

The Baker Land Bubble Bursts

Col. Jacob Baker was a Revolutionary hero who fought so valiantly in George Washington's armies—or so we are told—that, after the war, Congress awarded him a grant of land of many acres in his native State, Pennsylvania. But this hero was impecunious. He needed food and raiment. So, for a trifling rental he leased his lands for ninety-nine years.

The colonel died as he had lived, short of ready money, but he bequeathed his great tract of land to be shared equally by all his heirs. There could be no dividing up, however, until the end of the long lease. By that time the City of Philadelphia had squatted on some of the land; coal mines sprung up out of some of it. Ninety-nine years is a long time. The immediate heirs couldn't wait that long to enjoy the fruits of their inheritance. They died and forgot to mention it in their wills.

The lease expired eventually. According to our land laws, not only the land but all the improvements thereon legally reverted to the descendants of the original heirs. However, nobody turned up to claim it, so those in possession, though they were now only squatters or tenants at will, went right on selling and bequeathing the property.

Among these squatters were: United States Mint, United States Post Office, \$26,000,000 Philadelphia City Hall, Pennsylvania Railroad Station, Adelphi Hotel (\$2,300,000), Ritz Carlton (\$2,200,000), Bellevue Stratford (\$5,000,000), Land Title Building (\$7,300,000), Independence Hall, Franklin Square, much of the anthracite coal lands of Pennsylvania, Wanamaker Store, theatres, stores, houses, even Ben Franklin's grave.

Quite a haul. Which some years

ago the surviving Bakers decided it was time to deposit in the family coffers. Now our land laws are so complicated that to unscramble this mess required a lot of money. It was therefore necessary to corral the clan and their resources to make an assault on the land laws. So many years ago, seventy to be exact, the discoverers of this gold mine decided to look up all the descendants of the original Colonel, to inform them of their good fortune, and to solicit their contributions to the war chest. Their methods were quite thorough. They hired salesmen, they published a house organ, they studied genealogies. The Bakers were prolific. Also, they were quite willing to dispossess the lawless possessors of their patrimony. They contributed.

A dozen years ago Uncle Sam became worried. Was he really a squatter? Would he have to pay out all this back rent for the use of land he had originally given to this hero who slew red-coats? Back rent for a hundred years might be a whole lot. So, Uncle Sam set his sleuths to work on ferretting out the claims of these industrious Bakers.

The story might end with the recent imprisonment of two women and one man, who were proved in court to have inherited not a grant of land but a fraudulent scheme. But should it? For nearly twelve years the government spent our tax money to ferret out a fraud which in truth, had mulcted millions from gullible Bakers who contributed to a something-for-nothing scheme. Why did they do so? Because they knew that owning land is a something-for-nothing scheme, that it is being carried on successfully all over the world,

and has been for many centuries. Collecting rent is no less attractive than winning the lottery; it is more so because it is continuous.

The investigation and prosecution stopped only one fraud—on the gullible Bakers. But it protected another—that of the rent collectors who could prove their titles to the something-for-nothing scheme. If the Baker land grant had been proven a reality rather than a myth, the only effect would have been the substitution of the clan Baker for the present "valid" landlords. If these "valid" titles were traced back far enough they would be found to be based on frauds no less dishonest than the Baker fraud. But they have an Uncle Sam, with an army and a navy, to support their claim; the Bakers did not.

—F. C.

See: "Progress and Poverty," p. 342, pp. 344-346; "Teachers Manual, L. VII, Q. 8, 9.