

The Mail Never Stops?

by OSCAR B. JOHANSEN

IF HENRY GEORGE had been alive to see what happened in Chicago last October he might have changed his views on the post office. Although his masterpiece, *Progress and Poverty*, time and again demonstrated the superiority of private enterprise, he said that "businesses which are in their nature monopolies are properly part of the functions of the State, and should be assumed by the State. There is the same reason why Government should carry telegraphic messages as that it should carry letters; that railroads should belong to the public as that common roads should."

Mail delivery, of course, is not by its nature a monopoly as the telephone is. It is one of the simplest things that can be done and yet the government has made such a mess of it that it culminated in a nightmare in Chicago last October almost too incredible to be believed. Chicago has the world's largest post office. It is two blocks long and one block wide and sits astride the railroads entering Union Station. But early in October the greatest snarl ever experienced in the movement of mail occurred there. Ten million letters, circulars, magazines and parcels were crammed in the building and could not be processed. Mail sacks were piled up so precariously that it was almost impossible to walk. Trucks, trailers and railroad cars waited outside the building to be unloaded. Day after day mail sat in the post office untouched. First class mail was supposed to have been delivered, but the dividend checks of one local corporation reached Chicago area residents twenty-one days later. Advertising brochures of a department store sale were delivered weeks after the sale. Even the post office press releases announcing National ZIP Code Week arrived late.

So desperate was the situation that the postal authorities considered burning some of the outdated bulk mail. Only weeks later after taking emergency measures such as diverting mail ordinarily sorted in Chicago to cities as far away as Atlanta, Pittsburgh and Omaha, was some semblance of normality restored. The cost to business was incalculable. One department store claimed a loss of \$2,000,000 because its sale fliers were delivered late.

What was the reason for this snafu? Excuses galore were given. The post office is well located for mail coming by railroad, but trucks and planes are increasingly being used and mail on them is not processed en route as on the trains. A remodeling job left much construction equipment in the way. Personnel is of poor quality, overtime is restricted and budget limitations have hindered modernization. The true reason was summed up in one disgruntled businessman's statement, "When the post office goes stuck there's no competition to turn to."

The postal service is a monopoly, made so by governmental fiat for political reasons. There was a time when it had competition from private companies. This was before the Civil War. So efficient were these enterprises that the post office was in danger of going out of business. That was unthinkable as it was too convenient a means of rewarding the party faithful with jobs. So through legal devices the private companies were forced out of the mail business and the present monopoly is with us to this day.

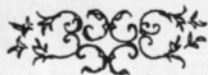
We can fly across the continent in four or five hours; we can make millions of telephone calls all over the country and have our calls completed within minutes but we cannot mail a letter to a town fifteen miles outside

of New York City and expect it to be delivered the next day.

Investigations are under way, management consultants are having a field day, so eventually some kind of order will arrive which may prevent our present mediocre mail service from getting worse. However that is no permanent solution. The only real one is for the government to dispose of the postal service to private enterprise. In a transition period of five to ten years the post office could be sold to competing companies and the money could be used to institute a program of retirement and dismissal of the present employees so as to cause as little harm as possible to the workers. Once the

mail service is operated by private businesses it will follow the same uniformly high pattern which exists in any field of competitive enterprise.

As Henry George pointed out, monopolies like the postal service are "trivial in extent as compared with the monopoly of land." But there is no reason why we have to put up with such man-made monopolies when it is so simple to correct them. And who knows, as people become increasingly exercised over our miserable postal service, and when its monopolistic features are repeatedly pointed out, possibly the way will be cleared for a discussion of the really all-important monopoly—the land monopoly.



Call it religion, patriotism, sympathy, the enthusiasm for humanity or the love of God — give it what name you will; there is yet a force which overcomes and drives out selfishness; a force which is the electricity of the moral universe; a force besides which all others are weak . . . and this force of forces — that now goes to waste or assumes perverted forms — we may use for the strengthening and building up and ennobling of society, if we but will, just as we now use physical forces that once seemed but powers of destruction. All we have to do is but give it freedom and scope.

— Henry George

Recalling the visit of Kul Bhushan Sharma from Nairobi, is *The New Era* (Magazine for Young Kenyans) reflecting his enthusiasm for Henry George's economic principles. An unsigned series on the Science of Wealth began with a definition of labor, land and capital. In clear language, with graphic illustrations, pupils were then given an explanation of money and the science of wealth.

From Australia comes a booklet, "Our Rating System—A Case for Rating Land Values and Exempting Improvements for the City of Perth." It was published by the Henry George League of Western Australia.

This is a highly condensed report that could perhaps only have been produced by Georgists. Long patient research is evident in the wide screen here presented. The League announced that it had no special interest to serve excepting as they share in believing that "what is good for the hive is also good for the bee."

There are 68 pages of results based on tabulations showing the effects of land value taxation, and since Australia has been a pioneer in this method the report should be of value to all students. The League modestly refrained from claiming that the application of U.L.V. (unimproved land value) rating would solve all the problems related to local government finance. "It is claimed however that without recourse to this system, arbitrary decisions, with consequent loss of civic rights, will often be unavoidable, and the preservation of equality and justice between ratepayers impossible."