

# How an Editor tries to sell readers the Big One

THEY TALK about the "power of the press."

Well, it is probably true that a well-established publication which consistently does its job has some measurable impact on its readers.

But as editor and publisher of the Salem, New Hampshire *Observer* (paid circulation 5,120), I am as much aware of limitations as of power.

If I had my way, you see, the people would long ago have amended their constitution to allow a gradual shift in the property tax from improvements to land values. And the people of the three towns served by the weekly *Observer* as its only local source of news – Salem, Pelham and Windham – would by this time have completed that gradual shift and be living happily ever after.

The truth is that those ends have not been accomplished in the 32 years during which I have wielded some measure of "power" as a working newspaperman in my native state, and it isn't because I haven't tried. I don't even have the alibi that the failure is the result of a shortsighted boss. As both editor and publisher for 24 of those years, I have chafed under no saddle except that of the

marketplace.

There may be some value in a brief look at my particular, narrowly-circumscribed role in what can properly be called an ongoing international effort. It comes under the category: case study. Let me offer my circumstances as a thin slice on a laboratory slide.

## By Richard Noyes

Instead of going to college, where they keep so many words in storage, I went from high school into theatre, where they use words as a commodity. I was one of the red-headed boys in a play called *Life With Father*. World War II detoured me into three years as a U.S. Navy flyer, but among my clearer memories of the Pacific Theatre is the one of the long days I spent, between trips as a transport pilot to Guam and Samar, inside Honolulu's public library. I wrote a book called *Growth*, which wasn't much good because I hadn't yet found anything worth writing about.

IT WAS apparent to me from childhood, as an awareness of the world around me began to emerge, fed by parents with active though not formally-schooled minds, nourished by a set of *Compton's Pictured Encyclopedia* whose pages my thumb had worn, and stimulated by a public school system I have no wish to fault, that words were wonderful, really wonder full.

I wrote a five-act play in blank verse about Edgar Allen Poe. As a high school student when Neville Chamberlain was being shown here in news reels with his umbrella, I wrote and won a prize for acting in a melodramatic one-acter about what a bad man Hitler was.

The theatre is not an easy ambition to set aside, but it seemed vaguely clear after the war, even to a bewildered young man, that the real magnet was language – words – and that words were used more abundantly in newspapers than anywhere else.

So I went back to New Hampshire in search of a worthy use to which they might be put.

AS A SMALL town reporter for a daily paper, I had a beat

## Free trade and the problem of mercantilism....

IN HIS spirited attack on protectionism, Nick Bilitch (Sept.-Oct. issue) concluded that "The case for free trade does not rest on the unique circumstances experienced by Britain during the nineteenth century; its basic truths are timeless".

Unfortunately, this very timelessness may constitute free trade's major disadvantage. Comparative advantage is a static concept with no inbuilt dynamic for structural change. Specialisation makes for inertia, and in the natural order it has often been the route to extinction, whereas man-the-adaptable has thrived.

Today's comparative advantages are the product of particular historic sequences. That one country should have an advantage in manufactures and another in raw materials can mainly be explained by the history of mercantilism. Every economic "take-off" except Hong Kong's has been founded on mercantile policies. Adam Müller, Friedrich List, Gustav Schmoller, Alexander Hamilton, Henry Carey – none were convinced that England should be allowed special dispensation in this matter. Mercantilism, it would seem, is the *laissez-faire* of violent nation-building ages.

Leopold Kohr observed of the developed nations that "as men and women do in

marriage, they united with the fully developed world after they had reached maturity, not in order to reach it". The human analogy can be pressed further. Infant human beings are protected and yet they manage to grow up!

### Letter to the Editor

May this not also be true of infant industries? It would seem to have been the norm in the whole of the developed world. British textiles conquered India through political fiat, rather than economic competition. It is in geriatrics that there is no economic future.

Mercantilism, then, is a stage on the road to *laissez-faire* – as can even be observed in Russia and China today. It is the means by which the nation is built up and internal barriers are removed, preparing the field for unregulated free enterprise. And, of course, it is quite immoral. But history cannot be gainsaid: comparative advantage is the fruit of power struggle.

What comfort then can we offer underdeveloped countries which are denied this route to prosperity? Foreign aid is the recognised mode of compensation for the handicaps of history, but it is notoriously partial and unrelated to real handicaps.

"In justice is the highest and truest

expediency." Contributions to the development fund should therefore come from economic surplus which is not earned but which is due entirely to the granting of political privileges, such as ownership of land. Such is the case with land value taxation. But if 30% of Britain's GNP is concerned with foreign trade then one must assume that land values are inflated by some function of 30%. Returning to the community that which is created by the community requires that a proportion of land value tax should go abroad, and where better than into the development fund?

Another component of such a pool of resources could be related to the terms of trade – the rate at which exports from different countries exchange against each other. The income gained from favourable movements in the terms of trade for some countries could be taxed and credited to those countries which have lost out.

Such a system assumes a common renunciation of mercantilism and a common acquiescence in the values underpinning Nick Bilitch's arguments. "Timelessness" is a great advantage. It is necessary to have an awful lot of faith in the power of abstract thought!

David Richards,

Bridgend, Mid-Glamorgan



● Richard Noyes (left) meets congressman Henry Reuss (Democrat: Milwaukee) after giving evidence to a committee in Washington

which included a druggist and Town Clerk named George Duncan, a memorable man. He understood both his town and his state, and for reasons that seemed to me strange, he kept asking me questions that didn't have obvious answers. I was the reporter, and should have been doing the asking, but it was clear he was trying to tell me something in his old oblique way. So I kept tracking down his leads.

One day it all dawned. I have read *Progress & Poverty* since, biographies of Henry George, his other books, and a great deal else. I have full respect for how much more there is left to be read on the subject. The point here is not that I knew everything all at once. It is simply that George's concept came over as a Big One — subordinate to language, maybe, but not by much. It was well worth the use of any words I could scrape together, and I have been at that business ever since.

New Hampshire's written constitution is the second oldest on earth. It has been the subject of review in 16 constitutional conventions by citizens elected for that purpose and no other, who have thereby shaped our state. George Duncan never told me, but I found from reading the record that he was trying, at the age of 36 in the ninth convention of 1912 to accomplish what I am still trying to manage. He was at it again in the tenth convention in 1918 and the eleventh in 1930, and as a state legislator during eleven terms.

It would be an over-simplification

to attribute cause and effect, but the truth is that New Hampshire stands now as the only state in the Union with neither a general sales nor a general income tax. We are more heavily dependent upon the property tax than any other state and, because land is increasingly being assessed here at full value, we come as close as any American state to enjoying the advantages of land value taxation.

The difficulty with which I wrestle, in my newspaper, is that people still fail to understand why we are the only state out of the sunbelt and the burgeoning West growing faster than the national average. Our fisc is sound, and people are "voting with their feet" by moving into a state where taxes seem reasonable, but they don't see Henry George's influence in it, even though I tell them time and again.

New Hampshire people see half the picture, which is probably better than nothing. Because they still fail to see the property tax as two taxes it is difficult to alert them to the dangers in the skyrocketing cost of land which must inevitably (short of land value taxation) be found in a state where so many people want to come to live.

And because they want to come here because of our low taxes, their minds won't open up to the idea that low taxes on buildings and incomes are one thing — low taxes on land quite another.

**W**ELL, what's to be done about it? How can the power of the press be brought to bear on the circumstances so briefly described?

My answer comes out of my style as an editor, and it is not far different from the method by which George Duncan cracked open my mind. I keep printing the truth, in little pieces, mixed in with the baseball scores and the wedding announcements, trying to never miss a trick.

The job of an editor, it seems to me, is to anticipate what questions the reader will have in mind the day he gets his paper, and print clear answers. You can't tell a reader what he doesn't want to hear. He won't read it. It's like the horse and the water to which you can lead him but which he must be left free to drink.

There are two essential ingredients in a successful newspaper, I think: clarity and credibility. The reader can't be told everything all at once without clouding his mind, and the editor can't "sing one song" over and over again without coming across as some kind of nut.

But there are some things which have to be said.

Salem, on the Massachusetts border where the major highway comes in from Boston, has for 20 years felt the full impact of the growth which springs out of our tax climate. Land values here are going through the roof. Nowhere in the state is a better job being done of keeping their assessments up where they constitutionally belong, and that helps keep us healthy. We have all the school buildings we need, and the police and firemen have the tools they deserve to do their job. Salem, for all its growth, is being seen at Concord, New Hampshire's capital, and in a small way at Washington D.C., as different enough to warrant understanding. I never miss a chance to tell lawmakers why we're getting along as well as we are.

But there is also the truth that must be faced: land prices keep going up, and at a rate which must eventually spell trouble. We're getting to the situation where people can't afford to come and live with us because a building lot costs so much.

That puts me in a position, as the editor who has kept telling them to hold taxes on most things down, to start telling people to push taxes on land values up. It seems inconsistent to some readers.

But so far no one, not even an advertiser, has asked me to stop. One banker, who holds the mortgage on the few acres I own, reminded me how much money I was making on them and questioned my judgment, but he didn't say anything to make me nervous.