

George In The News...

"A TAX TREATISE THAT SHOOK THE WORLD"

by Don Wegars

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"It's time to get our act together," Paul Nix admitted yesterday, opening the centennial celebration of the publication of Henry George's **"Progress & Poverty."**

There were 100 or so people on hand for the meeting in the Jack Tar Hotel, but they represented 11 nations and more than a dozen U.S. states, and they were still engaged - as hundreds of thousands before them had been - in trying to translate into action the "single tax" economic philosophy with which George rocked the world from San Francisco in 1879.

George wrote the book in a house on Rincon Hill while he was official state gas meter inspector. It became a worldwide best seller - more popular at the time than "Das Kapital" - and almost catapulted the rather obscure printer-journalist into the governorship of New York.

It is, Nix said yesterday, "A visionary work that gives us an idea of what the good life might be like."

Basically, George believed that increasing wealth brought increasing poverty because those who own the land get rich at the expense of those who work the land. The simplified solution is to tax the land only and not tax the buildings on it or the products made from it.

"What he really wanted to do," Nix said, "was eliminate poverty by shifting taxes away from the products of human endeavor."

Nix, president of the Henry George School of New York, suggested that the simplicity of the idea in "Progress and Poverty" leads to some problems.

"Different Georgists reach different conclusions," he said, "because it is so comprehensive that it's difficult to grasp entirely."

The schedule for the week-long centennial also suggests the extent of the problems involved in working with George's economic idea.

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Titles of talks include "Who Owns What Where?", "Site Value Rating in South Africa," "Justification of Public Property in a Free Society" and "Progressive Utilization Theory."

Those grappling with the questions include members of parliament from Denmark, Australia and New Zealand, state legislators; educators; professors - a cross-section of people who study economics.

There is, for example, Philip Finkelstein, deputy city administrator of New York City in the Lindsay administration (1966 to 1973).

"I was there during the days when 'urban' wasn't a dirty word," he said yesterday.

The Georgist movement, he said, "is not a mass movement - although maybe that's the trouble - but it is influential through the people who pick up ideas from it. We don't go marching with banners very often."

Georgists say they do not just fall into the traditional right-left political stereotype, and Finkelstein agrees.

"The argument of socialism versus free enterprise kind of evaporates with Georgism," he said.

Robert Scrofani, former president of San Francisco Tomorrow and a host from the San Francisco Henry George School, said the old J.C. Penny building at Fifth and Market Streets is an example of how non-Georgist economics tend to be non-productive.

The tax on the land itself hasn't increased recently because the building is unoccupied, and in disrepair.

"But if the land were taxed at its true value," he said, "there'd be a building there with people in it, working, because the landlord would have to pay taxes."

George came to his theories in a self-taught fashion after years on sailing ships, in the gold fields of California and Canada, and as a printer and journalist.

He was managing editor of The Chronicle for a time, and started the San Francisco Daily Evening Post.

He is also credited with bringing the secret ballot to the United States after he was defeated by Tammany Hall forces in a close election for mayor of New York City in 1886.
