

ALLEN C. LEWIS AND HIS WORK



ABOUT the year 1870 a wave of discussion on industrial education swept over this country. Out here in the West, as it was then called, the discussion was as widespread as anywhere. Nor were the reasons far to seek, so far as Chicago was concerned. What is to-day the Middle West was then beginning to make known its wants in a mercantile way, and prominent among these wants was a need for machinery suitable for the farmer and the manufacturer, and for the machinists and engineers necessary for the production and operation of such devices. It was true that such machinery and experts could be obtained from New York, or Boston, or Philadelphia, but the cost was great, time was constantly being lost, and general dissatisfaction resulted. In the rising young city of Chicago marked interest was displayed in the consideration of this mercantile problem. Newspaper editorials dealt with the question, and business people talked about the matter as one of vital concern. Gradually certain people came to feel that somehow or other a school of technical education was to be established. "Given the engineers, we shall make our own machinery, and thus free ourselves of inconvenient and costly dependence upon a distant base of supplies." This was felt to be true. In those days the founding of schools was not in so great vogue as it is to-day, and the good citizens waited to see who would make the initial move toward founding an institution which had become a positive want. At that time there were but three technical schools of any importance in the country, and they were situated in the Eastern States.

These matters were not lost upon Allen C. Lewis, hardware merchant. It is entirely probable, in the light of subsequent events, that even before his trip to France in search of health Mr. Lewis had, after much discussion and counsel with his brother, John Lewis, formulated the plan of establishing a school of technical education. He was vividly impressed, not only by the need for skilled artisans on the one hand, but also by the—to him—positive need for thorough training in one art for boys and girls on the other hand.

Mr. Lewis spent three years in Holland, Belgium and France. In those lands he observed the bitter struggle for existence, especially in the cities. He observed that the skill to ply a trade, even a small trade, such as the paper-flower industry in Belgium, was the one thing that stood between many a young person and dependence. Particularly was this true of the young women, and particularly did Mr. Lewis deplore the lack of training that leaves young women, in so many instances, utterly without resources.