

# the Henry George News

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## Doc Yellen — Giant Killer

by CLAYTON BAUER

**B**RAVE BEN YELLEN, the Brawley (California) medico, has won a resounding triumph over the land monopolists of Imperial Valley. Virtually single handed, he challenged the associated greed and brute force of the powerful land barons. Most Valley folk would not have bought odds of one against a million that Yellen could thrash the vultures of privilege. His victory rates as the economic upset of the year.

Of 5,000 landowners in the Valley, says Doc, 400 held a third of the almost 500,000 fabulous bonanza acres. Fully 70 per cent of the acreage was owned by absentees. The landlords' greed had squeezed out 1600 family-type farms. Families of local jobless actually faced starvation in one of the world's most prolific fruit and vegetable gardens — an oasis of unsurpassed fertility. The forces driving American farmers from their beloved land are the same forces picking your pockets at the supermarket.

Yellen is 58, a bachelor and practicing physician. His eyes are trained to seek causes from symptoms. Some time back a Mexican "stoop laborer" sought his help. The man had suffered a hernia, and Doc found it strangulated. Know what that means? If untended the man might die, cruelly.

This peon earned perhaps \$14 a week, spent \$13.25 a week for food at the labor camp and had another dollar deducted for "medical insurance." He got no note of the services due him, and he couldn't read anyway.

The policy in such cases was to dump aliens in their own country and threaten them with imprisonment if they tried to re-cross. Yellen's gorge rose as the U.S. Border Patrol allegedly picked up the hurt man and ran him out of the country. He took a hard second look at his Valley and set out determined to take the case to court.

From the early forties Yellen had watched the gradual uprooting of the family-type farms. Where once districts like Magnolia had been dotted with homes, sheds and clumps of cooling trees and shrubs, big machines had ironed out the land. The homes had gone to the town or outskirts. The fields stretched far and wide — and were all but empty of people.

The Ervine Company alone could claim title to 12,000 acres — every one as good as five of the best Midwest gumbo. Thus the holdings could produce as much as 60,000 Iowa acres. Furthermore a feudal empire of 93,000 acres in Orange County belonged to

*(Continued on page 13)*

(Continued from page 1)

Ervine who backed this vast domain with \$120 million of wealth. With both money and land behind them, farm bosses could insinuate themselves or their pawns into all the community's posts of power, and operate like a principality.

The many small farms had formerly spawned myriads of jobs, paid top wages, and built thriving towns. I myself trucked melons to the freight cars in Kunishima Brothers' shed in Holtville in the twenties when wages were double the rate for common labor in the East. But now land monopoly and special privilege for the rich were strangling Holtville. El Centro, too, had felt the pinch. Merchants and businessmen were going broke in an oasis that yearly produced garden truck worth \$225 million. Doc felt sick as he counted the drop-outs: Thom McAn Shoe, S. H. Kress, F. W. Woolworth and others. He knew many friends and patients who could no longer find jobs. The farm rajahs, with hot lines to Sacramento, could flood the Valley with cheap Mexican labor with one urgent call.

This monopoly of land tainted every office. The county assessor-collector, according to Statewide Homeowner studies, was under-assessing big farm properties by 50 per cent to 75 per cent. Absentee landlords were draining away something like \$4 million yearly of taxes they owed the Valley and local taxpayers had to shoulder the added burden.

Big farm flunkies also ran the Irrigation District. Yellen made comparisons of Imperial water costs with those of other districts. Fresno City was paying the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation \$10 per acre foot. San Diego Water Authority paid the same rate to its supplier. Farmers around Los Angeles were paying \$11 to their distributor, while Metropolitan Water District paid no less than \$13. Imperial Valley's

monopolists were getting their water for a ridiculously low \$2.

"Who's getting it in the neck?" Doc asked. Valley homeowners, renters and businessmen, to be sure — for this same Imperial Irrigation District was also supplying consumer electricity to the whole Valley at prices painfully exorbitant. What the monopolist farmers willfully shrugged off, the much-robbed general public was being made to assume. The biggest landowning company, Yellen alleged, was escaping each year as much as \$378,000 in water fees. The Valley population of about 75,000 was paying on an average, an individual \$5 tribute to one company.

### A War of Words

Scorning the risks, Doc battled this octopus wherever it raised a tentacle. He used mimeographed fight-talks as his weapons, naming names and evils, and his barbs stung. When farm moguls declared open war on him he fired heavier broadsides. He was arrested more times than he cares to count — once for a ten-day stretch.

The weak point in the barons' royal sway lay in a controversial ruling on a proviso of the federal irrigation laws. A farmer may enjoy U. S. subsidized water for up to 160 acres. Congress set this limit around the turn of the century.

The Imperial district claimed special exemption. Begun as a private enterprise, it had been flooded out and was able to resume distribution only with federal help. Imperial's water came via the All-American Canal. So did Coachella's, which obeyed the water limitation law. Imperial did not. In this desert, water hogging led to farm boss rule. How come? A Secretary of the Interior, in 1933, about to leave office, handed down the flimsy ruling. Interior's own solicitor ruled in 1945 that the water limitation did apply to the Imperial district. Justice



Department lawyers, arguing before the Supreme Court, declared in the same vein.

Yellen's method of attack was to pound out a damaging newsletter, run off a pack full of copies and stuff them into the parked cars on Brawley's streets. "Read and digest them," he urged, "then pass them on to friends." Other copies were mailed to officials in Sacramento and Washington, D.C. Stepping up his campaign, he ran for councilman. The farm bosses brought every political pressure against him, but he won. In the city chambers where machine politics and boredom had long prevailed the doctor teed off on land barons, and people listened.

Many a poor man would attempt to slip Doc a dollar, or five, or ten, but when Yellen, mindful of the income tax laws, told them he'd have to list their names, few felt they could afford to advertise their opposition to the landed interests. So Doc had to finance his own fight, though local voters gave him their secret ballot support.

While Brawley City Council opposed Yellen with ridicule, defeating

his every motion, he cornered officials in Washington and spoke his piece. When his complaint reached Senator Clinton Anderson, Chairman of the Senate Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, the Senator dashed off a peremptory note to Stewart Udall, the stout conservationist, who buzzed Frank J. Barry, Interior's chief counsel. To the latter it looked like a clear case for applying the limitation provision of the federal irrigation law to Imperial Irrigation District.

On December 30, 1964 the Department of Interior reversed the old Wilbur ruling, and set the Valley on its ear. So Doctor Ben Yellen and his stout helpers had cut the nabobs down to size. A powerful monopoly that had run rough-shod over our fairest garden spot for thirty years was defeated by one determined citizen. We've had many Georgist heroes, all but forgotten now. Today we need fresh workers to dig out facts and write about them. Ours is the most encouraging campaign in America. Let's to it, then, with the vigor and dedication of a Dr. Ben Yellen.

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"In the domain of agriculture, progress is more rapid if the peasant works for himself. For this reason the government has taken upon itself the task of making it as easy as possible for the peasant to gain access to ownership. This has been done without fanfare, without any great proclamations.

"To begin with, the uncultivated lands belonging to the great estates have been heavily taxed, while being given a time limit of five years in which the land was to be developed, under penalty of confiscation pure and simple. A novel system of recovery of lands from the large domains has been put into effect; it operates at Lake Alaotra and in Majunga, where the métayers of the Galland land-grant and of the Agricultural and Industrial Company of Madagascar will become owners. Land reform has been initiated; this is not spoken about, this is not well known."

The foregoing was taken from an article by Jacques Rabemananjara, Minister of Agriculture of the Malagasy Republic (formerly Madagascar), which appeared in *France-Amerique* on October 14th.

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An exhibit of painting by the Chilean artist, Haroldo Ramirez, has just closed at the New York Henry George School. Paintings and graphics by Irma Diaz of Mexico are now on exhibit until the end of January.