

## TEACHERS AND CLERGYMEN

Last week, I mentioned the world's unnatural penchant for taxing backwards. Several times every week, there appears a news article that absolutely must be answered or handled in this column. It takes the form of great puzzlement and distress over some grave problem which the writer does not know is a stand-out symptom of our backwards method of taxation. I try to save those news items and the stack beside my typewriter is getting too high. This week, it might be appropriate to sort out the ones which complain about the low pay of our teachers (and clergymen). Now it would seem to me that our teachers (and clergy) above all are in a position to solve the problem. If it can be argued that they don't have time to study it, I would counter argue that they actually do spend as much time in futile discussions as it would take to study the problem in a systematic manner. To start out, one of the ways would be to read a little of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, at least through the part which explains how and why teachers' (or any one else's) wages are in a rather stable proportion to the wages of any other occupation. I use the word "rather" to permit minor variation about an average. If that average has changed in the two hundred and six years since Adam Smith published, it has been by dint of some artifice which has changed the difficulty of entering the occupation and has kept part of the competitors out. This probably chased those losers into competition with other occupations, thus lowering the wages of the ones who were left to pay the teachers' wages. So the teachers' gain was probably mostly cancelled out. This mechanism, using the example of teachers, could be described using almost any occupation as an example — any occupation, that is, subject to entry on a competitive basis. The fluctuations about an average are of shorter duration than a human lifetime, but the average itself, is set by natural laws.

If the teachers' pay, then, is a fixed proportion of the pie, it would make great sense to exert mental effort to consideration of the size of the pie. The early writers such as Smith and David Ricardo, and J. B. Say were trying to do just that but it should be no surprise that they made an error or two in reasoning. Is there a good excuse for the army of later thinkers not to detect those errors? We cranks and zealots happen to believe that at least one did. You teachers who want to solve your pay problem may by-pass the earlier writers and go directly to the Polk library for *Progress and Poverty* by Henry George. (I put it there.) I have about half a dozen books which say it in as many different ways, some shorter, but none better. There are some modern "experts" who say that a proper tax formula should not modify the total network of economic processes, and then they turn right around and advocate the one we use which inhibits our standard of living clear down to what it is, with the average person barely above minimum survival. If you think your occupation is the one which is really hard hit, and all of the others rolling in affluence, then you are in a class with most of the people I have ever met. Each one feels that his pay is so low because others' is so high. This is not true. What is true is that his pay is too low because the others' is too low. And I'm not talking about just money; I'm talking about purchasing power.

I have been fond of saying that since teachers are in the best position to do something about it, they should be the last to get a raise. But my statement is useless because the fact is that their boat will be raised by the same tide that raises all the others. MFNE (My Favorite Nebraska Editor) is fond of a Great Truth that you can't get more from less. Maybenot, but you can sure get less from more and if it has gone on for enough centuries, people unfortunately accept it as natural.