

## Laying out the idyllic life in a latter-day Arden

*Frank Stephens saw a vision of Utopia in the single-tax theory of Henry George and set out to make it come true in rural Delaware*

The name rings like a merry little bell for all who know their Shakespeare—"Arden." It was the name of the enchanted forest in *As You Like It*—the forest that resounded with music and song, the murmurs of lovers and the jests of Touchstone—where a jolly band of young gentlemen went willingly into exile with the banished duke, there to "fleet the time carelessly, as they did in the golden world." It is a joyous spot on literature's map, and in the early 1900s a merry band of American dreamers put an Arden on the map of Delaware. It is there today, tucked among the suburbs of Wilmington, an oasis of idiosyncrasy.

Its citizens have been people of ideas—poets, novelists, playwrights and actors; painters, sculptors, metal-smiths and potters; Socialists, Communists, pacifists and anarchists; promoters of Esperanto, advocates of free love, and in the words of one early resident, "conservatives who had no ideas at all." In their enchanted forest they built a forge and craft shops in order to earn their livings by making and selling useful and beautiful things; they built an intimate open-air theater for performances of the works of the Bard; they staged elaborate medieval pageants, in costumes of their own design, to re-create the spirit of a simpler age; in the twilight, they gathered by a bonfire to sing

Naaman's Creek, site of Arden aquatic pageants, is bordered by beech and poplar, with paths for strolling.





Stephens' reverence for Shakespeare was carried into design of his half-timbered stucco home, built in 1909

with leaded-glass windows. He even carved a favorite motto, "Tomorrow is a New Day," into one crossbeam.

songs and tell stories, cherishing their sense of community. Valuing cooperation above competition, they strove to be happy rather than rich. Delawareans thought they were nuts.

I wish I could say that I discovered Arden in some appropriately romantic fashion—that my Land Rover was stopped by hooded archers in a bosky byway; that I was kidnapped by free-love agitators on a dark and stormy night; or that I tracked a fugitive Soviet coup meister to a secret Stalinist camp in the Delaware woods. Alas, I found it in a book. Browsing through the 1938 Works Progress Administration (WPA) guide to Delaware, I discovered a long description of Arden and decided to find out if this wonderful settlement could possibly have survived the intervening decades.

I found, first of all, that it is not easy to collect information about Arden in the usual ways. I called Directory Assistance to ask for the number of the Arden town hall.

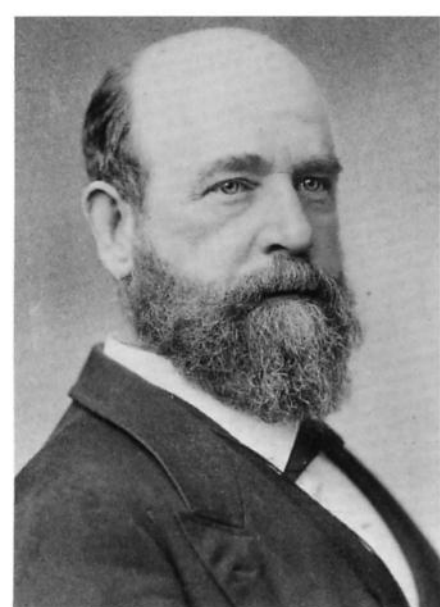
- "No listing."
- "Office of the mayor or village supervisor?"
- "No listing."
- "All right, the chamber of commerce, then?"
- "No listing."
- "Historical society? Rotary? Kiwanis? Elks?"

- "No listing."
- "Is there a listing of any kind for any town offices?"
- "None. But there is an Arden Club."
- "I'll take that."

A few phone calls later I was talking with the granddaughter of Ella Reeve (Mother) Bloor, the famous Communist labor agitator, and she invited me to visit the next Sunday afternoon.

Arden had apparently not changed all that much: I was able to navigate through it quite well by the 54-year-old WPA map. The whole place had a relaxed and congenial atmosphere. The obsessive orderliness of the typical American suburb is absent here. Arden's houses seem to lounge haphazardly under their leafy canopy of trees. That lawn could use a trim; that house, a dose of paint. The street signs are not the standard-issue green rectangles with glow-in-the-dark white letters; they are wooden, with the names carved into them. Surrounding the village green are stuccoed cottages and half-timbered Tudor fantasies, one of them displaying the motto "Tomorrow is a New Day" in Gothic letters (above). That's Arden for you—the future in Gothic script.

Mother Bloor's granddaughter, Joan Ware Colgan, told me about children learning modern dance on the



Henry George, single-tax father, almost won New York mayoralty race in 1886.

to play the title role, savoring the sweet pain of imagining himself the betrayed, misunderstood dictator. His character was a curious, contradictory mixture of idealism and practicality, of the progressive and the reactionary, of the puritan and the libertine—all of which, in time, would come to be a good description of Arden itself.

All across America there are dead utopias—Brook Farm, Oneida, Kaweah, Modern Times, Memnonia—places where dreamers pledged to plow and thresh together, to share equally in the sweat and fruits of labor, to yield their individuality or their spouses to the commune. Stephens made no such demands for socialist communality on his fellow citizens; indeed, Arden has always been a crazy quilt of ideologies and an arena of spectacular personality clashes. Stephens did, however, found the village upon a set of economic and social principles. For years he had been a foot soldier in a reformist crusade that is virtually forgotten today, but which fired the world with hope a century ago—the single-tax movement led by the maverick, self-taught economist Henry George. Arden is a living vestige of George's ideals.

The first 40 years of Henry George's life were like a Horatio Alger story without the payoff. Born in Philadelphia in 1839, he went to work at age 13 as an office boy; at 16 he went to sea on a freighter. Back in Philadelphia, and then in Boston and San Francisco, he worked hard at a variety of occupations, mainly journalism. But his efforts to start a news service ran smack dab into an unbreakable monopoly. Meanwhile he sank deeper into debt and degradation. Everywhere he looked he saw poverty growing worse and worse as America's wealth increased, and he wondered why. The answer, he decided, was land. At home in San Francisco, he poured his ideas into a book called *Progress and Poverty*, which for a time threatened to turn the country on its ear.

Henry George's ideas require something larger than a nutshell, but fundamentally he believed that it was a mistake to have private ownership of land. Landowners were nothing but parasites, feeding off the productivity of others through their extraction of rent and high selling prices for land. Whenever productivity improved, bringing increases in wages and business profits, landowners raised their rents or selling prices for the ground beneath homes, stores, businesses and factories, even though they themselves had contributed nothing to the increased productivity. "Rent," George reasoned, "is thus an invisible tax on enterprise. . . . a tax on capital as well as on wages."

His remedy? Ideally, the federal government should nationalize the land, but that was not practical. "*It is not necessary to confiscate land,*" George wrote, "*it is only necessary to confiscate rent.*" Taxing land at its full rental value would effectively turn all the profits of landholding to the common use. The revenue from such a tax would be so great that all other

green from a member of Isadora Duncan's troupe; about Upton Sinclair living here for a while and losing his wife to some wandering poet; about a pacifist who went to jail during World War I and then went to Russia to teach the Communists how to drive a tractor. She talked about William Morris' idea that artists could live together and make the things they need, and about something called the single tax, which is not a special levy on the unmarried. Listening to Joan, I realized that, by some strange alchemy, the theories and philosophies and crazy hopes of a hundred years ago remain very much alive in this place.

Arden was founded in 1900 by a 40-year-old sculptor and businessman named Frank Stephens. He was slim and good-looking, with a rugged, chiseled face and short, sandy hair. By nature he was autocratic, and he could be hot-tempered in the defense of his beliefs. As an amateur Shakespearean actor, his favorite tragedy was *Julius Caesar*, in which he liked

*The author is a freelance writer whose new book, Old Houses, is a series of essays on venerable American homes.*



Tricked out in "tax" armbands, Frank invaded Delaware and landed in prison.





Joan Ware Colgan, granddaughter of Mother Bloor, is an Arden trustee.

levies could be abolished, replaced by the single tax.

The idea captured the imagination of people from every social and economic class. *Progress and Poverty* sold two million copies in the United States and was translated into a dozen languages. Both George Bernard Shaw and Sun Yat-sen said their ideas were shaped by Henry George. John Dewey declared that George was one of the ten greatest philosophers since Plato. Leo Tolstoy wrote an introduction to a Russian edition of George's works and approached the Romanovs about converting Russia to the single tax. (Interestingly, Karl Marx hated *Progress and Poverty*, dismissing it as the "capitalists' last ditch.")

Throughout this country, enthusiasts joined single-tax clubs to discuss and promote George's ideas. Among the more fervent from the economist's hometown of Philadelphia was Frank Stephens. In the early 1890s Stephens went to New York to place himself at George's service, becoming one of his valued lieutenants. With other Philadelphia single-taxers, Stephens plotted strategy for a blitzkrieg during the 1896 elections. They needed to capture an entire political entity where

they could install the single-tax system and prove that it worked. They decided to take over Delaware.

In preparation for the campaign, scores of single-taxers went into training as public speakers. It is said that Demosthenes put pebbles in his mouth and orated to the waves; the single-taxers formed a Shakespeare Club and honed their skills on "Friends, Romans, countrymen!" Brown uniforms, emblazoned with a symbol of the Earth, were stitched up, and thus attired, the single-taxers commenced the invasion of Delaware to promote their slate of candidates.

But Delaware resisted being made the test tube for the millennium. Denounced in the press as "depraved and irresponsible vagabonds," the invaders were arrested one by one for violating the public-speaking and public-assembly regulations; Stephens was the second to be hauled in. In the face of diligent police work, the campaign was in danger of faltering, but Stephens believed he had a trump card. The master himself, Henry George, was monitoring the campaign with his chief strategists. If the author-

ities arrested him, there would be an immense public outcry. In high excitement, the single-taxers wired George: "Do you wish to personally test the law? Sentence for 30 days certain." But George drew the line at civil disobedience and refused to come. The single-tax slate was resoundingly defeated.

It was just as well that George stayed out of jail. Although he was only 58 years old, his health was failing rapidly. He suffered a fatal stroke in October 1897.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the scope of the grief felt at George's sudden death. An elderly abolitionist said that in his memory only Lincoln's assassination had touched the nation more deeply. George's son, touring Russia about a decade later, paid a call on Tolstoy, who offered to carry a personal message to George in the afterlife: "I shall see your father before you do. What shall I tell him?" "Tell him," said the son, "I kept the faith."

So did Frank Stephens. With another single-taxer from Philadelphia, an architect named Will Price, Stephens made plans for Arden. It would



The colony was a rustic summer retreat for city folk, but in its first decade many of Arden's residents also chose to live in tents.



In heyday, Arden Forge made fine ironwork, such as andirons, sconces.



Turning out jewelry and silver occupied this young woman in the early days.



Patrons bought, and residents bartered for, Weave Shop's fine linens, wools.



Caning and basket weaving were other crafts for which Arden was noted.

be right under the noses of his old enemies in Delaware. With his own money and some of Price's, and a loan from millionaire soap manufacturer Joseph Fels, who had a deep interest in the single-tax movement, Stephens purchased a 162-acre farm north of Wilmington.

Stephens drew up a deed of trust that established Arden as a single-tax enclave along the lines that George

had proposed: there would be no private ownership of land; the land would be held in trust by three trustees, who would grant 99-year leases to residents. The trustees would determine the value of each parcel and set the land rent—the single tax—to be paid annually. (This duty was soon to be taken over by elected assessors.) No other local levies would be assessed. As time went on and land values rose,

rents would increase—so the wealth created by the community, reflected in the rising value of the land, would be shared by the community. Residents could sell their houses but not the land. Upon the sale of a house, the land lease would be transferred to the new owner.

It was one thing to draw up a document governing a patch of empty acres; it was quite another to fill those acres with a living population. Turning to the ideas of the English reformers John Ruskin and William Morris, Stephens envisioned a community of artists and artisans who would support themselves in modest comfort, producing fine objects. In this village of tidy cottages and shops and forges, of genial fraternity and sorority, the true coin of the realm would be art. Accordingly, Stephens drew up a manifesto of principles: "The Arden craftsmen are a company of men and women who believe with the great English craftsman and prophet William Morris that 'all men should have work to do which shall be worth doing and be of itself pleasant to do' and which should be done under such conditions as would make it neither overwearisome nor overanxious. They believe also with Ruskin that men need not be baited into a shop like moths into a candle and that there are those who will buy what is useful without being ill-designed and dishonestly made even though its cost is more than that of factory goods."

The program required the proper setting. Will Price laid out the village, devoting nearly half of the land to greens, forests, paths and roads. He arranged house lots and roads to follow the contours of the land rather than the grid of a draftsman, and knitted the town together by a network of paths in an early example of separating vehicular and pedestrian traffic. Price's carefully groomed rustic setting and half-timbered cottages brought to life the medievalist spirit of William Morris. The spirit of Shakespeare hovered over the enter-



houses picturesquely set under trees that fringed the Common," occupied by "folk of every shade of radical opinion . . . who here strove to escape the galling mockeries of civilisation and win back again to pastoral simplicity." Simplicity included not washing the dishes—Sinclair and his family ate from wooden plates and tossed them into the fire at the end of a meal.

Kemp moved into a tent provided by Sinclair and quickly adapted to the rhythm of life in Arden. He was awakened by the birds, and spent his days writing and in literary conversations with Meta. He attended a "circus" in which all the animals were Ardenites in costume, and passed many a pleasant twilight at the communal sing-alongs in the woods: "the music softened our hearts and fused us into one harmony of feeling."

It would be gratifying to say that Arden enjoyed a long era of good

feeling, but that was not the case. Stephens' open-door policy created problems because many of the settlers were Socialists (a few were anarchists) who regarded the single-taxers as politically suspect and had little use for their theories. In the summer of 1911, an anarchist shoemaker named George Brown, who thought the village was getting a bit too respectable, decided to stir things up: he used a public committee meeting as a forum for his theories of sexuality, prompting the committee to have him arrested for disrupting the proceedings. Noting that the committee members habitually played baseball on the town green on Sundays, Brown went into Wilmington to have *them* arrested for "gaming on the Sabbath" in violation of an ancient state law. Upton Sinclair was caught in this net, as he had played tennis on the Sunday in question, and spent a night in the county

workhouse with the other violators. A crowd of reporters descended upon New Castle County to get the story, giving Sinclair the opportunity to denounce conditions in the jail to a national audience.

Sinclair soon made headlines again, in a scandal that helped create Arden's reputation as a free-love nest. The marriage of Upton to Meta had been unraveling before they got to Arden, and the arrival of Harry Kemp made for a triangle. During a chat with Meta, Kemp's eye had caught "the white gleam of one of her pretty legs where the elastic on one side of her bloomers had slipped up." Several weeks later Meta was slipping her bloomers completely off, as she and a naked Kemp played nymph and satyr, chasing each other through the Arden woods. One afternoon there was a moment of panic when they couldn't recall where they had stashed their

clothes. Harry and Meta left Arden for New York, and Upton filed suit for divorce to the accompaniment of trumpet blasts of publicity.

Free love was not part of the single-tax program, but it might as well have been. The story is still told of a beautiful young model who fell in love, simultaneously, with two artists who were painting her. She told them to flip a coin to see who would claim fatherhood of her son, and they did. At some point in his life Stephens became a believer in free love. In the 1880s he had been married to Caroline Eakins, the youngest sister of the painter Thomas Eakins (SMITHSONIAN, November 1991). She died in 1889, not long after giving birth to her third child. In a strange controversy that took place in 1886, Stephens had been the prime mover in the ouster of Eakins from his post as director of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, supposedly because of liberties Eakins had taken with his female students. But in the 1890s Stephens was living in sin quite openly with a woman named Elenor Getty. She never liked the free-love arrangement and finally persuaded him to go through with the

formality of marriage—to his dismay.

One of today's Ardenites whose memories stretch back to the early years is Amy Potter Cook. Ask her about the romantic scandals that swirled around Arden, and she responds, "Free love—we had that all over the place." But joshing an outsider, especially on the subject of sex, is an old Arden sport. As Amy relates, "Frank Stephens used to tell people, with a straight face, 'On very hot nights we take off our clothes and go into the creek to sleep.'"

Amy has vivid memories of Stephens working at his forge and of Will Price acting in Arden's Shakespeare productions. "Their whole idea," she says, "was to reenact Merrie Olde England." Her recollection is borne out by photographs of elaborate pageants, with knights and maidens (but no Godivas) riding through the town. Few onlookers appear because just about everyone in Arden was *in* these pageants. "The costumes were magnificent," Amy recalls. A brief memoir by Marjory Poinsett Jobson describes the Venetian Water Carnivals. During the day there were diving contests, races, games and music. When night

fell, the revelers walked down a path illuminated by candles to the creek for a waterborne pageant: "a queen and her court . . . came floating downstream on a barge with torches glowing and music playing as the pretty girls in long flowing dresses smiled and threw flowers to the crowd."

With the coming of World War I, Arden and the whole single-tax movement were split on the issue of pacifism. Daniel Kiefer sr., an Arden resident and pacifist, was removed from the chairmanship of the national single-tax organization. Stephens' son Donald spent nine months in jail for refusing to serve. He was nearly joined by his father.

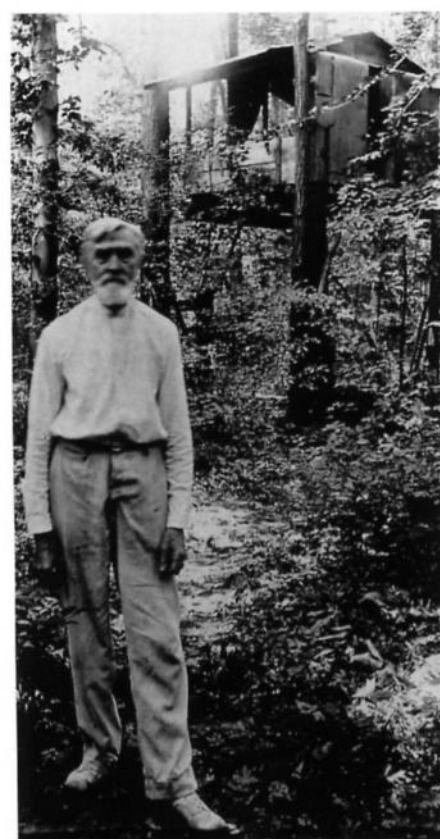
In 1918 a certain Mabel P. Van Trump called upon Ardenites to buy Liberty Bonds. Stephens fell upon her like a tiger: "You are a murderer and everybody who sells Liberty Bonds!" he thundered. "You are sending our soldiers abroad to be murdered!" Van Trump duly reported this outburst to the authorities, and Stephens found himself in federal court, charged with "making a certain false statement with intent to interfere with the operation and success of the military and naval forces of the United States." A jury refused to believe that calling Mabel Van Trump a murderer in Arden put the doughboys in jeopardy in France. Stephens was acquitted. One of the jurors sent him the \$9 he had received for sitting on the panel.

In 1922 the single-tax experiment expanded with the creation of Ardentown on 110 acres adjacent to Arden. A few years later, Stephens helped found Gilpin's Point, another single-tax community near Denton, Maryland. Visiting there with his two sons in 1935, he merrily organized an Arden-style campfire and, according to Donald, was "the life of the evening. He sang, recited and read Uncle Remus stories to us." The next day, Stephens, who had a history of heart trouble, was dead of a heart attack.

By that time Arden had been dealt heavy blows by the Depression, which



In 1928 Donald Stephens put on a Russian Night to benefit the village. It included this scene in a fourth-class Russian train.



Writer Upton Sinclair by tree house:  
it sparked rumor Ardenites lived in trees.

wiped out much of the market for expensive, high-quality crafts and forced the closure of the Craft Shop. But the Ardenites hung on. Joan Colgan remembers that there was a lot of bartering during the Depression, and "a lot of cooperation." The townspeople grew their own food and had communal canning sessions at the Gild Hall. Arden managed to survive, but no one knows how. As Amy Potter Cook says, "Everybody in Arden always wondered about that themselves."

Then, in 1950, there was a further expansion. Donald Stephens was instrumental in the purchase of another section of adjacent land to form the town of Ardencroft. This time the planners reached out to one group that had previously been left out of the Arden experiment—African-Americans. Village leaders went into Wilmington to recruit them. The presence of these families brought Ardenites face-to-face with the question of inte-

grating their grammar school. They did so, becoming the first locality in Delaware to integrate voluntarily.

In the early 1950s Arden was still a place apart, a forest surrounded by farms. Then came the suburbs. The growth of the DuPont company spawned huge housing developments around Wilmington. Arden was protected from unwanted development by its deed, which set aside the forests and other common lands as forever untouchable. Isolated within its bastion of greenery, with its private holidays and pageants and its peculiar history, Arden was viewed with wariness by the new neighbors. The old stories of free love, anarchism and Communism floated up again.

Alan and Maria Burslem, who grew up in Arden in the 1950s and '60s, recall the culture shock that occurred when Arden kids graduated from the town's grammar school and ventured into the regional junior high school.



Maria says, "I had some friends in junior high who were not allowed to come to Arden. Their parents had heard rumors about that crazy little town, that it was a nudist camp."

Alan thinks that the outsiders' fears arose partly because Arden just looked so different: "We had trees and dense growth. Arden was a scary place to go into from the land of a thousand brand-new houses and no trees."

The Burslems and their two sons live in a house Maria's great-grandfather built as a summer place in 1919 (it has been greatly enlarged since then). She has the deed fixing the original annual rent of \$10.65 for the land. Also on the property are Alan's pottery workshop and showroom. "It's a great place to be an artist," he says. "We wander around to each other's studios. I drag people into mine when I'm excited about new work."

Maria finds that the old Arden spirit is still alive: "There is a deep caring among those who live here. We treasure that closeness. You're in contact with all different generations. It's inspiring to see Rae Gerstine dancing away at the folk dance every Wednesday, at age 91 or whatever."

Rae can indeed be found at the regular Wednesday folk dancing at the Gild Hall, a meeting place that had been the barn of the farmer who sold the land to Frank Stephens. Under the lofty ceiling, people of all ages square dance to recorded music and a live caller. After a few numbers, the caller steps down from the stage, and a folk-dance instructor puts on recordings of Polish, Armenian, Israeli and other dances. When Rae finally decides to sit out, she talks animatedly of her life in Arden. "I was 93 last November, but I still function. I do so much I can't keep pace with everything. I dance and I go swimming." She is also one of the financial pillars of the town, serving as the secretary-treasurer of the Arden Building & Loan, which she operates out



Woodland *Midsummer Night's Dream* typified early plays and pageants; almost everyone was an eager participant.



Sculptor was but one of Stephens' roles; some others: scholar, actor, economist.

of her home to keep the overhead low. "We charge no points," she says proudly. "When someone asks for a loan, I tell them the fee is \$5, payable in singles." The B & L takes two singles to cover processing costs (it makes loans only in the three Arden communities), and the appraisal committee gets the remainder.

Two beneficiaries of the Building & Loan's lending program are Susan and Edward Rohrbach, who are putting an addition on their house facing the Arden Green. Called Rest Cottage, the half-timbered house is one of the oldest in town. It was designed by Will Price himself. Both Rohrbachs are painters, and Edward is an architect as well. He is designing and building the addition himself, to harmonize with the original architecture. The interior is cozy, and crowded with books and artworks. A large wood-burning stove takes up a good part of the living room; there is no other heat. In the yard, the Rohrbach children, ages 10 and 13, have a ramshackle playhouse built of scraps, harmonizing with no particular style but entirely in the spirit of Arden.

Susan grew up near Arden and al-



ways yearned to get in, especially after she had children. "I wanted them to experience the freedom and involvement of living in a community like this. They can be themselves here, and they also feel a real responsibility to the town. It's like an extended family."

With a population of about 500, Arden still operates under the single-tax system, which has an unusual effect on homeowners, an effect that is not to everyone's liking. Because Arden collects taxes based on land alone, regardless of what stands upon it, a small house on a half-acre is taxed at the same rate as a large house on a half-acre. As Henry George intended, the single-tax system rewards someone who gets maximum economic use from the smallest amount of land.

In a film history of Arden, Mike Curtis, an Arden resident who is the director of the Henry George School in Philadelphia, defends the peculiar results of the single-tax system: "What is a man getting from the community? He's getting . . . land. Well, he should pay the community for that. Through his own efforts he's built a big house. Why should he owe other people money for that? Why should

he pay a fine for his industry? To me, it makes all the sense in the world." (Single-tax fervor runs deep in Mike's family: at a raucous town meeting in 1954, his grandmother literally dropped dead arguing about someone trying to sell—sell!—land.)

Since 1967, when the village was incorporated, the controlling government body has been the Town Assembly, which meets four times a year. Budgets must be approved by a majority of eligible voters—age 18 or older—attending. The town's 1992 budget is about \$220,000, which Arden collects from its citizens through land rent. Of that amount, roughly \$150,000 will go to New Castle County for schools, police protection and property taxes (the town is *not* exempt from county property taxes). Arden pays for its own trash collection and road maintenance, and is covered by a nearby volunteer fire department.

The tax payment, or land rent, for a quarter-acre lot is about \$720, subject to adjustments according to the desirability of a lot's location. No bureaucracy exists; indeed, there are only two paid employees, both part-time: the secretary and the treasurer. Well-

organized committees staffed by volunteers do just about all of the work. In the words of one resident, "It's the purest democracy you can get."

With very little effort, Arden could have transformed itself into a tourist stop—a faux art colony with weekend studio tours and troubadours on the Green, or a Colonial Williamsburg of socialism and free love. But Ardenites have never aspired to make their community a living museum. Visitors who wander into it looking for entertainment will come away disappointed. It is quiet and picturesque, but there's no place to buy ice cream or HENRY GEORGE T-shirts. Nor is Arden an architectural theme park—mingling with the half-timbered cottages are ranch houses and split-levels. Despite the architectural impurities, Frank Stephens and Will Price would recognize much of their town if they stopped by today. They would also find the old spirit of Arden intact, a spirit described by a visitor in 1915: "Arden is the capital of the state of Uncritical Friendliness; it belongs to the federation of Mutual Helpfulness, under a constitution of Equal Opportunity. It is far removed from the world we know."

Busy Ardenites (from left): Rae Gerstine keeps Building & Loan solvent; Susan and Ed Rohrbach, with sons Alex (in cap) and Sian, are remodeling home; Amy Potter Cook holds a magazine cover she designed.

