

Fairhope: A Sentimental Review

by Dian Arnold

(This essay, which Dian wrote in June, 1999, is published here as our way of saying goodbye to a dear friend and colleague. Dian Arnold passed away in January of this year. Her friendly, folksy, dynamic spirit will be missed by us all. She is survived by her husband of 36 years, Claude, and 6 children and 3 grandchildren. — L.D.)

Actually I first remember Fairhope in the 40s when my grandparents rented a cottage in the Battles Wharf community. I remember walking on the beach and playing in Mobile Bay. It was cool and I enjoyed the freedom there.

In the fall of 1953 my Dad moved to Mobile and went to work with Morris Timbes in his advertising business. With help from Mr. & Mrs. Timbes, my Dad persuaded my mother to allow me to attend the Organic School, located in Fairhope, as a boarding student. The school made a tremendous difference in my life and I shall always be grateful for that blessed experience. As a Senior in High School, I was required to take the course in Henry George's *Progress and Poverty*. The last session of that class was a brief summary of how Fairhope worked as a colony to demonstrate the validity of George's ideas.

After graduation I left Fairhope to pursue a career with horses. I learned a great deal in the two years away, but my biggest lesson was how much the community of Fairhope had meant to me. I gave up a lot of the comforts money could buy to be a part of it. I knew Fairhope had two things that made it unique: the Organic School and the Fairhope Single Tax Corporation.

I made up my mind to find a job, but devote my spare time doing what I could do to support and further the work of both organizations. It didn't take me long to learn the school and Fairhope Single Tax Corp. were closely related. The Corporation was founded by idealists who wanted to establish a colony to demonstrate the ability of all mankind to occupy this planet in harmony, productivity and provide a better life for all its inhabitants. They were concerned about the plight of so many poor people while there seemed to be so much wealth held by a very few.

Founding a community in a remote location on agriculturally sub-standard land required hard work and a lot of time, so they needed a school to provide their children with quality education. Marietta Johnson had studied education and desperately wanted an opportunity to demonstrate the validity of the new ideas she was discovering about how children learn — ideas different from the standard practice of the day, governed by the

desire to help all children develop their full potential. These ideals made for a natural co-operation. About thirteen years after the founders set to work building Fairhope, the Organic school started in a one-room building and land furnished by the Corporation.

It seems to me that lack of money, human mistakes in judgment and a lack of faith in the intelligence of the average citizen have plagued both these organizations over the years. Now the principles which provided the freedom and opportunity for so many to thrive and prosper have been replaced with the standard economic and educational practices of the day. But I'm still somewhat optimistic. If mankind truly makes progress and learns from past mistakes, there is a great deal to be learned from the Fairhope experience.

The idea of and validity of site value taxation was to me still very much in evidence. It alone provided for individuals of various talents and capabilities to use those abilities freely in a community with less monetary restrictions. It seems to me it can provide a better



Claude and Dian in 2000

life for everyone. It provides the freedom for people of different beliefs to work together — which benefits all. There were plots of deeded property priced high and out of use or vastly under used — but almost all of the Corporation lands were being used productively and to capacity.

There never was a Single Tax community in Fairhope because the residents pay income tax and State sales tax just like everyone else. What they didn't pay was improvement tax on personal property. They couldn't profit by withholding the sites they held by lease. It seems to me that they had was the freedom to be different — and the responsibility to use the land profitably. This left them with a keen interest in learning about the abilities and ideals of others. Somehow the prevailing human fear of new ideas just didn't seem to exist in Fairhope — even as late as the 60s.

Later, though, I believe that fear existed all through the development of Fairhope. The mistakes were largely because of fear — inability to finance or provide the manpower to maintain services and public sites. Some strong willed individuals felt they had to provide what was "best" — exercising judgement on behalf of the others. Had the founders been willing to charge non-lessees for

using the parks as the city government of Fairhope now does they would have had funds to keep the parks up. Had they offered to pay tuition at the Organic School for the children of lessees who wished to attend the school both the school and the Corporation would have benefited. The school would have had sufficient funds to maintain good educational practices, the lessees would have had an alternative to the public school and choices of opportunity have made the difference in this country in my opinion.

Had the Fairhope Single Tax Corporation kept rents up and in line with the demand for the sites, in spite of the lawsuits filed against them, possibly there would not have been so much site value for the lessees to sell when the use of the land changed and became so much in demand. Had the officers of the Corporation been willing to communicate — with lessees, public officials and the media — a clear understanding of the ideals under which the Corporation was founded, maybe individuals would have been drawn to embrace the practices and promote the ideals on a broader scale through political action. We might still have a community with the openness I found when I came here.

What we do have is a beautiful site, with some benefits in public parks — but from an economic standpoint, Fairhope is now much like any other Alabama community, where taxes are collected on site and improvement value. Individuals sell site value on leased land and pay an extra \$50 a year for their 99-year lease. There is no City sales tax. The city charges sufficiently for utilities to lessees and non-lessees alike to pay for the operation of city government and yet the charges aren't much more than any other community in this county.

We don't hear much about helping make a difference in this world, except for a handful of individuals. The corporation manages the paperwork for transfers and taxes, for a "not for profit" organization, on what amounts to about one eighth of the land area now comprising the community.

I sometimes wonder if Henry George's reform had been adopted by a County, State or Country, would it survive? Is it unrealistic to believe that mankind must continue with the inequality on this planet that seems so unjust for so many? Would human greed let a system that provided for a greater opportunity for freedom slip away when they became too comfortable in the material results? Sometimes it seems to me that is happening right here in the United States of America and yet it has taken quite some time in mankind's development to achieve the freedom we have experienced. Possibly this is just a period preparing us for the recognition, implementation and preservation of a still greater freedom and equality of opportunity. I must believe that is the case. **GJ**