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The Homestead Ideal and Conservation of the Public Domain

By IRVING MARK

THE EARLIEST MIGRANTS to the Atlantic frontier beheld the vision of a homestead and a farm. This hope for a share in the land persisted and was transmuted through the years into a right to the soil. The early belief in the "natural right" to land was vigorously expressed by the Reverend John Higginson of Salem to Governor Andros *c.* 1687: "The right to Land Soil we had received from God according to his Grand Charter to the Sons of Adam and Noah, and with the consent of the Native Inhabitants."¹ In similar vein did the Jersey yeoman in 1746 claim that "No Man is naturally intitled [*sic*] to a greater Proportion of the Earth, than another."² The recurring waves of westward-moving settlers came to regard the vast public domain of the United States as the common property of the Nation. The common folk had equitable claims springing not only from the toil of the occupant but also from the expenditure of blood or treasure. Through a common sacrifice, the Nation secured the Western Cession of the original states, the Louisiana Territory, Florida, Oregon, the Mexican Cession and the Gadsden Purchase.

With the founding of the Republic, Hamilton and Jefferson differed on federal land policy. Hamilton's view was to secure quick returns in cash even though the speculators would gather in a rich harvest at the expense of the people. Jefferson's policy favored low selling prices and small parcels primarily in the interest of the settling farmer. The imprint of Hamilton's policy was dominant at least until the Pre-emption Act of 1841. But the persistent cry of the people for land grew with swelling force.

I

IT WAS EXPRESSED by the settlers in Illinois in their "Petition to Arthur St. Clair Governor of the Northwestern Territory" in 1790, wherein the squatters asked for land and a preemption to their improved lands. The petition accurately reflects the attitude of "squatters" who knew that they were on land that legally belonged to "absentee landlords." Quite naturally they felt that the actual occupiers of the wilderness ought to have some equitable claim to the land that they improved. Hence forty-six banded together and addressed their request to General St. Clair, under whom James Pigott (*c.* 1739-99), one of their leaders, had served in the Revolution, concluding:

¹ *The Andros Tracts*, 3 vols. (Boston, 1868-74), Vol. I, p. 124.

² *New York Weekly Post-Boy*, June 9, 1746.

Your petitioners humbly request, that, by your excellency's command, there may be a village, with in-lots and out-lots sufficient for families to subsist on, laid out and established in or near the Prairie de Morivay. We know the other American settlers near the Mississippi to be in equal deplorable circumstances with ourselves, and, consequently, would be equally benefited by the privileges we ask; and that those of us that came to the country and improved land since the year 1783, may be confirmed in a right of pre-emption to their improvements, is the humble request of your petitioners. . . .³

The provisions of the Land Act of 1796 for public auction of 640-acre blocks at a minimum of \$2.00 per acre provoked objections in the Fourth Congress from William Findley, James Holland and Jeremiah Crabb. These men were "for encouraging farmers, and against engrossing." Congressman John Evert Van Alen of New York in 1796 vainly strove to reduce the size of three square-mile allotments in behalf of the small holder. His view was reported in the *Annals of Congress* as follows:

He considered the land now about to be sold as the joint and common property of every citizen in the United States, and that therefore it ought to be disposed of in such manner as would best promote the general interest of the whole community: . . . first, to accommodate actual settlers; and secondly, to bring money into the Treasury; and added, that, as he conceived the first to be the greatest object, it ought to be attended to, even if it would in some degree require a sacrifice of the other.⁴

From the settlers along the Ohio in 1797 came the request for free land after three years of occupancy. Although Congress bent to the extent of allowing a four-year credit and 320-acre blocks west of the Muskingum River, it did not yield.

In the Jeffersonian era the call for homesteads continued. John Parish's *Remarks on Slavery* (1801) and Thomas Brannagan's *Serious Remonstrance* (1805) argued for land grants to poor Negroes. Petitions for free land continued to reach Congress from Mississippi (1804) and Indiana (1806, 1814). In 1812 Representative Jeremiah Morrow of Ohio presented a similar request from "the True American Society," whose members held "every man entitled by nature to a portion of the soil of the country." The Irish Emigrant Societies of New York and Baltimore memorialized Congress in 1818, requesting "that a portion of unsold lands may be set apart, or granted to trustees, for the purpose of being settled by emigrants from Ireland on an extended term of credit."⁵

³ *American State Papers, Class Eight, Public Lands* (Washington, 1832), Vol. I, p. 20.

⁴ From *Annals of Congress*, 4th Cong., 1st Sess., 1796 (Washington, 1849), p. 422.

⁵ *Niles Register*, Vol. 14 (1818), p. 212.

Such pressures forced further bending in the Land Act of 1820 which reduced the minimum price to \$1.25 per acre and the allotment to 80 acres. There followed more demands for a fair share of land from Maryland, Illinois, Louisiana and Missouri. A report on public lands for education was presented to the Maryland Senate, January 30, 1821, stating:

In whatever point of view therefore the public lands are considered, whether as required by purchase, conquest or cession, they are emphatically the *common property of the Union*. They ought to enure, therefore, to the common use and benefit of *all* the states, in just proportions, to the use and benefit of any *particular* state or states, to the exclusion of the others, without an infringement of the principles, upon which cessions from states were expressly made, and a violation of the spirit of our national compact, as well as the principles of justice and sound policy.⁶

A Memorial of the Missouri Legislature on Federal Land Policy, January 4, 1825, presented to the Senate on December 27, 1827, stated:

Our country is peculiarly the asylum of the oppressed, and emphatically the poor man's home. Every law, then, which opens before the poor man the way to independence, which lifts him above the grade of a tenant, which gives to him and his children a permanent resting and abiding place on the soil, not only subserves the cause of humanity, but advances and maintains the fundamental principles of our government.⁷

II

IN THE JACKSONIAN PERIOD small farmers and mechanics prodded more relentlessly. Thomas Hart Benton called for an inquiry into the expediency of donating lands to settlers, and in 1828 a House committee on public lands reported favorably on such a policy. Langdon Bylesby argued for the natural rights of the occupier and toiler on the land. Bylesby was a Philadelphia printer, inventor and journalist. Indebted to William Thompson, the "Ricardian Socialist," he saw in producer cooperatives the salvation of labor. Labor, as he saw it, consisted of independent artisans who were being strangled by the capitalist's control of the machine. Harking back to Jefferson, he demanded that labor no longer be deprived of its due share of the products of its efforts. Land inheritance violated the "natural equality of rights" to acquire subsistence and property. Technological improvements increased the power of wealth over labor. To offset this power, he advocated the voluntary associations of mechanics. In his *Observations on the Sources and Effects of Unequal Wealth* . . . he wrote:

⁶ *Report with Sundry Resolutions Relative to Appropriations of Public Land for the Purposes of Education, to the Senate of Maryland, January 30, 1821* (Concord, N.H., 1821), pp. 9-10.

⁷ *American State Papers, Public Lands*, Vol. V, p. 36.

No one has a just *natural* right to occupy more of the soil than will, with a due portion of the physical labour of which he is capable bestowed thereon, afford him fair share of the comforts of life and means of happiness; and whatever more he claims, or takes, must, in some shape or other, be unjustly withheld or taken from those who lack it, wherever talents and industry are equal in one and the other.⁸

The *Mechanics' Free Press* of Philadelphia, October 21, 1828, sent its memorial to Congress demanding the "birth-right to the soil" for all users, urging:

That your Memorialists recommend to Congress that the Public Lands be reserved as a donation to the citizens of the United States in the character of perpetual leases, free from rent, and subject to revert to the Government when the lessee or his heirs fail to cultivate or occupy it in proper person, for—years together; providing that, in the future location of towns, &c. for general or public purposes, the incidental possessor of the soil, besides a reasonable compensation for it, shall only share and share alike, in the lots and other advantages thus to be derived.

Radical mechanics of New York, through the *Report of the Committee of Fifty . . .* (1829), insisted upon equal distribution of the soil. Small wonder that President Jackson in his message of December 4, 1832, declared that "the public lands should cease as soon as practicable to be a source of revenue." Labor demanded this policy in the National Trades Union's resolutions in 1834, favoring the granting of land to settlers which:

RESOLVED, that this Convention would the more especially reprobate the sale of the Public Lands, because of its injurious tendency as it affects the interests and independence of the laboring classes, inasmuch as it debars them from the occupation of any portion of the same, unless provided with an amount of capital which the greater portion of them, who would avail themselves of this aid to arrive at personal independence, cannot hope to attain, owing to the many encroachments made upon them through the reduction in the wages of labor consequent upon its surplus quantity in the market, which surplus would be drained off, and a demand for the produce of mechanical labor increased, if these public lands were left open to actual settlers.⁹

In similar vein Paul Brown's *The Radical; and Advocate of Equality* stated:

We want an equalization of the property of lands and the main resources of subsistence, so that we can have secured to us equal opportuni-

⁸ Byllesby, *Observations on the Sources and Effects of Unequal Wealth; with Propositions toward Remedying the Disparity of Profit in Pursuing the Arts of Life, and Establishing Security in Individual Prospects and Resources* (New York, 1826), p. 24.

⁹ *The Man* (New York), August 30, 1834.

ties of access to a comfortable livelihood, both as it respects employment and other means necessary to preserve health and life. And we want assurance of the same access to all useful knowledge that others have; that no set of men may in future have the advantage of superior knowledge to cheat us out of any of our rights.¹⁰

The added weight of organized labor brought the Western farmer's cause to fulfillment. The demands of the frontiersmen had at last wrested the Pre-emption Act of 1841 under which each settler had a right to the first chance to buy unsold land upon which he had "squatted." George Henry Evans championed the homestead cause through his columns in *The Working Men's Advocate*. He publicized the demands of the National Reform Union of the City of New York, which in 1844 reported:

Your Committee does not recognize the authority of Congress to shut out from those lands such citizens as may not have money to pay another ransom for them. Still less do we admit their authority to sell the Public Domain, to men who require it only as an engine to lay *our children* under tribute to *their children* to all succeeding time. We regard the Public Lands as a Capital Stock, which belongs, not to us only, but also to posterity. The *profits* of that stock are ours, and the profits only. The moment congress, or any other power, attempts to alienate the *stock itself* to speculators, that moment do they attempt a cruel, and cowardly, fraud upon posterity, against which, as citizens and as honest men, we enter our most solemn protests.¹¹

Thomas A. Devyr, John Commerford and Lewis Masquerier also agitated for "the right of the people to the soil." Lewis Masquerier lectured on agrarian utopianism and abolition of landlordism, the wage system and organized religion. In *Young America*, the organ of the National Reform Association, he presented a forceful argument for equal division of the land, holding:

The unlimited accumulation of property has resulted from the usurpation of the soil, and by compelling others to pay rent for the use of it, there seems to be no mode so effectual to counteract as to limit each man's power of accumulation to his own natural labor and equal share of the soil.¹²

Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune* presented lengthy statements on the "land reformers." Opposing the land speculator, Greeley wrote:

Thus Speculation is perpetually operating to scatter, to retard and barbarize our pioneer settlements, compelling each settler to wander off into

¹⁰ Paul Brown, *The Radical; and Advocate of Equality* (Albany, 1835), p. 10.

¹¹ *The Workingman's Advocate* (New York), July 6, 1844.

¹² *Young America* (New York), July 19, 1845.

the untrodden wilderness unless he is able and willing to pay five times what he should pay for his location. Banish the speculator or break up his pestilent calling, and our new lands will be settled far more compactly than they now are, since almost every one would prefer to have neighbors if he were not required to pay too much for the privilege.¹³

Augustine J. H. Duganne plucked from his *Iron Harp* the cry that "God gave equal earth to mortals." Favoring the natural right of the settlers to land, he sang:

Listen workers! listen!
Earth is yours—the broad, wide guerdon
Given to man with life's first burden;—
God hath set his seal and word on
Man's true title. Listen!¹⁴

The inexorable pressure of this public agitation forced political recognition. In 1842 land was donated to settlers in Florida under certain circumstances, and in Oregon in 1850. In 1846 Felix G. McConnell of Alabama and Andrew Johnson of Tennessee introduced homestead bills. In support of such bills, George Washington Julian, the Free-Soil and abolitionist Congressman of Ohio, on January 29, 1851 argued:

They simply demand that, in laying the foundations of empire in the yet unpeopled regions of the great West, Congress shall give its sanction to the natural right of the landless citizen of the country to a home upon its soil. The earth was designed by its Maker for the nourishment and support of men. The free and unbought occupancy of it belonged originally, to the people, and the cultivation of it was the legitimate price of its fruits. This is the doctrine of nature, confirmed by the teachings of the Bible.¹⁵

Galusha A. Grow of Pennsylvania, on March 30, 1852, similarly contended:

For if a man has a right on earth, he has a right to land enough to rear a habitation on. If he has a right to live, he has a right to the free use of whatever nature has provided for his sustenance—air to breathe, water to drink, and land enough to cultivate for his subsistence. For these are the necessary and indispensable means for the enjoyment of his inalienable rights, of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.¹⁶

Despite the persistent support of Andrew Johnson of Tennessee, George W. Julian of Ohio and Galusha A. Grow of Pennsylvania, no general bill for free land actually came to a vote in Congress until 1852, and then it

¹³ *New York Tribune*, January 24, 1852.

¹⁴ Augustine J. H. Duganne, *Poetical Works* (Philadelphia, 1855), p. 136.

¹⁵ G. W. Julian, *Speeches on Political Questions* (Albany, 1872), pp. 51-2.

¹⁶ *Congressional Globe*, Vol. 25 (1852), Appendix, p. 427.

was defeated in the Senate. The Free-Soil Party declared its support in 1848 and again in 1852. The Pittsburgh platform of the Free-Soil Democrats, August 11, 1852, ran:

11. That all men have a natural right to a portion of the soil; and that, as the use of the soil is indispensable to life, the right of all men to the soil is as sacred as their right to life itself.

12. That all the public lands of the United States belong to the people, and should not be sold to individuals nor granted to corporations, but should be held as a sacred trust for the benefit of the people, and should be granted in limited quantities, free of cost, to landless settlers.¹⁷

But no major party took up the cause until 1860. The opposition was strong. The Southerners feared the spread of free-soil settlements. Eastern manufacturers and land speculators were disturbed by the economic impact of westward migration. The former feared the loss of labor supply; the latter, the competitive acquisition of land. The Know-Nothing Party disliked expending the national heritage upon foreign immigrants.

III

BUT THE SANDS were running out. In 1860 Galusha A. Grow of Pennsylvania got through a land-reform measure, albeit amended to include a charge of twenty-five cents an acre. President James Buchanan vetoed this bill. But the Republican Party included the homestead plank in its platform. Its victory and Southern secession opened the way. On May 20, 1862, Abraham Lincoln's signature sealed the passage of the Homestead Act. It was the fulfillment of a dream—but a dream clouded by the prior claims of railroads and speculators and by the financial burdens of beginning afresh.

The ideal embodied in the Homestead Act of 1862 was well expressed by Congressman William Steele Holman of Indiana:

Instead of baronial possessions, let us facilitate the increase of independent homesteads. Let us keep the plow in the hands of the owner. Every new home that is established, the independent possessor of which cultivates his own freehold, is establishing a new republic within the old, and adding a new and strong pillar to the edifice of the state.¹⁸

Even the newly emancipated Negroes cherished the dream of "forty acres and a mule." Mary Ames, a New England teacher sent South by the Freedman's Bureau, has depicted the bitter anger and sorrow of freedmen of Edisto Island, South Carolina, upon being informed that they

¹⁷ E. Stanwood, *A History of Presidential Elections*, 3rd ed. (Boston, 1892), p. 188.

¹⁸ *Congressional Globe*, 37th Cong., 2d Sess., part 2 (1861-2), p. 1031.

would have to yield their "little homes and gardens" which they had built out of the property seized from their former masters.¹⁹ Although Congress failed to adopt it, a policy of confiscation of the great plantations in behalf of the poor whites and Negroes was regarded, according to the war correspondent Sidney Andrews, as essential to democracy. In *The South Since the War*, Andrews gives a graphic account of the Negro's hunger for land through his letters from the Carolinas and Georgia. He reports an ex-Rebel lawyer as saying:

I'll tell you what I think you should have done. The policy of confiscation should be rigidly carried out at once. Mercy to the individual is death to the State; and in pardoning all the leading men, the President is killing the free State he might have built here. The landed aristocracy have always been the curse of the State,—I say that as a man born and reared in Georgia and bound to her by every possible tie. Till that is broken down there can be no real freedom here for either the negro or the poor white. The result of the war gave you a chance you never will get again to overthrow that monopoly.²⁰

But disappointment was not confined to the freedman. The mere enactment of the Homestead Act did not fulfill the dream it embodied. A vast land monopoly was being created by the huge land grants to the railroads. Charles H. Pearson in 1868 anticipated F. J. Turner's thesis in demonstrating the effect of land famine upon the labor reserve and upon democracy. In 1870 Edward Thomas Peters launched bitter attacks upon the large-scale accumulations of public lands by railroads and private land jobbers in speeches and articles which appeared in *The National Standard* and the *Century*. In a lecture before the Pre-emptors Union, a squatters' organization, he declared:

What, then, is our obvious policy? Clearly it is to part with them only to actual settlers, and to let no man have more than he can cultivate with his own hands and with the help of his children. The time is coming when we, or our children will need these lands, and we cannot afford to commit the egregious blunder of giving away in our collective capacity as a nation, or selling for a mere song, the very lands which we or our children, will soon be compelled to buy again at a high price from such great landlords of our own creation. Such folly is without a parallel.²¹

The squandering of the public domain was accompanied by a rapid and reckless exhaustion of our forest resources, toward which the public, including the homesteader as well, was apathetic. The warning by the

¹⁹ Mary Ames, *From a New England Woman's Diary in Dixie in 1865* (Springfield, Mass., 1906), esp. pp. 95-101.

²⁰ Sidney Andrews, *The South Since the War* (Boston, 1866), p. 369.

²¹ Edward Thomas Peters, *The Policy of Railroad Land Grants, a Lecture Delivered by E. T. Peters before the Pre-emptors Union . . . Washington, D.C., on Wednesday Evening, April 27, 1870* (Washington, 1870), p. 14.

American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1873 passed unheeded. The Timber Act of 1873 placed forestation in private hands by offering 160 acres more to grantees who would place 40 acres aside for trees, a policy which only encouraged more land grants to lumber interests rather than to homesteaders.

In the Gilded Age, Henry George observed the headlong rush for wealth and the great increase of landed wealth through mere population growth, fraud and speculation, side by side with grinding poverty. His *Progress and Poverty* was written to solve this "great enigma of our times." In it George warned:

These rights [of the Declaration of Independence] are denied when the equal right to land—on which and by which men alone can live—is denied. Equality of political rights will not compensate for the denial of the equal right to the bounty of nature. Political liberty, when the equal right to land is denied, becomes, as population increases and invention goes on, merely the liberty to compete for employment at starvation wages. This is the truth that we have ignored.²²

George Washington Julian, early advocate of the Homestead Bill, lashed at the railway companies in a series of bitter articles.²³ A host of writers continued the barrage against "landlordism," pleading for the poor man's right to land: William A. Phillips, Thomas P. Gill, Joshua K. Ingalls, one of the early advocates of the Homestead Bill, and John Rankin Rogers, a Populist leader. Republican Congressman from Kansas (1872-78), Phillips presented the farmer's viewpoint on land, silver and greenback questions. Repudiating Henry George's single-tax program, he favored a graduated tax on land, large incomes, and inheritances. He believed in conservation, the organization of labor, and the regulation of public utilities, although he was not a Populist. His views on land are presented in *Labor, Land and Law* . . . wherein he wrote:

The right or power of the state over land should be to see that it is used for the equal benefit of all. To give a monopoly of land to a few is to give the bread and meat of the people to a few. The state never had any right to do that. In making the attempt it exceeded its powers. The unjust systems that have grown up under it call for reform. . . . We are certainly laying the foundation of a landed aristocracy. We have allowed our timbered regions to be devastated and destroyed, until the condition thus produced affects the productiveness of some of our agricultural regions, and the comfort of many of our people. We present a startling picture of speculation in lands and lots by those who add nothing to their improvement, and fortunes are made without labor by the increase of

²² Henry George, *Progress and Poverty* (New York, 1879), p. 545.

²³ *Atlantic Monthly* (March, 1879), *International Review* (February, March, 1883), *North Atlantic Review* (March, 1883).

population and the efforts of those who do not benefit by it. Speculation, and the fact that land has been made a chattel, enhances the valuation of lands and lots so as to put them beyond the reach of those who are poor or even those in moderate circumstances.²⁴

John Rankin Rogers helped organize the Farmers' Alliance in Kansas. A "greenback" Republican, he founded and edited the *Kansas Commoner* in 1887. Moving to Washington State in 1890, he was elected in 1894 to the lower house of the Washington Legislature. Here he introduced bills to redistribute the tax burden, freeing small homesteads entirely, to improve the conditions of miners and to broaden the scope of public education. He was elected governor of the state by a coalition of Populists, Silver Republicans, and Democrats, and strove to enact the Populist program: lower expenditures, more taxes for education, public control of railroads and utilities. He called for a home for every family, arguing:

For the problem is complicated by the acquired rights of present possessors, which must be respected, and by the further fact that two rights to land are at once plainly apparent: the right of the public to whatever land or natural opportunities are used or needed for use by the public, and the individual right of man to the soil as a free gift from the Creator, or from nature, as proven by reason, by revelation, and by the necessities of his position. Occupation and use is the only natural title, the only just title, to land. Whatever the public occupies and uses, or needs for its occupation and use, should be taxed by the public; whatever the individual needs for use and occupancy, outside the domain of the public, should be free from tax by that public which does not in this case occupy or use.²⁵

On the basis of the reports received from his representatives, the Land Commissioner, William A. J. Sparks, kept reporting throughout the Eighties on "bold, reckless, and gigantic schemes to rob the government . . . in every state and territory containing public lands."²⁶ The zeal with which John W. Le Barnes, a law clerk in the Land Office from 1880 to 1888, fought to protect the public domain for the poor led to his dismissal, which prompted General James B. Weaver, the Populist presidential nominee, to say: "He has for many years done his utmost to hold in check the whole gang of land sharks of every shade."²⁷

²⁴ William A. Phillips, *Labor, Land and Law; a Search for the Missing Wealth of the Working Poor* (New York, 1886), pp. 19-20.

²⁵ John Rankin Rogers, *Free Land, the Remedy for Involuntary Poverty, Social Unrest and the Woes of Labor* (Tacoma, 1897), pp. 11-2.

²⁶ *General Land Office Report, 1875-1893. Land Office Report for 1887*, p. 54.

²⁷ *New York Herald*, January 13, 1888. For Le Barnes' efforts to separate the church and state in Massachusetts, see I. Mark and E. L. Schwaab, *The Faith of Our Fathers* (New York, 1952), pp. 284ff. Even Chief Joseph of Nez Percé stated: "The earth is the mother of all people, and all people should have equal rights upon it." *North American Review*, Vol. CXXVIII (April, 1879), p. 432.

IV

THE PASSING OF THE FRONTIER near the end of the nineteenth century marked the end of an era, the underlying character of which Frederick Jackson Turner has described:

Most important of all has been the fact that an area of free land has continually lain on the western border of the settled area of the United States. Whenever social conditions tended to crystallize in the East, whenever capital tended to press upon labor or political restraints to impede the freedom of the mass, there was this gate of escape to the free conditions of the frontier. These free lands promoted individualism, economic equality, freedom to rise, democracy. Men would not accept inferior wages and a permanent position of social subordination when this promised land of freedom and equality was theirs for the taking. Who would rest content under oppressive legislative conditions when with a slight effort he might reach a land wherein to become a co-worker in the building of free cities and free states on the lines of his own ideal? In a word, then, free lands meant free opportunities.²⁸

The next few decades were distinguished by more intense social tensions, as the range of opportunities contracted. The controversy of private and public interests in the contracting public domain resounded with acrimony and brought the matter of conservation to the fore. Under the Forest Reserve Act of 1891 some 45 million acres of forest had been removed from public entry by the end of the century. President Theodore Roosevelt, influenced by vigorous advocates of conservation like Frederick Hayes Newell and Gifford Pinchot, set aside over 235 millions in the United States and Alaska. The discovery of a gigantic system of fraud by which railroads, lumber companies and ranchers were looting and ruining the public reserve enabled the President to transfer the national forests to the Department of Agriculture, where they were efficiently administered by Gifford Pinchot. Moreover, Roosevelt secured wide publicity for the work of the Forest Service, particularly through his Inland Waterways Commission and the national conservation conference, which led to the foundation of the National Conservation Association in 1909, headed by President C. W. Eliot of Harvard, and of the National Conservation Commission under the chairmanship of Gifford Pinchot.

A series of irrigation projects was instituted by Theodore Roosevelt to allay the hostility of the West to his conservation program. To promote irrigation, he set aside the ineffectual Carey Act of 1894 with the Newlands Reclamation Act of 1902, providing a fund for irrigation drawn

²⁸ *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. XCI (January, 1903), p. 91. For conflicting views and bibliography, see G. R. Taylor, *The Turner Thesis Concerning the Role of the Frontier in American History* (Boston, 1949).

from the proceeds of the sale of arid and semiarid lands. A new reclamation service was established under Frederick H. Newell, who initiated the planning of great dam projects. In addition, national parks, game preserves and bird refuges were established. Not until Franklin D. Roosevelt was the cause of conservation again so vigorously advanced.

Nevertheless, the demand for acquiring homesteads continued. The 1905 report of the Public Land Commission and articles by men like B. Millard and F. B. Stevenson²⁹ criticized the large-scale land frauds, which developed communities of hired laborers instead of homesteaders. William E. Smythe related the struggle for homesteads to the need for conservation. He was a fervent propagandist for irrigation. In 1905 two of his books appeared, making a profound impression: *The Conquest of Arid America* and *Constructive Democracy: The Economics of a Square Deal*. In the latter he wrote:

The Nation should not part with title to one single acre of land more valuable for timber and water supply than for agriculture. The title to such land should forever rest in the Government, and henceforth the right to cut the timber should be sold at its true value, and lumbering should be conducted under rigid regulations which look to the perpetuation of the forests and the preservation of the water supply. . . . No man should be permitted to obtain title to agricultural land now belonging to the people of the United States without building a real home upon it, cultivating the soil in good faith, and living there for at least five years. Nor even upon these terms should any man be permitted to get title to more land than is reasonably necessary for a home and a living. Nor should title pass until the land has been made fit for settlement by the provision of adequate irrigation facilities.³⁰

Another inveterate foe of "landlordism" was Tom Hickey of Texas. In 1909 he organized the Texas sharecroppers into the Renters' Union, later called the Land League. He expressed their demands through *The Rebel* at Hallettsville, Texas, until 1917, when his paper was suppressed by the Post Office Department for "seditious" utterances expressing opposition to World War I. Warning that all the farmers would soon be tenants and their sons "peons in the Mills and Factories," in characteristic style he concluded a column thus:

Up and at them Rebels! Crush the damned and Democratic Party and Landlordism out of the United States FOREVER! PREPARE for LIFE and let the LANDLORDS, CAPITALISTS AND PLUTOCRATS DO THEIR OWN GOING

²⁹ Appearing in *Harper's Weekly* (June 24, 1905) and *Everybody's Magazine* (May, 1905).

³⁰ William E. Smythe, *Constructive Democracy: The Economics of a Square Deal* (New York, 1905), pp. 367, 369.

TO WAR! Death to PEONAGE! Down with TENANTRY! Long live Industrial Democracy.³¹

The columns of *The Rebel* were spiced with socialist, land-reforming and militant labor ideas. They contained letters from Eugene Debs and Tom Mooney. They recorded the hot defiance of the Land League before the Commission of Industrial Relations, which held its hearings in Texas in 1915 to ferret out the causes of unrest among the sharecroppers. In 1914 Hickey and his supporters secured over 60,000 names for their first "Land Petition," which called for taxation equal to the unused land rentals and for rural credits to help homesteaders. They wanted to place the "landless man on the manless land."³² Characteristically, he thundered against "The Enemy Within, the Land Grabber," in an editorial:

We see the Land Grabber dominating every state administration in the Union and even the United States congress.

The Land Grabber, controlling land and money, controls the press and legislature as a matter of course, and then he proceeds to nail up the schoolhouses, tie the pulpit to his chariot wheels and drag the ermine of the judiciary in the mire.

Arrayed in arrogant power, the usurer-land-grabber insults with impunity his victims. Though they be a legion to his one he feels safe, because he is organized; they are not; and hence behind him stand all the forces of government, clothed with the power of shot and shell and manufactured public opinion. . . .³³

V

FROM THE DEPRESSION of 1921 onward, the long-range effects of declining prices and mounting costs upon the American farmer were felt with staggering force. As the attractiveness of homesteads subsided and large-scale mechanized agriculture grew, the farmer's struggles for land became a movement for maintaining his status as an independent small producer with a fair share of the national income and for advancing the public over the private interest in the Nation's natural resources. The latter battle necessarily involved the technician scientifically trained to cope with the intricate scientific aspects of conservation. Thus, John Ise, a Kansan economist, widely publicized the need for a constructive program to safeguard the natural resources of the Nation (the fraudulent squandering of which became painfully evident in the Teapot Dome scandal), in his many books: *The United States Forest Policy* (1920), *Our Vanishing Oil Resources* (1929), and *Sod and Stubble; the Story of a Kansas Homestead* (1936). In *The United States Oil Policy*, Ise wrote:

³¹ *The Rebel* (Hallettsville, Tex.), January 8, 1916.

³² *Ibid.*, January 9, 1915.

³³ *Ibid.*, May 29, 1915.

It ought to be clear to any mind above that of an orang-outang that the people of the present generation are only life tenants on the earth, and that they have no right to waste and destroy that which, as far as we can see, will be as essential to the happiness of future generations as to our own. . . .

It has been demonstrated many times that the government is the proper agency to hold most mineral resources, or perhaps all mineral resources. The government is the only agency that can afford to hold such resources indefinitely in the promotion of the general good. Private ownership has almost always led to wasteful use of the resource, and not infrequently to bankruptcy of the owner.³⁴

Senators Thomas J. Walsh of Montana, James Couzens of Michigan, Robert La Follette of Wisconsin, and George Norris of Nebraska led the fight for federal regulation of water power inadequately protected by the Water Power Act of 1920. Norris's valiant attempt to have the government operate water dams at Muscle Shoals was defeated by President Calvin Coolidge's veto in 1928 and by President Herbert Hoover's in 1931. The battle for conservation was fiercely waged in 1931 against Hoover's Garfield Commission by Ward Shepard, who criticized the Commission's policy:

The "great Western strategy for the protection of our watersheds and the plant life on them" which the Public Domain Commission set out to create thus disappears in an atavistic throwback to the economic philosophy and the land politics of the Eighteen Eighties. "Homestead thinking," to use Doctor Wilbur's phrases, has won a decisive victory over "watershed thinking" and over conservation thinking in general. Neither Congress nor the public will be deceived by the fictitious aura of conservation that surrounds what is really only a good old-fashioned land-grab.³⁵

And two years later, the Tennessee Valley Authority was established, vindicating Norris's vision.

The New Deal instituted its most far-reaching changes in the matters of conservation, power regulation and the utilization of natural resources. The conservation program of Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration was partly emergency relief and partly permanent reform. The Civil Conservation Corps, created in 1933, afforded work relief to young men and at the same time rendered invaluable service in the restoration and preservation of American soil, forest, water power and wildlife. The recurrent droughts of the Nineteen Thirties led to the passage of an Omnibus

³⁴ John Ise, *The United States Oil Policy* (New Haven, 1926), pp. 489, 497.

³⁵ Ward Shepard, "The Handout Magnificent," *Harper's Monthly*, Vol. LLXIII (October, 1931), p. 602.

Flood Control Bill and the construction of many reservoirs and power dams. Important conservation work was carried on by the Tennessee Valley Authority, the Resettlement Administration and the Public Works Administration.

Most important was the Tennessee Valley Administration, which was created by the Muscle Shoals Act of 1933 and empowered to acquire and operate dams, manufacture and distribute nitrate and fertilizer, generate and sell electricity, control floods through reforestation, withdraw marginal lands from cultivation, develop the Tennessee River for navigation, and advance "the economic and social well-being of the people living in the said river basin." Under the able direction of Harcourt A. Morgan and later David E. Lilienthal, the TVA effected a vast social and economic transformation throughout the Tennessee Valley.

But the uprooting of the farmer from the land has proceeded inexorably. Not only has there been a relative shrinkage in the proportion of people engaged in agriculture through the years, but also small farmers have been severely hit by the greater efficiency of large-scale mechanized agricultural units and by the long-range agricultural depression that developed between the two World Wars. In spite of their forceable resistance to foreclosures in the Farm Holiday movement, millions of farmers have lost their lands irrevocably, swelling the ranks of the "Okies" and other migratory laborers. Victims of droughts and "big blows" in the Dust Bowl areas, whose plight has been depicted by the House Tolan Report of 1940-41, have swelled the ranks of the "American peasants." While World War II, postwar relief, and Marshall Plan aid temporarily improved the farmer's conditions, they also strengthened the small farmer's competitors immeasurably. Nor have the war and its aftermath solved any of the basic problems of American agriculture which have made the family farmer's position on the land less secure than ever before.

Leland N. Fryer, in *The American Farmer; His Problem and His Prospects*, wrote:

The vital problems in American agriculture have not been solved during the war years. They have only been veiled, temporarily, by high prices and by the opportunity for small farmers to work at industrial jobs. The causes of rural distress are still with us, and they are ready to flare up again like a malignant disease.³⁶

How prophetic this observation was may be seen in the recurrence of

³⁶ Leland Fryer, *The American Farmer; His Problems and His Prospects* (New York, 1947), p. 2. A similar forecast was projected in A. W. Zelomek and Irving Mark, "Historical Perspectives for Post War Agricultural Forecasts: 1870-1940," *Rural Sociology*, Vol. 10 (March, 1945), pp. 69-70.

farmer distress since the Eisenhower administration. Except for large commercial producers, farmers in the Nineteen Fifties did not keep pace with other groups in their share of "Eisenhower prosperity." From 1952 to 1956 farm income dropped 26 per cent. Small wonder that "the farm problem" and Secretary Ezra Benson's program of "flexible price" support became a serious issue in the 1960 campaign.

From the beginnings of the Republic, the yearning to fulfill the homestead ideal has been a durable part of the national pattern. Into it the twentieth century has woven the desire to conserve the public domain. In the face of the precarious position of the family farmer and our dwindling natural resources, these ideals are likely to remain part of the national fabric for a long time to come.

Rutgers University

An American Creed

I DO NOT CHOOSE to be a common man. It is my right to be uncommon—if I can. I seek opportunity—not security. I do not wish to be a kept citizen, humbled and dulled by having the State look after me. I want to take the calculated risk; to dream and to build, to fail and to succeed. I refuse to barter incentive for a dole. I prefer the challenges of life to the guaranteed existence; the thrill of fulfillment to the stale calm of utopia. I will not trade freedom for beneficence nor my dignity for a handout. I will never cower before any master nor bend to any threat. It is my heritage to stand erect, proud and unafraid; to think and act for myself, enjoy the benefit of my creations and to face the world boldly and say, this I have done. All this is what it means to be an American.

DEAN ALFANGE