

America Given Away Forever

By Alvin J. Forry

In 1879—the year “Progress and Poverty” appeared—the public lands, the land owned by the people as a whole, aggregated 1,100,000,000 acres. This is about fifty-five per cent of the total area of the country—the rest having been privately appropriated. Nevertheless, the country was at that time suffering from a depression.

In 1931 only 177,101,551 acres remained in the public domain. Over 900,000,000 acres had been given away to citizens and corporations during that half century. Not leased, not in usufruct, but in title deed in fee simple. The privilege of collecting rent went with this enormous gift of land.

Henry George and his followers have pointed to the land enclosures in England as an iniquitous deprivation of Englishmen's rights, and to the economic consequences. From 1710 to 1843 only 7,000,000 acres had been appropriated by English landlords—very petty larceny to what was done in this country. Let us look at the enormity of our American Land Robbery.

The “rock-bound coasts of Maine to the Golden Gate of California” comprise 1,920,000,000 acres—about three million square miles. This is about one-eighteenth of the surface of the earth. A sizeable piece for one hundred and thirty million people to live on, quite comfortably, considering the natural resources and fertility of this land, to say nothing of the productivity of the people.

What has happened to this public domain? Here are some figures on the transfer of our common heritage to private ownership:

	Acres
* For Military services in Revolutionary War, Indian wars, War of 1812, etc. to 1840	10,000,000
* To veterans of Mexican War	60,000,000
* Homestead grants 1863-1920	234,983,114

** To states for schools, to 1929	98,519,946
* To seminaries and normal schools	1,820,800
** To A. & M. Colleges ..	7,830,000
* Grants & sales in 1921 ..	15,500,000
** To railroad promoters & builders	167,832,000
(a domain approximately the size of Texas)	
** To states for flood control, 1849 on to 1900 ..	64,000,000
** To states to encourage construction of wagon road	3,250,000
** To states for canal and river navigation	6,750,000
Samples of queer land grants:	
** To General Lafayette ..	34,000
** To Canadian refugees (soon after Revolutionary War)	3 townships in Ohio

There were even grants offered and a few actually made in 1776 to deserters from the British army and navy!

Land and the War System

The practice of giving land grants for military reward and as an inducement to military service dates back to ancient times. This practice crept into American life in the colonial period, and lasted until 1862 when the Homestead Act replaced it, except that veterans of the Union army were shown special consideration. Each of these veterans was permitted 160 acres (twice the amount then allowed the homesteader), and was required one year's residence instead of the ordinary five year stipulation.

This policy was begun as early as 1646 when the Colony of Virginia gave 100 acres to the commander of its settlement at Middle Plantation. Maryland gave land grants to soldiers who had helped to put down an insurrection, and Connecticut did the same for leaders in the Pequot War. In the Revolutionary War the Continental Congress made more and

more tempting offers of land grants in order to secure soldiers; in 1780 a major general was promised 1100 acres and a brigadier general 850 acres. In the War of 1812 every private soldier was promised 160 acres of land. By 1855 the Federal Government, more and more eager to give away public land, passed a general act providing that a grant of 160 acres of land be given to any soldier, or his heirs, who had been in the service after 1790. Some 70,000,000 acres of land were given as military rewards or inducements to military service. Thus the Government gave away as war booty a tract of land about the size of our present state of Colorado—and during a period of less than a hundred years!

Land and the Prodigal Railroads

To-day when the railroads are pleading “poverty” it might be well to recall some of the vast grants of land given to them. The practice of making land grants to railroads began back in 1850 when Congress gave almost 4,000,000 acres of land to be held in trust in order to induce completion of the Illinois-Central Railroad. From 1850 to 1871 about 80 such grants were given in the Mississippi valley, totaling 158,293,000 acres, or a territory almost as large as the combined area of the New England States, New York and Pennsylvania.

An interesting grant to the railroads was that of some 21,000,000 acres to which they never made formal claim. For fifteen years the General Land Office recorded this vast tract of land as the sole possession of the railroads. No settlers were allowed on the land; but the railroads were permitted to cut the timber on it. And all those fifteen years settlers had to stay fifteen to thirty miles away from the railroads which the United States Government was helping so much in its “altruistic” project of opening up the west! In 1887 President Cleveland ordered that these lands be thrown open for general settlement.

Thus Went Our Land

This brief summary of the disposition of our public lands is indicative of the process whereby Americans have been made landless by their government. A study of this process reveals revolting incidents of corruption on the part of both public officials and the land-grabbers, and sheds much light on the economic and social consequences. The following recapitulation of the transfer of our public lands to private ownership, with the attendant annual burden of economic and speculative rent placed upon American producers, dramatizes its own story:

	Acres
Total land grants (from 'World Almanac', 1932)	670,519,860
Total land grant (from differing figures found in 'Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences')	704,219,914

This leaves 218,678,535 acres of land grants, or land that has in one way or another passed from public to private ownership since 1879—not to mention the 820,000,000 acres which had previous to 1879 passed from public to private ownership.

Or, this would be the present status of our 1,920,000,000 acres of land, which originally was all public:

	Acres
To Land Grants and sales, since 1879	704,219,914
To land grants, or miscellaneous ways of transferring public land to private ownership, unaccounted for, since 1879	218,678,535
Land which by one means or another had passed from public to private ownership previous to 1879	820,000,000
Our total public domain in 1931	177,101,551

Total area of all land in U. S.	1,920,000,000
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* From the World Almanac, 1932.

** From the Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, Vol. IX, p. 32f. (published in 1933). states that "in all, fully 130,000,000 acres of public domain were given to states for common school education." 11,050,000 acres were given to the states for Agricultural & Mechanical Arts Colleges.