

# MY COUNTRY 'Tis of Thee

Thirty-five per cent of our people own 99 per cent of our land—less than 25 per cent of our farmers own their farms



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THE U. S. Department of the Interior has reported a plan for draining and clearing ten million acres of bottom land along the Mississippi. The land reclaimed under this project is to be parceled out in ten-acre tracts to one million veterans of World War II. Here is "forty acres and a mule," with a modern twist. Presumably there is no longer any land available, unless we resort to expensive methods to "create" some.

The possibility that there might not be available land looms frighteningly large when we consider the record of our soil waste. It has taken the inhabitants of the United States a trifle more than three centuries to accomplish the following destruction: An arable land area more than six times the size of England and Wales has been rendered unsuitable for further tillage because of the loss of practically all of its top soil, plus severe gullyng. Land in excess of twice the cultivated area of Germany has lost almost all of its top soil and is, therefore, of little agricultural value. "While other countries are trying to conquer new agricultural regions, by force of arms, we have busily thrown

away an empire larger than any of them will ever conquer"—a total of 674,577,376 acres!<sup>1</sup>

In some parts of the South, the one-crop system had begun to take its toll by the time of the Civil War. The maximum acreage and production, in 23 counties of Georgia, was reached in 1880; in all but 36 counties, the peak agricultural development was attained prior to 1920. In the Piedmont area of Alabama, the decline began in 1880. The intensive cotton-growing methods carried on under the old plantation system left large regions of worn-out land which were turned over to poor whites and Negroes, to be worked on shares. As tenants, they had neither the means nor the incentive to terrace the land against erosion or guard against further soil exhaustion.<sup>2</sup> Under such conditions, damage to soil continues apace.

With the rise in the price of wheat, precipitated by the last war, it became common practice for the wheat grow-

ers of the Middle West to mortgage their land to purchase additional acreage. The depression of the early thirties therefore found farmers, once well-to-do and independent, threatened with foreclosure of mortgages written at war-time levels. In the struggle to escape tenancy, in which many failed, these farmers set on a course they knew to be dangerous. Every acre was forced to yield the maximum market crop, without rest or rotation. In the fall, no cover crop was left on the ground. What could not be sold was harvested for silage for live stock faced with starvation. Finally nature took up the dare in the form of an unusually dry winter and spring. Devitalized soil, dry as dust, responded to heavy winds, and the Middle West was in danger of becoming a desert.

Nor have the forests and wild life of what was once a natural paradise fared any better since the advent of the white man. The state of Minnesota alone once had enough timber, if cut with foresight and care, to supply the country for centuries.<sup>3</sup> Today experts estimate that the timber in our remaining forests, if not replenished, will last only from 35 to 40 years.<sup>4</sup>

THE PHYSICAL ASPECTS of conservation are well understood but, unfortunately, conservationists too often find themselves in the embarrassing position of being allowed to lock the stable door only after the horse is stolen. In Wisconsin, for instance, effective conservation measures were not passed until after the timber companies had cut

over the best land in that state and had moved on to Minnesota, Washington and Oregon.<sup>3</sup> But the problem is still far from being solved. Every year thirty million acres of farm and forest land are ruined by neglect!

Destruction of irreplaceable resources is only the beginning of our misuse of the earth—141 million acres of good arable land are held out of use by private interests for speculation, while less than 25 per cent of our farmers own land. The rest of our so-called farmers are actually tenants, share-croppers or outright farm laborers, many of them in the miserably paid migratory class.

The government, under its conservation program, now holds over 400 million acres of farm and forest land out of use, in the mistaken idea that disuse is conservation. True conservation is dependent upon the proper cultivation of land, and even if it were true that the land itself could be improved by disuse, the loss of production and waste of human powers resulting from denying men access to it would outweigh the value of any such conservation measures.

When we turn the spotlight of analysis upon our cities, the same picture of land abused and held out of use is clearly seen. The acres of slums to be found in almost every large city are as sad to behold as are the cut-over, burnt-over wasteland of northern Michigan and Wisconsin. Both testify to man's reckless rush to grasp the profits of a day without heed of the consequences of tomorrow.

Urban slums, like rural wastes, form breeding places for ignorance, crime and disease. People in the lowest income levels, unable to escape to a better environment, are trapped in these areas and gradually sapped of all self-respect and initiative.

Dr. Clifford Shaw, Professor of Sociology, University of Chicago, has made an exhaustive study of Chicago slums and their inhabitants. His findings are so conclusive as to upset completely the theory that poverty and crime are characteristics of certain families, nationalities and races.<sup>5</sup>

When Dr. Shaw speaks before civic groups, he tells the story of the slum: a neighborhood where tradition is turned upside down by poverty; where to steal an apple is heroic, to buy it, sissy; where little thefts turn into big ones as older children influence younger ones; where almost all roads lead inevitably to the reform school and the penitentiary. In conclusion, he has a favorite question he likes to pose, especially to groups of women: "Would you be willing to exchange babies with a family living in the environment I have described? Can you be sure which child at the end of eighteen years will be a good citizen and which a potential criminal?"

THE COST to the community of maintaining slums is almost incalculable. Besides the toll in wasted human health and energy, there is a bill to pay every year for maintaining charities, public health centers, and agencies for the prevention of juvenile de-

linquency and crime. When the question of providing better housing arises, we are told that there are no available sites for building, that first the present slums must be cleared, which presents more difficulties.

This, in face of the fact that approximately 40 per cent of the average municipality is entirely vacant. The remaining 60 per cent includes the area used for streets, parks and other public purposes, as well as for privately owned structures.<sup>6</sup>

On Long Island, between Patchogue and the New York City line, there are enough subdivided lots to accommodate the whole of New York City's population in one-family houses.<sup>7</sup> Yet 79 per cent of the families in New York City live as tenants, many in over-crowded tenements.<sup>8</sup>

Why don't these families move out to Long Island? For the same reason that poor families no longer trek west to build homes on the prairie. Land, in this land of the free, is no longer free. The owners of idle land, unable or unwilling to utilize it, hold it out of use in anticipation of a profitable sale. Wherever one looks, in villages, farm sections or cities, valuable land is found lying vacant, forcing the use of poorer land because of its cheapness. This waste is reflected everywhere in higher costs of production and lowered standards of living.

A few years ago Los Angeles authorities estimated that 2000 miles of streets had been constructed fronting on vacant lots within the city limits. The annual expense of maintaining

these streets averages over a million dollars. Counting delinquent taxes and other costs, the city is spending approximately an extra three million dollars annually for the upkeep of these miles of uninhabited area.<sup>9</sup>

THE DUAL PROBLEM of abusing and withholding our resources and building sites can be met only by a vigorous, intelligent challenge of our present system of landholding. For so long as the land of the nation is considered to be the private property of individual owners—to do with as they see fit—society has no real foundation upon which to urge that trees be replanted, that mineral resources be utilized judiciously, or that valuable urban sites be released for productive use. Only when the land is recognized as the common heritage of all the people of every generation will our resources be properly used and successfully conserved. It does not follow, however, that it would be wise or even necessary to nationalize the land and turn it over to bureaucratic management. Instead, land can be held under titles securing to the individual his use of it and his interest in the improvements which he erects upon it, if only the ground rent, which is the impelling incentive to monopolization and abuse of land, is taken by government in lieu of all other taxes.

The ownership of land should be recognized as a privilege, for which favored individuals must compensate society. The ground rent could very easily be collected by society in the

form of a tax. For what is more natural than that the cost of establishing justice, providing for the common defense and promoting the general welfare be financed from a fund created by society?

If the land of America were, in this way, recognized as the people's estate, valuable resources now withheld from use could not long be idle. What owner could afford to pay a rental on his land unless he puts it to use? Not only would all productive industry be greatly stimulated by the release of valuable land now locked up by the high prices derived from capitalized ground rent, but its release would in turn open up opportunity to those who are now denied access to it.

Apart from these advantages, the taxation of ground rent is an altogether sound fiscal policy. It would place no burden upon labor and enterprise as do most of our existing taxes. William Pitt, speaking before the British Parliament on ways and means to finance the wars with France and the American Colonies, said: "To levy a direct tax of 7 per cent is a dangerous experiment in a free country, and may excite revolt; but there is a method by which you can tax the last rag from the back and the last bite from the mouth without causing a murmur against high taxes; and that is to tax a great many articles of daily use and necessity so indirectly that the people will pay them and not know it. Their grumblings then will be of hard times, but they will not know that the hard times are caused by taxa-

tion." Whether or not Pitt deserves the doubtful honor of having invented the indirect tax, such taxation is everywhere in operation. These taxes are passed on to the ultimate consumer in higher prices, thus diminishing purchasing power and discouraging production.

The French taxed windows and the people boarded them up. The Russians taxed beards and beards were snipped off. The Virginians taxed the apparent value of wives' clothing and when the assessor made his rounds, women appeared in rags. The old lesson that the power to tax is the power to destroy has been so well learned that now we tax tobacco, alcoholic beverages, narcotics and luxuries for the express purpose of discouraging their use. Why, then, do we not see that when we tax buildings, clothing and food we are penalizing the producers of these necessities?

Let us apply the same principle to the taxing of ground rents, to find how it would work. First of all, land cannot be driven away, neither can it be hidden nor fully destroyed. The result would be that those who own land which they do not use would not pay its rental. They would thus be forced to use the land or surrender it to others who would use it.

A tax on ground rents would insure the certainty of collection. No one, if he can prevent it, will endanger his possession of the land upon which his home or business rests by a failure to pay for its rental, whether he pays it to another individual or to the gov-

ernment. Then, too, the realization that he is getting value received for his taxes would change his entire attitude toward them. Most of the tax evasions, which now make the cost of collection expensive and greatly diminish the actual revenue obtained, come from a not clearly defined, but no less real, sense of resentment on the part of the taxpayer.

DESPITE the soundness and simplicity of this proposal, there are those who violently oppose a tax on ground rent. They maintain that to tax rents would be unmoral confiscation, because many present owners of land have paid the full current value for the privilege of pocketing the rents. To begin collecting ground rents now is viewed as "changing the rules while the game is in progress, to the disadvantage of one contestant." This same argument was advanced to favor the perpetuation of human slavery.

On the other hand, there have always been those who understand that human welfare is utterly dependent upon some means of securing to men the right to the land upon which they live. Under the leadership of Moses, land was held in trust for the community, and individuals used it only under an arrangement whereby the community was compensated.

Among those who fought for the rights of man and advocated the collection of ground rents was our own Thomas Paine.<sup>10</sup> Had the understanding of the people of his day been fully aroused, the history of our land use

would tell a far different story. Thomas Jefferson was never able to implement the Declaration of Independence by the concrete means he knew were necessary to carry its truths to full application. Still, wherever he could, he worked toward that goal. In the lands which were opened to settlement during his administration, he set aside Township 16 of each section, to be forever the property of the community. The income from its rental was to pay for education throughout the section. With free education secured and a working pattern of the principle in operation, he felt that the fight toward freedom would go on. But he reckoned without realization of man's short-sighted avarice. In almost every case, as soon as a school board was organized, its first act, through bribery and trickery, was to sell the land. Only one good working example remains to testify to the practicality of Jefferson's plan. The world-famous schools in one section of the iron range of Minnesota are paid for from the rental of valuable ore land.

But what can farsighted men do without the enlightened following of

those they seek to help? Twice ground rent taxation has been written into a national constitution: in the Articles of Confederation and in the Weimar Constitution of the ill-fated German Republic. Each time people in general were too ill-informed to use the instrument thus placed in their hands, and those whose privilege it challenged were too well-informed to permit its use.

We are, in part, fighting a war to secure the land of the United States from outside domination. Will we continue to respect the domination of special privilege and monopoly from within, and offer our returning soldiers no better share of the country they have fought to save than a few acres of Mississippi River bottom land?

#### REFERENCES

- 1—Beals, Carleton, "American Earth," p. 410
- 2—*Ibid.*, pp. 345, 380.
- 3—*Ibid.*, p. 303.
- 4—*Ency. Americana.*
- 5—Shaw, Clifford, "Brothers in Crime."
- 6—*Economics Simplified*, pp. 149-150.
- 7—Geiger, Raymond, "Theory of the Land Question," p. 199.
- 8—*Economics Simplified*, p. 221.
- 9—*Ibid.*, p. 197.
- 10—Paine, Thomas, "Agrarian Justice."

### *Paper Conservation*

Benjamin Franklin, having been touched by a relative for \$50, was asked for a sheet of paper so that the borrower could give him a note for the amount. "What!" exclaimed Franklin. "Do you want to waste my stationery as well as my money?"

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» Certain thoughts are prayers. There are moments when, whatever be the attitude of the body, the soul is on its knees. VICTOR HUGO