



Ralph Borsodi's principles for homesteaders

RALPH BORSODI (1886-1977) was the author of 13 books and 10 research studies. He was also physically active, a productive homesteader and a real doer who practised what he preached. He experimented and implemented on many levels—from good nutrition, through building his own home and garden; weaving his clothes and furnishings; organizing experimental small communities, a School of Living for a new adult education, and developing new social institutions—the Community Land Trust and a non-inflationary currency, which he called Constants.

No one of today's specialty-labels encompass Ralph Borsodi. I am pushed to use more general and abstract terms—decentralist, liberator and human benefactor. This article will concentrate on his efforts to implement the community-use of socially-created values in land as part of his plan to encourage people to leave cities for more rural living.

Ralph Borsodi was never in public school, infrequently in private schools, and did not attend college. (Yet St. Johns College of Annapolis later conferred on him a Masters, and the University of New Hamp-

shire, a Doctorate.) He was educated mostly by wide readings in libraries, and by his father, a publisher in New York City. Borsodi Sr. wrote the introduction to Bolton Hall's **A Little Land and Living**, which encouraged living on, and intensive production on, small plots of land, and the public collection of site-values.

Ralph Borsodi, Jr. joined the Single Tax Party which grew out of popular enthusiasm for Henry George and his two campaigns for the mayoralty in New York in the 1880s. Borsodi mounted his soap box in Union Square to exhort people to vote for the land-value tax. The Party named Borsodi editor of **The Single Taxer**. In it he discussed the need for a school to teach economics as George presented it, placing land in a category separate from capital, showing how the law of rent determined the law of wages, and how private use of land values resulted in the disparity of wealth—poverty on the one hand and riches on the other.

When still a young man, in 1910, Borsodi was sent by his father to dispose of some Texas land holdings. What to do with several hundred acres of land in the Houston area? He knew that this land was part of a "great Savannah"—in the path of progress. His errand brought him both conflict and guilt. As people would come to this area, the value of the Borsodi land would rise. What price should he ask for it? Should he accept money which he had not earned? "Don't be foolish, man," a local hotel-keeper advised him. "Hang on to that land and who knows you might become a millionaire!"

Troubled, Borsodi bought a small-town paper, **The Rice City Banner**, wrote editorials, printed news, and discussed the land problem. After a year, he made a decision. He would sell the land at a modest price to a realtor. But Borsodi would go on to find ways to "solve" the land problem. The realtor would not worry about unearned increment from the land, and doubtless went on to pocket a large sum.

Borsodi returned to the East with a mission. Now, 1911, he saw Megalopolis with new eyes. More than ever he was conscious of ground space. On Manhattan's 22 square miles, two million people were rushing to and fro, on, above and beneath its surface, needing space and giving to land its fabulous value.

At that time New York City represented 20 billions of dollars worth of wealth. Half of it was in land, most of the value concentrated in a small core at the centre. A few blocks away was an ocean of squalor, filth and poverty. Who had title to that land? Certainly not the two million people working there. Probably a few large holders with familiar names—Rockefeller, Astor, Vanderbilt. Land bought and sold for hundreds of thousands of dollars a front foot! Millions of tenants paid rent each month with barely enough left over to keep body and soul together. To Borsodi, New York was a devouring

ugly monster.

His friendship deepened with Myrtle Mae Simpson, a Kansas farm girl. They married in 1912, and Borsodi's father assigned them to a job in Chicago. Chicago's Loop was even more concentrated, though with more over-all sprawl, destitution, slums and ugliness than in New York.

Borsodi contacted Louis Post, editor of **The Public**, a journal devoted to Henry George's principles. Borsodi used its columns to challenge Socialist and Marxist ideas.

The Borsodis took other radical steps. Myrtle Mae's anemia, the children's coughs, and Borsodi's rheumatism led them to investigate natural therapies. They turned to whole foods. Explaining it as best they could to the two boys, Ralph and Myrtle Mae gathered up the loaves of white bread and boxes of white sugar and packaged cereals and chucked it all into the garbage pail. In 1920 they left the city and moved to 16 wooded acres in Rockland county. They built temporary shelters and settled down to modern "homesteading".

They used rock to build shelters for chickens, rabbits, goats and a pig; and for the first of a three-sectioned home for themselves. They added a craft section for looms and weaving; a breeze-way for pool and billiards. They planted, tilled, harvested and processed vegetables, and in a few years berries and fruit. They were 80% self-maintaining in food. They felled trees and cut wood for fireplaces and furnace. They built a swimming pool and tennis court, and installed a linotype in their basement—Borsodi had things to say about the modern crisis and what to do about it.

In 1928 Borsodi startled the world by publishing **This Ugly Civilization**, America's first documented critique of over-centralized industrialism, which was widely read during the ensuing Great Depression. Because of it Borsodi was invited to Dayton, Ohio, in 1932, to deal with their overwhelming unemployment. Borsodi saw this as a way to extend "homesteading" as a social movement, and a way to implement a trustee-ship, rental-form of land-tenure.

He proposed that families should return to the land: "Ring Dayton with many small communities of from 30 to 50 families, each producing their food and shelter on 2 to 5 acre plots. Let a Homestead Association of families hold title to the land; let each family pay an annual rental fee to their association rather than pay an outright purchase price."

Persons involved agreed. Social agencies advanced money to buy 80 acres. Independence bonds were issued to provide loans to families for buildings and equipment. Families applied, plots were assigned, individuals instructed in gardening and building: construction was begun. Suddenly the funds were exhausted.

To obtain more financial support, the only alter-



MILDRED LOOMIS, in this study of the life of Ralph Borsodi, describes the problems of setting up rural communities with ownership of land vested in the group.

native seemed to be: "Borrow from the Federal Government." Borsodi advised against it. "Government money usually means government supervision and control. Government is to protect persons and property from harm—not to build homes. Keep Government out of business!" Borsodi concluded that if the homesteaders chose government aid, he would withdraw and return to his homestead.

The homesteaders chose government funds. Borsodi withdrew, saying: "If we in the U.S. are to get a proper balance between city and country, and learn the proper function of government, we will need a new education." Family and friends helped him plan and establish the School of Living in 1936, near Suffern, New York. On its four-acre homestead, the school was at the centre of 16 family homesteads, on a 40 acre plot called Bayard Lane Community. Here, too, Borsodi initiated the group-title to land, with member-families paying an annual rental rather than a fee for outright private ownership.

Affairs went well; sixteen lovely homesteads surrounding the School of Living, where gardening, home-production and workshops in adult education were continuous. Educators, authors, homesteaders, and social-changers attended, from 1936 to 1945. After college degrees and social work in Chicago's slums, I studied with, and assisted, the Borsodis for the year 1939-1940.

One Bayard Lane homesteader, H.M., had good results with his homestead flock of chickens. He envisioned a thriving business of 1,000 laying hens in a 3-storey chicken house. But his contract under group-title to land prevented this. He would change the land-tenure back to private ownership. He was determined and energetic. By a narrow margin of votes, these homesteaders rejected group-tenure and reverted to fee-simple.

Borsodi resorted to writing and travel. In 1939 he analyzed predatory economics in **Prosperity and Security**. He described and advocated modern home-

steading in **Agriculture in Modern Life**. Reluctantly he sold the School of Living building to a homesteader, and in 1945 moved its library and activities to the Loomis homestead in Ohio. He travelled to Mexico and India, studying and lecturing at a Gandhian University in Ambala. There he examined the village-title to land, wrote **A Decentralist Manifesto**, and began his *magnum opus*, a curriculum for adult education—the definition and analysis of **Seventeen Major Problems of Living**, along with alternative (including decentralist) solutions.

Returned to the United States, now past 80 years, Borsodi had a new opportunity to achieve his two most cherished ideas of land and money reform. A younger friend, Robert Swann, was in Georgia hoping to prevent the racial tension from erupting into violence. Swann was appalled by the poverty, the helplessness and the illiteracy of both blacks and whites. "What these people need is an economic base," he decided, and turned to Borsodi for guidance.

"What shall we do?" he asked.

"Get the families on the land!" Borsodi replied.

"But how?"

For weeks Borsodi and Swann worked on what in 1966 was registered in Luxembourg as The International Independence Institute (I.I.I.)—to teach and help establish the trusteeship of land. I.I.I. is a quasi-public cooperative corporation, in which individuals become members and in which they may invest funds. The I.I.I. secures land, by purchase or gift, and then declares the land in trust, never to be sold again. The I.I.I. is taking land, now, and making it available to users for an annual rental to the Trust. It does not wait until voters in a country, state or nation are persuaded to use the socially-created value of land for the community in lieu of taxes. It proceeds to secure land and turn it as a "gift to mankind" for users who contract to use it ecologically.

The history and goals of this effort are described in a book, **The Community Land Trust, A New Land Tenure for America**.¹ Some 100 community land trusts, with impartial, non-land-holding trustees from the communities in which they exist, are now operating. The first Community Land Trust, New Communities, Inc. (Atlanta, Ga.), took 5,000 acres out of the speculative market into a community trust.

In almost every region of the U.S.—in Maine, in the mid-Atlantic, in the Great Lakes Region, Oregon, California, and even in Washington, D.C.—urban trusts are assisting people to learn and practise the concept that land is the common heritage of all people, that freedom and security require that land be not a commodity for buying, selling and profit-making.

1. \$4 from The School of Living, Box 3233, York Pa. 17402.

False Economics!

LOCAL government housing experts have now admitted that public sector involvement in the land market has had adverse effects for ratepayers and people wanting to use land.

The second report of the Development Management Working Group¹ contains the following admissions and admonitions:

◆ Authorities should bear in mind the effect of the scale and nature of their activities on the land market. "Perhaps in some areas if they held off some of the expensive purchases they might induce a bit more realism in those holding on to land in memory of high prices."

◆ Some authorities have paid large sums for land without knowing fully its condition or how they intended to use it.

◆ The cost of having excessively large land banks to meet every eventuality is considerable: these should be kept continuously under review.

"It does seem to us to be false economy for authorities to hold onto potential housing land for excessively long periods."

The authors of the report considered it necessary to offer elementary economic lessons to the councillors and town hall officials who annually spend hundreds of millions of pounds. Lessons such as: "Many problems have arisen from confusing the value of a piece of land, with the (historic or prospective) cost of acquiring it. *The two are in fact quite separate.*"

1. Value for money in local authority housebuilding programmes; DOE, 1978.

'NIL' LAND VALUES

THE LABOUR Party's NEC wants the government to change the method of valuing inner city derelict land. The executive wants more land brought into public ownership. One proposal is that the price to be paid should be determined by the income land has earned in recent years, rather than its notional value as industrial land. The party's chairman, Frank Allaun, MP, said: ". . . great expanses of former industrial land has been left lying derelict for up to 20 years in many towns. If this land was acquired cheaply it would do more than anything to solve the desperate housing problem. . . ." Labour's original intention, he said, was that land should be bought at "existing use value"—nil—or its agricultural value, rather than between £20,000 and £75,000 an acre. (*The Times*, 13.10.78)

PETER SHORE, Minister for the Environment, has announced a £15m. scheme to smarten 29 English inner cities. The money will be spent to improve the visual environment—clearing rubbish, planting trees, cleaning and painting street furniture and buildings, erecting fences, etc. He explained: "Anyone who knows the inner city areas will know that there are pockets of land that are shabby and abandoned, and that has effects not only on those who live and work there but also on those who might seek to invest." (*The Times*, 7.9.78)

NEWS DIGEST