

# How America Lost Her Frontier

By V. G. PETERSON

The passage of the Homestead Act in 1862 was the culmination of decades of political wrangling, in which the participants represented every regional, political and economic group in the country. During this time wages, on the whole, had been high, but employment was uncertain and the hours and conditions of labor long and hard. The working men of America naturally turned their attention westward, seeing in cheaper land a weapon that would enable them to withhold their labor except when favorable terms were offered.

The story of the Homestead Act—from soap box to statute books in twenty punch-filled years—is necessarily also the story of George Henry Evans, the father of National Reform. The work Evans did is now little more than a footnote to nineteenth century history. Neither in life nor in death can it be claimed that he was wholly successful. When Homestead was passed, ten years after his death, it omitted the very essentials of his cherished plan. The great reservoir of free land in the public domain, which he thought would last for centuries, ran dry in a few short years.

Such fruits as his endeavors bore are described in a recent study by Helene S. Zahler, "Eastern Workmen and National Land Policy." (Columbia University Press, \$2.50).

The National Reform Association was formed in 1844. Their program demanded that the unoccupied public land be laid out in townships, six miles square, divided into farms and village lots of limited area, one of which could be acquired free by any landless citizen who actually settled on the tract. The natural resources were to be reserved for the community and disposed of for its benefit.

In the spring of its birth-year, National Reform took to the soap-box. Armed with banners embroidered "by the loving hands of the ladies' auxiliary, and with transpar-

encies bearing appropriate slogans from Moses or General Jackson," they expounded their doctrines on likely corners of Old New York. The press greeted them, apathetically at first; later with open hostility. The conversion of Horace Greely, an early accomplishment, was a distinct feather in Evans' cap.

Thus, armed with a consistent plan, a press of its own, a small group of converts and a political party pledged to support any candidate who would advance their ideas, National Reform sallied forth to conquer. Tons of tracts and leaflets were issued, and New Yorkers opened their eyes one morning to find the city plastered with the message, "Vote Yourself a Farm." It was a good slogan.

The National Reformers were no respecters of party boundaries. Every public question was transformed into a land argument. No matter whose fight it was, they managed to elbow their way to somewhere near the middle. Their logic was inexhaustible.

Organized labor, fighting for free education and a ten-hour day, had little time for the new enthusiasm. But the National Reformers had come up from the bench and the lathe. There was a homogeneity that could not long be denied. Soon Evans and his friends were traveling from labor convention to labor convention, all over the New England States, getting resolutions adopted and winning new converts to their ranks. "The land for the landless," was the cry.

Evans never lived to see the final passage of the Homestead Act. He was saved the disappointment and

humiliation which the form in which it was finally made law must surely have brought to him. It included neither reservation of the public domain for the actual settler nor restriction of the land to the landless. Yet it bore some resemblance to its stalwart fathers. Limitation was recognized, the homesteader being restricted to one entry sworn to be for his own use. Exemption was recognized, the homestead being free from execution to satisfy debts incurred before the issue of patent. But no precautions were taken against the land monopolist. The man whom Evans had feared most, and had sought hardest to destroy, remained to plunder. The politicians had been too anxious to keep on the right side of their patrons to bother about making Homestead an instrument for true, impartial land reform. The landless worker came off second best.

When Henry George wrote "Our Land and Land Policy," in 1871, the public domain not yet disposed of in June the year before, amounted to 1,387,732,209 acres. This book, George's first published work, was one of the most famous of the criticism levied against the failures of the United States to reform its land policies.

Evans and Henry George were alike in many ways. They were both printers who later became publishers and used the press to spread their doctrines. They were both believers in natural rights and in man's inalienable privilege to use the earth. Both sought to enlist the aid of political parties to put their message over. Evans got to the statute books, but in a form so bastardized as to give him little satisfaction had he been there to witness it. But unlike Evans, although Dr. Zahler has failed to remark this, George left behind him a complete, constructive and implemented philosophy that can never be merely a footnote because it is part of the annals of time itself.

