

Montana's Disappearing Frontier

by RUSSEL CONKLIN

AS I look back over the history of the single tax movement I find that Henry George, even after his defeat at the polls in 1886 felt he had reached hundreds of thousands who might otherwise never have learned that the earth belongs in usufruct to the living. No such claim can be made for my recent campaign, but there are 10,000 people in my district who voted for me and listened to my theories. I didn't hesitate to use the terms "land tax," "single tax" and "land reform." And tax reform is our vital issue.

One of my most widely quoted speeches was about South America. It is not the communists or the agitators who have thrown the starving millions at the gates of South America's great cities—but they are there to take advantage of the discontent. And what about Montana? The number of families living on farms grows smaller every year. The average size of the Montana ranch grows bigger constantly. Absentee landlords are bringing their cattle to Montana to fatten on our long grass, but they don't improve the ranches. Many Montana farm operating losses are used to offset profits made elsewhere, and the owners are waiting for the capital gains at low tax rates. Land in Montana is priced above what the investment can yield. The incentive is to sell out. We have little industry, and our young people are leaving our state. The problem is easy to see in South America, and now in Montana where the frontier is gone the same conditions are creeping up faster than we realize.

In Billings, Montana's second largest city, there are 500 homes for sale. Rents in Great Falls have recently dropped as much as 20 per cent. In our community we depend on federal funds to

a frightening degree to maintain a huge air base and 150 missile sites. They call it our biggest industry, but *you* know it is not industry at all. No wealth is being produced by these huge military expenditures. They are simply draining off the wealth of an ever-decreasing number of producers.

Our economy is not healthy. Our schools are sub-standard. Our cities are beginning to look like the aging cities in the East. There are brown spots here and there, and buildings are beginning to decay, as suburbs stretch ever farther out into the wheat fields. We may not have slums, but we have some real examples of poverty and want. Talk to these people about taking a course in economics? A thousand will listen to lectures about what the air force is doing for our town, while 15 may show up at the library to see "Land—and Space to Grow!"

Along about 1912-15 when the single tax was being discussed in Oregon and Washington where we lived, my father said, "son, put all your money in land, some day you'll be able to cash in." Had I been less of an idealist I would now have the means to go out and tell our story to others—but not without blushing. I think speculation in land is morally wrong and economically unsound. Furthermore I believe it can be stopped. But we will have to beat the bushes to get the people out. I'd like to put on an advertising campaign and go from door to door as I do in political campaigns, but I could raise thousands for political activity easier than I could get \$100 for a Henry George campaign. And yet it seems to me the chance to get out and push our reform is the biggest opportunity offered to us in this half of the century.