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Single Tax Movement in Wisconsin

By John Harrington

WISCONSIN. ACTIVITY IN THIS STATE—THE REAL DISTINCTION JUSTIFYING PUBLIC REGULATION OF RAILROADS.

We have had several Single Tax lecturers here this winter, consisting of Mr. Ernest Crosby, Mr. Bigelow Mr. Bengough, and Mr. White. The lectures have been attended by audiences averaging about 350, and have been listened to with delight. The impression made has been so good that it now seems to be a certainty that a similar course will be given next winter; and in that case the audiences will be more than doubled.

As we have no session of the State legislature this year there is no legislative progress to report. The last legislature did not hit upon much of value to Single Taxers, except in the collateral line of railroad legislation, in which a long step was taken, namely the creation of a railroad rate commission. This commission is now in existence, and is doing preliminary work. The commission has quite broad powers in the regulation of railroad rates and in the prevention of rebates and special rates. There is, I think a mistake in the theory of the law; it is entitled "an act to regulate railroads and other common carriers, &c." The implication is that a railroad is regulated because it is a common carrier. It seems to me that it should be regulated because it is in its nature public property—a public highway. A railroad company has a dual capacity. That of a carrier, and that of an "owner." As a carrier it is a private enterprise, but engaged in serving the public in that peculiar capacity that requires public regulation, like an inn-keeper. The business is essentially private, and for private gain in spite of its public character.

But as an "owner" it is the trustee of essentially public property, and it is in the capacity of trustee of public property, a public highway, that we find the real ground for public regulation.

John Harrington / Oshkosh, Wis.