

Have Americans Not Heard of Henry George?

By PHILIPP KNAB, Austria

IN the July edition of the *Reader's Digest* there is a piteous story entitled "Our Great Big Highway Bungle". What is it about?

Well, in 1956 a 40,000 mile super-highway network scheme was launched, which was "to sweep majestically from coast to coast, as the greatest engineering project of all times, a splendid monument to a free people's wisdom, daring, foresight and skill". It was to cost 27 billion dollars.

Today it is reported that this dream has become a nightmare of recklessness, extravagance, special privilege, bureaucratic stupidity and, sometimes, outright thievery. Unexpected additional costs have increased the estimate to nearly 40 billion dollars, officially; to more than 50 billion, privately.

What has gone wrong? Why? asks Karl Detzer, the author of the article, and he proceeds to enumerate the chief causes and the most glaring examples of what seems to be a chain reaction of gigantic fraud and graft. Local need—and local greed—at the expense of the general good, encouraged by irresponsibility and inefficiency, waste, reckless planning, manoeuvred by gangs of boosters into the heart of cities to be cut in half in spite of the majority of the inhabitants protesting, but bringing huge indemnities to some land owners; mismanagement, bribery and so forth, a monotonous record of administrative and moral deficiency. Several times Detzer refers to land speculation, to costly purchases with more dollars going for land than for construction, to officials securing the strategic spots along the right of way, to splendid real estate deals; but he fails to see that here he touches the very root of the evil.

For a government to announce that it is going to construct a project of such magnitude—without owning the necessary land and without having land-value taxation as a means of redress—is as foolish and irresponsible as the medieval kings' throwing golden coins among the cheering crowd, making it fight and scramble for some of the money the whole people had to toil for in the way of taxes. Whereas it should be the duty and wisdom of governments to strengthen the instincts of solidarity and unselfish service for the community, such a procedure is apt to unleash all the passions of reckless egotism.

The question may be asked: Have the Americans in charge never heard of a man called Henry George? One of their—and humanity's—greatest thinkers and moralists? What are they being taught at their numerous universities and high schools of business, economy and sociology? Even a mere abstract of Henry George's teachings must

have given them an idea of what was to be expected from advertising such a programme in a country where land monopoly still reigns supreme.

Will not the Communists sneer at this sad tale of unchecked speculation and use it as a sample of capitalistic inferiority? There will be the smart of truth in such scorn. Surely there are even far worse things hushed up by the close censorship of the Bolshevik slave state, but that is no excuse for a system which claims to have found the key to the problem of human symbiosis.

The American taxpayer whose indignant reaction is now expected will be at a loss where to direct it, for members of both big parties are mixed up in the case. But what he should learn from it is that sound public investment always produces a multiple of its volume in rising land values and that the federal and state governments, supposing they had a share therein by a moderate tax on these values could always cover the expenditure of such investments, without squeezing his pocket, either by gradual redemption or by using them as a security for a loan. As it is the cost is met out of the tyre and gasoline tax, i.e. at the expense of the many whereas the soaring land form a bonanza for the privileged few.

All we can say and hope for is that Americans read their HENRY GEORGE.

Ezra Cohen (1891-1960)

IT is hard to believe that we can no longer call upon Ezra Cohen for counsel or to speak at a Henry George function; that we can no longer see his warm and friendly smile and benefit from his sympathetic approach in reconciling differences of opinion.

Ezra Cohen was born in Manhattan's lower East Side, in the same building where "Al" Smith had lived. This was the time when Henry George had become world famous and friends were urging that he go into politics as the best way of publicising his objectives. The story of his two mayoralty campaigns, the ganging-up against him of the machine politicians of both parties, the probable miscounting of ballots, the second campaign against the advice of his doctor, his death just before election and the enormous outpouring of love and affection at his funeral, is well-known to Georgeists who have read the literature describing those days.

Ezra was too young to appreciate these events, though his father then and for the rest of his life, was a staunch disciple of George. It was a soapbox speaker, some twenty years later, at 59th Street and Broadway, the "Hyde Park" of New York, who supplied the revelatory spark that lit the torch that Ezra carried thereafter.

As a young man, Ezra followed Greeley's advice and went west to Salt Lake City. There he worked in a large retail women's apparel shop for three years, by which time he had become its manager. People whom he met then, in business, social and charitable activities, kept up their friendship with him to the end of his life.