeed also be a "first" in that claim. Watertown, Wisconsin, which has the honor of having the first private kindergarten, concedes this fact in their 1856 *Historical Society* book entitled *Margarethe Mayer Schurz, a Biography*, by Hannah Werwath Swart: "Charles Frederic Viebahn was called to the

superintendency of the Manitowoc Schools in 1872. He was an able exponent of the Froebelian philosophy of education. At Manitowoc, Viebahn found a young rural teacher, Miss Emily Richter, in whom he saw excellent qualities to promote his vision. He hired her and to prepare herself adequately to teach at the kindergarten level, she was encouraged to pursue the course at the German English Academy in Milwaukee to learn the methods of Froebel. This she did. Upon her return to Manitowoc, in 1871, Miss Richter was placed in charge of the primary department of education and as far as is known this was the first appearance of the kindergarten in the public schools of the state."

Much later, in 1930, another young kindergarten teacher came to teach in Miss Richters' first Kindergarten room. This



One class of 5 year olds, 1936, McKinley School. Teachers: Clarissa Stull and Ethel Pech.  
(All names not available)



was the First Ward (later Roosevelt) school located on South 8th St. The teacher was anxious to make the room appear more cheerful and appealing for the little children and one of the very first things done was to take down from the high wall a large framed portrait of a serious looking bearded man. The portrait was stored in a closet until word got around to some of the older residents of the neighborhood and the teacher was told that the picture was to go back up on that wall promptly. The teacher was not too impressed when she heard that the bearded man in the portrait was C. F. Viebahn who had begun this first public school kindergarten. The principal was understanding and advised that the picture be put back on the same wall but on the other side, really in the entrance hall of the building. It is too bad that the contribution others make to bring about things which we take for granted are often not appreciated until much later. The First Ward School, later named Roosevelt, site of the first public school kindergarten in the state and perhaps in the nation, has long been demolished.

Records show that Watertown, WI had a private kindergarten since 1856. Other towns in Wisconsin had opened private kindergartens with varying degrees of success and continuance. Mr. Viebahn was deeply involved in the improvement of education for children and from the beginning he planned a kindergarten. It was at a school meeting at Osman that he met Miss Richter, the first kindergarten teacher. She was the daughter of the late Mr. and Mrs. A. M. Richter. Mr. Richter had been a pioneer Manitowoc manufacturer who came to this country from Germany, settling first in Sheboygan County, then moving to Newton and finally to Manitowoc, where he became City Clerk and established the A. M. Richter & Sons, Vinegar manufacturers. Miss Richter later enrolled in the Oshkosh Normal School from which she graduated with a two year degree. She returned to Manitowoc to teach in the First Ward high school for a number of



**Miss Emily Richter**  
*First Public School Kindergarten Teacher, 1873 Roosevelt School, Manitowoc, Wisconsin. Died in 1941 at the age of 90.*

photo — Hugh Klingholz

years. She passed away at the age of 91 in 1941.

Recognition has frequently been given Manitowoc's kindergarten system and at the time of Miss Richters' death her obituary read: "From the beginning Manitowoc's Kindergarten system advanced until today it is recognized throughout the country and its program is copied by many other school systems. The system here is considered a model."

Let us pause now to further acknowledge Watertown's kindergarten beginnings, where the first wind-blown seed of Friedrich Froebel's idea fell on fertile soil in our country. Nourished by the loving care of Mrs. Carl Schurz, a young mother who had previously studied with Froebel in Germany, the first private kindergarten in our country became a reality in 1856. Many years before that Froebel opened his first school for pre-school children in Blankenburg, Germany, and called it a kindergarten, or "a garden where children grow." In his enthusiasm he enlisted the interest of others, and started training schools for teachers. In Watertown, Mrs. Schurz' first pupils were her own children and three relatives. Her kindergarten

was in a suburban home. Later as other children enrolled the kindergarten was moved to a building in a city. Chairs, a piano and other kindergarten materials were moved in and the class was formally begun in November of 1856. Mrs. Schurz was of frail health. Her teaching career was of short duration, and was continued by a relative. The Watertown Historical Society biography of Mrs. Schurz and the restoration of the kindergarten, which was moved from its original site at Jones and 2nd Street to the Octagon House hillside, are wonderful and tangible tributes. The Watertown Historical Society is to be congratulated for its foresight in preserving this first private kindergarten.

The desire for more kindergartens became contagious and from that time on enthusiastic educators worked diligently to establish kindergartens in many cities of our country. At first many of them were private, and they later became part of the public school system.

### **SOME STEPS IN THE DEVELOPMENTS OF MANITOWOC'S KINDERGARTENS**

After the first kindergarten was established in Manitowoc in 1873 each public school in the city incorporated a kindergarten and one or more trained teachers according to the enrollment. One of Froebels' convictions was that "every age of life has its own peculiar claims and needs in respect of nurture and educational assistance, appropriate to it alone, what is lost in the nursling cannot be made good in later childhood, and so on. The child has needs which must be met at their proper ages, not earlier, nor later."

All along the line Manitowoc's kindergartens surely helped to link the school with the home and kept parents in touch with what the kindergarten as well as the school aimed to do for the children. Mothers' meetings were organized and well attended and were a good bond of home-school affiliation. Prospective kindergarten pupils and their mothers were invited to visit school during a specified week each Spring. The home-call



program was serving a unique purpose as early as 1930. Many booklets were compiled by the teachers and published at intervals by the Board of Education explaining kindergarten rules and regulations, stating the daily program, and giving tips which helped parents to better understand the child at this age. "In 1935 a handbook entitled "Our Kindergarten" was prepared by the kindergarten instructors and published by the Board of Education. Copies were placed throughout the United States and Canada and sales also were made in Japan, England, and Russia. As a result of this book Manitowoc's kindergarten system was recognized throughout the country and its program was copied by many other schools." (from the *Manitowoc, WI, Herald Times*, Feb. 8, 1940.) The kindergarten has always served as a happy transition from home to school. Young parents, as well as children, have enjoyed this involvement which prepares children for the more formal work of the elementary grades, besides encouraging skills and instilling concepts which help the child to gain in confidence and success. Kindergarten teachers appreciated the unique privilege and the joy of sharing with parents their young children at this formative and impressionable age.

### **THE TWO-YEAR KINDERGARTEN PROGRAM**

The two year kindergarten program was a bonus for children and parents appreciated it and took advantage of it. Early in the century provision was made to include the four and five year old children in separate groups. Each teacher would have two classes, the juniors, (4 year olds), and Seniors, (5 year old), one group in the morning and the other in the afternoon, each group attending about 2½ hours of the day for two years. This gradual introduction to the school offered to children and parents a comfortable start and time to acclimate children in a planned learning situation. As early as 1928 the teachers

compiled a curriculum which was different for each age group, making sure that the second year of kindergarten attendance was not a repetition of the first. Teachers were challenged to provide a stimulating environment for both four and five year olds, and while aiming to help them to adjust they also sought to satisfy the hungry young minds. It was felt that children of four and five years learn best in groups. Besides factual learning, the learning to share, to take turns, to co-operate, and to respect the rights and views of others, were all considered important. The children at this age were beginning to have an interest in the world around them and their place in it.

Manitowoc, along with other Wisconsin cities, enjoyed the two year kindergarten program until enrollments became so large that there was not room in the schools for the four year olds. The birth rate was high and enrollments climbed every year. Then the State Aid for 4 year olds was discontinued. After carrying the two year program for two years longer than most cities in Wisconsin it was discontinued in 1958 with great reluctance. Quoting from the *Manitowoc-Herald-Times*, Sept. 12, 1957: "The discussion of the withdrawal of the Junior kindergarten brought a storm of protest to the floor of the Board of Education meeting, and a desperate attempt was made to save it. Board members Atty. John Danielson and Roland Detjen voted against dropping the four year old group, but it was generally agreed that without state aid the taxpayer had to be considered. Supt. Angus B. Rothwell said, however, that his professional committees would make an investigation to see if some solution could not be agreed upon, since a total of 650 children were involved." Since the four year olds were dropped each kindergarten teacher has had two groups of five year olds in attendance one-half day.

### **NURSERY SCHOOLS FILL THE VOID**

Nursery schools quickly picked up some of the void, however only a small percentage

of the four year olds were enrolled in them in comparison to almost every four year old in the city having been admitted to the Junior group. Since 1972 Day Care Centers have provided an educational program for children 2½ to 7 years of age. Many children benefit by the group participation and learning. Of course the number of children enrolled is still small compared to those who would take advantage of four year old kindergarten were it ever to be reinstated.

### **SCHOOL DISTRICT REORGANIZATION BRINGS THE KINDERGARTEN TO RURAL CHILDREN**

In 1955 Manitowoc County went through a school district reorganization which brought the number of five year olds enrolled in kindergarten to a higher number. At this time county districts became a part of the Manitowoc School District. Accordingly five year old children who never had been included in the County schools were bussed into the city schools with their brothers and sisters and were enrolled in the city kindergartens. Beginning with the districts nearby such as Rapids, Goodwin, Silver Lake the perimeter was gradually increased as more district schools consolidated with the Manitowoc Public Schools.

The birth rate has fluctuated during the years and at the present time it is very low, reflecting now, 1979, in the general school enrollment. Most buildings at present have only one kindergarten room and one teacher in comparison to two or three rooms each with a teacher when enrollments were high and the four year olds in attendance. Because of the low birth rate, the surplus of trained teachers, and rooms available in school buildings it is not inconceivable to envision that at sometime the four year olds may be taken back into the public schools and state aid be reinstated for them. This realization will depend on enthusiastic leadership and the willingness to use funds and rooms for this purpose in the face of other priorities.



**Table One**

Kindergarten enrollments show fluctuations over the years due to several factors:

1957-58 peak enrollment. The last year when four year olds were enrolled.

1962-63 five year olds enrolled only, County children taken in.

1978-79 enrollment at low ebb, due to declining birth rate.

	1957-58	1962-63	1978-79
Number of children enrolled	1283	854	414
Number of kindergarten teachers	23	14	10
Number of kindergarten rooms	22½	14	10

## **BENEFITS OF KINDERGARTEN TRAINING FOR CHILDREN: Principles and Objectives**

The need for children of this age to have the opportunity for group instruction is obvious. A child starts learning at birth and it has been an accepted fact and quoted many times that the child learns more in the span from birth to six years than he will learn in any other span of the same number of years during his life-time. What he learns, when he is ready, and how this learning fits into a sequence pattern has always been of concern to kindergarten teachers. The very early kindergartens offered a program which was later considered inadequate, although unique. It delighted children and was certainly of great value as a background for first grade participation. The Manitowoc kindergartens, as in kindergartens of other cities the program followed more or less the teachings of German educator, Froebel. The educational material was called the KINDERGARTEN GIFTS and OCCUPATIONAL MATERIAL and could be ordered from E. Steiger, New York. These materials were used in all early kindergartens. The first "gift" consisted of six soft balls of various colors. The exercises in using them were to teach the colors, to train the eye, right and left, and up and down. The set in a wooden box cost \$1. The second "gift" was a wooden box containing a sphere, cube, and cylinder, which purpose was to teach the difference in shapes, there was a wooden beam for hanging, price 70¢. The third "gift" was a large wooden square, also in a wooden box, the

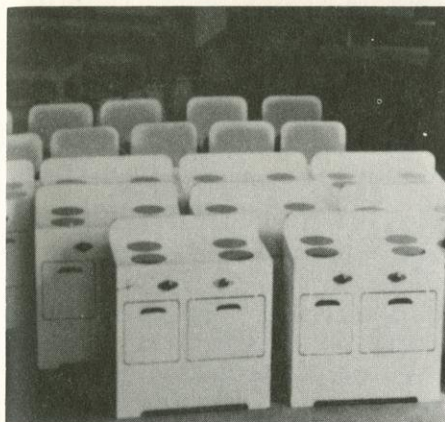
square would divide into eight small cubes of equal size, the purpose of using them was to teach form, placement, and number, price 25¢. The fourth "gift" was a large cube divided into eight oblong blocks, the use was to point out differences and similarities between the blocks of gift three. All forms fit neatly into wooden boxes with the directions for use kept in each box. With these materials the children would sit at low red tables which were squared off into 1" grooves for placement of the forms. Sewing cards were also a part of the equipment. The purpose of using the early materials was to teach the children to learn to follow the teachers directions. Objectives were to learn color, form, and number. The varnished hardwood floor was painted with large red circles, these were boundaries for seating either on little red chairs or on the floor, with legs folded. The red circle was also used as a boundary for singing games. Self-expression, stimulating creativity and individual development were not considered as important as everyone doing the same as the teacher directed. That there was great love between teacher and child was certainty and the teacher and her (perhaps untrained) assistant were considered by all to be "special" people who had a unique, almost magical way with young children.

Taking along with it much of the beginning values this early state of kindergarten training gradually took on another form as teachers were trained to look

for childrens' natural interests and needs and to enlarge their range of experiences. The children were taken on walks and trips. An awareness of the beauty and mystery of nature was fun to teach and to learn about. Froebel and his teachings were given a small place in the training of teachers. There was a freedom for more self-expression, more and newer types of equipment were added. Much of it was still confined to use which would develop the smaller muscles, instead of the large sturdy indoor and outdoor equipment which came into use later. During this period the two year program was started which continued until 1958. Much credit should be given those educators who considered this stage in a child's life so important. Manitowoc was a "first" in the state to include the four year olds and continued with it the longest, sharing this honor with Shorewood and Appleton.

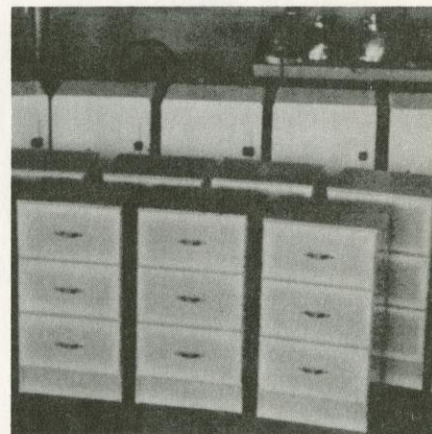
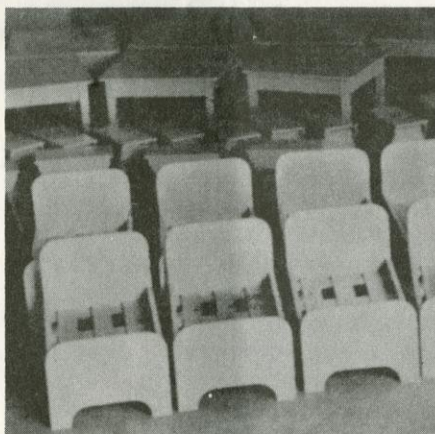
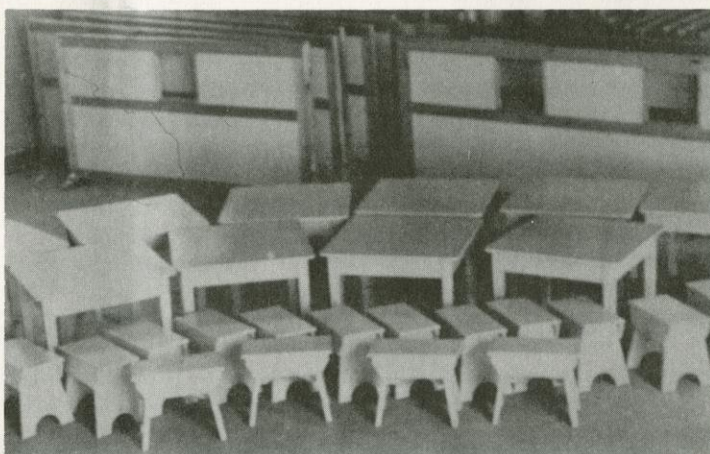
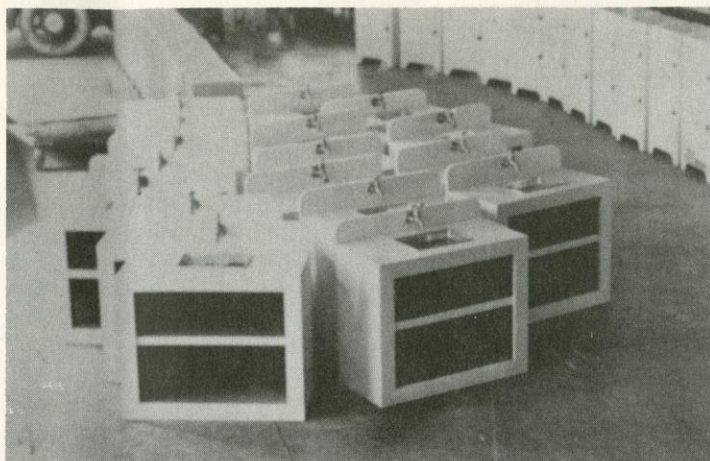
Starting in the 1920s' during the third stage of program change there was a new emphasis. The child was viewed from the standpoint of his needs and included the wide scope of his social, physical, emotional, and mental development. The curriculum for a program of social studies was written by the teachers. Emphasis was placed on acquainting the children with the environment surrounding them with suggested units of interest, learning about the farmer, the bus driver, the baker and others. Bus trips were planned and these gave the children first hand experience and concepts which would be valuable when they later were able to read about experiences they had. Social values were considered important, including respect for the rights and opinions of others and an appreciation for those who contributed to present living and enjoyment. Big equipment was ordered such as wagons, tricycles, and large toys for outdoor play, and slides, swings and a merry-go-round were shared with the lower grade children. An outdoor storage house was built for each school area to shelter outdoor equipment such as big wooden





boxes and sliding boards which were made according to specification by the Manitowoc Public School Industrial Arts Dept. This department also constructed en masse five year old life size play house walls and furniture for home dramatization. Complete with dolls, doll carriages, dishes and other improvised furnishings and equipment the "play house" was a source of great fun and great learning. Play (in a guided situation) was given an important part in the program. It was felt that "play" was the occupation of childhood, as through it children were learning many life values. All activities were natural and childlike and the all-around development of the child was considered important.

When it was possible to schedule it some of the kindergartens benefited by instruction from the art, music, or speech special teachers. "Reading Readiness" was introduced and charts and typed material was read to the children from their dictation. This was meaningful because it originated in their own activities. The First Grade was visited and kindergarten children saw the first grade children working and heard them read. One of the units of study was the construction of a Library in the kindergarten. There was great interest in books borrowed from the school or libraries. Pets were brought in or the children visited them in their own environment. Rabbits were born and chicks hatched. The mysteries of life's beginnings were experienced at first hand and information printed on charts or sheets for group and individual learning. During this



*Kindergarten play house furniture, which was made en masse during a summer work program by the Industrial Arts Dept., Bernhard Hagen, designer and supervisor.*

photo — Bernhard Hagen



period of kindergarten progress it was believed that the kindergarten functioned as the foundation for future life, both in school and in society. The program covered six fields of activity; the home, the community, nature interests, physical welfare, dramatization, and reading readiness. Some kindergarten teachers were hired by the Board of Education to work with national authorities to write the units, so that teachers coming into the system would have guides to use to instill the optimum in learning in these children of kindergarten age. Even as this was done it was with the realization that techniques would change, and that changes in education are normal and usually for the best.

Although the kindergarten has

always sought to appreciate each child for what he is and to help him to make a comfortable adjustment the present stage of kindergarten training does more to challenge the child's mental alacrity and academic accomplishments. A modification to the September entrance date now allows the children a chance to participate in both kindergarten and over-lapping first grade work as they are ready. Beginning reading and mathematics activities are engaged in individually or in small groups. These children work with both the kindergarten and first grade teachers. Those who fit into this plan comfortably could be second graders in less than the full two years of kindergarten and first grade. Perhaps modern day exposure of children to many

learning situations early in life helps some of them to make more rapid progress in the way of school achievement. Educational TV, pre-school attendance, in nursery classes or Day Care, family travel, and an awareness on the part of young parents to realize the importance of explaining and describing, helps more than is realized in the educational progress of the young child. Children in this stage of kindergarten learning seem to be responding on a higher level of mental achievement.

So the educational pendulum swings on and fortunately the clock keeps ticking, each era of kindergarten bringing along with it the best of the old to be included with the best of the new.



One kindergarten class (five year olds) who helped to celebrate the 100th birthday of the kindergarten. Picture taken May 3, 1956. Andrew Jackson School. Classes were large, 33 students in this class. Another class of comparable size attended the other half day.

photo — Sig Weinert  
**First row:** Tommy Everard, Liz Graczyk, Mary Pierson, Greg Fell, Joan Pantell, Jean Morguson, Tari Mueller, Patty Paddock, John Steinbrocker, Mark Hollor, **Middle row:** Jeff Scheu, David Mittnacht, Kay Williams, Patsy Tadych, Peter Callahan, Susan Spindler, Barbara Ourada, John Bender, Scott Paris, Billy Raatz, Ricky Jansky, **Top row:** Greg Haver, Karl Buettner, Vickie Trastek, Rosemary Block, Sandra Schwartz, Ann Ziebell, Billy Swetlick, Lynn Mazanet, John Grall, Mark Kubsch, Rickie Rasmussen, Miss Ethel Pech, Teacher, Michael Blandin, absent.





#### Maniotowoc Kindergarten Teachers

November 12, 1956. Over 1200 four and five year old children in attendance.

**Seated from left are:** Nancy Zellmer, Joan Murphy, Meredith Schumann, Judy Verduin, June Johnson, Mrs. Svea Bassett, Lavina Beeck, Naomi Perkins, Ethel Pech, Mrs. Joan Muchin and Mrs. Edna Erckson. **Standing from left are:** Kathern Mueller, Florence Kuehn, Mrs. Helen Meisnest, Clara Schreihart, Marcia DePurvie, Berniece Benedict, Chairman, Jeanine Carlson, Annette Fortunato, Rita Saphner, Charlene Brandt, Eileen Scheib, and Marjorie Oelhafen.

photo — Maniotowoc-Herald-Times

## THE KINDERGARTEN CENTENNIAL

The Kindergarten Centennial was celebrated in 1956 by Maniotowoc kindergarten teachers. This was done for Watertown, WI having started the first kindergarten in our country, 1856, with direct leadership and impetus from Germany. It was fitting that we help Watertown celebrate this important event because of our claim to having started the first public school kindergarten in 1873 as was stated earlier in this manuscript. Surely our Emily Richter and Charles Veibahn were influenced greatly by German born Margarethe Schurz and Friedrich Froebel.

The week-long celebration in Maniotowoc was planned by the kindergarten teachers. A radio broadcast was given every noon hour over the local radio station, giving the history and present-day value of kindergarten training for children. A program of colored slides and a tape recording were made for any school to use for Mothers meeting or PTA programs.

The Andrew Jackson kindergarten teachers called upon the Masquers dramatic group to

plan a skit. Six of the mothers of children enrolled in the Jackson kindergartens were members of the Masquers and they wrote the skit after engaging in research. It was first used at a May Mothers Meeting and later for a PTA program. The Masquer mothers were Mr. Leo Touey, Mrs. Bert Beduhn, Mrs. Pat Callahan, Mrs. Charles Bouril, and Mrs. Margorie Ziebell. Mrs. Sylvester Ferguson was the musician. The children Lynn, Wendy, Pat, Kelly, Ned, Anne, Anne, and Jeanne book the parts of early kindergarten students. Much research took place to obtain salvaged or improvised early kindergarten play materials and clothing. Mrs. Beduhn as the teacher wore a starched white blouse with leg-omutton sleeves and a long full black skirt, dark hair hanging long in curls. The children wore Kate Greenaway dresses with pantaloons, high button shoes and dark suits with starched white shirts. They gathered in their play around a pot bellied stove. The teacher, as kind and stately as the original teacher 100 years before, led the children

in the May-pole dance and other regimental musical drills. The children had no script but chatted freely in their participation. Their original conversation would have been in the German language so it mattered little if they were not understood by this audience. They enjoyed playing the unfamiliar games and used the unfamiliar materials of long ago, geometric blocks, balls of colored yarn, sewing cards and weaving mats. The five year olds who took part in the skit would at this time be twenty-eight years old and are living in many parts of the country.

The Maniotowoc Herald Times and WOMT radio station were generous in helping to promote interest and give information concerning the Kindergarten Centennial. Also some of the articles written and published during this time were:

"100th Year for Kindergartens, What about the Past?" by the Dept. of Kindergarten-Primary Education, Washington, D.C. April 1957

"What's Happening to Kindergarten Education in Wisconsin?" by Leona E.





*Kindergarten Centennial Skit put on by Masquer mothers at Andrew Jackson school, May 1956. Teachers: Mrs. Bert Beduhn, Mrs. Sylvester Ferguson. Pupils: Wendy Beduhn, Peter Callahan, Jean Ferguson, Anne Savage, Lynn Touhey, Ann Ziebel, Chip Bouril, Kalley Callahan.*

photo — Sig Weinert

Fischer, Elementary School Supervisor, State Department of Public Instruction, April 1961

"Kindergarten Centennial, Pride in Their Heritage," by Ethel G. Pech, Andrew Jackson Kindergarten Teacher, Manitowoc, Wis. published in Wisconsin Journal of Education, November 1956.

Manitowoc teachers attending the Wisconsin State Teachers Convention in Milwaukee, Nov. 1-3, 1956, were surprised when handed the convention program

to recognize the photographed Manitowoc Centennial skit pictured on the cover, the picture being used to commemorate the Kindergarten Centennial 1856-1956.

\* \* \* \* \*

Before closing, this writer would like to pay tribute and dedicate this article to her kindergarten teacher, Miss Bertha Boehmer. Miss Boehmer now lives in Fort Bragg, Calif., and corresponds frequently with friends who were her kindergar-

ten students. Miss Boehmer was the well-remembered and much loved kindergarten teacher at Luling School, later McKinley School, the building now used as the Instructional Services Center. Now teacher and pupil, both retired, can reminisce on the value of kindergarten training for children and remember the joys of having served long years as a kindergarten teacher. Miss Boehmer was honored June 13th of this year on the occasion of her 100th birthday.

## MANITOWOC COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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