

Recollections of a Curmudgeonish Georgist

By OSCAR B. JOHANNSEN

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I can see him today. It must have been in the Fall of 1938 or '39 that I first entered the Henry George School of Social Science, which was then located on East 29th Street. The man who greeted all who entered was Mr. Otto Dorn, who, I learned later, was a Trustee of the School. He was a courtly gentleman with a greying Van Dyke beard, which caught the eye immediately. His distinguished bearing and gracious welcome could not fail but impress anyone who entered.

This was disconcerting, for I had come prepared to demolish the theories of that crank, Henry George, who (I was led to believe) was against real estate. Could such a man who appeared to be as intelligent as Mr. Dorn be led astray? I knew all there was to know about real estate, for my father had owned three tenements. I remembered only too well how he, my brother, and I slaved to paint the roofs of these buildings, and repaired leaking faucets and electric fixtures, trying to keep the buildings in presentable shape so that there would be no vacancies. One vacancy was enough to cause my mother and my father sleepless nights.

The school hummed with activity. The depression was still very much in the minds of all of us, and most of those who came were anxious to find out why jobs were so scarce and why the economy seemed to be going from bad to worse.

Shortly after we were ushered into a classroom and met our teacher, in walked a very attractive young woman with a dazzling smile to give us a little talk about school. Theresa McCarthy was her name, but while she was, without question, an Irish beauty, her voice certainly had no tinge of an Irish brogue to it. What fascinated me, and I am sure all present, was the beautiful modulated voice she had. Her diction reminded me of those English actors and actresses whose voices made those of American actors appear to be flat and banal by comparison.

As I think about it now, it is strange that I should have been so impressed by the physical attributes of the school's personnel. Possibly it was because I must have felt that with such attractive and intelligent people, the school must have something.

So, I took the ten-week course. Ironically, as the course proceeded, instead of my being able to annihilate George, I was slowly but surely agreeing with what I read and heard in the classroom. But it was not until about the ninth or tenth lesson that it suddenly hit me that this was not a course on some kind of fiscal reform, but that it had to do with freedom, and to me the *sine qua non* of happiness is freedom. Without freedom, life can be a torturous experience instead of a fascinatingly enjoyable one. It dawned on me that what we were learning was a highly individualistic philosophy, with freedom of choice and freedom of activity as its base.

That decided me. I was hooked. I took the advanced courses, studying Henry George's *Protection or Free Trade*, *The Science of Political Economy*, *Social Problems*, as well as Max Hirsch's *Democracy versus Socialism*. After having had my fill of these, I was invited to join the Teacher Training course under lovable, if irascible, Frank Chodorov, the then Director. Once again, I studied *Progress and Poverty*, this time with the "Master." To this day, I have the notes and amusing examples that Frank used, to make the course not only an interesting but an informative one. I doubt that he ever was able to keep that pipe of his lit for more than five minutes. Sometimes, I think he used it so as to enable him to tamp it when a tough question was thrown at him, and thus give him time to ponder how best to answer it.

The day arrived when, as one of the new teachers, I stood before my first class. It was a good one. Somehow or other, I managed to struggle through the whole course, and I found it exhilarating. It was so surprising to find how many of the students looked up to the teacher as though he knew all, even though I stressed that as the teacher I was not some guru with all the answers. But not all students were awed. Some could make the class really lively with caustic arguments. Some could put everyone to sleep with their interminably long, boring comments. I knew that the best monitors of a class were the students themselves, so I let the class bores mumble on until they were

advised to cut it short, in no uncertain words by their fellow classmates. It was great fun.

And, of course, because of the school, I wound up absolutely unbearable to my friends. I was always spouting George. I don't know why they tolerated me. I even managed to get some of them to attend the fundamental course. But, to my dismayed surprise, while most of them were impressed and recognized the truths, they did not seem to have imbibed the enthusiasm which filled me.

"It's a beautiful theory. I'm for it, and if it comes to pass I'll go along with it, but it's not going to happen in my lifetime, so why get all excited?" In a nutshell, that seemed to be the attitude of far too many of them.

But nothing could stay me. I had discovered something which saved me from being a socialist; something which changed the direction of my life. This was true even though I began to recognize that Henry George's dream for a just society was going to take years, possibly generations, for it to reach fruition. We, of my generation, were among the pioneers. It was we who had to do the educating so that those who came after us might someday actually be able to turn the dream into reality.

Now, it is 1982. The school is celebrating its Fiftieth Anniversary. Did Oscar Geiger, the founder, expect that it would last fifty years? He had planted a seed which has borne fruit, probably beyond what he reasonably could have expected. The political action of George's time has been all but forgotten. The political activists of his day are all dead. Only the school, and its affiliates, survive to carry on the dream. It remains the central institution around which the Georgist philosophy revolves. It has had its ups and downs, and will have more in the future.

But the seed which Geiger had sown was a good one, and as long as it is nurtured as he would have wished it to be, Henry George's dream will live on, and those of us who have helped to keep it alive may someday look down from the heavens above (where all good Georgists go) to tee the dream become a reality.