



Dreamers of  
The American Dream

STEWART H. HOLBROOK

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*Part Four*

GOD MADE THE LAND FOR USE

## THE POPULIST REVOLT

TRY as they would, generations of dedicated land reformers were never able to devise an equitable and foolproof system for distributing the public domain. Granted an imperfect world, it is improbable that such a distribution was possible. The Homestead Act was a noble try. That it did not achieve even near perfection was due not only to land speculators but to the all-but-universal venality of him for whom specifically the Homestead Act was passed—the so-called common man. It seems odd that attention to this moral defect is seldom if ever drawn in the immense literature dealing with the fraudulent acquisition of land.

Gustavus Myers tells of "entire trainloads of people, acting in collusion with the land grabbers," who were brought from cities and towns out into the homestead belt to act as dummy applicants for the lands coveted by the conscienceless speculators. Well, who *were* the passengers that packed these trains? They were the common man eager to aid, at the going rates for dummies, in the plundering. Sometimes the dummies could perform their simple duties without an exhausting ride on the steamcars, as was made clear when evidence was taken in the monstrous fraud known as the Oregon Timber Ring.

Much of the evidence came from an ebullient character, Stephen A. Douglas Puter, who called himself "King of the Oregon Land Fraud Ring." Born in the California backwoods, he found two terms of schooling sufficient for his needs, and at seventeen was "running compass" on a United States surveying crew. "By reason of my field work on the survey," he recalled much later, while relaxing in jail awaiting trial, "I gained a knowledge of all the desirable claims." So he did, and at the age of eighteen, he charged \$25 for "locating" such a fine claim and offered, for an additional \$25, to erect a shack on the claim. This was the only "improvement" any of these claims were ever to know, for the entry men were dummies. Within a short time young Puter was taking charge of groups of as many as twenty-five applicants, whom he marched to the courthouse in Eureka, where they declared their intention to become citizens, got their first papers, and were then led directly to the land office to file their entries for homesteads. The location papers were all ready for them. A notary public helped them

to execute acknowledgment of a blank deed. Then Puter gave \$50 to each, who thereupon had completed his part of the deal, went away, as often as not to one or another of the saloons and dives which made Eureka something of a reservoir for the common man.

"The description of the tracts filed on," Puter explained, "was afterward inserted in the deed and transfer of title made to the corporation." The corporation was of course the outfit that wanted the virgin redwood standing on the claims so closely that the sun had never penetrated to the soil in five hundred and more years. Puter figured that the timber alone was then worth from \$200 to \$300 an acre. As for himself, Puter pocketed \$1250 for each batch of dummies as processed.

Seeking fresh pastures, Puter moved to Oregon, where he found what he called the land business fairly booming. "Every hotel in the timbered sections of the state," he recalled, "was crowded with timber speculators, cruisers, and locators. Moneyed men were here from Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota and other states, eager to make investments and grasp the unlimited opportunities of reaping big returns." So were thousands of locators and, of course, prospective entrymen. Puter was not at all discouraged at the competition of locators, while the surplus of dummies brought *their* fees to a new low. One of Puter's agents, Spider Jackson, whose stated occupation was that of head bouncer at Erickson's vast saloon in Portland, signed up several dozen denizens of the North End at "fees" ranging from a high of twenty-five dollars to a low of a ten-dollar gold piece. Although most of the dummies were loggers, sailors, or itinerant workers, Spider saw no reason why women should not get in on a good thing, and acted accordingly. At the jolly resorts operated by dainty Mary Cook and Elizabeth (Liverpool Liz) Smith, he induced a total of six inmates to apply for homesteads in the foothills of the Cascade Range, giving each a ten-dollar gold piece for her trouble. They were delighted. Although there seems to be no official record of such things, Spider Jackson may well have been the first subagent of a locator to provide dummy entrywomen from Below the Line.

Stephen A. Douglas Puter went onward and upward to become the leading locator in Oregon's timbered counties. His opposite number, in the range country east of the Cascades, was Henry Owen, who, even in that remote and sparsely populated region, could somehow whump-up, on short notice, an astonishing number of entrymen to file on homesteads. It was told of Henry that he'd ride out into the great loneliness of the short grass, shoot his Winchester into the air three times, and entrymen who swore they were trappers, hunters, sheepherders, cowboys, or merely geologists would pop up from the ground.

But his really important contribution to the technique of fraud

awaited passage by Congress of a land measure entitled the Swamp & Overflow Act. This permitted the purchase of marshland at \$1.25 an acre. The purpose of the act, of course, was to cause the buyer to drain and improve what otherwise was worthless land. As soon as he had read an official copy of the new act, Henry Owen dropped his efforts to fill homesteads to specialize in swamp-and-overflow. Procuring a small, flat-bottomed rowboat, he hitched it behind a team of horses, and was hauled across the best grazing land he could find. Then to the nearest land office, where he could, and did, take oath that he had covered the area in a boat. This sounds just a little too cute, yet it is of record that he filed on and bought so much land designated as swamp-and-overflow that he became famous as the Oregon Swamp Rat.

Techniques similar to those described were being practiced at one and the same time in all of the Western states and territories. In Alabama speculators in coal and ore lands got entire families to file on homesteads, and there were instances where the father was alleged to be living on one quarter section, a son on another, and the mother and unmarried daughters on others. In the lake states there were locators who built a claim shanty on an ox sled to be hauled about from one claim to another for a series of dummy settlers. There is no need here to say more than that, between 1862, when the Homestead Act was signed, and the end of the century, for every free homestead entered and retained by a bona fide settler, nine others were bought from railroads, or speculators, or from the government itself. So far as the outright frauds were concerned, the government roused, now and then, during these three decades, to feeble efforts at retrieving stolen lands, and to indict and sometimes to fine guilty operators. Not until the new century came in did a man eminently fitted to deal with corruption appear. He was Ethan Allen Hitchcock, a great-grandson of the president and general manager of the Onion River Land Company. We shall come to him presently.

The Middle West had been filling up with settlers a full decade before the Homestead Act was signed. They were attracted by the expert publicity put out by the new railroads of Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Iowa, each with a land grant to dispose of. In the van of those to Minnesota was a young Philadelphian named Ignatius Donnelly, who in 1856 purchased eight hundred acres of wild land on the west bank of the Mississippi below the territorial capital of St. Paul. He wanted to found a town.

Young Donnelly's wild acres were no wilder than Donnelly's imagination. His town, which he christened Nininger City for a friend, was not a real estate affair. He was no promoter seeking to make a quick

fortune by unloading lots on the gullible. Nininger City, to his mind, was to be a community where artistic and intellectual pursuits went hand in hand with agriculture and industry. A city of course must have citizens, and Donnelly's first move was to establish *The Emigrant Aid Journal*, unquestionably the oddest and possibly the most intellectual periodical ever issued in connection with land acquisition. Its logotype was magnificent, one of those teeming, old-fashioned trade-marks one can study for an hour, like a Hogarth drawing, and still discover things.

Here across the top of Donnelly's paper were steamboats racing like mad to the great terminal of Nininger City; railroad trains were belching smoke across the prairie; covered wagons were coming on out of the East; men were plowing, wheat growing. Fruits and vegetables of startling girth clustered around the houses. Thus far the paper displayed the characteristics of virtually all town-promotion literature. But beneath the dazzling picture was something wholly out of character. It was a question and an answer:

Dost thou know how to play the fiddle?  
No, replied Themistocles, but I understand the art of raising a little village into a great city.

Classic Athenian figures were not commonly associated with the opening of the American West, but neither was the sort of city Donnelly had in mind. Right away you learned that lots here were sold at cost, which Donnelly reckoned to be no more than six dollars. Yet there could be no speculation, none of the quick turnover in land that fetched the usual shark. Donnelly's contract stipulated that the purchaser must "begin improvements" within six months and complete them within two years. Until then the lot could not be resold by the original purchaser. Such unthinkable restrictions alone would doubtless have been enough to prevent Nininger City from having a glorious future. But Donnelly had gorgeous dreams far beyond those of most men. He wanted only those settlers who had their hearts set on erecting the finest, most intelligent commonwealth possible.

Nininger City got off to a good start. By the end of 1856 the town was still abustle with new arrivals and a great noise of hammers and saws. *The Emigrant Aid Journal* was coming off the press in thousands of copies, many of which were being "placed in the reading rooms of all transatlantic steamers." A bounteous hotel, the Handyside House, was open, offering a menu listing nine kinds of meat and fowl, four kinds of pie, ice cream, blancmange and charlotte russe. In the Handyside's cellars were eight kinds of imported wines, including champagne. Little wonder if Nininger City's hotel astounded visitors.

A literary society, the Atheneum Company, had been organized. So had a musical society. And the erudite editor of the *Journal*, who was Donnelly himself, was indicating the sort of place its founder yearned for. Between helpful accounts of how to make good butter and the care of farm machinery were interspersed a poem by John Greenleaf Whittier, a piece against spiritualism signed by Harriet Beecher Stowe, and a forthright indictment of slavery by the editor. In another issue Donnelly discussed lavender farming, tore off a rousing account of the Battle of Balaclava, and wound up with a lengthy obituary of James G. Birney, the abolitionist. In still another he hailed the first number of a magazine called *The Atlantic Monthly*; announced organization of a co-operative society by which prospective immigrants of the British Isles could pay their fares—doubtless to Nininger City—in more or less easy installments; and then he let go a thunderous blast consigning all bankers to the lowest and hottest chambers of hell, which he intimated was in charge of Adam Smith, and good enough for him. In it was a promise of things to come—to come rolling in threatening dark clouds out of the West and to waft an enormous feeling of unease to Eastern United States.

The year now was 1857. Just as Nininger City went blooming into its second year a sharp, sudden panic hit the country. Banks closed, many never to reopen. Factories shut down. Wheat rotted in the fields. Nininger City's pulse slowed, then all but stopped when it became known that the railroad, which Donnelly had been assured would pass through his city, chose another route that would put nearby Hastings beside its tracks. It was a blow Donnelly's town could not survive. By May its population, which had risen to near one thousand, picked up and left.

But not Donnelly. That stouthearted man and his wife remained, to live another half century in the big rambling house they had built in the city of culture. And at least one thousand prairie dogs returned to their old homes in Nininger's now empty lots, and the big harvest moon of 1858 revealed tall grass, high enough for hay, growing thick in the doomed city's main street.

Ignatius Donnelly had lost everything in the crash, save his resiliency, which was that of rubber. He leaped into state politics to be elected lieutenant governor, then was sent to Congress, where he sat in the House and made an excellent record. Yet he was hard to handle. The republican bosses of Minnesota found they could not manage him, so the skids were greased, and he retired to his old home amid the melancholy ruins of Nininger City. Here began work on a book that was to live.

He named it *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World*. It appeared in 1882

from the House of Harper, and turned out to be a serious if popular work to "demonstrate the truth of Plato's story of a sunken Atlantic continent." First and last, it sold more than a million copies and was in print seventy years after publication. The sales put Donnelly on his feet, and took him to the national lecture platform. He continued to write, and soon came *The Great Cryptogram*, a book that stirred an uproar to last a long time. This book—said its author—proved beyond doubt that Francis Bacon wrote all the works attributed to Shakespeare. After touring the United States again Donnelly toured England, and when he returned to Nininger City this time, he was an international literary character.

Meanwhile the now famous author had been editing an independent weekly paper, *The Anti-Monopolist*, and took out after an imposing number of "enemies of the people." These included land grabbers of all sorts, banks and bankers, railroads, high-tariff men, hard money, and minor menaces as, if, and when they were recognized for what they were. He welcomed the new Patrons of Husbandry, called the Grange, and did a good deal to change what began as a mere social order into a powerful group numbering one and a half million members who sought relief from the "oppression" of railroads and banks.

By 1890 Donnelly, hailed as the Sage of Nininger, was ready to enter his period of the Apostle of Protest. True, he had already been protesting sporadically for thirty years, but now he turned every effort to capitalize on the fame his books had brought him. His next book was a charge of dynamite which the author hoped would waft everybody into the Utopia he outlined in the closing pages of a novel entitled *Caesar's Column*. The plot of this fantastic story seems to have occurred to Donnelly, so writes Richard Hofstadter, "in a moment of great discouragement, when he was struck with the thought of what might come to be" if what he considered the worst tendencies of the 1890s "were projected a century into the future."

Readers of *Caesar's Column* were given a graphic picture of the hell of the United States in 1990. The country is controlled by an inner circle of plutocrats who demolish all opposition with machines which Donnelly had to invent for the purpose, there being at the time he wrote no such things as radio, television, or a fleet of huge dirigibles ready to drop poison-gas bombs. To operate these weapons for detection of subversive plots and the destruction of their perpetrators, the Plutes have in their hire a police force called Demons. The honest, simple American farmers have been turned into savage serfs. The honest, simple American workingmen of the cities have become a sullen, silent proletariat.

When at last the farmer-serfs and the proletariat rebel, they manage,

through a secret revolutionary group called the Brotherhood of Destruction, to buy off the Demon police, and then ensues a monstrous round of looting and massacre beside which the Terror of France's revolution seems almost bloodless. So great is the carnage that the disposal of corpses becomes an immense sanitary problem. It is solved by piling the dead, under the command of one of the rebellion's leaders named Caesar, into a gigantic pyramidal column and covering it with cement.

Such was the end of the United States of America. Donnelly's climax was a gorgeously hideous affair, and one can wonder if its visual possibilities have never been considered by the Caesars of motion pictures and television.

There remained, of course, Donnelly's message, his reason for writing the book: When the awful carnage was done, and the corpses piled higher than one could well imagine, a remnant of decent as well as intelligent Americans escapes by dirigible to the mountains of Africa, where they start all over again, this time founding a sort of patented Utopia, in which Donnelly's program is adhered to. Land is distributed equitably. There are no banks. Interest is illegal. In other words, all is well in the first Christian socialist state the world has known.

The appearance of *Caesar's Column* was perfectly timed. It was a dark period. The optimism of the pre-war generations in the United States had been tempered by and almost disappeared in the troubles accompanying the rising industrialism and the plight of Western farmers bedeviled by mortgages and the "grasping and domineering railroads." Donnelly's was a desperate work. It came at a desperate moment when, as Hofstadter, a historian of reform, put it, "the threat of a social apocalypse seemed to many people not at all remote."

The threat was given direction by the forming of the National People's Party, whose members called themselves Populists. The Populists included some twenty-odd dissident or rebellious groups that were seeking reforms beyond number. Though a majority of these were already indoctrinated as Greenbackers, Socialists, Single Taxers, Knights of Labor, Farmers' Alliance men, Grangers, and even Prohibitionists, Donnelly's book about *Caesar's Column* had scared all hell out of thousands of conventional and conservative Democrats and Republicans, convincing them that the United States faced major economic reform or dreadful apocalypse.

Donnelly leaped joyously to the platform to speak for Populism. Long identified with the Grangers, he reminded farmers that the crowning infamy of the railroads was their theft of the public domain, and pleaded for both political and economic action. Otherwise, he said, "we will be making a gun that will do everything but shoot." He sought to combine the fears and hopes of city and country as the

basis of a religion to defeat the baleful influence of the plutocrats. Eloquence flowed from him like fire from the open hearths of Pittsburgh and Johnstown, like the fires Kansas farmers were feeding, in their own mortgaged stoves, with ten-cent corn because it was cheaper than coal. Paced and inspired by this rotund and magnetic man who, so wrote John D. Hicks, "was at his best in unsparing denunciation," Populism did become a virtual religion to millions of Americans in the West and South.

Up out of the rotting wheat and burning corn of Kansas suddenly appeared an apparition named Mary Elizabeth Lease, a tall and stately woman with the voice of a bass trombone, to stump villages and cross-roads in the grain belt, telling her audiences: "What you farmers need to do is to raise less corn and more hell." Ranging the cow country came Sockless Jerry Simpson, a terrific rouser, demanding the single-tax, and government ownership or control of almost everything except cows, range cattle, and ensilage cutters.

Down in Georgia, Tom Watson, a small wizened demagogue, moved across the red clay with shouts against the jute trust. Dripping venom like a cottonmouth moccasin, he struck at industrialists who were "importing the scum of Europe to work for nothing in their factories"; while Pitchfork Ben Tillman operated in the Carolinas, an agrarian jihad with a brass throat, fighting what he called oligarchy for his followers, the woolhats.

There were many others, too, who appeared with "the frightening banners of revolt," and Donnelly himself kept up an ominous drumming in Grange halls, in churches, and from the tail gates of farm wagons, all to the end that fourteen hundred Populist delegates, representing every possible shade of reform, and even more conflicting ideas as to how the reforms were to be achieved, met in convention at Cincinnati. There, with a tact that matched his eloquence, Donnelly took charge of this disparate mob of the discontented, to work out a compromise platform.

In 1892, in Omaha, four thousand Populists let go a cheer that "rose like a tornado" as Donnelly took the platform. It lasted for thirty-four minutes. Then the delegates nominated James B. Weaver of Iowa, a former Union general, for president of the United States, and for vice-president a former Confederate general, James G. Field of Virginia. "The Blue and the Gray," cried Donnelly, "are woven together to make our banner."

Now Donnelly turned to write most of the new party's platform, a document singular for the clarity of its prose. The Populists polled a surprising 1,027,329 votes in the election that year. It was in reality one of the most influential protests in our history, for nearly if not all

of the dreadful heresies Donnelly put into the plank were to be made into national laws during the next forty years. In his masterly summary of what he termed *The Populist Revolt*, John D. Hicks remarked "that much of their Program has found favor in the eyes of later generations." He quoted Mary Elizabeth Lease, who was proud, thirty years after, that "the seed we sowed out in Kansas did not fall on barren ground"; and William Allen White, who believed the Populists "had abolished the established order completely and ushered in a new order."

But as a distinct political group the Populists disappeared. They went underground to reappear four years later as Democrats, when the astute fixers of that old party listened, incredulous at first, to a new drum, the "drum incarnate" of William Jennings Bryan, the silver-toned wonder boy of the Platte, who was to run and run again as the champion of the downtrodden. Bryan and his managers were a pale substitute for Donnelly and his bearded wild men, but a residue of Populism remained, heaving turbulently under blankets labeled "Free Silver, 16 to 1," until it could be aired and given physical form in the next century.

Strangely enough, it was left to conservative William McKinley to appoint as his Secretary of the Interior the first cabinet officer to tackle head-on and without gloves the systematic robbery of government lands. This was Ethan Allen Hitchcock, mentioned earlier, a great-grandson of Colonel Ethan Allen of the Green Mountain Boys. At the time of his appointment to the Cabinet in 1898, Secretary of the Interior Allen was sixty-three years old. Long since well-to-do, by reason of the first successful plate-glass manufactory in the United States, which he established near St. Louis, and extensive interests in iron and steel, he had served as our Minister to Russia, from which he returned to accept the Interior post.

Secretary Hitchcock began his long regime with a quiet and most thorough investigation of the countless problems presented by an empire of public land which hordes of cleverly sharp men were determined to obtain or at least use for their own benefit. He was still so engaged when President McKinley was killed by an assassin and Vice-President Theodore Roosevelt took the executive office. Within a short time Hitchcock was ready. He could hardly have had a chief more in accord with his plans than Roosevelt.

Corrupt and merely incompetent Interior officials and agents began falling like leaves in autumn. A vast plot of corporate interests to get control of Indian lands of the Five Tribes was prevented and "a magnificent inheritance of oil and gas resources" was preserved for the red men. Secretary Hitchcock also suggested what proved to be effective restrictions and qualifications in regard to leases, timber-cutting, mineral rights, and many another improvement in departmental pro-

cedure. Few if any of these changes were made without pressure to stop or hamper the Secretary. Demands were made on the President to remove him. Roosevelt refused. Hitchcock, frosty in manner, collected in speech, went ahead, utterly impervious to the influence of men high in government counsels.

Early in 1903 the Secretary suddenly dismissed his commissioner of the General Land Office. Almost simultaneously he instituted a relentless investigation of frauds based on the Homestead Act, and one of the great scandals of the period came in for an airing. More than one thousand persons in twenty states were indicted, among them several United States senators. Stephen A. Douglas Puter, King of the Oregon Timber Fraud Ring, decided to tell all, and unfolded a tale of corruption that is said to have bemused even the veterans of *Crédit Mobilier*. In 1906 alone one hundred twenty-six land sharks went to prison.

Exhausted by almost a decade of defending his actions, and attacking frauds at the same time, Ethan Allen Hitchcock resigned in 1907 from the Cabinet, soon to die at seventy-two. He left a public domain incomparably safer from raid than it had ever been before. It is to be hoped that some obituarist suggested the possibility that, if any reward were to come to Secretary Hitchcock, it must come from the hearts of a grateful people. Possibly it did, though one doubts it; and fifty years after his death, he who "throttled the land-grabbers with the iron hand of government" is so forgotten that most if not all of the many recent books on the history of conservation in the United States fail even to give him so much as a footnote.

### 5.

## HENRY GEORGE: THE NOBLE FAILURE

IF, after putting the fear of the law if not of God into the hearts of the land grabbers, Secretary of the Interior Ethan Allen Hitchcock is forgotten, this is not true of Henry George, whose herculean efforts of a lifetime were rejected first and last by his countrymen. Perhaps he is remembered chiefly because he was a splendid dreamer and a magnificent failure; and also because a magnificent failure to achieve the impossible strikes a responsive chord of sympathy in men, most of whom come in time to recognize their own failures.

Henry George was the Single-Tax Man. More than half a century after his death his name, and often many pages about him, appear in all