

# In the beginning there was the land . . .

by Leonard Rubin

Land ownership and use has not always been regarded by all civilizations in the same manner.

Early civilizations, tribal societies, the American Indians, Eskimos, and similar groups all regarded land as being held in common by the tribe or group itself. Generally, tribal land had perimeters that covered hunting grounds. Should another tribe attempt to poach upon such territory, an inter-tribal war would usually ensue.

Advanced civilizations early in history ~~often allowed their chiefs, rulers or~~ leaders to assume the authority to assign land to groups or individuals. Such land could be used for hunting or, later, agricultural purposes. In either case the group or individual to which it was assigned was required to pay the leader in one form or another. Often the leader favored his own family in assigning use of the land, which sometimes led to divisions or breaking up of the groups and formation of rival groups.

It was not such a difficult transition still later for a sovereign or ruler to claim he ruled "by divine right" and owned all the land and controlled his domain absolutely.

## Kings and Leaders

However, in Greece, Egypt and Rome various concepts of land ownership existed side by side. Often the leader or ruler owned vast tracts of land, the public owned certain lands in common, and private individuals owned other tracts. At the same time it is interesting to note that few claimed absolute control over the waters, because in the case of large rivers the source or course extended far beyond the control of particular rulers or individuals. In the case of the seas, while ownership was not claimed, areas were staked out and guarded by early navies of particular states or rulers adjacent to the seas.

In more recent times monarchs have claimed ownership of virtually all lands under their jurisdiction and authorized their use by lieges and lords or major supporters who lent their own armed subjects to support the monarch in his wars and conquests.

The entire concept of land ownership was not endorsed or agreed upon by all individuals or thinkers. Plato in his

*Republic* tells how the Guardians, or leaders of the state, should own no land or property and should be supported by the citizens on a minimal basis, receiving just enough to keep them well and strong with no accumulated surplus of anything allowed them.

Thomas More in *Utopia*, which was a critique of the England of his day, had all the land in his imaginary country owned in common. This was the period of the rule of Henry VIII. Subsequent writers of utopian concepts generally followed More in making the ownership of the land common to all citizens.

## Imperialism

Most monarchs of that time and subsequent ones not only claimed ownership of most of the land in their domains, but those in foreign lands which their countrymen had explored or claimed in the name of the king. The early history of the American colonies is filled with accounts of settlers being granted large tracts of land by both the English and French Kings—Lord Baltimore in Maryland, William Penn in Pennsylvania, Oglethorpe in Georgia, Sir Robert Heath in the Carolinas (named after Charles I). Later, Charles II made over the territory to eight of his favorites who became "the true and absolute Lords Proprietors" of Carolina. Often the Dutch and English laid claim to the same territory for their respective kings based on exploration and settlement by people from their lands.

Meanwhile in England itself, thousands upon thousands began to be dispossessed from what they considered their land by "Acts of Enclosure" which gave certain lords and favorites of the king the right to enclose lands for the grazing of sheep which was more profitable than raising agricultural crops. However, there still existed smaller tracts of land belonging to the public called "commons." This whole system touched off a series of incidents which, along with the industrial revolution, changed the entire course of English history.

## Mixed Bag

Most nations today combine various systems arising from their history, with elements of monarchy, feudalism, industrialism, public ownership and socialism. Thus, land policies of today are a very mixed bag, depending on which nation you are describing. The United States was

one of the first nations to set aside large acreage and designate them national parks and public lands in perpetuity. Other nations have since followed suit.

Of course, in communist nations such as the Soviet Union and Peoples Republic of China, there is no private ownership of land. However, individuals are granted the right to use the land in the public interest. This is particularly true of small agricultural holdings where, in order to stimulate the growing of small crops, individual "ownership" was granted and the possessors are given a percentage of the crops raised.

~~Recently there has been growing~~ interest in the concepts of Henry George, whose ideas now perhaps seem to be contemporary. George's land value tax concepts appear to be a possible solution to the collection of sufficient revenue and at the same time proper encouragement to private enterprise. Also, George seems to be in tune with the environmentalists, in fact in time he may be considered to be one of the first important environmental thinkers.

*This is the first of several articles by Mr. Rubin describing his course, "The Environment: Problems and Solutions." The first session was entitled "Land Policies and the Background of Land Ownership." Subsequent sessions deals with "Population and People," and environmental pollution.*

Ed.

## California High Schools

(continued from p. 1)

tion describes how summer school students invited Mr. Pollard to speak at additional, unscheduled meetings—and brought their parents. "Family conversations had been so stimulated by the repetition of classroom and afternoon discussions that students arranged for their parents to join us one evening. Judging by the parting comments of both parents and students, this meeting was extremely successful and sets an educational precedent in that such a demonstration of positive interest in academic activities has never before been exhibited in such a manner." This teacher concludes his remarks with this statement: "the Henry George School is indeed providing a valuable service both to the students and to the community . . ."