

THE DEVELOPMENT OF OUR COUNTRY

**ADDRESS BY THE HON. LLOYD FLETCHER BEFORE THE TEXAS
FARMERS' CONGRESS, AT AMARILLO, TEXAS**

Somebody has said, and it seems to be generally ascribed to Emerson, that: "If a man make a better mouse trap than his neighbor, though he build his house in the woods, the public will make a beaten path unto his door." The same might be said of a country. If you have a better country, one offering more opportunities than your neighbor, though you build your house in the woods, the public will make a beaten path unto your door. In order to develop a country there must be people to settle and make homes in that country. There must be a country with sufficient resources open to settlement to employ and maintain that people. If we desire to settle and develop our country we must be able to assure people that conditions are better here than in the places where the prospective immigrants reside. We must be able to offer them more and better opportunities than they find at their present places of residence.

The greatest opportunity that man can give to man is the equal enjoyment of the lands of his vicinity; that he will have the opportunity to use and occupy the vacant lands of the community wherein he resides; that the people who have no lands may be accorded the privilege of applying their honest efforts to the productivity of the unused lands.

In this country we have the lands—millions of acres. Land that is ready for the plow—land that is ready for the home. But the plow is rusting and the homes are few. Lands everywhere that wait for the toiling and willing hands of the teeming millions. Yet our lands lie idle, and the hands are still. "We have acres wanting hands; and there are hands wanting acres."

I can remember when a few dollars would have purchased an entire county of our State, and I am not an old man either; and I can remember when a few dollars did purchase an entire county of our State. Now our lands are valuable and the price is high. You ask me why I did not purchase an entire county and grow rich as the county was settled; and I ask you in return if you would have been the better for it, and if the people of this county would have been the better for it. There are fewer people in those counties where such purchases were made than where they were not made. And there are fewer products raised and placed on the people's market to feed the world with than in those counties where such purchases were not made.

Let us take the case of the White Deer Land Company, which owns the fairest part of three of our sister counties. Five hundred thousand acres of the richest lands of our country were given by one of our Legislatures to a railway company as an inducement to enter our State. Not only that, but the land was exempted from taxation for twenty years. The railway company sold this land to the said land company for about fifty cents per acre, together

with the tax exemption. The land company leased these lands to cattle companies for about four cents per acre, which yielded them an income of about eight per cent on their said fifty cents per acre investment. Yet they paid the State of Texas not one cent in taxes. When the twenty year tax exemption period had expired, this county had increased in population, and the people had built up the communities adjoining these lands, until the said lands of the land company were worth four dollars per acre. Thus up to this time the land company had not only received eight per cent on their investment, but a profit by way of increased values in these lands of eight hundred per cent. The land company then took its lands away from the cattle companies, and placed about every fourth section on the market. But this is not all. After the company had sold out the land thus placed upon the market, it offered a few more sections upon the market at an advance over the last price named. They have continued this system until the sections remaining unsold have now reached a price of twenty dollars an acre, a figure that the company never dreamed it would reach. Thus the company has not only sold these lands to settlers at this advanced price, but they have used these very people, and their industry, to create more values on the lands remaining unsold; and they did this without the consent of these people, and it would seem without their knowledge, for now when the people undertake to purchase more lands for farms and homes they learn that their own presence and industry have worked to their disadvantage. The lands have gone up steadily in price in proportion to the increase in population in those communities; and indeed far exceeding the proportion.

Not only have these people added values to these vacant lands of the land company, already made rich by the presence and industry of the population, but the people, themselves forced and compelled by the rest of the people of this State, have taxed the lands they purchased, which was entirely reasonable and proper, but they have also taxed every sod upturned, and every improvement on their lands, and every item of personal property they hold, thus paying a treble tax, while the land company paid only a Single Tax, and that on much smaller valuation because their lands were unimproved and held for speculation only. Thus you see the rich land company has the benefit of a Single Tax, while you have not. The land company pays no improvement tax; its lands are unimproved and held for speculation. It does not intend to improve them; it does not intend to do anything with the said lands that will not enhance their value. You are not only paying the greatest burdens in taxation; but your own presence and industry, and the people that you induce to come to your community will create more unearned value on these vacant lands. And your children and your children's children will suffer the iniquity of buying lands, the value of which they created themselves, at a figure which will require the flower of their life to free from the unearned value they will be compelled to pay the land company for the same lands.

Further do I call your attention to the fact that the owners of these vacant lands do not reside in your communities; neither do they reside in your State. Nay, the beneficiary of these lands reside not even in your nation, but has his abode with the Lillies of France. Your brawny hands and sun-tanned faces are strangers to him. He dreams of the dollars you make for him; but not of the hardships you suffer in sending his gold across the water.

Another significant fact I call to your attention. You have never heard of improvements increasing in value because of the presence and industry of people in the community where these improvements are located. The increased value goes to the land, and not to the improvements. Then why not let the burdens fall on that which receives the greatest benefit? And while the land is in the hands of the speculator, let it at least share a part of the burdens of taxation in proportion to the benefit it, and its owner, receive, from the community for whose support the taxes are necessary. You are not doing yourselves justice by allowing the speculator to take all the values you create, and that while you are paying a treble taxation and he a single taxation.

Speculation in land can do nothing and will do nothing save increase the selling price of lands. High land value never built up any community or country. If it did, why not form a club for the purpose of increasing land values, and place the first price to be received at five hundred dollars per acre. It is evident that such a move would only retard development. It would be an absolute prohibition against the locating of people upon the lands as home purchasers. The higher the land the more the speculation; and the more the speculation the higher the land. In countries where the lands are the highest we find that fewer people own even a home. We find more tenants. We find there the richest people; and we find there the poorest people. We find great palaces and ragged hovels. People reveling in luxuries, and people in abject poverty. People owning more land than they can traverse in a day; and people without a place to lay weary heads. Land of high value will not raise more grain, nor graze more cattle, than it would if its value were low. It makes no difference how low you value the homestead, it will support the family just the same as if you should place the value high. But it makes a vast difference what value you place upon the land when you purchase a tract for a homestead.

Before you can build up a country you must first remove the land speculator. He is a drawback to your community. He holds his lands out of use, and you are compelled to go around it to find a neighbor. You might as well have a hole in the ground as that much land, for all the good it does your community. The land speculator takes out and puts nothing in your community. If he buys your land at thrice its value, he still does nothing for your community, unless you want to put the community out of existence, for as soon as he has paid you the gold, you move out of the community with it, or buy out your neighbor who moves away with the same gold, and it is gone forever.

I met a preacher a while ago, and in talking to him about speculation in lands, he asserted that the land speculator is a useful citizen. The preacher, of all men who should raise his voice against undeserved poverty and iniquity, when asked what benefit a mere land owner could be to a community had the temerity and the foolishness to remark: "Why, he is holding the land for future generations." For future generations, when thousands of the present generation are starving for the use of land! As if land would be dissipated, or its usefulness destroyed by a sane and proper mode of cultivation!

Do you not think that your sparsely settled communities would settle much faster if you had cheaper lands? Lands that a poor man could buy? Do you not think that you could have better improvements in your community if your settlers did not have to pay so much for land, which would leave them more money with which to erect improvements? Why tax a man because he improves and beautifies his lands and your community? And why favor a man because he fails or refuses to improve and beautify his vacant lands?

We need better schools; better public improvements; better highways—but not better highwaymen. We need a few paved highways across our country. Now is the time to launch your campaign. Why wait until you are old and feeble to improve your community? If you want to develop your country and to do a real service for humanity, do something to make it unprofitable to hold lands for speculation. Do something to place these unused lands in the hands of the industrious and laboring people. Do something to increase the number of home-owners; and do something to decrease the number of landlords. A renting tenant can have but little interest in your community, for his stay depends upon the will of his landlord. To-morrow he may be required to move from your community and leave the associations of his childhood behind. There is no inducement for him to improve and beautify your community. His stay with you is more uncertain than life, because a single landlord can move him away.

Again, by allowing speculation to run riot in your community which you would have settlers occupy and develop, you allow its land value to increase to a point that prohibits the laboring people of your community from occupying it. Thus they are forced to the centers of population to compete with other laboring people who have no lands. As a consequence the occupations of life are crowded; wages are lowered, or the cost of living increases without the needed increase in wages. Strikes are declared, and the commerce of the country is jeopardized. Poverty, suffering and crime is the inevitable result. If you want to develop your country be Single Taxers. And if you want to help the laboring man be Single Taxers. The land speculator already has the benefit of a single tax. You need all the help you can get. Why not then invoke the great principles of the Single Tax, and remove the land speculation, and the temptation to speculate in land? The Lord's Prayer does not teach us to withstand temptation, but it teaches us to pray to be delivered from evil and to be led not into temptation.