CHAPTER 11

THE HENRY GEORGE SCHOOL: 1932—1960

> "The progress of civilization requires that more and more intelligence be devoted to social affairs, and this not the intelligence of the few, but that of the many. We cannot safely leave politics to the politicians, or political economy to college professors. The people themselves must think, because the people alone can act. . . .
>
> "Let no man imagine that he has no influence. Whoever he may be, and wherever he may be placed, the man who thinks becomes a light and a power."[1]
>
> —Henry George (1883)

These lines express George's Jeffersonian faith in the capacities of the common citizen; but it is doubtful if he ever thought of an educational institution as a means of sowing the idea which was so vital to him.

In the depression year of 1932, however, at a time when ordinary men were groping for an understanding of the forces that had engulfed them in economic disaster, the time was ripe, and in New York City the first Henry George School was started by a New York fur dealer named Oscar Geiger.[2]

Like George he was self-taught and scholarly. He had left school at the seventh grade, had been ordained a rabbi, but had given up orthodoxy in favor of a more general philosophy. He had known poverty but then had done well in business.

Oscar Geiger had been an ardent single taxer ever since in his youth he had read *Progress and Poverty* in an all-night

sitting. The heavens opened: there was a panacea for poverty. At dawn he rushed out and awakened the bewildered friend who had lent him the book, to ask what they could do about it.

He worked for George in the 1897 mayoralty campaign, and thereafter spoke at indoor forums and outdoor soap-boxes, becoming a quiet but impassioned orator in the cause. When interest in the movement collapsed after the First World War, this worried him.

A strong vein of pedagogy had always run through the movement, which was rife with reading-circles, pamphlets and expository lectures. It was Geiger's conception to crystallize this element into an educational institution that would bear the main brunt of the work. Now in the depression of the early '30's it seemed as if instruction in an unknown form of economics might be heeded.

At its start the School, run on a shoestring, was just an expansion of Geiger's lectures and forums. The second year a modest building on New York's West Side was rented by one of the richer students to serve as headquarters. Eighty-four people, many of them public school teachers, enrolled.

Geiger was besieged with complaints from single taxers who couldn't see why George's splendid message required elucidatory classes. If a person couldn't grasp something so simple without going to school over it, wrote one correspondent, "his mentality is moron and his morality is nil."

Nevertheless, the School was chartered by the New York State Board of Regents and acquired a board of trustees which included George's daughter Anna (Mrs. William B.) de Mille, and the philosopher John Dewey as honorary president. While emphasizing that the Georgist system of thought was a broad one Geiger, as stated in a declarative circular, kept to the strict belief that the entire rent of land should be taken in lieu of all taxation.

The procedure adopted in class was the so-called "Socratic" method, whereby the teacher through questioning elicits the pupils' thoughts. Geiger went through *Progress and Poverty,* framing questions and answers based on it as a guide to the

discussions. These notes of his were later formalized with modifications into a "Teachers' Manual" that was used for decades.

His spiritual bent found an outlet in philosophic papers he composed; some of his thought was aspiring and original, some of it naïve. He felt that everything including the kitchen stove would work better under the single tax. For instance, he wrote that George's plan would solve "the divorce problem" since girls would no longer make loveless marriages for economic security.

His last photograph shows him with high forehead, small black moustache and, behind glasses, a rapt, friendly expression. Humanitarian, serious-minded and proselytising, he had the kind of teaching gift that stems from a sensitive interest in young people, rather than from intellectual brilliance. Yet he was an intelligent expositor and an effective teacher who inspired his pupils spontaneously to carry on what he had taught them.

He conducted all the classes, did the administrative work and bore much of the financial burden. His health broke under the strain and he died of a stroke within a year. But he had fulfilled the prophecy of Henry George who, some thirty-five years earlier, had said, "That young man will carry on my work."

Oscar Geiger was the prototype of many Georgist leaders to follow him; gentlemanly, philosophic and even scholarly in temperament, but limited in educational background, and professionally connected with business or financial rather than intellectual occupations. What the majority certainly were *not* was members of the professions one would logically associate with this type of undertaking: with rare exceptions they were not economists, legislators nor (but for the first batch of public-school teachers) educators.

They were an idealistic, kindly race moved by faith, these prominent old-timers of the *School.* Many converted, by exhortation or by mere example, their sons, their pupils, or their friends' children, so that in time a kind of ancestral tree prevailed, with involvement in the cause passed down from respected relatives or acquaintances of an older era. Among the second-generation Georgists were the children of elders who

had personally known George, Tom Johnson or Louis Post. One Chicago family, the Tidemans, has had at least seven men of three generations involved in the work.

During the summer of 1934, right after Geiger's untimely death, a dedicated band of New York alumni taught *Progress and Poverty* in their offices and homes. Soon classes spread casually to other cities: first Chicago, Philadelphia, Newark and Boston; then Detroit, San Francisco and over a dozen others, including three in Canada—with New York remaining the headquarters. In a few years some similar foreign schools were formed, the largest in London and in Australia.

It was an adult-education institution, non-profit and non-political, primarily teaching economics as interpreted by Henry George. The teachers were volunteers culled from graduates who—until the late 1960s—had passed a "Teachers' Training" course given by the directors or leading former teachers. Later a few special lecturers were added here and there, but on the whole the method of manning the staffs with unpaid alumni persisted. Very few had taught elsewhere, and they were apt to function as discussion-leaders rather than as the usual type of lecturing instructor.

The institution is supported by contributions, and by grants from Georgists foundations.

The beginning course, entitled "Fundamental Economics" is based on *Progress and Poverty,* and is usually taught in ten weekly evening sessions. There have been intermediate courses based on three of George's other books, and advanced courses, varying from year to year and branch to branch, on current topics. Students come chiefly as a result of large-scale mailings, many never having heard of Henry George until they received a postcard. Since its inception the School—whose formal name is The Henry George School of Social Science—has graduated over 125,000 students from its "basic course," with about 2,000 more added annually, at one time.

The Schools in New York and a few other cities have their own building—the one in Philadelphia being also the museum-

birthplace of Henry George, complete with the bed he was born in. Other branches often consist of suites in office buildings; and classes in the suburban sub-branches—of which at one time there were over a hundred—may meet in library, church or some other neighborhood locale.

Extra-curricular activities have abounded, some open to the public. In New York these, for many years, included the "Fridays-at-Eight": fortnightly films of a documentary or travelogue type, alternating with entertainment—sometimes with no reference to social questions—according to the talents of those whose services could be procured free. On the more professional side, the New York headquarters harbors a handsome library of Georgist literature and relevant economic material. For a long time annual banquets were held, the speakers including journalists, professors, and civic leaders from Commonwealth countries, who had a peripheral interest in Henry George.

Many of the other branches also have libraries, film showings and special events. And in several places, notably around New York and on the West Coast, the activities have extended much further into the communities, with School-sponsored radio and television programs, and some Henry George classes conducted in high schools.

During the decade of the 1940s there were at least three prominent figures who did much to shape the School's future: Anna de Mille, John Lincoln and Frank Chodorov.

Anna George de Mille became president of the School in 1937. She had a deep sense of mission about carrying on her beloved father's work, and a conviction that the School represented its best hope. Slight of build, refined and unobtrusive, she had an iron persistence in advancing School affairs wherever she might be. For instance, she could be overheard at an art gallery delicately reminding a friend of the need for funds; and her daughter Agnes wrote of "my incredible mother" who got blondined chorines in the former's dance troupes to accept single-tax literature. Mrs. de Mille also taught classes and in every way provided guiding leadership to the School.

When she died in 1947, John Cromwell Lincoln, founder of the Lincoln Electric Company of Cleveland and a successful engineering inventor, succeeded to the presidency. Born in 1866, he had contributed to the School since its early days of the 1930s, and had just set up the Lincoln Foundation, which from 1936 until 1976 supplied the School with the greater part of its funds.

Much honored by Georgists, Lincoln once laconically described himself as "a crank on Henry George"—perhaps remembering that in 1924 he ran for Vice-President of the United States for something called the Commonwealth Land Party. Others have variously called him a kindly, pioneering industrialist, an inventive genius, a diamond-in-the-rough without much culture, and the grand old man of the School. Genuinely idealistic as his writings show him to be, he was not above profiting from land ownership—especially in Arizona copper mines—just like anyone else. When he died in 1959, *Time* magazine could pithily juxtapose his single-tax pamphleteering and the fact that he owned a real estate empire supposedly worth $100 million.

But probably the most influential figure at the School during this period was Frank Chodorov. Starting out in life as a salesman who, enamored of *Progress and Poverty,* tried to sell its ideas along with his product, he became by virtue of brilliance and dynamism a power in the Henry George movement. With Albert Jay Nock, the essayist of George sympathies on its editorial council, he had edited the monthly, *The Freeman,* (the second Georgist periodical of that name). Nock was Chodorov's friend and hero, and the two spent much time discoursing together.

In the late 1930s, under Mrs. de Mille's presidency, Chodorov was appointed Director of the School. All went well at first: he was considered a brainy, genial teacher and executive, a great friendly bear.

But by 1940 due to him the School was in trouble. He had not only become high-handed in School affairs but had turned into a rampant anti-collectivist who saw "government interference" everywhere. When World War II broke out he opposed

entry into it, urging in *The Freeman* that no one buy government bonds and sarcastically counselling his readers to buy U.S. Steel instead, since they would then enjoy land-derived profits. The government heard of all this, and sent F.B.I. investigators to the School.

This was serious, for if political tendencies of any kind were proved, the School would lose the tax-exempt status on which its solvency depended. The trustees, alarmed, drew in the anarchic horns their institution seemed inadvertently to be growing, and fired Mr. Chodorov. A peaceable Canadian lady was chosen to succeed him. An F.B.I. man who had listened in on the classes became a Georgist.[3]

Although a single taxer since his youth, Chodorov's *anti-statism* was frankly derived from Nock; for he formally acknowledged, in an essay published in 1959, that it was Nock's *Our Enemy the State* that had furnished him with his own socio-political ideas (Chodorov wrote *The Income Tax: Root of All Evil*).[4]

A further piece of evidence on the ideological relation between the two men and its result may be found in *Letters from Albert J. Nock*. In 1939 Nock after praising the School wrote gleefully to a friend:

"A bit of good news (also strictly between ourselves). The H.G. School in N.Y. is managing somehow to get Max Hirsch's Democracy vs. Socialism republished—they mean to use it as a graduate textbook. This is a great thing . . . I am tremendously het up over that book of Max Hirsch. That surely is a streak of luck."[5]

What had happened was that, during Chodorov's directorship, the Georgist publishing house, the Schalkenbach Foundation, republished an out-of-print book written in 1901 which (besides extolling the land tax) maintains that even the mildest kind of government regulation will lead inevitably to a communistic form of socialism. Such an equation was in line with the anti-New Dealism of Chodorov and Nock, and was undoubtedly why the book was revived then.

Unlike Nock, Chodorov was clearsighted enough to recognize that he himself was *adding* something to George's ideas—for

he wrote that the State's "power complex" was not faced by George, and that his land tax remedy, excellent as it was, "does not come to grips with the basic malaise of Society."[6]

Nevertheless, a number of Georgists followed Chodorov completely in his anti-state bias, and his influence deepened the conservative trend in the movement long after his tenure in it had expired. He was held in affectionate esteem by many School members up to his death at ninety in 1967, when his eulogy was delivered by the Conservative editor, William Buckley, Jr.[7]

What is distinctive about this adult-education experiment—in personnel, in methods and in goals?

To take the personnel first, there is a certain stamp to the Georgist personality, though like all such things, it is difficult to describe.

Georgists as a whole come from the middle class. While they include doctors, lawyers, ministers and other professionals, small businessmen seem to predominate. Politically they are apt to be inactive. They are friendly, democratic with a small d, and above average in integrity. Mentally they may seem a trifle prosaic until one gets to know them; then one finds that they are unobtrusively open-minded and independent—dogmatic perhaps about George, but relatively free of conventional moulds in other respects. "Georgists are people who go about the world in groups of one" is a saying stressing their individualism.

Most of the leading members have complete faith in the value of what they are doing, and an unpretentious dedication to their work which is appealing. Unworldliness is one of their marked traits. They are not always competent: this results perhaps from the special circumstances which may attend their entry into the movement. It is not uncommon for a man with no previous interest in either education or economics to devote a large part of his life to the directorship of some Georgist organization after a chance contact with *Progress and Poverty*.

Georgists can be simplistic in their thinking on social mat-

ters, and during the Chodorovial decades this was compounded. Up until about the late 1950's there were a good many octogenarian officials who were imbued with the conservatism of both age and the anarchic dogma of that period of Georgist history. Some displayed a wooden pertinacity in sticking to the literal tenets of *Progress and Poverty,* being unwilling to admit that the poverty problem could be any different from what it was in 1879, and they were fond of such phrases as "All taxation is robbery!" or "Man is entitled to the fruits of his labor!" These elders have since died out, and later the dogmatists were usually found not so much among the directors and trustees as among a few enthusiastic graduates, old-line teachers, or local hangers-on at the meetings.

The line of demarcation between Georgists and non-Georgists gradually grew less sharp, as persons of higher academic credentials and slightly less commitment to Henry George joined the staffs, and somewhat more sophisticated students attended the classes. But there has always been a large nucleus of longtime staffers from all over the country who, knowing each other well through annual conferences and other contacts, give a family feeling to the entire movement.[8]

What is distinctive about the School's goals?

The unique, major purpose of the Henry George School has been to educate so many people in George's principles that its graduates would become a force in securing legislation to enact them. "Where there is correct thought, right action will follow," George had said. How well this sanguine experiment has succeeded, or what its peripheral value may be, will be discussed in later chapters.

What is distinctive about the School's method of teaching?

The so-called Socratic method of questioning the pupils so as to make them think for themselves stems, of course, from ancient times, and a modified form consisting of guided discussion is now often used in non-Georgist classes. But in Geiger's day instruction was carried on more exclusively by lecturing, so that he was rather advanced in sponsoring this discussion method.

The real originality of the Georgist procedure for about four

decades, however, lay in its combining this method with the fixed question-and-answers on *Progress and Poverty*. While many Georgist discussion-leaders now still come prepared with a list of points to be covered, these guides are not as rigidly comprehensive as the *Teacher's Manual* which for so many years shaped the "Fundamental Economics" course. This consisted of ten "lesson sheets" carefully paralleling the argument of the book in its questions, and with answers taken almost verbatim from it. Students were supposed to be able to furnish the latter after having done their homework; and while they were free to disagree or digress, they usually wound up saying what was on the *Manual*. So the unique quality of the School's teaching lay in the blending of an informal, open-ended atmosphere with what was actually a good deal of propaganda. This doctrinaire quality of the instruction was enhanced by the fact that the teachers were former graduates.

It must be noted that not all of the teachers taught by this method. Yet through the 1960's *P. & P.* complete with the *Manual* was used by the great majority of Georgist instructors.