

ANNUAL JOINT GEORGIST CONFERENCE

NEW YORK, N.Y. * AUGUST 28 - SEPTEMBER 1, 1980

A New Beginning

For the first time in many years, the Annual Georgist Conference for North America was held this year in New York, from Thursday, August 28, to Monday, September 1. It has become known as the Joint Georgist Conference, being co-sponsored by various Georgist groups.

This was a fitting year for a New York Conference, as it marked the inauguration of a new Headquarters at 5 E. 44th St. The Henry George School moved there from 50 E. 69th St., where it had been since 1944, along with the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation. The Henry George Institute has also moved into the same building.

The Conference was the first event to be held at the new quarters. About 130 persons attended, from coast to coast, also Canada and the Dominican Republic. The building, which had only been occupied for a month, was still being renovated.

After an informal social evening Thursday, Paul S. Nix, President of the New York Henry George School made the opening remarks on Friday morning. He said the new building offers new opportunities for cooperation in the Georgist movement, and for new programs. He favored a multi-dimensional approach, including research, education, publications. We must talk to people in ways they understand, he said.

Tax Reform

Philip Finkelstein, Director of the New York HGS, welcomed the delegates and was chairman of the first session which dealt with tax reform. He stressed the importance of the property tax and said that full-value assessments should prevail.

Don Clifford of the New York State Board of Equalization spoke, referring to his work in getting full-value assessments operative in the State, against many obstacles. There are now more than 1500 independent assessing units. The legislature has failed to pass a workable reform bill concerning assessments. Mr. Clifford outlined principles to be observed: 1, Assessment and tax functions should remain separate. 2, Equity must be adhered to. 3, Any system must be fairly administered. 4, The taxpayer must understand the administration of the property tax. 5, Adjustments should make the property tax more progressive. 6, Equality of assessments must be improved.

George Kerchner, staff member of the Center for Local Tax Research, reported on work done by the Center showing ratio of current assessments to full value in New York, and how bringing assessments in line would raise more revenue.

Larry Spancake, also of the Center, discussed principles of taxation, including benefits received and ability to pay. He said that there is general agreement that unearned income should be taxed, and he pointed to the advantages of the land tax.

In the following session, Pennsylvania was featured, with Steven Cord as chairman. He referred to recent increases in the land value tax in Pittsburgh, Scranton, Harrisburg and McKeesport. (See GJ No. 26.) John Kelly, "anchorman" in Scranton, told of efforts to get LVT increased there, including press publicity and approaches to the City Council. Further efforts will be made to "push it up a notch."

Richard L. Biddle, chairman of the Incentive Tax League in Philadelphia, said that at least one-third of the Councilmen in that city know about LVT. In spite of downtown

building, the city has declined, and Mayor Green has pointed to three groups whom he will not let "run away with the city" - union leaders, politicians and land speculators.

Dan Sullivan told of the background of Pittsburgh's interest in LVT, and Bill Coyne (Pittsburgh Councilman) reviewed how LVT was recently increased in the city. He said that results are already showing - five new skyscrapers are going up, other building is increasing, and vacant land is being sold more quickly. He urged more contact with legislators to increase LVT.

Parties and Projects

The first afternoon session of Friday featured representatives of political parties: Arthur Weinberg representing John Anderson (independent candidate for President); Richard Walton for the Citizens Party (Barry Commoner for President); Charles Drew for Jacob Javits, running for re-election to the U.S. Senate; Eliot Jacobson representing the Carter/Mondale ticket; and Barry Gringer speaking for the Libertarian party (Ed Clark for President). They all gave eloquent reasons why their party should be voted for, but a query to each about land value taxation revealed that none was ready to endorse it.

Another afternoon session dealt with problems and projects in the developing world. Prof. Arch Woodruff of the Lincoln Institute served as chairman and also told of reforms in Taiwan based on "land to the tiller." He contrasted the good effects of this with the bad results of thwarted land reform in Vietnam.

Robert Scrofani (Director, San Francisco HGS) said that a study of the third world shows how pervasive is the land question, and if the right reforms are not undertaken, "we may have more Cubas." Lucy de Silfa (Director, HGS, Dominican Republic, told of her work there and how influential persons are getting interested in Henry George's thesis and are coming to the School.

Alanna Hartzok (also a Director of the San Francisco HGS) reviewed Japanese land reform; and Robert Fornari of New York gave an analysis of food production in developing countries.

After these solid sessions, some recreational relief was provided via a boat ride around Manhattan. There were interesting sights to behold, but most of the time our people were talking with one another. Still, it was a break.

Education and Politics

On Saturday, the morning session was given to presentations on teaching Fundamental Economics. Dr. Albert Alexander of the New York Council on Economic Education was chairman, and he raised the matter of teaching economics to people who have no background in the subject, also of teaching children. "To teach less, you have to know more," he said.

Fryda Ossias (Trustee, New York HGS) told of her experiences in teaching high school students and what methods are best for them. They respond to games. Stan Rubenstein (Director, Long Island HGS) has revised the basic course in Fundamental Economics using the condensed edition of Progress and Poverty, changing the order of presentation and trying to make it more lively and current for the modern student.

Michael K. Curtis (Arden, Delaware) displayed charts showing how he tries to bring the Law of Rent to life with actual land areas. Harry Pollard (Director, Los Angeles HGS) reported on the Interstudent Program being conducted in numerous schools in California. A competitive spirit is introduced in the teaching of the fundamentals, and he felt the best years for this program were the 7th and 8th grades.

At a brief session following this, Floyd Morrow (San Diego, Calif.) made some comments on the political scene, observing that a person elected to office should be a leader, not merely a representative. He referred to his own recent experiences in running for the California legislature, in which he narrowly lost. And he appealed to Georgists to get more active in politics.

Money and Energy

Two looming economic problems dominated the first afternoon session on Saturday. Paul Nix spoke on the energy problem and pointed out that 254 billion gallons of oil are consumed daily. He discussed alternatives to oil, considering that most were not yet practical alternatives and said that "we should not give up on oil."

Lancaster M. Greene (President, Robert Schalkenbach Foundation) gave the example of Alberta, Canada as a model of oil policy, where the Province collects royalties from oil lands. He also mentioned the great coal reserves in the U.S.

Oscar B. Johannsen (Director, Schalkenbach Foundation) spoke on money and inflation. He said that inflation is not just a general rise in prices but is the issuance of a quantity of money with no wealth back of it. This in turn leads to a price rise. Governments used to debase coins, now they inflate, and they can do this because they have monopoly control over money.

Stanley Sinclair (Trustee, New York HGS) said that, in addition to the points made by Mr. Johannsen, we must consider what the Federal Reserve has done. It issues notes that look like money but are not, and they buy less and less.

Enclaves and Ecology

Leonardo Lassiter chaired a meeting on single tax colonies. A Philadelphia real estate man, he told of his program to acquire depressed lands in that city and erect building complexes. Having discovered the Henry George idea, he seeks to promote it.

Michael Curtis spoke of his 4-year experience as assessor in the single tax colony of Arden, Delaware. He said most people there want only enough rent collected to cover public expenses rather than the full rent. But Mr. Curtis proposed taking it all and using the extra rent to buy more land so people can have the benefits of a single tax community.

Claude Arnold told of the colony in Fairhope, Alabama. The city now has 12,000 population of which about half are on colony land. The Fairhope Single Tax Corporation now collects about 50% of the full rent. The colony has to deal with recurring legal efforts by a group of dissidents to dissolve the corporation and convert from leasehold to freehold. After repeated defeats, the dissidents are trying again. One good result is that other leaseholders have formed a group supportive of the colony.

A session on Ecology and Economics was chaired by Tony Meis, editor of The New Leaf. John McConnell, President of the Earth Charter Foundation and promoter of Earth Day, cited the dangers to the environment by widespread misuse of land and resources, and advocated a change from "earth-kill to earth-care."

Mildred J. Loomis (Director, School of Living) wants to encourage interest-related groups to work together for the "decent life", which is the real meaning of Decentralism. She has recently published a book on the subject. (See GJ No. 28.) Seymour Rauch (Buffalo, N.Y.) spoke of the seeming conflict between environmental integrity and economic efficiency. They can be brought together, but not without land value taxation.

The annual meeting of members of the Henry George Institute was held Saturday evening. Robert Clancy, President, reviewed the activities of the Institute. After being at 55 W. 42nd St. since its inception, the Institute has now moved to the new School building at 5 E. 44th St. Members present agreed that the HGI should continue its program in the new quarters and maintain its independence. It was felt that one headquarters for the New York Georgist organizations was a good development.

Georgism and Neo-Georgism

Sunday morning brought a discussion of the broader philosophic aspects of the Georgist philosophy. Robert V. Andelson, author of Critics of Henry George, spoke on his "neo-Georgist" approach. George is more than an economist, above all he is a teacher of righteousness. No one has successfully attacked his ethical premises and his ideas on property rights. However, some of his economic tenets can be challenged, including his "all-devouring rent thesis."

Jack Schwartzman (editor, Fragments) replied that "neo-Georgism" was only a word. He contended that land rent is a barometer of the need for public expenditures and anything taken beyond that simply fosters the big state.

Prof. Charles Collier used the term "neo-geo-Georgism" and said that modern economics has challenged George's economic assumptions. What remains that is valid, is the free market, free trade, ethical grounds and special land value taxes.

Prof. Bernard Bellush praised Henry George as one who challenged and questioned. He was the first American to nationalize a campaign for social reform, and he had an impact. George believed in political action but warned against bureaucracy. "Reading Henry George and history," he said, "I realize how little civilization has advanced."

Organizations

On Sunday afternoon, a meeting of the Council of Georgist Organizations was held, chaired by Mr. Finkelstein. This Council was formed at the San Francisco Conference last year and Clay Berling was the first Chairman. Delegates to the New York Conference expressed their views on what was needed to get the Georgist movement together and make it work more effectively - more publicity, access to the media, suitable literature and visual aids. It was agreed that the Council should be continued, and Robert Clancy was proposed to be chairman for the coming year. Edward J. Dodson of Philadelphia was selected as Deputy Chairman, and both agreed to serve.

An unscheduled meeting followed, featuring two speakers: One, Jack Schwartzman, stressed the importance of the individual and stated that the Georgist philosophy is essentially an individualistic philosophy. The other speaker was Lawrence D. Clark of Massachusetts, who said that the desire of people to own a piece of land is strong, and we should not weaken that but concentrate on the LVT aspect of our proposal.

A meeting of members of the Henry George Foundation of America was then held, chaired by Steven Cord, President. Activities for the year were reviewed, trustees elected and finances discussed. There was also discussion as to whether the Foundation's periodical, Equal Rights, should be continued, and it was agreed that it should be. Frank Nelson of Delaware volunteered assistance in editing it.

Banquet

In the evening, a reception prior to the Conference Banquet was held at Headquarters, hosted by the School, during which a letter of greeting from John Garver of Washington, D.C. was read by Mr. Clancy. The delegates then proceeded to the nearby Biltmore Hotel for the banquet.

After dinner, George Collins, as chairman, noted that the last Conference held in New York was in 1964 (it was also an International Conference), and in that same year Mr. Collins took over the directorship of the Philadelphia HGS, following the death of Joseph A. Stockman. He observed that considerable progress has been made in Philadelphia. He presented a Henry George School pin to Richard Biddle in appreciation of his services; and also wished Happy Birthday to C. Lois Jessop, joined in by the audience. Thanks and appreciation were also expressed to those who had planned this Conference.

Lancaster M. Greene then presented a plaque to Constance Weinstein, widow of the late Arnold A. Weinstein, former President of the Henry George School. This plaque will be placed outside the School auditorium which will thus be named for him. Mrs. Weinstein responded, noting that she and her husband first met at the School and had a long interest in it together.

Richard Noyes (editor, Salem Observer, New Hampshire) spoke of "the joy of discovery", the discovery of an idea and the discovery of an association. He found this latter in the work of historian Frederick Jackson Turner whose thesis on the frontier was closely related to Henry George's ideas.

Mr. Finkelstein introduced James H. Tully, Jr., New York State Commissioner of Taxation and Finance. Mr. Tully told the audience that his grandfather was a staunch supporter of Henry George. Today, he said, renters are 30% of the population and should be considered in a tax relief program. He also cited the "circuit-breakers" as a way of aiding low income families. And he mentioned efforts to levy a gross receipts tax on oil companies, now in the courts.

Finale

Monday, September 1 (Labor Day) was the final day of the Conference, and in the morning an Evaluation Session was held, chaired by Robert Clancy. Delegates agreed that this Conference evinced a good spirit, variety in the program and a good amount of general participation. Mr. Finkelstein and his staff were commended for planning the Conference under difficulties. Points conferees felt could be improved were: Keep expenses lower, arrange it so more people can participate in discussions, offer more help to Georgists, bring in outside experts. There was also discussion on a location for the 1981 Conference. A number of places were proposed, most favoring a New England location, perhaps southern New Hampshire. St. Louis, Mo., came in second as a preferred location. A possible date would be the Fourth of July weekend. This will be worked out by the Council.

The final event was a walk up Fifth Avenue, amidst colorful sights and crowds of people, to Central Park and a visit to the Henry George tree, where some talking, a little singing and much photography took place.

Thus ended the 1980 Conference, with interesting prospects ahead of us for the coming year.
