

A Practice in Social Change

by MILDRED J. LOOMIS

THE term "land trust" is a new phenomenon in social change. Young people in great numbers are discussing and forming "communes." In December 1969 I took part in two conferences attended largely by the "new generation." Discussion and planning sessions were long and earnest. The Peacemakers, an action group for peace, now see the relevance of free land to a peaceful world. They determined to constitute an incorporated Peacemaker Land Trust which would act as a receiver of donated land—the land to be placed in trust would not be reconvertible into property, but would remain in trust in perpetuity. Owners of other land would not be eligible as trustees (users) and no trust land would be leased or subleased when it was no longer in use. Under no circumstances would legal coercion be brought to bear—only moral suasion was to be the guiding influence.

Ralph Borsodi was one of the first to declare, in *This Ugly Civilization* (1928), that "land is a trust." In 1936 he founded the School of Living in Suffern, New York, in which I participated. Hundreds of families who wanted "a little land and a living" were encouraged to incorporate as non-profit, land-holding, homesteading associations. An Independence Foundation provided loans at low interest rates. Families were to build and own their individual homes and homesteading buildings. Each was to possess and occupy its acre or two on a 999 year lease from the Association on terms indicated in a legal document called Indenture for the Possession of Land.

The indenture spelled out the new concept of land as a trust rather than as private property. It transferred to each homesteader possession of a certified plot, subject to "productive and

creative work in the home, shop and on the land, primarily for family use," on monthly payment of a small annual assessment to the Homestead Association.

In Israel a similar move has been widely implemented. The Jewish National Fund has been buying and holding title to land since 1948, making it available to groups of settlers on long term leases. Instead of selling the land or giving title to individuals and groups, the land remains the property of the Fund in the name of "all the people," free from speculative land-lordism. Thus land users get a start without the prohibitive cost of buying land. A wide variety of Israeli communities and specific holding agreements have developed, but in recent years the trend is toward group trust-holding of land and individual- and family-holding of buildings and produced goods. This gives a balance of individual and communal interests so necessary to a healthy growth of both individual persons and community interaction.

Gramdan (village trust-holding of land) was begun in India in 1949 by Vinoba Bhave, Gandhi's successor. It is a massive application of the land-trust idea. Gramdan means village trusteeship of land, allotted to users in town meeting. The movement now includes more than half of all the land in Bihar previously held by private landlords. Bihar is one of India's poorest states. Expectation is that Gramdan will take over three to six more of the remaining fifteen Indian states by 1975.

In 1967 the land-trust ideas and practices in the early School of Living communities were revived. Robert Swann, after working with evicted share croppers—feeding them, finding

jobs and helping them find homes—decided that “free land” or land as a trust, was a primary need. With Ralph Borsodi’s help a new International Foundation for Independence was instituted for the purpose of securing funds and making loans at low rates to groups of families who would hold title in common, on long term leases, and pledge never to turn the land back into speculative private ownership. To date the Foundation’s small capital has assisted groups in Georgia, Mississippi, New Mexico and Mexico.

Related to this Foundation is an International Independence Institute for teaching the Foundation’s concepts and practices to communities, colleges and government agencies. It has been instrumental in initiating an independent action group—New Communities, Inc. One of its first projects in Southern Georgia will be to assist some 500 families to resettle a 5000 acre tract on a lease-hold, trust holding, common possession pattern. Thus one large plantation will become a self-maintaining, diversified, homesteading, non-speculative community of families. The anticipation of course is that this will

become an on-going, dynamic method with enduring benefits, both to participants and to non-participants, in reduced land values. It aims to help rural people maintain and develop successful communities on the land and thus eliminate some of the rural roots of the urban crisis. This work is directed by Robert Swann assisted by Erick Hansch. Information is available from them at RFD 1, Voluntown, Connecticut.

The Indenture for the Possession of Land has been termed a remarkable document in legalizing trust or common title to land. If that had become a much more widely-used pattern of land development, important social results could have been realized. Hundreds of thousands of families moving into such communities when it was introduced thirty years ago would have benefited from lower costs and indenture holding, and land values would have dropped in surrounding areas. But instead government and regular real estate development continued to be the pattern, and the general impact of this ethical trust holding was not felt.

THE WHITE HATS ARE COMING

The White Hat Committee has been formed in California to place an initiative measure on the November ballot to make it unconstitutional for taxes to be levied on any property other than land.

Irene Hickman, County Assessor of Sacramento, California, who is pushing the measure, says, “Passage of this amendment to the California Constitution will reverse the trend of taxation in this state away from penalty taxes on building, equipment, inventories and other personal property toward an incentive tax policy that will encourage growth and progress.”

The Committee, which has offices at 710 Alhambra Boulevard, Sacramento, California 95816, is actively seeking funds to support its drive.

The measure will benefit over 92 percent of all California homeowners, businessmen and farmers, according to the Committee. “By increasing the taxes on land from two to three times, we would provide the same amount of tax monies presently collected from taxing buildings, personal property and land,” they said. The tax on land, they estimate, will save the average taxpayer up to 35 percent of property tax.