

A Brainworker Back on the Land

By Abraham Segal

I have lived for the past four years in this isolated rural community here in the North Carolina Blue Ridge. There are no mills and factories nearby, and outside of the town store keeper, clerks, etc., the people support themselves mainly by cultivating the land or running or working in small sawmills.

Since the closing down of the village tannery some eight years ago, there had been little cash money until the advent of the W. P. A. The farmers have largely depended and still do on their crops and on trading small surpluses. They do exactly as Henry George said: "The man who cultivates the soil for himself receives his wages in its produce." "And they who do the work of production, put in as they take out, they receive in subsistence and wages but the produce of their labor."

Before coming here, these statements, to me, were merely theoretical generalizations; now they are experienced facts. City-bred, I knew nothing about land and its cultivation and cared little. I had only the vaguest notions of how vegetables grew and what they looked like outside of grocery stores and tin cans.

* * *

This ignorance of mine was a constant source of amazement to the natives and I was frequently asked "what kind of rations do you eat up north?" Soon after coming here, I went to a neighbor to buy some vegetables. She was busy and told me to go to the garden and help myself. I hesitated, rubbing the toe of my shoe in the dirt, like an embarrassed small boy, then admitted I didn't know what they looked like in the garden! But I soon learned. I had to or starve.

That summer I studied gardens and watched the women folk can fruits and vegetables. I asked many questions about gardening for it dawned on me that it was the answer to "what do I eat?" I waited impatiently for the coming of spring.

(Friends of Mr. Segal, who follow the Marxist philosophy, asked him: "Why are the 'capitalists' interested in Henry George?" As far as those who are really "capitalists" in Marx's confused sense, the land monopolists and their lesser spawn, the members of capitalistic combinations, their interest has always been clear: to combat him. As for the real capitalists, the owners of plants, machines, stocks, and for the enterprisers and other managerial labor, we ask in reply: Why shouldn't they, as well as all labor, be interested in establishing progressive capitalism? The real question is, why aren't more of them interested? Mr. Segal, a student of the Henry George School and not yet an adherent of George, discusses, from his observation and experience, the Marxist contention that capital which is unavailable generally is necessary for a man to make a living. He does not discuss, be it noted, George's point that capital is nevertheless necessary today as an element in modern competitive production.—The Editors.)

My first garden was not a howling success for illness delayed my planting and the land was sterile, washed-out clay. I made a few mistakes, like using red clay that packed like concrete, for seed boxes; for to me dirt was dirt without any distinction as to kind. Then I buried lima beans six inches deep and my few chickens—dignified with Bible names, which was regarded as sacrilegious by the pious—thought that I was planting for their amusement. Yet the garden was not a total failure.

The second season I had more experience and a better piece of ground—so I raised more than enough for myself and distributed lavishly plants and produce in refutation of the contention that "I couldn't learn to garden from a book."



Having rented more land than I could cultivate, I followed the local practice of bartering my spare rented land for ploughing and shares of the potato and corn crop; this eliminated much physical work on my part. I furnished one bushel of seed potatoes and one-half-sack of fertilizer. From this investment I received five bushels of potatoes and eleven bushels of corn which I used to pay the rent for cabin, land and wood. Yet my business friends term me an "intellectual" without the cliff-like forehead!

In addition I raised enough cabbages, beans, peas, tomatoes, spinach, peppers, to fill 100 quarts and had all the fresh vegetables I wanted to eat.

The third season I was again handicapped by illness and a poor piece of ground. However, I still had my processed stuff from the previous year, for a long stay in the hospital provided food and shelter. And that is carrying me through now until crops mature again.

* * *

This season I hope to be a banner one. From my neighbor, I rent a very comfortable cabin and a small, fertile piece of ground about 40 x 40 feet. He is supplying the fertilizer and plowing—for \$24 a year rent. As he detests gardening and is not very successful at it, we are exchanging my head work and planning for his labor.

My seed potatoes and vegetable seeds will cost me about \$1.50. His investment for a larger garden to feed his family of eight will cost him, exclusive of labor time about \$15. He has no work outside of occasional carpenter work. I confidently expect to harvest enough fresh vegetables to eat during the season and to fill 150 quarts, besides storing away in the ground, for winter, root crops like beets, carrots, cabbages, potatoes, sweet potatoes, turnips. My investment for jar rings, caps, sugar, salt, spices and wood for cooking will average about \$4 to \$5; possibly less.

From his garden, my neighbor will have enough vegetables for his family to fill 500 quarts and sell the surplus in the community market at the county seat. Last fall, I showed my neighbor how to grow turnips successfully on a large scale and this winter his wife tells me that she sold on the market to the townspeople and mill workers about \$15 worth of turnip greens and turnips. His investment for turnip seed was 45 cents; the fertilizer came from his own stable and he owns a horse for motive power. With good management he ought to be able to sell his surplus vegetables for about \$150.

* * *

It is my opinion based on observation and questioning that there are two major classes of farmers here. The first type just barely get along due to inadequate management. The second class do much better than just barely raise enough for their families and stock. There are no large scale farms or dairy herds or poultry flocks. County taxes are low, about \$1.29 per \$100.

Many farmers own and pay taxes on land that for various reasons they cannot or will not use and improve for themselves. A good share of the land has been allowed to grow up in brush and to erode. But there is a scarcity of fertile land which could be rented. As Henry George said "were land treated as public property it would be used and improved as there was a need for it." I have observed a number of cases of farmers who actually rent land from others for they do not care to spend time and energy improving their waste land.

Wages for casual labor like ploughing, cutting wood, rough carpentering average \$1.00 to \$1.50 for an eight-hour day.

* * *

With good management one could make a very comfortable living here and not even work. If I had the energy and a small capital investment, say \$50, which I hope to accumulate very gradually, I could raise my living standards. I would have a small flock of poultry, about 25, properly sheltered and fed. I would have a small strawberry bed and small fruits for my own use and sell the surplus.

Living standards are low. There are no modern conveniences like electric lights, running water, bathtubs. Many houses are unpainted and simply furnished with few pictures or radios. The people have early been conditioned by long isolation and lack of educational and cultural opportunities and contacts. When on one hot day, I mentioned to a neighbor that I missed a shower bath arrangement she murmured, "I don't for I never had one." This is the prevailing attitude of the ma-

junty.

As an incentive, the county is offering a reward of \$25 to a county household which improves its kitchen, with a good ceiling, linoleum, conveniently arranged closets and tidiness. I am going after that prize for I want it to buy a typewriter. If I don't get it, I shall let my "housewifely" instinct for tidiness deteriorate and let my house stay dirty!

See: "Progress and Poverty." p. 33, p. 79, p. 401, p. 457.