

Jobless Go Back to the Land

By Bolton Hall.

The soil of New York City, from which lofty office buildings and apartment houses have grown in profusion, produced during the 1937 harvest season more than 600 tons of fresh vegetables for persons on unemployment relief who turned gardeners, according to the Works Progress Administration.

Tomatoes, with a total yield of 330,279 pounds, led the list of twenty-three vegetables raised in Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens and Staten Island. (None of Manhattan's vacant lots was made available for garden plots.) The total harvest was about 1,215,270 pounds. The corn crop accounted for 87,111 pounds, beats for 86,561 and turnips for 84,913. All the work done in the gardens was performed by families from the home or work relief rolls. Materials and supervisory aid were supplied by WPA.

Among the vegetables produced in substantial quantities were wax beans, broccoli, carrots, cucumbers, lettuce, radishes, rutabagas, squash, Swiss chard, kohlrabi, pumpkins, spinach, peppers, lima beans, peas, cabbage and eggplant.



Additional data is available in the recent WPA survey, "Part-Time Farming in the South-east." Workers in the textile, naval store, lumber and coal and iron industries, earning from wage employment less than \$500 a year, were able to raise in a year for their own consumption on plots from one-quarter acre to three acres products of a total value ranging from \$70 to about \$400. The survey found that this improved their diet, since their gardens produced more and better food than they would have been able to buy.

This is not cited to raise the interesting question of the possibilities

of enclavial land settlement as an unemployment relief and rehabilitation device in the present monopolistic order, but as evidence upon an even more fundamental question, whether even today, when buildings rise to 80, 90 and 100 stories, available land only and not capital is necessary to make a living.

This evidence has been accumulating a long time. What I wrote about it in 1908 may still be recalled:

What unskilled labor with little capital can do on quarter acre plots of poor soil, well situated, is best shown by the Vacant Lot Gardening Association of various cities.

It has met with marked success between the waves of speculation, in over twenty cities throughout the United States and also in England and France, as a means of opening employment to those who are incapable of earning a living elsewhere. Its practicability and efficiency have been recently demonstrated, particularly in Philadelphia, where for years from one to two hundred acres have been kept in cultivation. In 1907 over 800 families raised on about two hundred acres, crops worth \$40,000.

There are plenty in New York City who want land, but Vacant Lot Gardening there has a serious drawback—lack of land within easy reach of congested centres that can be had free; however, thirty acres in the Bronx was loaned by the trustees of the Astor Estate, only fifteen cultivable. Ninety gardeners started in at the beginning of the season and less than 5 per cent failed to carry their work to completion. The cost to contributors is about \$10 per family. Against this the families have products of nearly \$10 for every dollar expended.

Gaylord Wilshire, a prominent Socialist, and editor of Wilshire's Magazine, says:

"In our grandfathers' days 'necessary machinery' meant an axe, a hoe, and a log cabin, all of which were easy of individual production and ownership. Today, 'necessary ma-

chinery' means a combined reaper and harvester, made by a one-hundred million dollar trust, a one-hundred million dollar railway to haul the wheat to market, a million-dollar elevator to unload it, and a million-dollar mill to grind it into flour, and finally a hundred-million-dollar trust to bake it into biscuits for all America."



But the Vacant Lot Gardens show that even today available land only and not capital is necessary to make a living, and that any person who can get a bit of land can succeed on it if he will work with his head as well as his hands. There will be a revolution in our farming plans and our farm life just as soon as the people wake up to the fact that the land about our towns and cities, nearly all of which is held idle for speculation, is the land out of which they should get their living.

See: "Progress and Poverty," pp. 209-216; p. 243; p. 451. See also: Hall, B., "Three Acres and Liberty," Macmillan, New York; Hall, B., "A Little Land and a Living," The Arcadia Press, New York, especially Chapter III.