

# THE SINGLE TAX REVIEW

A Record of the Progress of Single Tax and Tax Reform  
Throughout the World.

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## WHO OWNS THE UNITED STATES?

*(For the Review.)*

By W. B. NORTHROP.

Searching for vestiges of the Public Domain is like looking for owls in Iceland. There are no owls in Iceland. The Original Public Domain, according to Professor John Bell Sanborn, consisted of 1,835,017,692 acres of land exclusive of Alaska. Out of this vast total, 741,702,365 acres have already been "appropriated" and 132,441,774 acres "reserved." In 1899, 591,343,953 acres were supposed to be "vacant."

It would seem from the figures that the country still has some of the Public Domain left. There is some: It is at the bottoms of the lakes and on the tops of the mountains; places hardly fitted for pioneering enterprise. I forgot to mention that there is a little arid land left here and there—mostly there.

Railroads of the country have absorbed enormous tracts of our public lands, both Federal and State. Considerable of this railroad land has been sold, but the corporations still retain sufficient land to carve out for themselves, if they so desired, an extensive empire. However, as their land and transportation monopolies practically give them the empireship of the United States, there is no reason why they should set up for themselves a more limited domain.

The Federal grants (according to a remarkable report entitled, "Lumber Industry, Part 1, Standing Timber, January 20, 1913, Department of Commerce and Labor, Bureau of Corporations") given to railroads amount to 190,000,000 acres of land—considerably more than the entire area of the States of Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and several of the New England States. In addition to the generous Federal land grants which the railroads of this country have received, individual States have donated to the railroads other enormous tracts. For instance, Texas has kindly given to railroads 32,400,000 acres of its best lands. The State of Florida, the entire area of which is less than 35,000,000 acres, has given away 19,000,000 acres. In Min-

nesota, the State has parted with 5,670,000 acres. Other States have given away separate batches of additional millions of acres.

It seemed to be a pleasant pastime of our early legislators to indulge in the game of separating citizens from their birthrights. Today our people have as little access to the natural opportunities of this country as have the landless Helots of Mexico who dwell in the peon barracks of the Haciendas.

The original idea of giving to railroads such vast allotments of our national lands was ostensibly to encourage these benefactors of the public to build railroads. It is a curious commentary on the whole system pursued by our government in this respect, that the railroads which did not get a slice of public land pie completed their road construction with more alacrity than those who did. Again, many railroads received public land grants for the purpose of building roads and then quietly—very quietly indeed—forgot to build the roads. In their forgetfulness, they omitted to return the lands which they had obtained under false pretenses.

There is a very significant map published in the report above referred to, which is printed in this number. This map outlines the land grants given to railroads in this country by the Federal government. It does not include the millions of acres more given by separate States. If these latter figures were added, they would considerably swell the total land grants already mentioned. The Union and Southern Pacific systems have received together 90,000,000 acres of Federal lands, not to mention State grants. The strip of land given by our government to the Union Pacific and Central Pacific Railroads from Nebraska to California comprises an area the width of which along that entire distance is 40 miles; that is, 20 miles on each side of the railroad track. Another strip of land granted to the railroad running through Northern New Mexico and Arizona is 100 miles in width, or 50 miles on each side of the railroad track.

There seems to have been a mad desire on the part of our legislative Solons who solicitously safeguarded the welfare of the country during the years 1850-1871, to part with lands for which they were the trustees, handing these properties over to railroad corporations. In 1842 Asa Whitney modestly asked Congress to give him 100,000,000 acres for the purpose of building a railroad from the Missouri River to the Pacific Ocean. He only wanted a strip of land 60 miles wide along the entire distance. A compliant and complacent Congress used its best endeavors to give him his little strip, but the negotiations fell through owing to some financial difficulty. But it wasn't Congress's fault that he didn't get it.

In 1845, there was a strenuous agitation of the question of nationalizing railroads, and a strong sentiment existed among the people for retaining our public lands as national assets. But the government of that day ignored the public will and weal and thus merited the Anarchist's definition of all government as being "a conspiracy against the people."

The Southern Pacific Railroad in its various land transactions did not

pretend to adhere to the terms of its agreement with the government when it received these grants. It violated its contracts on every occasion and in every particular. It established a land monopoly throughout California which is one of the most conspicuous examples of corporate greed in the world today. This railroad, it might be said in passing, has the greatest monopoly of timber land in the Northwest, owning 106 billion feet in Northern California and Oregon alone. This is even larger than the famous Weyerhaeuser timber holding which comprises 96 billion feet in the Pacific Northwest. A billion feet of timber would fill a freight train 417 miles long or build 65,000 six-room houses. If the Southern Pacific Railroad loaded all its timber on freight cars and placed them end to end, they would extend 44,202 miles—almost twice around the earth. The Southern Pacific Railroad in Oregon owns 2,895,595 acres of land. The government is now engaged in a suit against this railroad for alleged violation of the conditions attached to its land grant requiring that the land should be sold to actual settlers only, at a price of not more than \$2.50 per acre. It is charged by the government that vast tracts of land have been sold to timber monopolists and land speculators. Another violation of the grant charged against the railroad, is its retention of 2,074,454 acres of land and its refusal to sell the same to settlers. Most of this land has been entirely withdrawn from the Oregon market.

Another great land octopus is the Northern Pacific Railroad. Its steel tentacles have grasped 57,920,000 acres of land on its main lines and an additional acreage of 42,500,000 acres on its branch roads—102,000,000 acres in all.

In most of the grants of lands to railroads, the Federal government imposed a specific condition: that the roads should be built within a certain time. Otherwise, the grants would lapse and automatically become government property again. Though many roads failed to comply with these conditions, the government has never brought suits to reclaim the lands in question.

Though much of the railroad land has been sold, there yet remains an enormous acreage in the hands of the various companies—estimated at at least 200,000,000 acres, including State as well as Federal land. On page 233 of the Government Report on Standing Timber above referred to, this sentence appears:

"The fact that today out of 17,000,000 acres of land granted nearly 50 years ago to several then distinct corporations as much as 13,888,000 (or about 80 per cent.) is still retained in a single ownership is of great significance to the public—for its one holder, by virtue of its retention of land grants, is today the largest owner of timber in the United States."

Instances of large railway holdings have been cited here to show what has become of our Public Domain and to demonstrate how the interests of the people have been betrayed by their representatives at Washington. The government report already quoted points to the evils which have followed from the policy pursued by our early statesmen, so called. It says: "Instead

of securing a wide distribution of the Public Domain in the hands of a large number of independent owners, as apparently contemplated, the practical result of this legislation has been a high degree of concentration of ownership. When such lands become concentrated in a comparatively few hands, there is a serious public danger."

It looks as if our early forefathers wanted to wash their hands of the Public Domain. What they could not give away to the railroads, they sold at from 16c. to \$1.25 an acre, parting with these lands not to individual pioneers but to corporations and land speculators. Much of the land sold at 16c. an acre is now worth \$200.00 an acre, or more. H. H. Schwartz, former Chief of Field Service of the General Land Office, stated officially in 1909 with reference to the sale of certain lands: "These lands brought to the people or general government a gross sum of \$30,000,000. *At the date of sale they were reasonably worth \$240,000,000.* The profit of over \$200,000,000," continues Mr. Schwartz, "went, not to the needy settler engaged in subduing the wilderness, but to the wealthy investors."

The Government Report further states:

"There has been created not only the framework of an enormous timber monopoly but also an equally sinister land concentration in extensive sections. This involves a great wealth in minerals. The Southern Pacific has 4,318,000 acres in Northern California and Western Oregon and with the Union Pacific, which controls it, millions of acres elsewhere. The Northern Pacific owns 3,017,000 acres of timber land and millions more of non-timber land. In Florida three holders have 4,200,000 acres, and the 182 largest timber holders have over 16,990,000 acres, nearly one-half the land area of the State.

"Finally," says this Government Report, "to timber concentration and to land concentration, is added a closely connected railroad domination. The formidable possibilities of this combination," continues the Report mentioned, "in the Pacific Northwest and elsewhere are of the greatest possible importance. This formidable process of concentration in timber and in land certainly involves grave future possibilities of impregnable monopolistic conditions, whose far reaching consequences to society it is not difficult to anticipate fully or to over-estimate. . . . The underlying cause is our public land policy, resulting in enormous loss of wealth to the public and its monopolization by a few interests."

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We might well ask ourselves, therefore, who owns the United States? The answer is plain: Mostly, the railroads.

Who owns the people of the United States? As ownership of land means ownership of those who must have land, the answer is equally simple.

There is another question which is even more vital: Is there any way out of the difficulty for the people? Can they recover the lost empire? Is a way open to the Promised Land?

There is: Tax these great land holdings on their present market value.

There are in the United States at this time 359,030 miles of railroad track. These tracks rest on land. This land has a value. Tax it on its full value. Railroads have terminals, usually in the most central portions of the cities which they enter. Tax to the full these terminal values.

If the vast land holdings of the railroad corporations, their rights of way, the land of their terminals, the value of their timber and mineral and coal lands were taxed to their full value, a mighty step forward in the way of progress would be made. The stolen birthright would be restored.

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## ADDRESS OF FRANK W. GARRISON AT THE JOHN SHERWIN CROSBY MEMORIAL MEETING.

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PHILADELPHIA SINGLE TAX SOCIETY, PHILA., MARCH 12, 1914.

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John Sherwin Crosby belonged to a generation of reformers whose lives may be said to have fallen within the classic period, when the eloquence of Henry George was enlisting the world in the new crusade against unjust taxation. I cannot speak of Mr. Crosby as one of his intimates, but even my inadequate tribute is not without a certain fitness as offered to one who took part in a similar meeting held in New York in memory of my father.

I have heard it whispered that reformers are rather given to memorializing one another and basking in the sunshine of mutual admiration, and as I desire not to err in that direction, I shall not attempt a eulogy. Suffice it to say that John S. Crosby was a man whose charm of manner and intellectual equipment put measurably within his reach the higher prizes in his profession, and he might have excused himself from assuming the handicap of an unpopular agitation. But, responding to a generous and compassionate nature, he hastened to sustain a brief for all who suffered from oppression and misery under a false and cruel economic system.

Times have changed since then, and it is no longer considered a sign of mad eccentricity to confess the Single Tax faith. The world is growing dangerously tolerant, and has almost ceased to brand us as "anarchists," "socialists," or "communists," in the sense that we are thirsting for a sort of French Revolution and an opportunity to despoil the rich. Henry George is almost universally spoken of with respect, and even our opponents are apologetic at not having read *Progress and Poverty*.

Only in the very fastnesses of monopoly does the name Henry George still evoke a figure of terror. It was Josiah Wedgwood who said that "To the House of Lords 'socialism' means something ridiculous about 'promiscuous love,' something merely immoral, but the word 'Henry George,' suggests actual robbery. In the House of Commons he was only 'a half-educated fanatic,'