

# Would-be Pewabic tiles grace old McKinley

By CRAIG PIECHURA

What was rumored to be an obscure treasure trove of prized Pewabic pottery tiles is in fact a pretty impostor. Brilliantly colored, illustrated tiles grace the fountain and fireplace at Southfield's old McKinley Elementary, (since 1971 the Southfield Education Center) at 18330 George Washington near the corner of Southfield and Ten Mile. Built back in 1929, the school is inordinately ornate. It was initially used as an incentive to attract people to settle in the then-new area. Visitors to the building often stop to admire the art work on the walls, commenting on the craftsmanship. However, many visitors are informed by school officials that the tiles are examples of Pewabic pottery, which is prized around the world and prominently found in the Detroit area. Mary Chase (Perry) Stratton founded the Pewabic Pottery, an old Tudor-style building at 10125 E. Jefferson Ave. in Detroit in 1907. The establishment is still in operation.

BUT THE TILES at McKinley were not made at the Pewabic Pottery.

"The tiles are very pretty, but they're not Pewabic," said Tom Brunk, archivist for the Pewabic Pottery Museum, which is now an extension service of Michigan State University's College of Lifelong Learning.

Brunk believes the tiles found on the walls at McKinley are an example of American pottery commonly produced before the Depression.

"Pewabic tile has more rounded edges, because every one was handmade. The grouting is incorporated into the Pewabic design. They wouldn't split up a scene like these do," Brunk said.

"It's typical of the tiles produced by Flint Faience and Tile, or maybe the American Eclectic Chemical Tile Co. of Ohio," the archivist added.

If the tiles had been Pewabic tiles, they would be prized by artists, potters and antique collectors because of the iridescent glaze process developed by Mrs. Stratton and which was lost when she died in 1961 at the age of 94.

ARCHIVIST BRUNK said that people put too much emphasis on the glaze. He said Pewabic tiles are noteworthy because of a combination of factors: The kiln used, the temperature,

the firing techniques and the materials used.

Some of the substances used to produce the iridescence were costly, such as silver nitrate, tin oxide and cobalt for an Egyptian blue effect.

"A ceramic lamp cost almost \$100 in

1904, and that was a year before Mr. Ford established the \$5 a week wage," Brunk said. "It was like going to a sculptor to commission a work, not to a tile shop; or to a tailor instead of Montgomery Ward."

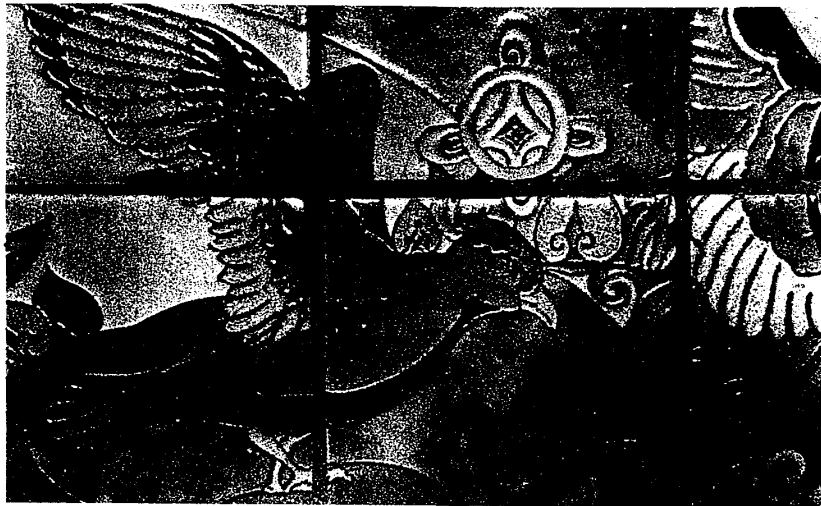
While modern potters have been

able to glaze pots, the current process requires much hotter kiln temperatures than Mrs. Stratton and the original staff at Pewabic used.

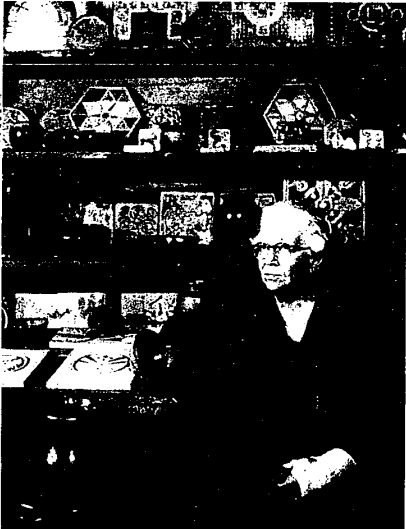
The scarcity of the tiles adds to their value, but people who don't know a thing about pottery technique readily

appreciate the beauty of the tiles and pots developed in the Pewabic studio.

A current exhibit entitled "Pewabic in Architecture" is being featured at the Detroit Historical Museum. The show runs through June 3 when it will travel on to other cities.



Birds of brilliant blue hues adorn the drinking fountain at the Southfield Education Center, formerly McKinley Elementary. The late Mary Chase Stratton (left) developed the lost art of Pewabic pottery tiles.



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