

# Carl Betz

Educator, Musician  
1854-1898

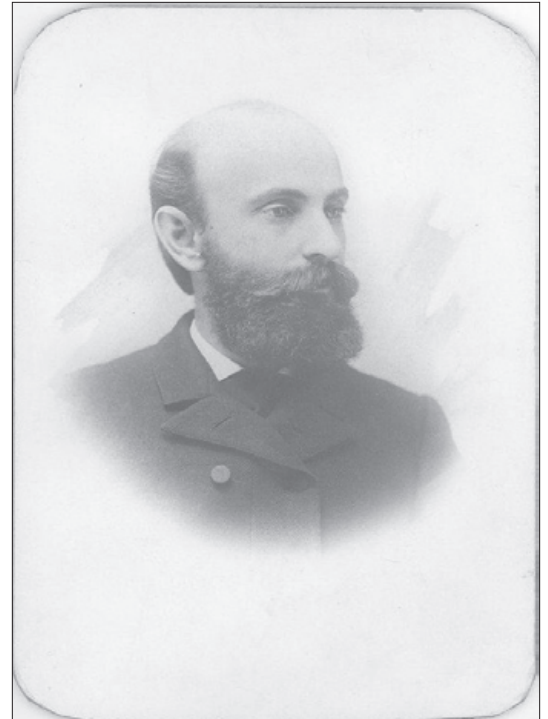
By Daniel Coleman

The rainy Saturday afternoon of April 30, 1898, saw a funeral procession unique in Kansas City's history. Nearly 1,000 children lined the streets of the city's Northeast neighborhood to watch a hearse pass, after which they gathered on a small rise above an Elmwood Cemetery receiving vault to bid farewell in song to the deceased. They honored Carl Betz, the teacher who made physical education and music instruction a regular part of their days in an era when school was often a dry exercise in rote learning.

Carl Betz was born June 1, 1854, to Kunigunde Leitner and John G. Betz, natives of Bavaria who had immigrated to the United States just a decade earlier and settled in Belleville, Illinois. When Carl, their sixth child, was around two years old, the family moved to St. Paul, Minnesota, where John Betz's active role in the German American community and nascent Republican Party led to terms on the school board and city council. Young Carl attended public schools through his first year of high school, after which he went to work at a St. Paul bank.

Betz was offered the position of assistant cashier at age 19, but in the spring of 1875, he chose employment as teacher of gymnastics at the St. Paul Turnverein, a gymnasium established by the local Turner society. The Turners, or *Turnerbund*, were a worldwide organization founded in Germany and common among German immigrants in the U.S. Local chapters played an important community role in addition to providing instruction in the system of physical exercise. Betz attended the Turnerbund's official school for instructor training in Milwaukee.

Throughout the next decade, Carl Betz was employed as a teacher of gymnastics at Turner societies in South Bend, Indiana, Louisville, Kentucky, Terra Haute, Indiana, and again in St. Paul. In Indiana, Betz met Louise "Lulu" Wittig, and in 1885 returned to Terra Haute to marry her before the couple headed west to his next Turnverein assignment in Kansas City, Missouri. In May of that year Betz made a pitch to a gathering of Kansas City teachers in which he offered to instruct the city's public school students for three



months, at no charge, in a system of calisthenics of his own design. The program was so successful that Betz was hired as the school district's first Director of Physical Training after just two months, making Kansas City the first among U.S. cities to institute physical education as a permanent part of its public schools curriculum. Betz also petitioned the Board of Parks Commissioners for public playgrounds for children. His physical education curriculum earned him honors at the Paris Exposition of 1889 and the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893.

Exercise programs based on the Kansas City model soon were seen in places like Chicago, Pittsburgh, and Cleveland, and Betz was approached so frequently for consultation on his methods that he published a set of books to explain them. The first four of the projected seven volumes of *A System of Physical Culture for Public Schools* sold in the thousands. In 1896, Betz published a book of music for schoolchildren, *Gems of School Song*. An accomplished pianist, cellist, and singer who studied music for a year in Germany, Betz composed many of the book's songs himself, and was appointed as the school district's Director of Music.

Kansas Citians came to know Betz's work through annual springtime presentations of student gymnastics and singing in venues such as the Gillis Opera House. Tragically, just weeks before the planned program for 1898, Betz was seized with appendicitis. On April 28th he died of the infection, and that year children sang in mourning at his funeral procession. Among the grieving were five of Betz's own children and his widow Louise, expecting a sixth. The resilient Mrs. Betz supported the family in subsequent years by teaching German, and the older children helped raise the younger. Carl and Louise Betz's oldest daughter, Annette, became a legendary educator in her own right, as a founding faculty member of Kansas City Junior College, a forerunner of today's Metropolitan Community College system. Carl Betz's grandson and namesake was a successful actor, best known for his television role as Dr. Alex Stone, husband to Donna Reed on "The Donna Reed Show."

### Sources

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