



Dreamers of
The American Dream

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Part Four

GOD MADE THE LAND FOR USE

"strike for the green graves of their sires." He lived on to die at the age of seventy-eight, in 1888, a time when to a new generation the days of the patroons seemed to be as far in the past as those of the Bible. By then, too, thousands of men and women who had been born and reared on manorial leaseholds were rearing their own families on lands acquired through the national Homestead Act, a law, incidentally, which Dr. Boughton's good friend and agitator, George Henry Evans, had been the first to propose.

4.

FREE HOMESTEADS FOR ALL

THE two Evans brothers would have been given notable dreams in any age, but because they grew to manhood in the United States during the early nineteenth century their dreams almost automatically called for some reform or other, or at least a radical departure from established ways. The lure of the untried has perhaps been never so general, or so urgent, as in that period.

New homemade religious sects were offering new routes to heaven. The United States Patent Office was deluged with drawings and models of new machines. The whole country was fairly yeasting with ideas for improving him called the common man. No little of this abounding optimism came with the realization of the unlimited resources of virgin land.

It is astonishing still to reflect, in so young a nation, how assured and widespread was the belief of Americans, no matter where born, that they were the hope of the world, that their institutions were based on the laws of Nature, which was always written with a capital, and that they were engaged in perfecting a refuge for the oppressed everywhere. It was their plain duty to live up to the ideals that had been so eloquently declared by the Founding Fathers. Not only to live up to them, but also, if any of these magnificent promises seemed to be corroding from the abuse of self-interest, to act. Among the more idealistic of these Americans were the English-born Evans boys, George Henry, born in 1805, and Frederick William, born in 1808, who had migrated to central New York in 1820.

Both lads were omnivorous readers. George was apprenticed to a printer, Frederick to a hatter, and both continued to read. At this time Thomas Paine was their favorite author as well as authority on matters

spiritual and material, and the strong provender they got from *The Age of Reason* and *Common Sense* turned them, on the one hand, into infidels and, on the other hand, into devout believers of the proposition that every man has an inalienable right "to the materials of Nature," such as light, air, water, and soil.

Within two years George Evans was editing at Ithaca a radical paper called simply *The Man*. He followed with interest the attempts of factory hands and other urban labor to organize unions in the larger cities, and presently went to New York, where he became active in the movement. At this time he regarded equal educational opportunity as the basic need of the poor, but gradually saw that "the primary social injustice from which all others sprang" was unequal distribution of land. When a Workingman's Party was organized in the seaboard cities, Evans was made editor of its official organ, *The Advocate*. Brother Frederick had meanwhile walked eight hundred miles from central New York to Ohio, to join an Owenite community of reformers which disbanded almost immediately. He came on to New York to work with George on *The Advocate*.

The Workingman's Party grew steadily until 1836, when it was disrupted by factionalism and went to pieces a year later in the widespread financial panic and depression. Frederick Evans, in the eyes of his still-infidel brother, went to pieces too. He joined the United Society of Believers, commonly called Shakers, at Mount Lebanon, New York, to remain for sixty years and become the presiding elder. In ill health, and embittered at the failure of the Workingman's Party and the defection of his brother, who had "turned to heaven and the spirit of departed friends for guidance," George Henry Evans bought a farm in Granville, New Jersey and retired there to revise his social thought. He regained his health. From time to time, as money permitted, he published a little paper, *The Radical*, in which was aired the agrarian philosophy he believed was the answer to almost everything.

Declaring that every citizen had an inherent right to a piece of land, Evans demanded that the federal government pass an act permitting actual settlers to stake out portions of the public domain for their own immediate use. He thought that this "inalienable homestead" ought to be one hundred and sixty acres. The proposal began to attract the attention of all manner of active radicals, and of others who merely dreamed. Encouraged by letters and comment, and with his health restored, Evans roused himself and returned to New York City. Gathering a group that numbered many of the extinct Workingman's Party, he organized the National Reform Association, and revived the old *Advocate* as its organ.

Evans's backing of Dr. Smith Boughton and the anti-renters, which has been covered in the previous chapter, was a deciding factor in

breaking up the manor leaseholds. Evans was also keeping an eye on the national scene. Nothing was attracting more attention just then than the dispute between the United States and Great Britain over the sovereignty of the Oregon country. Serving his first term as a congressman from Indiana was one of Evans's old radical friends, Robert Dale Owen. Drawing up a petition seeking to dispose of Oregon lands free to settlers, Evans asked Dale to introduce it in Congress. He did so, and five months later presented to that body a formal request for a general homestead law.

Both memorials died in committee, but the idea did not die in the *Advocate*, nor in *Young America*, nor in the *Daily Sentinel*, all of which were edited by George Henry Evans almost to the time of his death in 1856. By then a new champion had appeared to carry the banner of free homesteads for all. But let us not leave Evans without recalling the homage paid his memory by reformers who had known him in the flesh. In 1874 a group of his comrades of the anti-rent wars sought out the grave of "this pure-hearted man who had done so much for the cause." They found it on his farm by a little path "amidst a wild growth of herbage, while the moaning breeze waved the branches of the overhanging trees like a banner, as if still inviting the landless and the pauperized masses to strike for perpetual and not a mere transient share in the soil."

The new champion of free homesteads was Galusha Aaron Grow, something of an Old Testament character, who weighed two hundred pounds, stood six feet two inches, and in youth had been a prodigious man with an ax. He was born in 1822 in Windham County, Connecticut, where four years later his father died, leaving a widow and six children. Mother Grow was happily a fearless and enterprising woman. In 1834 she set out for "The West," meaning Pennsylvania, where new settlements were being opened up in the Tunkhannock Valley. Here she bought four hundred acres of wild land, near what became Glenwood, and also opened a store. Young Galusha and an elder brother went to clearing and farming. A sister or two helped in the store.

Both farm and store prospered so well that the Grows began to deal in lumber and hemlock bark, which was used in tanning leather. At the age of fourteen Galusha was competent to fell timber, and was a very fiend with a spud, the tool used to peel hemlock. He must also have been wise beyond his years, for in the same year Widow Grow permitted him to take a boatload of bark and lumber down the Susquehanna for sale at Port Deposit.

The Grows' operations flourished. Galusha prepared for college at Franklin Academy, Harford, Pennsylvania, then entered Amherst, from which he was graduated in 1844. In that year he campaigned for

James K. Polk, then entered the law office of Governor Chauncey Cleveland of Connecticut. After admission to the bar in 1847 he formed a partnership with David Wilmot at Towanda, Pennsylvania, whose name was to become historic in connection with the Wilmot Proviso. In 1850 Grow ran for and was elected to Congress, taking his seat as its youngest member.

His first speech was significantly on the subject of man's rights to the soil. His ideas had been formed, not only by the efforts of George Henry Evans and the National Reform group, but by his own experiences on the frontier, where he observed the activities of land speculators, a majority of whom he considered to be the most rapacious and unconscionable men at large. Grow knew at first hand of the sufferings of, and even the disasters to, settlers that were largely brought about by dishonest land sharks. These things had made him in fact if not in name something of a single-taxer.

Grow was returned to Congress for a second term, during which he drew up and introduced a bill providing that every applicant be given a quarter section, or one hundred and sixty acres, of the public domain, with the stipulation that he himself should settle on the land. It did not pass. Neither did its failure discourage its sponsor. Again and again, in the next decade during which he was re-elected continuously, Grow introduced his homestead bill, and took every occasion to talk it up both in Congress and elsewhere.

As the crises between North and South approached, Southern members grew implacably opposed to Grow's bill, while Northern members just as firmly favored it. Congressional sessions grew in turbulence. There were fist fights in both the House and Senate, and occasionally a hot-tempered Southerner issued a formal challenge to a duel. This practice, however, was memorably discouraged when Senator Ben Wade of Ohio, who had called a Southern gentleman a liar on the floor of the Senate and was challenged to choose his weapons, was waited upon by the fire-eater's friends. Would he accept, they wanted to know? Senator Wade leveled at the intermediaries as mean a pair of small, beady black eyes as they ever saw. "I am here," he answered coldly, "in a double capacity. I represent the State of Ohio and I represent Ben Wade. As a Senator I am opposed to duelling, but as Ben Wade I recognize the code. I say your friend is a foul-mouthed old blackguard, but you will find that he will not notice what I have said. I will not be asked for retraction, explanation or fight." Nor was he. From that day until secession the tendency of Southern gentlemen to toss challenges was notably lessened.

In the House it was Congressman Grow who did something to tame members from the South. Being a dyspeptic, he shunned all drink at a

time when many senators and congressmen drank too much for their own or their country's good, Grow could be "counted on to take the offensive at any time" and "his coolness and strength made him one of the most aggravating Northerners," one who could easily goad an impulsive Southern gentleman to desperation. He delighted in doing as much, and soon became celebrated for a rough-and-tumble fight with Congressman Laurence M. Keitt, a notorious fire-eater.

Although abolition and states' rights absorbed much of the attention of Congress, Grow found it necessary to devote no little of his energy to detecting and defeating the endless parade of dubious or patently fraudulent land-grant bills introduced by the creatures of smart lobbyists. He could scent a land-steal bill quicker than anyone else in House or Senate. Because of his knowledge of the schemes and methods of land sharks he was quite able to expose seemingly innocent and meritorious bills as bogus.

When at last secession cleared the House of its Southern members, Grow knew that his chance had come. He was elected Speaker at the special session of the War Congress in 1861. During his term he had the superb joy of watching passage of the Homestead Act, which was later signed by President Lincoln. The act was not Grow's original bill, nor was he wholly responsible for it, or even for its passage. But his was surely the greatest single influence in connection with it.

Defeated in the next election, Grow became active in various business enterprises in lumber, oil, and railroads, and for four years was president of a Texas railroad. In 1893 he returned to Washington as congressman from Pennsylvania, to serve another ten years, becoming the veritable Nestor of the House, yet still active in extending and improving homestead legislation. At his death, in 1907, Galusha Grow was mentioned in obituaries as "The Father of the Homestead Act." One saw him as "among the last remnant of that veteran corps whose ranks have been decimated by the grape and cannister of Time . . . who has now been compelled to take the achievements of a long life for a pillow and seek rest in that sleep whose night giveth place only to the morning sunlight of immortality."

The first effects of the Homestead Act were all that the most devoted land reformer could have wished. It set off an immediate wave of migration westward. Before the war was over more than fifteen thousand homesteaders were actually settled on two and one half million acres. And in 1872 alone homestead entries totaled almost five million acres. The measure seemed foolproof: Any adult citizen or any alien who had filed his first papers could claim 160 acres of the public domain. He must live there for a term of five years. He must erect a dwelling, the minimum specifications of which were stipulated in the contract.

He must also "improve the land," which meant clearing or plowing, according to the character of the homestead. These things accomplished, the settler was given title.

Though drawn up and passed with the best of intentions the original Homestead Act was seen, after a few years, to be faulty in practice. One of its inadequacies was due to the fact that the law's framers, whose "experience was gathered in the humid East," had drafted a measure unworkable in the semi-arid West. A land unit of 160 acres was generous anywhere in the Mississippi Valley. But he who sought to make a living on the Great Plains needed much more land, or much less. "If he were a cattle rancher," wrote Ray A. Billington, "he should have from 2,000 to 50,000 acres, and at least 360 acres if he practiced extensive agriculture," although a mere 60 acres would do if irrigation were used. But nowhere west of the 98th meridian was 160 acres a workable agricultural unit.

From time to time, beginning in 1873, experimental amendments to the Homestead Act were adopted. The first of these was an honest attempt to adjust the law to Western conditions and permitted the homesteader to apply for an additional 160 acres. Later came amendments called the Desert Land Act (1877), the Timber and Stone Act (1878), and other modifications of the original homestead law. Meanwhile the Morrill Land-Grant College Act gave each state 30,000 acres of Western land for each senator and representative in Congress. Other grants went to subsidize railroad construction. Still in circulation up into the eighties were land warrants called soldier's script, issued to veterans of the Revolution and all other conflicts. These could be bought for much less than face value, then exchanged for land. Coupled with direct sales by the General Land Office, the many outright grants comprised by 1887 the impressive total of half a billion acres. These lands, as Billington points out, "were surrendered to monopolists," by which he meant speculators, "in an era when orators boasted the United States was giving land free to its poverty-stricken masses." Despite which almost one hundred million acres were in perfected homestead entries by the turn of the century.

The failure of the Homestead Act to live up to the hopes of its sponsors was due in part, as said, to deficiencies in the law, and in larger part to the myriad speculators who had been learning their business ever since 1624, when the first ship's captain entered the names of his crew for a head right of fifty acres each of crown-colony land in Virginia.