AN attempt to give an airplane survey of fifty years in Pittsburgh schools can, of course, only touch the high spots. But it may give the principles, the sanctions, and the ideals underlying American education.

There is, carved on the walls of Soldiers’ Memorial Hall, one of the most significant, yet one of the least known, statements of Abraham Lincoln. It gives the very heart of The American Way, as follows:

**TO GIVE AN UNFETTERED START AND A WHOLE CHANCE IN THE RACE OF LIFE**

That is precisely what the Pittsburgh schools have attempted to do. To make opportunity and obligation equal has always been what Senator John J. Ingalls of Kansas called “an iridescent dream.” But it is a vision worthy of freemen.

In 1892, fifty years ago, Pittsburgh and Allegheny were still separate. Perhaps the least said about school conditions at that time the better. There were, of course, many bright spots in the picture, if you Point With Pride, rather than View with Alarm. But there were also many conditions which were intolerable. Pittsburgh had local school boards, with a Central Board of Education composed of one representative from each district. Allegheny had fifteen wards with six school directors each, the entire number constituting a Board of School Controllers. Personally, I worked nineteen years for ninety bosses. All that was necessary to get anything done was to get forty-six members to agree to it. But it was easier to get forty-six to agree then that it often is to get two to agree now.

The school laws were so complicated that a Philadelphia lawyer could not understand them. So a commission was appointed to codify them.

1 An address delivered at a luncheon meeting of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania on December 1, 1942. Dr. Gerwig spoke from his own half century’s experience in the Pittsburgh schools, in the course of which he has served as secretary of the Board of School Controllers of Allegheny (the present North Side), and as secretary of the Pittsburgh Board of Education, of which he is now a member.—Ed.
This commission worked faithfully for four years, through two sessions of the legislature, and evolved the present Pennsylvania School Code, acknowledged by experts to be one of the most outstanding examples of efficient school legislation in existence. All outstanding school laws were repealed and the present Code was substituted.

On October 20, 1911, a Board of Public Education was appointed by the Court of Common Pleas. It consisted of three women and twelve men, serving by appointment, without salary. It differed in sex, in religion, in financial standing, in education, in as many ways as it is possible for a group of that size to differ. But the members have continually kept conscientiously before them one single object—the welfare of the children and the interests committed to their care.

The task confronting the new Board was tremendous. Burdens and benefits both ran to extremes. A down-town school district would have 1/6 of a mill local school tax; an outer residence district, 16 mills. The children of a few favored residence districts had good school facilities; the underprivileged children of the poorer districts lacked proper buildings, teachers, playgrounds, and all that contributes to capable citizenship. A recent report says we have 40,000 “indigent” children.

In 1942, after a third of a century’s conscientious and untiring effort, Pittsburgh has a school system which is appraised by qualified experts as among the foremost in the country, which means, of course, in the world. It is first among the large cities to have a seat and a full day’s schooling for every child. A recent critical survey, made by Dr. George D. Strayer and a group of the best qualified school authorities in the country, gives detailed ratings for all the various school activities which are a just cause of satisfaction to both parents and tax-payers.

The progress made and the present status of the schools may perhaps be best shown by a few concrete illustrations. These group themselves under the following headings: the task; the means employed; the organization of men and women; and the product.

THE TASK

Pittsburgh early accepted The Big Idea underlying the American Way of Life. It recognized the child as the most valuable asset of the nation. It accepted the school as the chosen institution through which all the
latent capacities of every child might best be developed. It understood that the concept of a Universal Father in no way implied identical children, but that each individual child had an inalienable right to an opportunity to develop every God-given talent, along with the obligation to dedicate this capacity to the welfare of all. The dignity and integrity of the individual is the crux of this war. Is the citizen supreme? Or the state? Or team of citizen and state?

In addition to its acceptance of the general American ideal of education, Pittsburgh has always recognized its unique cosmopolitan nature. While the lure of liberty and the aspirations for equal opportunities drew lovers of freedom from the ends of the earth, the opportunities for work and its rewards drew them, like a magnet, to Pittsburgh. They came, not empty-handed, but Gift Bearers, bringing, in skilled and capable hands, with hearts burning to share the arts, crafts, and cultures that centuries of experience in the Old Countries had taught them—a heritage of untold riches for the Promised Land.

They came from Scotland, with sympathetic hearts and canny heads in balance, to climb the Highlands of the Soul, and dwell with their heads in the clouds, but their feet on the ground.

They came from Ireland, bringing their light hearts and merry wit, their lilting songs and fairy fancies, to cheer the world in the new sunshine of opportunity.

They came from England, bringing their priceless heritage of literature and of law, and of the staunch ability to Carry On, however Thin the Line might become, in the determination to make and to preserve a civilization worthy of self-governed freemen.

They came from Germany, many of them followers of Carl Schurz and the early rebels against Prussian domination, samples of an humble but capable citizenship, in the days when some Germans were gentle.

They came from France, bearing arts and crafts; ability to think clearly and to state eternal truths simply.

They came in crowds from Italy, bearing in their hearts and hands the loves and the lore, the dreams and the achievements in the realm of beauty which America so urgently needed, and which Italy was so abundantly able to supply.

They came from Greece, still bearing resplendent visions of the Glory
that had been theirs, along with an eagerness to work for the Glory that Is To Be America.

They came, some of them, originally from Africa, by way of the Old South; from the fields and mountain-bound fiords of Norway and Finland, and Denmark, to the plains of plenty.

They came from Bohemia, from Poland; came Czech and Slav, Hungarian, Roumanian, Lithuanian—from all the lands where voice or viol, where brush or pencil, where color or sound had long been media for carrying a symbol or message of beauty from one soul to another soul.

They came from China, from India, from every portion of the Orient, offering their message of peace and poise.

They came from the steppes and boundless domains of Russia; from the sister republic of Switzerland, ready, willing and able, as was their William Tell of old, to defend their liberties against any tyrant that threatened.

They came, the red men, the first Americans, with their vision of a Great Spirit who rules over all, with their peculiar ways of expressing wonder and worship; with their unique habit of sharing with all, instead of attempting a greedy monopoly.

Not claiming to be Supermen, but Freemen with equal rights, these Pioneer Gift Bearers came to Pittsburgh, eager to lay their gifts upon the altar of freedom.

THE MEANS Employed

What happened through the decades can best be illustrated by a concrete example. The old Central High School, whose embattled towers still rise above the city, offered at first the typical classical course to children of the privileged classes who came from the ends of the city. In time the South, Fifth Avenue, and Allegheny high schools were added, each a little nearer to the homes and the needs of the children.

The great educational dividing line, however, is the Schenley High School. And it has a peculiar historical significance, closely connected with Pittsburgh's Civic Center.

Mary, the granddaughter of General O'Hara, an American Revolutionary officer, inherited from him the land he received as his war bounty.
She married Captain Schenley, an English officer, and because of the English custom the estate was held intact, until in the fullness of time it was developed from a million-dollar cow pasture into one of the most unique Civic Centers in the world.

The Schenley High School has a record which has not, and probably never will be surpassed. It was built at a cost of 19.5 cents a cubic foot, probably an all-time record for economy and efficiency. Incidentally it was the medium for teaching the entire city the value of figuring cubic-foot costs. World War I sent building and other prices climbing, finally as high as 59 cents a cubic foot. The Westinghouse High School, more economically specified, had to be advertised four times and finally built in sections, at a cost of 43.74 cents a cubic foot, more than twice that of Schenley. It has not been possible to build a high school since of similar quality for less than 40 cents per cubic foot. The last of the Schenley bonds were paid off in July. The city has built over 26 million dollars worth of high schools since Schenley—but it has not been necessary materially to modify any of the Schenley plans or essential specifications.

From 1900 to 1930 the Pittsburgh district had the longest period of the steadiest work at the highest rate of wages and profits of any manufacturing community on earth. How wisely or fairly that wealth was distributed is a question. It very wisely ploughed under a portion of these profits into schools as the best medium for general welfare. Yet Golden Triangle and slums still lie side by side. Many of the most level-headed observers predicted that Schenley would not open with more than 850 pupils. Its average attendance since opening has been over 2500.

Pittsburghers have been hard-headed enough to recognize that a plant, fully paid for, which could not be rebuilt for twice what it cost, which was running, day and night turns, at three times its estimated capacity, was not a bad investment, particularly when compared with empty or idle stores, offices, or factories.

None of the other high or elementary schools built since have been fortunate enough to make the phenomenal financial and material record of Schenley, but each one of them is honestly, economically, and well built. Owing to the absence of growth in population there is no present urgent need for new buildings. The entire school plant is in good physi-
cal condition and repairs or replacements on old buildings can very properly wait until the present emergency is over. Meantime the ideal of giving each Pittsburgh child an equivalent opportunity for the development of his own unique ability, in whatever field it may lie, is probably more nearly attained here than anywhere else in the world. Pittsburgh long ago recognized that it could not be the "Workshop of the World," especially in the trying technical competition of both war and peace, without training the skilled workmen of the world. Connelley and the other trade schools were among the last schools built. And Pittsburgh, although, like every other city, neglecting the spiritual training of all its children, overemphasizing the material and mental realms, and neglecting the spiritual, has been fully awake to the cultural possibilities of music and art, particularly in the development of those latent capacities in the blood streams of a richly-endowed cosmopolitan people.

THE ORGANIZATION

It is manifestly impossible to give adequate credit to all the men and women who have contributed so fully during the half century to the Pittsburgh schools. The members of the School Code Commission, the first and succeeding members of the Board of Public Education, the superintendents, principals, and teachers of the schools have all done their parts. To attempt to discriminate among them would be unfair. They all hold places high in general esteem, and deep in the hearts of grateful people, from the modest teacher, who was the confidante and inspiration of a shy boy or girl, to the highest official.

THE PRODUCT

In trying times like these, when the service stars of Pittsburgh school boys and girls are turning to gold all over the world and when service is measured, more and more, in terms of supreme sacrifice, all lesser standards disappear for the time. Pittsburgh steel, as always, is found tried and true in defense of the right. And Pittsburgh schools, more than ever, have their representatives on every frontier 'round the entire globe. Our high schools are forwarding their school papers to their alumni everywhere, who will be heartened by the news that their school has not forgotten them. Every high school in the city has its memorials, usually in deathless bronze, to those who have served and sacrificed. The ranks of
our Youth are eagerly pressing on, ready and willing to answer when the call comes, trained to meet all the most rigid requirements of the selective service. When Uncle Sam says "I want you." they will answer "Ready, Sir!"

More than ever they are trained and determined to be able and willing to defend their own rights; to respect the rights of all others; and to secure and maintain a just and durable peace among men of good will. More than ever they are determined that the fit shall survive and the unfit shall be controlled or eliminated. More than ever do they realize that the American schools are the Officers' Training Camps for Peace. Nowhere in the world can there be found better examples of Junior Republics, successfully functioning in preparation for their places in a world of self-governed freemen than in our modern schools. Whatever the problems of the present or the future, our Youth are being trained, ready, able and eager to meet them.

No reasonable person supposes that Pittsburgh will promote progress exclusively by the mass production of plate glass, pickles, or pig-iron. Pittsburgh is justly proud of its school system, from top to bottom. The Cathedral of Learning embodies the Spirit of Pittsburgh. It is a continual challenge and inspiration to rise. Along with it, in various lines, are Tech and Duquesne, and the Pennsylvania College for Women. Along differing lines are the Carnegie and the Mellon Institutes, unique in their way, and for their service are the Heinz Memorial for religion and the Foster Memorial for music. With these, and with the public, parochial, and private schools, no Pittsburgh boy or girl may fairly be said to lack educational opportunity.

So Pittsburgh may be said to have taken fairly and fully to heart, during the last half century, the words of Theodore Roosevelt:

THE MOST EXPENSIVE CROP IS IGNORANCE
AND THE BEST OF ALL THE CROPS IS THE CHILDREN