

PART II

EMBARRASSMENT OPENS A DOOR

AS THE FOLLOWING CHAPTER illustrates, Ralph Waldo Emerson was so right when he wrote, “We know that the secret of the world is profound, but who or what shall be our interpreter, we know not. A mountain ramble, a new style of face, a new person, may put the key in our hand.”

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Newsroom, *Columbus Citizen*, 1951

“CITY DESK, RYBECK.”

“My name is Kathy Shoaf. I’m calling to request an announcement of an economics course sponsored by the Henry George School. I’ll be teaching it at the YMCA next month.”

“You said Henry George? Could I ask, is your school accused of being subversive?”

“Absolutely not. We want to strengthen America.” She bristled and her voice was shaky. I was embarrassed that my abrupt query had upset her.

Ms. Shoaf had no way of knowing that my intention was to take the community’s pulse, so to speak, because my head was spinning from a bitter controversy I had been reporting on for weeks.

Ohio State University, my beat, was caught up in a troubling battle. OSU’s president and trustees were engaging in what turned out to be a prelude to McCarthyism. They spied on instructors and took lecture quotes out of context. They spread fear with rumors that the campus was infiltrated by Reds or Pinkos – names that, during the Cold War era, implied friends of the Soviets and foes of America. To block subversive influences, they imposed a “gag rule”, requiring professors to get permission before they could invite off-campus experts to speak to their students. When the president refused to let A.J. Muste, a well-known pacifist, address a sociology class, incensed faculty members went public, charging an

assault on academic freedom. As this elevated into a national story, I found myself competing with reporters from the *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune* and the wire services to track all the charges and counter charges.

Keeping up with more seasoned reporters was not my only concern. Writing even-handedly about the controversy as faculty, alumni, and people around the nation took sides on the gag rule was a challenge because my editor, Don Weaver, wholeheartedly supported the university administration. To his credit, he never asked me to alter or tone down my reports, many of which included arguments 180 degrees from those in the editorials he was writing.

Getting back to Ms. Shoaf, she had no way of knowing, either, that she ignited my memory of an economics professor who devoted perhaps a few minutes to Henry George and dismissed him as a wrong-headed idealist of the Progressive era. So hearing his name triggered an image of someone far from the main stream.

My query was a clumsy attempt to see how much the red scare on campus had permeated the Columbus community at large. Once I realized Ms. Shoaf mistook my question for an accusation, I assured her that was not my intent. Truly curious, I said I would put a notice about her class in the paper and then try to attend it myself. Which I did, but the experience did not go smoothly.

In college I had studied economics theory with Valdemar Carlson, a Keynesian, labor economics with Lewis Corey, a fiercely anti-Marxist ex-Communist, and the interaction of politics and economics with John Sparks, a constitutional specialist. With that background I felt rather qualified, after skimming the class readings, to dispute Ms. Shoaf's presentations. The biggest hurdle was my inability to accept her insistence on the pivotal role of land in the economy, an idea that was alien to anything stressed by my professors or that I had encountered in my readings.

Yet I admired Kathy's respect for opposing views and even more her volunteer work with the area's multiple sclerosis sufferers (she advocated for them and arranged wonderful parties for people with MS and their families). So I agreed when she asked me to drive her and two associates to Montreal for an international Henry George conference. They offered to pay for the gas, no small inducement in a day when journalists were near the poverty class. It struck me as an opportunity to pursue my ornithological interests. I hoped to spot Hudsonian Curlews and other birds known to

thrive on the mud banks of the St. Lawrence while Kathy and her friends talked economics.

"The best laid plans..." I looked in on the conference, got intrigued and never did see my birds. Did I suddenly see the light while exposed to lectures by Henry George's followers? Not at all. What fascinated me in the talks and discussions was a refreshing contrast to the stultifying conformity that prevailed in central Ohio during that Cold War era. The conference attendees seriously questioned the underpinnings of society, political ideologies, and conventional thinking about peace and war. What philosophy or perspectives, I wondered, united this disparate group of Georgists whose professions ranged from stock brokers to farmers, from teachers to preachers and attorneys?

Curiosity about that assemblage, what made them tick, led me to devote the next couple years to studying their theories and analyses of social maladies. My chief mentors were Robert Clancy, head of the New York Henry George School, who oversaw branches around the country, Verlin Gordon of the Ohio branch, and Robert Benton of the Detroit branch, who commuted to teach in Ohio.

Many others shared their knowledge with me as I wrestled with their unfamiliar concepts. Joseph Stockman, director of the Philadelphia Henry George School, who was steeped in Chinese philosophy, never let discussions get too serious. Rupert Mason, a California bond specialist, told how he helped revolutionize the financing of irrigation districts in his state. Perry Prentice, a Time-Life publisher, brought public attention to urban land issues in *House & Home* magazine. Woodrow Williams, a rough-cut self-taught Ohio farmer, was a wise friend and teacher. Professors Harry Gunnison Brown and Mason Gaffney were among the few professional economists seriously focusing on land taxation in the 1950s. Vi Peterson, originally from England, executive secretary of the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, used her diplomatic skills to unite disparate Georgist groups in America and around the world in a period when most of the tides were inhospitable to their reform ideas, which is putting it mildly.

Before I could agree with the Georgist overview, I was forced to unlearn or put in different context much that I had gleaned from college courses and journalistic forays into economic matters. Yet, the more I delved, the more convinced I became that George's ethical orientation and reliance on scientific methodology could

resolve problems that otherwise seemed insoluble. And the more I appreciated my good fortune in answering Kathy Shoaf's phone call.

The next section traces influences along my intellectual journey, helping to explain why the Georgist message eventually began to resonate with me and shape my life's work. My hope is that telling these stories will enable others to more easily grasp the conclusions I reached.