

The Community

ALL SOCIETIES have a land ethic (good or bad) dealing with who should own, control and use the earth's land, water, minerals and air. When arrangements have permitted just and fair access to these natural resources, life has generally been harmonious and "good." Where **some** people have owned and controlled natural resources, and the masses have been users under permission from and payment to "owners," then some people were rich and most were poor—conflict and war resulted.

Western civilization's land ethic violates the counsel of ancient sages and Biblical prophets by practising private (alloidal) land tenure. Civilizations rose—and fell!—because of it. Roman law-givers legalized it. Wherever Roman conquerors went, private property in land was established—in France, Germany, Britain. Nobles accumulated wealth; the masses lived via tenantry, proverty and submission.

In England, "the power of the Lords and law" sealed this system with the Enclosure Acts. The nobility were granted private ownership to all the erstwhile common grazing lands which could be "enclosed" by visible or invisible (stated-on-paper) boundaries. Sheep herders were thus forced off the land and into cities, to become factory spinners and weavers of wool from their former flocks.

In the 1600s and 1700s hordes of these landless ones fled to "the land of the free." Some intended a free-holding of land in America; witness Boston Commons. Unfortunately, the Lords had preceded them; the new-continent had been parcelled to nobles and their favourites by special "grants from His Majesty, the King." William Penn was given a grant the width of Pennsylvania, extending west "to the Pacific waters"!

In America the newcomers worked and saved. There were always some who fared well; others lived at subsistence level. But they had an option. Families with both need and courage could always escape—take up some of the boundless, cheap land to the West. Waves of people went West; land was gobbled up by both users and speculators. The day came when no more land was open, unclaimed. But people kept coming—via birth and immigration. At times the disparity of earnings and opportunity was so serious that economic depressions hit.

People on the land could not pay their rent or their mortgages. They fled to cities and turned to charity and government for survival. Cities grew with blight at their centre; industry increased, producing goods and providing jobs via the trading and using of such goods. Workers formed unions to "get higher wages" by striking and refusing to produce. Government passed laws to pay the unemployed and give social security to the aging. Taxation increased, government budgets overspent, federal debt skyrocketed, inflation spiraled, technology replaced human workers, unemployment went from 5 to 10 to 20 and 30% of the adult population.

Many were told and believed that this American Way was Progress. Ralph Borsodi, observing, participating and trying to heal it, called it *This Ugly Civilization*. Ralph Borsodi set his life to help America achieve the old, ethical way of holding land counselled in the Bible and practised by America's native people. In his 90-years, he experimented with a common, or group-trusteeship of land—in the Dayton Liberty Homesteads (1933); the Suffern School of Living community in 1936, the Bryn Gweled Homesteads at South Hampto, Pa., in 1943. He studied and worked with Gandhians; he wrote and reported endlessly on his efforts. With Robert Swann, he formed the Community Land Trust in 1966 as a tool for taking land out of the speculative market, to be held in trust by voluntary associations of concerned persons.

◆**LAND TRUSTS** attract people wishing to "get back to the land." They present a working model of how land can be held and enjoyed jointly. But given the present structure of tenurial rights, they do in fact represent exclusive, private ownership (albeit with multiple claims on the land by all members of the group who form the trust).

◆**IN A SOCIETY** which taxed all land values, the trusts would have to pay to the central exchequer the value of their land. This fiscal mechanism would ensure that everyone shared in the benefits of the land, while securing possessory rights for those who tilled the soil.

◆**SAM DYSON**, President of the Fairhope Single Tax Colony, in the US, affirms: "Fairhope Single Tax Corporation has demonstrated the advantages of land value taxation over a period of 84 years and we are constantly disappointed that governments do not recognize the primary importance of land and land prices and how these factors affect the economies of the states and nation . . . Governments for the past 45 years have placed all sorts of limits and controls on labour and capital and yet nothing has been done in regard to land, land pricing or value taxing."

THE COMMUNITY Land Trust is usually a non-profit corporation. It is a quasi-public entity, but a very simple mechanism. Its purpose is to secure and hold land in trust for members of a community. Such interests are of unlimited duration. Obviously no person or group of persons can exist in perpetuity, so it is necessary for an artificial or "legal" person to be set up. A non-profit corporation is uniquely suited to this use.

Land Trust

REPORT FROM
YORK, PA., BY
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The corporation consists of a board of trustees which represent three groups: (1) the users of the land or lessees; (2) the community as a whole, the town, county or ward in which the land is located; and (3) the larger, more impartial community. These trustees may be self-perpetuating or elected (by consensus or other agreed-on method) by the constituencies they represent.

The Community Land Trust secures land by gift, purchase or other method, and commits itself to maintain and develop it in an ecologically responsible manner for the benefit of the community. This development must assure the protection of the rights of all concerned, including future generations.

The land held by a community land trust is allocated to users under a lease-arrangement, the user agreeing to a monthly or annual rental fee for its use, but without an initial purchase price. The proceeds from granting use—whether to a homesteader, the right to mine ores, or to construct a shopping centre—are returned to the community in which it exists. For example, if a community land trust owned a coal reserve in West Virginia, the proceeds of the sale of the coal would be reinvested in the community for the benefit of the present and all future members of the community, possibly in research and development of alternatives to coal, like harnessing wind and solar energy.

The Community Land Trust itself, and its lessees, thus become stewards of the land, the concept being multiplied

and extended with each new acquisition and conveyance.

The Community Land Trust is directed in the United States by Robert Swann and associates, 639 Massachusetts Ave., Cambridge, Mass. A land-trust directory lists nearly 100 groups operating or in formation as community land trusts, in America. The first to be operative was New Communities, Inc., on 6,000 acres near Albany, Georgia. It is settling both blacks and whites, under local administration, onto five acre tracts. Many other community land trusts average 200, 100 and fewer acres each. Some formed since 1966 and benefiting from experience and development include the Sam Ely Land Trust in Augusta, Maine; Abnaki in Putney, Vt.; Evergreen Land Trust, Seattle, Wash.; Northern California Land Trust, San Francisco; School of Living Land Trust, York, Pa. The School of Living's *Green Revolution* for March 1978, discusses and lists a directory of many others. (\$1.00 from Box 3233, York, Pa.).

The Community Land Trust, by the staff of Center for Community Economic Development, is a manual and guide to a new model for land tenure in America. (\$3.50 from the School of Living, York, Pa.).

At a time when use (and mis-use) of the earth is a matter of vital, perhaps primal concern, the Community Land Trust affords a ready instrument for protecting land for future generations, and enables us to make significant changes in social policy in the face of apparent public lethargy.