

Essay in Practical Georgism

By CATHERINE WASHBURN

“SO you're a Georgist? Then there is nothing you can do about it except to educate more people toward remote political action?”

Without entering the arena of how much political action, when and where—may I answer this commonly accepted dictum by suggesting certain minor activities that help prevent frustration by practical action? I refer to the use of Georgist knowledge to better one's own position. This sounds, and *is*, self-centered; but the more material fruit a Georgist gathers, the more he can further the cause, either by increased leisure for teaching, study, or travel, or by gifts or bequests.

Inasmuch as it is the system that is harmful to all, (landlords do not escape income and multitudinous other taxes) the man who from his knowledge of this system of justice in reverse makes it yield him a slight advantage, certainly does no one an injury. Thrift is, as Henry George made clear, no answer to the economic problem as a whole, but if it helps the Georgist to solve his own economic problem, thrift may, if related to basic theory, eventually react upon the larger problem.

For example: since Georgists know so well how improvements are penalized, why not try to be a little less improved by living in a barn or garage? May I report how delightfully this can work? I recently bought an old stucco garage—formerly a carriage-house with living quarters for the coachman. It nestles into a back corner of a larger place being sold in sections, so it looks out upon the grounds of various other homes and thus has more privacy than that of houses in line on a street. Besides a larger than two-car garage, it includes a living room, kitchen, and lavatory downstairs, and two large bedrooms and a “bathtub room” upstairs, also huge closets.

All This, and Pegasus

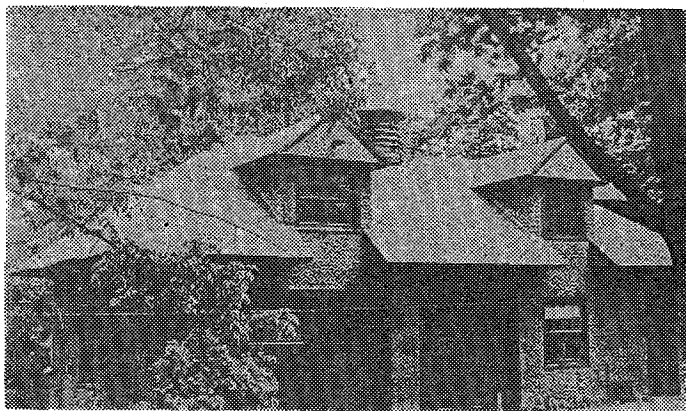
It has a hot-water heating system, by oil-burner, and an automatic gas water-heater. The irregular lot contains about 7,200 square feet. The architecture is the “modern” English of about 1900. True, the building shows some wear of time, so a few repairs were needed, but the structure is solid as a rock, comfortable, cheerful, and possessed of certain quaint charm. The horse is still active as weather-vane atop the cupola.

The other day I received my tax bill, \$33.40 for the first half of 1954. You see it's just a garage with “servant's quarters” although in a good neighborhood where the taxes on the houses of the “masters” are forcing them off the hill. I moved here from another “desirable” neighborhood, where, however, the average size of property is smaller. There the tax on a two-family, twelve-room house on 5000 square feet was \$322.38 for the year 1953. All that “improvement” was considered an “investment,” on the apartment, of which I was permitted \$56.40 monthly rental for six rooms, attic, and garage by the O.H.E.

A comparison of assessments is equally illuminating. Our town assesses at about one-third of market value, which is proved by the figures on the house I sold—assessed value of house: \$3,975; land, \$700; sale price, \$14,900. But my garage-dwelling is assessed at \$400 and the land at \$650—although nearly one-third larger than that assessed at \$700. The building is not

modern and could never be entirely modernized, heaven be praised! But it could certainly not be built today for much less than \$10,000, to judge by the prices of the little boxes in developments nearby. The purchase price was \$6,850.

Is not the moral plain? Admittedly there are not enough similar “quarters” to house all Georgists who have a taste for stable living, but look around, and don't insist too much on external improvements. I'm planting ivy to clothe the stucco and letting the hedge grow taller. If the maples and lilacs toward the back become a forest, so much the better. Nature may eventually hide my little retreat from any sidelong glance of



the assessor. I have no number. I'm just “in the rear” (although I have 52 feet on the side street). I shall ask for none. Perhaps the depth of content is in direct proportion to the degree of the inconspicuous.