

Escape From Affluence

by OSCAR B. JOHANNSEN

IN the final chapter of *Progress and Poverty* Henry George looked behind the problem of social life to the individual life, and to the meaning of life itself. To him life here "was intelligible only as the avenue and vestibule to another life." He had a sense of mission and did not spare himself but threw all his strength and energy into a plea for human progress and a more ideal republic.

Now that America has become in many respects the envy of the world, our young people take the affluence for granted and spurn its material advantages. They seek more "fulfilling work" than that of well paid office employees. Many of them are willing to work with their hands and to endure discomfort in order to achieve creativity.

Overwhelming too is the lure of the land which draws many away from the stultifying routine of commuting to the city. Whether they realize it or not, the commune dwellers are trying to escape from the demoralizing effect of an unjust system of land tenure which reduces the less privileged to grinding poverty.

Too few philosophers have revealed any clear understanding of the psychological distresses which arise when men are separated from the land. Man comes from the land and returns to it. It is part of him and he is part of it. When he is forced into the cities he may be politically and socially free but he does not always feel free. More often he leads the life of "quiet desperation" of which Thoreau wrote.

Urban life has become too complex, too sophisticated, too pointless. Young people tend to gravitate to the opposite—to simplicity. They feel if they could return to the simple life of their forefathers they would gain some elusive thing that has been lost. For them the growth of civilization seems to have caused more problems than it is worth. They do not see that it was only as civilization grew that imperishable literature, divinely inspired music and ever more beautiful forms of art were created to deepen the spiritual nature of men.

A reversion to the simple life may bring contentment for a time since it affords release from responsibility. But sooner or later people must turn their talents in directions that are more challenging and ennobling. Instead of looking for an escape, one should seek out the causes for the disappointment, frustrations, evils and emptiness of the present. That search will necessarily lead to a study of man's relationship with the land. Only when this relationship is understood and corrected will our national life reflect the harmony in which individuals may hope to achieve such creativity as they desire.