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# A SOCIAL EXPERIMENT

## THE ALABAMA SINGLE TAX COLONY

On the high bluffs that run along the eastern shore of Mobile Bay there lies the little settlement, Fairhope. In outward appearance it is merely a thrifty village with a background of small farms. But behind this modest exterior there is steadily going on an experiment in political economy. In fact the experiment is the main thing; for Fairhope enjoys the unique distinction of being an ardent single tax community, putting its theories into practice within the bounds of a conservative State, without confiscation of land, without any change of existing laws, and without evading the usual tax regulations. The town—if it may so be called, without a mayor or policeman—is a little more than eight years old, and is thriving. Such an actual test of Henry George's theories, imperfect though it may be in some particulars, must appeal strongly alike to the advocates and to the opponents of his views.

The present experiment is the outgrowth of the faith of a few enthusiastic single taxers, chiefly from Iowa, who some nine years ago boldly determined to establish a colony where their faith might be put into practice. A committee was sent to select a site. From several suggested they selected what is now Fairhope, because of its healthfulness, its accessibility, and the diversity of occupations that it seemed to offer. Here the first settlers arrived in 1895. The Fairhope Industrial Association was duly incorporated, and each of the half-dozen families paid two hundred dollars. With this money the land was purchased on which the colony was founded. Today the settlement owns 1,400 acres of land, and contains a little over seventy dwellings, several stores, a bakery, a hotel, a blacksmith shop, a saw-mill, a livery, a printing office, a school-

house, a church, a free library of 2,000 volumes, and a weekly paper. It has built a wharf that extends a third of a mile into the bay, and a steamboat that runs directly to Mobile.

The general plan upon which the colony is managed is simple. The "Fairhoper" rents his land from the community. These rents bring in a fund from which the community pays all State and county taxes on its lands and on the personal property of the renter, including houses. Any balance remaining is spent on public improvements. The land belongs to the community. The houses and other things put upon it by the individual belong to him. He pays no direct tax except his rent. To quote the words of a single taxer, "We do not fine a man because he builds a house, or gets a piano for his wife."

There have been but few changes in the general plan of organization and administration. Consequently the experiment can be followed with some clearness. The basis of everything is the Fairhope Industrial Association. Membership costs one hundred dollars, and only those can now obtain it who give evidence of genuine faith in the single tax theories. This restriction is probably necessary in order that the colony may remain under the control of those who are in sympathy with its purposes. There are at present about twenty resident members.

Affairs are administered by a president and an executive council. They are elected by the members of the Association, and have the highly responsible duty of re-assessing once every year all the rentals in the community. Thus the administration of all important matters, including the annual fixing of rents, is controlled by the members of the Association, who must be of the single tax faith.

But there is no such restriction upon the renters. Anyone may rent the land, improve it, build upon it, and live in the colony, whether he is a single taxer or an anti-single taxer. He has perfect freedom of speech. He is welcomed to the public meetings in the school-house, of which due notice is posted on a large blackboard in the centre of the town, and may take part in the discussions, which are usually animated, and often touch questions of much importance to the community at large. His rent is assessed in precisely the same manner as that of any member of the Association; and if he considers it unjust, the question may be referred to a popular vote. Yet this referendum is only for the members of the Association. No others may vote upon it. And it is granted only when ten per cent. of them sign his petition for it.

What might almost be called an accident has given occasion for a third class of settlers in the town. Certain bodies of land have remained for one reason or another in private hands, so that in several instances houses may be seen side by side, one of which is on colony land and the other on private land.

Under this unique arrangement there has come together an interesting group of men and women. Here are several single taxers from Iowa; there goes one from the conservative state of Massachusetts; another is full of interesting reminiscences of a socialistic colony in Mexico. This family came by private conveyance all the way from Ohio; that one belongs to a party of single taxers from Holland. Down by the bay shore a Norwegian is building his boats; up the hill the library is kept by a "Fairhoper" who lived for some years in Paris. In the winter the hotel and cottages fill up with northern travelers coming south to escape the cold; in the summer they are succeeded by the Mobilians who come out on the high bluffs to avoid the hot city nights.

Yet, with all this diversity of population, the town is pervaded by a common spirit that is unmistakable, and is perhaps best described by the word "democratic." It is a spirit of independence and equality, not unmingled with a fondness for discussion. One sees it everywhere—on the boat, in the public meetings, in their newspaper, even in the picturesque little amphitheater

that nestles against the hillside and looks over the platform where the band plays and the young people dance out on the blue waves, in a way that carries one back to the early days of Greece. Along with this spirit there is an entire absence of anything like secrecy. Their meetings are open to all; the books are easily accessible; the yearly assessment of rentals is printed and distributed, so that everyone knows just how much everyone else has to pay. No one who has been in Fairhope long enough to study the situation can doubt the perfect candor of its leaders, or the general desire of the colonists to do what is fair and just.

Yet in spite of a good location, a well organized government, an excellent personnel, a healthy spirit, and a continuous growth for eight years, the success of the experiment does not seem to me at all assured. In a country where so many small towns are prosperous and healthy, and where corruption, inequality, and pauperism are the besetting sins of large cities, something more than eight years of town life, even if attended by prosperity, is necessary to prove the general efficiency of Mr. George's remedy.

Serious problems have already arisen which may become more difficult as the settlement grows.

One of the most obvious difficulties arises from the peculiar conditions under which the experiment is made. In order that the colonist may pay no taxes besides his land rent, the community undertakes to pay them for him. What then will happen when they exceed his rent? Shall their excess still be paid? Would not this be making the rich richer at the expense of the poor, and thus accentuate the divergence between riches and poverty instead of lessening it, as the single tax claims to do? Yet to refuse to pay this excess would discourage any large plans for building or making other extensive improvements on the land. It would exclude from the supposed benefits of the scheme those who have any considerable amount of strictly personal property. And what is still more important, it would be interpreted as a lack of faith in the practicability of the single tax ideas, and would chill enthusiasm. Nor is this merely a prospective trouble. Several such cases have

already arisen, and the question is frequently and earnestly discussed in their meetings. So far they have kept the faith, and paid all of the renter's taxes for him, even when they exceeded his rent.

On the other hand, another difficulty grows out of the surplus, which so far has regularly remained after the payment of taxes and small administrative expenses. The policy at present is to devote this to the acquisition of public utilities. The community already owns the wharf, the bath houses, and a public water supply; and hopes in time to have telephones, electric lights, and street cars. Simply to give the use of these free to all renters,

could accurately calculate the increased rents to correspond to a free wharf, a free steamboat, or even free street car lines.

Indeed, the most obvious difficulty of the whole system seems to be the accurate assessment of the rents. The usual principle of demand and supply can scarcely be depended upon here, where the giving up or transfer of leases is complicated by the fact that the renter owns the buildings and improvements. If the rent be too high and he wishes to move, he must either pull down his houses and take them with him, or find someone else who is willing to pay the rent and buy his improvements. The former alternative is a desperate one, and



THE BUSINESS CENTER OF FAIRHOPE

even if it were financially possible, would be to give a dangerous socialistic trend to the whole single tax experiment. To charge for their use would add all the complications connected with the municipal management of natural monopolies. The natural way would seem to be to permit all renters to use them free, and to raise the rent in proportion as the value of each piece of land is increased by them. At present the public water supply consists of a deep well with a large storage tank above it. The use of it is free, and the rent of the neighboring lots has been raised on the theory that they get the chief benefit. But it is hard to see how anyone

the latter does not check the rise in rent. So far the "Fairhoppers" have been able to check their estimates by comparison with the values of private holdings adjoining their own. But this guide becomes less valuable as the colony continues to grow. Whether Fairhope can discover a way to solve these and the other problems that may arise is a question for the future to answer. Meanwhile both the advocates and the opponents of the single tax theory will watch with interest the experiment.

*George Petrie*