

Opting out of the Rat Race

BY MICHAEL WIGAN



IN HIS BOOK *Travels With Charley*, an account of a ten thousand mile trip across the United States in a motor-caravan, John Steinbeck recalls how everywhere he went people wished that they could come along with him. In his own words, they had a "burning desire to go, to move, to get under way, any place, away from any Here. They spoke quietly of how they wanted to go some day, to move about, free and unanchored, not toward something but away from something."

Steinbeck says that "nearly every American hungers to move," but this longing is not confined to Americans, although they may feel it more strongly. The desire to "get away from it all" is strongly felt everywhere. Holiday makers are going ever further afield, and there is scarcely a place in Europe that is not now "on the map."

What are so many people trying to get away from? From work? No doubt this is part of the reason, for work for many people today is dull and monotonous. To a sunnier climate? Probably, for a dull monotonous climate makes a dull monotonous job just about unbearable after fifty weeks or so. From friends and neighbours? In today's unfriendly world the more uninhibited atmosphere of a holiday may provide a welcome break. From the city, in which so many people live? Undoubtedly, for even the most contented city dweller must find welcome peace and a change of scene in the countryside or at the coast.

But deep down under all these superficial causes there must be a more enduring reason. Many, many people, I suspect, are fed up with life; that is, fed up with life as it is lived today, fed up with the endless grind, the trapped feeling of living out a prison sentence, the sheer artificiality and (literally) killing pace they must submit to if they are not to go under. Life has lost its joy, its beauty, its adventure, and not all the consumer goods, the welfare services, the vast array of entertainment that are ours today can satisfy the longing for a happy and meaningful life. Modern man—Western man at any rate—has forgotten how to live, and if it strikes him, this is a shocking and a sobering thought. All our science, all our technology, though it may make life more pleasant in some ways, is also geared up to blot it out altogether—and not just by the atom bomb. There are the adulterated foods we eat, the unnatural farming methods we use, the poisoned air we breathe, the polluted water, the drugs, the additives, the stimulants we take to keep us going. For how much longer can man survive under conditions like these? With degenerative diseases and mental illness on the increase, with crime abounding, with standards of education falling, with indifference and apathy growing, and love and

charity on the decrease, is it any wonder that so many people want to "opt out" of our present civilisation and return to a simpler and more pleasant way of life?

Of course, for every hundred people who think like this, there is probably not more than one who actually does anything about it—perhaps not even one. To opt out of the rat race is not easy; one is in many respects a prisoner of it. In breaking a vicious circle, one does not know where to begin, and in this situation the advice of others who have done so can be invaluable.

In 1921, Ralph Borsodi, a New York advertising and marketing consultant, moved with his family from their city apartment to a smallholding in the country. There they raised crops and kept animals, wove cloth, sewed garments and built their own buildings. They called their mode of life "modern homesteading," Mr. Borsodi wrote about it, and the philosophy behind it, in *This Ugly Civilisation*.

From this experiment of Borsodi's grew the School of Living, an organisation dedicated to doing just what its title suggests—finding out how to live. The School of Living is now centred at Brookville, Ohio, and its Director of Education, Mildred J. Loomis, has produced a fascinating book called *Go Ahead and Live*. It is not a history or a text book about the School but a factual account of two real people—a young man and his wife—who decided to give up their city life and join the homestead pioneers.

Ron and Laura, as they are called in the book, made contact with the School of Living, called on its members for encouragement and advice, and here record their experiences.

The basis of a happy married life—according to modern psychologists—is a satisfactory sexual relationship. Ron and Laura consulted a psychiatrist about their emotional problems, to some effect, and this was the beginning of their changed way of life. They sought advice on diet and healthy habits of living. Laura decided to have her child, at home, without drugs or anaesthetic, and to breast feed it. (The opposition from the medical profession to this idea, which after all is what women have been doing since the world began, is astounding).

With three in the family, Ron and Laura decided to buy a house, but after discussing the economics of the project with School of Living friends, changed their minds.

Instead they visited established homesteads, which are of great range and variety, discussed the way of life with the modern homesteaders, and eventually rented a house and five acres of land, which they called, appropriately enough, "Training Ground."

During this period the couple learned more about

community homesteads (a number of homestead families on adjoining holdings) and eventually applied to join one. They leased some land from the homestead association for their own use and also worked on the communally-owned land that comprised the rest of the unit.

The aim of the homestead community is to be as independent as possible of the outside world. The community owns its own land, is self financing, grows its own food by organic farming methods, builds its own houses and educates its own children. Their methods are unorthodox but highly effective, and above all, the homesteaders possess what so many people seek—contentment, and a real joy in living.

Only one serious criticism must be made of this book, and that is of the economic views expressed by Ron and Laura's friends. They rightly object to the high price of land, and recognise that land is different from the products of men's hands, but they also object to paying interest, regarding this as unjust and as the basic cause of our economic troubles. They believe in the actuality of "overproduction" and are staunch malthusians, believing the breeding of more children than a homestead can support to be a crime against society.

Apart from the shaky economics, this can be recommended as an unusual and fascinating book. It gives practical advice on many subjects and suggests many books for further reading. For anyone sharing the feelings and frustrations of Ron and Laura Baker, here is something to set them thinking. Maybe it will encourage them, too, to *Go Ahead and Live*.

LAND AGENT FAVOURS SITE-VALUE RATING

MEMBERS of Stoke Newington and Hackney North Conservative Association, on June 22, heard Mr. T. A. Ende, a land agent, give an address on "Taxation and Rating Reform." The supporting speaker was Mr. V. H. Blundell, Secretary of the United Committee for the Taxation of Land Values. They were introduced by Mr. Peter Galbraith, J.P., Chairman of the Association.

"The defects in our rating system," said Mr. Ende, "are that the assessment has to be made on the value of the land plus improvements to it, and the rate is levied only if there is 'beneficial occupation.'"

"This so complicates the valuation officers' work that they and their staffs simply cannot cope with it." The simplification the speaker advocated was assessment of rates solely on land-value and levy of the rate whether there was "beneficial occupation" or not.

Throughout the United Kingdom, he said, town planning authorities had prepared town maps which could be made the basis of valuation for rating. He exhibited the town map of Stoke Newington and demonstrated that the whole of this area had been completely "zoned" for residential, commercial, industrial, public utility, educational, recreational and other uses.

"Density" and "plot ratios" together with the local "programming" of areas for re-development would

determine the capital value of the land and the rate could be levied as a percentage of that value. He showed residential districts with densities of 100 and 136 persons to the acre, and this, said the speaker, determined the capital value of the land on the basis that a developer was allowed 1.1 persons per room.

"Sales of land for development purposes in the neighbourhood indicate that developers would be prepared to pay about £540 per room for the freehold of large sites for residential purposes," said Mr. Ende, "and I should think that when Hackney Borough Council has completed the compulsory purchase of the odd numbers in Bethune Road, the value of the cleared site to a private developer per acre would be expressed by the following equation:—

$\text{£}(136 \times 540) \text{ divided by } 1.1 = \text{Say } \text{£}66,750 \text{ an acre.}$

"After payment of compensation to the occupiers of the existing houses, I should think the Council would make a 'dealer's profit' of about 70 per cent., on the cost of the land.

"The price at which a dealer would buy up property of this kind by private treaty without any compulsory powers and the price at which he would sell to a developer with 'outline' town planning permission, would represent respectively the capital value of the land before and after re-development, and I suggest that the rateable value would be about 6 per cent. on these respective values, and the rate in the £ would be assessed and charged on this."

The economic principles behind land-value rating had been laid down by Henry George, the American economist, and the speaker said that he had explained these in a widely-circulated booklet which he had written himself entitled "Taxation and Rating in the Twentieth Century."

George held that ultimately there were only three factors in the production of wealth—land, labour and capital—and that the wealth was channelled off in the form of (a) rent for the use of land; (b) wages or income arising from any human exertion, mental or physical, directed towards the production of wealth, and (c) interest on capital.

"He maintained," continued the speaker, "that the labour of the managing director, along with that of the works manager, office manager and sales manager and their whole staffs combined to create the wealth they were producing and that all capital used in their operations was renewed and maintained by their labour and therefore it was wrong to tax income and interest on capital and the proper source of all revenue was land values.

"That was indeed twentieth century taxation policy," said Mr. Ende. "I wonder what Conservative today could quarrel with it?"

Considerable discussion took place among the audience and both Mr. Ende and Mr. Blundell answered questions. Whilst both speakers agreed that the rate would fall ultimately upon the freeholder whether actually collected from him or not, Mr. Ende stressed that it would distribute itself evenly among the occupiers, each according to his use of the land and the value of it.