CHAPTER 16

THE NATIONAL CONFERENCES 1950—1970

Each July when members convene for the annual conference of the Henry George School, a high mark of the movement is reached. Since the other Georgist organizations send representatives to this conference, it has a comprehensive character that sums up the work of the whole enterprise in the United States and Canada. Let the reader now imagine that he is present at these conferences, as they took place during the 1950s and 1960s.[1]

As many as two hundred staff members, teachers and trustees of the School and the allied organizations, as well as a few graduates and friends, live together for four days at a city hotel or college campus, each year in a different part of the country. The group has met in New York, San Diego, Chicago, St. Louis, etc., and on the campuses of Rutgers University in New Jersey, Chatham College in Pittsburgh, Pa., the University of Toronto and many others. An academic site does not imply interest on the part of the economics department; it means the host director has scouted around and the college is satisfied the Georgists will be pleasant enough people to have on campus.

The directors, trustees and others have grown to know each other well, so that a cozy family feeling prevails. Presiding capably is the New York School's longtime director Robert Clancy, a fluent speaker and writer. During the 1950s there were a number of elder statesmen around, and to be up in one's eighties was, as Clancy put it with slight overstatement, "not

old for a Georgist." In the 1960s the average age of the conferees dropped considerably, but there were still not many below forty.

Usually at least one of the several educators either definitely or loosely connected with the movement speaks at the Conference. During the 1950s it was apt to be one of the older long-established professors.

It might, for instance, be economics professor Glenn Hoover of Mills College, California, cautioning Georgists that since land speculation goes on in good times as well as bad, it should not be insisted on too sharply as the main cause of depressions.

Or perhaps it was Professor Harry Gunnison Brown detailing the unsuspected connection between Georgism and Keynesian theory: for Keynes felt "liquidity preference," or hoarding, undesirable in that it holds back production, and George's plan for untaxing business profits similarly emphasizes the wisdom of giving people an incentive to invest.

Later on, younger academicians were more apt to take the rostrum, such as Steven Cord, professor of history at Indiana University (Pa.) or Mason Gaffney, professor from the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee.

In addition to such Georgist members or sympathizers, some entirely non-Georgist professor may be featured, often one from the region where the meeting is being held. He, too, is not necessarily an economist but perhaps an historian or political scientist. The typical professorial guest is good-humored, intelligent, usually not from an Ivy League college but maybe from New York University, the University of Oregon, Wayne State. He is half in sympathy with the School's point of view and does not stress his divergence from it, but gives a stimulating, well-documented talk, perhaps on the history of land reform, more likely on some current topic slightly relevant to it. In the question-period he is apt to parry the efforts occasionally made by a listener to convert him to Georgism, and he easily holds his own against any commitment to land value taxation that doesn't suit him.

Local prestige is enlisted on non-academic fronts too. The director of the host School may be sufficiently acquainted with some political officeholder or perhaps a local newspaperman

or author, to persuade him to address the gathering. The octogenarian Arthur Roebuck, a Canadian national Senator, spoke when the meeting was held in Toronto and again in Montreal; Mayor Alioto tendered the greetings of San Francisco, and Mayor Barr those of Pittsburgh; Congressman Thomas Curtis of Missouri was featured when the conferees met in St. Louis. The Ohioan writer Louis Bromfield and Eric Hoffer, author of *The True Believer,* graced Cleveland and San Francisco gatherings respectively.

Whereas during earlier years the emphasis of the Conference lay more on the theoretic and philosophic aspects of Georgism, it became more activist in its outlook as time went on. Presently the Georgists had a few modest practical successes to point to, achieved by assessors and appraisers previously steeped in the School's teachings, and occasionally by a small-town mayor. One or more of these political or civic servants frequently speak at the meetings.

This trend of municipal activity (except for the much earlier "Pittsburgh Plan") started about 1955. Russell Conklin, mayor of Great Falls, Montana and former director of a School branch there, had land assessments revalued upward to correspond more closely to their true value—especially when a new state highway made land prices shoot up. In 1961 S. James Clarkson, who had taught Henry George classes in Detroit, became mayor of a suburb of that city called Southfield. He and another Georgist whom he appointed as Chief Assessor not only brought all assessments up to market value but also applied a 3% depreciation to buildings; and within a few years Southfield recorded more new office buildings than 30-times-as-large Detroit, and much apartment construction too.[2]

This "Southfield story" was often happily recounted at the meetings until, alas, the three percent depreciation was repealed. Usually, however, what Georgist public servants had to report was simply the more realistic land assessments, rather than any real steps towards a tax shift.

Other speakers included the philosophically minded, who gave talks on Georgist themes such as the supreme justice of taxing land, or the value of equal opportunity for all.

Considerable time is spent on discussing the School's educational effort, for this was the original heart of the conferences. Usually several branches have some kind of outward progress to relate: the directors of certain extensions have explained land value taxation on local television panels, or over the radio, or in newspaper columns; in some cities courses in Georgist economics have been introduced to selected high schools; one branch can claim a record number of pupils attending. Yet there is the nagging problem of no real alumni body, for most of the graduates don't return to the School.

Much inward soul-searching goes on as to the best directions for the teaching to take. There is the perennial question of whether to use *"P & P"* as mandatory reading. Some directors describe their methods of conveying the same teaching without adhering to the more rigid statements of the book; others feel that the beauty and lucidity of the text itself supply an inspiration to the students procurable in no other way.

While the directors often meet in closed session, at times the whole assemblage is invited to give its views. Should the instructor aim to reach definite conclusions at the end of each lesson, or should he leave the discussions open-ended? Should we say the School's course advocates land value taxation, or simply that it offers "economic study?" Perceptive answers to these and other questions may serve to improve classroom procedures, or make the teaching relate more smoothly to the students' concern with current issues. But one thing is never examined, and that is whether there may have been any really significant flaw in George's thinking. It is simply assumed that there isn't.

A half day is devoted to hearing the annual reports of the other Georgist organizations, of which the widest in scope are the *Robert Schalkenbach Foundation* and the *Henry George Foundation of America.*

The *Schalkenbach Foundation,* lodged in the same building as the school in New York, is the Georgist publishing house—with something added. Founded in 1925, it was endowed with a

bequest from Robert Schalkenbach, a New York printer and friend of George, who left his modest fortune to "teach, expound and propagate" the economist's ideas.

The initial task was to republish *Progress and Poverty,* then out of print. Between 1929 and 1945 about 100,000 copies were distributed, many given to congressmen, professors and public libraries. Translations followed, and later American editions of all George's other books.

To this list have been added biographies of George and numerous other works of related literature, both classic and contemporary. Some of the latter are the outcome of research projects initiated by the Foundation.

It also supports the *American Journal of Economics and Sociology,* a journal started in 1941, going to about 80 countries (the number varies from year to year) as well as to many college libraries in the United States. Edited by Will Lissner, a *New York Times* journalist, its boards have included professors such as John Ise (economics), George Geiger (philosophy) and Charles Barker (history) not formally connected with the Georgist movement. Though sympathetic to the land tax, this journal covers a variety of other issues, historic and sociological as well as economic. While the Foundation keeps its hands off the contents, it represents one of the Georgists' chief efforts to go to the academic world.

Other Schalkenbach projects include two documentary movies which, by depicting selected landscapes and cityscapes, point to the contrasting patterns of land-use that exist according to whether ordinary taxation or land value taxation prevails. The award-winning "One Way to Better Cities" has been widely shown to civic and university groups, on local TV stations, and on a network.

The Schalkenbach Foundation is the oldest extant Georgist organization. Though over half its officers are also connected with the School or other Georgists organizations, it has usually included men active in civic affairs who have no further affiliation with the movement. A longtime president was Lawson Purdy, Tax Assessor of New York City. In 1974 the president became Pierrepont I. Prentice, informally known as Perry.

Prentice was a vice-president of *Time*, Inc. and for some years edited two of its subsidiaries, *House and Home* and *Architectural Forum.* In trying to discover how to solve housing problems, he met people who told him, "Go to the *Henry George* School", he did just that, and became a convert to land value taxation. A quiet man with no inborn flair for publicity, he became by virtue of his enthusiasm and his positions with *Time*, Inc. a sort of one-man publicity bureau for the Georgist movement.

This began in earnest in 1960 when *House and Home* devoted its whole August issue to LAND. The following April the magazine printed "An Open Letter to the President" (Kennedy) on the subject. In July 1962 the *Reader's Digest* ran an article based on the August 1960 issue, and this in turn was read into the Congressional Record. Since then articles with substantial reference to the land value tax have appeared in *Life* (1965), *Fortune* (1965) and *Time* (1968); also in later years. But Perry's ripples have spread well beyond Luce publications, since the latter's articles have given rise to much newspaper comment too. Does the *Christian Science Monitor,* for instance, have an article discussing the land tax? Read further and you will discover that it is an address by an associate editor of *House and Home.*

Prentice has initiated, moderated or addressed numerous conferences of public officials, urban planners, businessmen and tax experts, and it is due to him more than to any other one individual that so many civic leaders are now familiar with the concept of land value taxation, and see at least something to be said for it.

The *Henry George Foundation of America* was founded in 1925 at a Georgist congress in Philadelphia to celebrate the purchase of George's birthplace there. Its headquarters are in Pittsburgh, Pa.

The guiding spirit had long been Percy R. Williams, executive secretary since its inception, and former Chief Tax Assessor of Pittsburgh. While the twenty-odd board of trustees includes officials of other Georgist organizations, its most active workers have largely been Pennsylvanians several of

whom, such as Mr. Williams and State Senator Bernard McGinnis, held civic or Democratic political office outside the Georgist movement. The most prominent was David Lawrence, a charter member of the H.G.F., later governor of Pennsylvania. This foundation is the only Georgist organization at this point to have a Democratic tinge to it; and despite the advanced age of many of its members it has always been lively in tone.

Originally chartered as an institution of popular education, the H.G.F. soon grew to be predominantly legislative in its field of action. Many of its members have been the men who in their youth, in 1913, pushed through the Graded Tax Law, requiring Pittsburgh and Scranton to increase the tax on land and decrease it on buildings. In 1951, largely as a result of their proddings, a similar but non-mandatory law was passed for the third-class cities of Pennsylvania, so that since then every city except Philadelphia has had the option of taxing real estate at a differential rate.

At the annual Conference the H.G.F. usually has something to report in the way of incipient activity, both in Pennsylvania and elsewhere, for such options.

Among several other organizations reporting to the Conference have been the *Institute for Economic Inquiry* (of Chicago) and the *Lincoln Foundation.*

The *Institute for Economic Inquiry* is an interesting stepchild of the Georgist movement. Founded in 1961 by John L. Monroe—son of the Frederick Monroe who headed the 19th century Lecture Association of that name—it is a modified offshoot of the old Henry School of Chicago, also started by Monroe, in 1939.

This Commerce and Industry Division, as it was called, had developed along independent lines. Its students and the locales for its activity differed from those of the other schools, the classes taking place on business or industrial premises for personnel thereof: salespeople, mechanics, engineers, sometimes even company presidents. Instructors chosen and trained by the School led the discussions.

There was no insistence on the merits of the land tax, though it was presented as something desirable. The emphasis was

just as much, if not more, on the merits of unhampered production; and a distinctive element of the programs was the fostering of labor-management friendship through a joint study of economic ideas. In tribute to such values the *Christian Science Monitor* in 1960 ran an article on "this unique program to focus thinking on economics."

The *Lincoln Foundation* was founded in 1947 by John Lincoln, head of the Lincoln Electric Co. of Cleveland, and at that time head of the H.G. School. Its purpose was to "propagate the ideals of Henry George," which it extended to include matters of public finance and principles of economic liberty. Its officers have included John's son David Lincoln, Perry Prentice and the journalist and staff writer of *Newsweek*, Raymond Moley.

The Foundation is a granting rather than an operating institution and for decades was the chief "angel" of the Henry George School. With its financial leverage it has been a strong behind-the-scenes influence in the Georgist movement.[3]

The more technical aspects of the Conference's agenda are eased by the informal manner in which they are presented and by the genial atmosphere prevailing between the sessions. Enough now of charts and statistics and such groggly things: it is time for an outing! A chartered bus rolls up and the conferees are off for an afternoon of humming talk and sightseeing. If the scene is a great city, there are observations from a leader up front on the building-patterns evident in the sections passed through. If the meeting is near Philadelphia, George's birthplace is visited; in Cleveland Tom Johnson's statue is noted; Montreal as a conference locale was made to coincide with Expo '67.

What do the participants talk about on campus lawns, at historic sites, at mealtime and at bedtime? As in the case of many conferences, the informal conversation is as significant as what goes on at the sessions.

They speak most often of their efforts to get land value taxation adopted in their localities. One director has obtained the ear of a councilman; another has had a letter printed in the newspaper, noting how land prices have skyrocketed since a

new bridge was built. A teacher emphasises how we must get people to understand the distinction between what society owns, and what belongs to the individual. There is much interchange of news between friends, and occasional jollity. At one conference, mindful of George's definition of "land" as embracing all of nature, the conferees went around greeting each other with the password "Water is land!"

Just as indicative as what is discussed is what is *not* considered worthy of attention; and the most striking example of this occurred at the 1969 Conference in Chicago. The previous winter had seen the publication of the *Report of the National Commission on Urban Problems*. This report, headed by ex-Senator Paul Douglas of Illinois, an ex-professor of economics and long an admirer of Henry George, contained in its section on Land the most favorable, albeit tentative endorsement of an increased land tax, and the most detailed consideration of the technical problems related to its possible adoption, ever to emanate from a prominent non-Georgist source.[4]

As to methods of application, it was a gold mine of valuable analysis. Though it also suggested for consideration the standard Georgist proposal of higher taxes on land, lower on buildings, it was especially significant in the attention it gave to techniques alternative to this, including higher income taxes on land gains, and transaction taxes on sales.

The relevant sections of this report had indeed been well covered early in the year in the house organ, the *Henry George News;* the Schalkenbach's secretary had sent copies to the heads of all School branches, and other Georgist organizations may have received them too. But that was the end of it. At the summer Conference the copiously laden free-literature tables were bare of any Douglas Report, and the sessions devoid of any reference to it. A unique opportunity to discuss an influential, lucid, comprehensive point of view sympathetic to yet outside itself was thus bypassed by the Georgist movement. It is probable that the non-taxing methods advocated, as well as various recommendations for government subsidies and planning, were sufficiently unappealing to the Conference directors for them automatically to overlook, rather than consciously

reject, what would have been a highly appropriate subject for the agenda.

Another noteworthy omission in what is discussed at the Conferences concerns current politics. There is surprisingly little talk of political figures, even in a presidential-election summer or upon national occasions. When the Conference met in July 1965, Adlai Stevenson, former presidential candidate and U.S. delegate to the United Nations, had just died, and the flag of the California building in which the Georgists were housed was at half staff throughout the week; but in all the speeches and proceedings there was no mention of him.

Yet whether or not the conferees mention political matters, it is highly relevant to inquire what the political complexion of the movement—during these two decades anyway—may be. For the philosophy which the movement advocates could be realized only through legislation, and law is entwined with politics.

Formally the School is a non-political institution, the whole movement nominally non-partisan, and many members favor the plague-on-both-your-houses attitude discernible among the early single taxers. Yet people concerned with social change do have marked even if subconscious political preferences.

Without directly asking anyone's political affiliation, it is possible to glean a good deal by frequent attendance at Georgists' meetings and by familiarity with their history and leaders. Judged on this basis, the dominant political tone of the movement would appear to be Republican with more than a trace of conservatism.

To give some examples:

John Lincoln, Ohio-born president and chief financial supporter of the School, was a Taft-type Republican who referred himself to George's belief in freedom and individual enterprise. The School's head from 1960 to 1968, Joseph Thompson, wealthy retired president of the Pacific Gas and Electric Co. and of the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce, was a man of conservative, big-business background. Colonel Harwood, former trustee and economist, to whose Institute School-endowed students have repaired for training, was rightist in his

point of view as, of course, was director Frank Chodorov. Gilbert Tucker, founder of the Economic Education League, one of the lesser Georgist organizations, to the close of his life in 1968 never ceased deploring That Man Roosevelt. One of the most politically-minded of Georgist officers, Raymond Moley of the Lincoln Foundation, joined the movement only after his bitter split with Roosevelt, following which he always supported Republican presidents.

Through the years about half the School directors including the majority of the most active have been heard to disparage first the New Deal and then its derivative social legislation right through President Johnson's "war on poverty."

The *Henry George News* "saluted" certain tax-dodgers who balked at paying income taxes; in another issue, a scathing review of John Galbraith's *Affluent Society* said it expressed "current thought-trends against individual freedom." Guest lecturers at the conferences and other events included ultra-conservatives such as Chodorov after his retirement, and Vivien Kellems, the industrialist who wouldn't pay withholding taxes. While such lecturers may not have been frequent, their presence was significant in that their audience was not inclined to protest their point of view. For instance, when at the 1958 Conference J. Bracken Lee, ex-governor of Utah, advised abolishing the income tax, a reporter for the *H.G. News* wrote that "Governor Lee's message fell on sympathetic ears."

Until about 1964 "planning" was a word to be used disparagingly and later was still looked on warily; also in that year many Georgists had nothing to say against the presidential candidate Barry Goldwater. Lancaster Greene, the investment councilor who was vice-president of the School, has opened a meeting by saying, "Do we belong to ourselves or to the government?" Perry Prentice in publicizing the movement habitually stresses its anti-tax, supposedly "free enterprise" side.

To repeat, the pattern gradually disclosed during the 1950s and '60s is one that favors views ordinarily associated with Republicans or Conservatives rather than with Democrats.

Yet if one turns one's attention not to the majority of Georgists active in the movement, but to those who have held political

or civic office outside it, a curiously contradictory picture emerges. Almost all of them, as far as can be readily ascertained, were Democrats.

There was Lawson Purdy (1863—1959) president of the Schalkenbach Foundation, who as Tax Commissioner of New York City brought about the separate assessment of land and buildings—a prerequisite to land value taxation. Percy Williams and many other officers of the Henry George Foundation who were a moving force in instigating Pennsylvania's differential "Graded Tax" laws of 1913 and 1951 have been Democrats. So was Henry George Jr., George's son and a congressman from New York. The aforesaid mayors Conklin and Clarkson, as well as a State Representative, Vernon Kilpatrick, whose efforts preceded theirs, were likewise Democrats.

While one cannot, of course, categorically say that all Democrats favor a strong central government and that all who oppose it are Republican or Conservative, these equations hold true often enough to suggest that there has been a political paradox to the Georgist movement. For its guiding personnel have tended to sentiments that harmonize with Republican or Conservative views, while its legislative achievers have been Democratic.

Some officials of the School have sensed this dichotomy. "The free-market economists such as John Chamberlain, Ludwig von Mises, Henry Hazlitt and Leonard Read are the ones we feel ourselves in sympathy with," a School director in the 1950s once said, "But all four have declined to support us. Perhaps we don't know who our friends are."

Professor George Geiger, son of the School's founder, expressed this idea far more stringently. In a 1941 article entitled *The Forgotten Man: Henry George,* he wrote:[5]

"To the more legitimate reasons (for George's neglect) may be added an unfortunate tendency on the part of the most influential of George's present-day American supporters to use his work as a club with which to berate 'collectivists' of all sorts—from Stalin to Roosevelt! . . . certain it is . . . that his permanent influence in American social thought will be in those very circles that are now being alienated by such right-

wing tactics." This passage, incidentally, may explain the striking fact that Professor Geiger has had only minimal contact with his father's School.

Beneath the paradox lies the fact that the Georgist political philosophy is really an independent one. George believed, to a degree entirely uncharacteristic of the Republican party, in the removal of special privileges; yet he also felt, unlike the Democratic party, that legislation to cancel these privileges separately at the source should be adopted, rather than tolerate them and then redress the resultant inequalities with countervailing blocs of strong union and/or governmental power.

The question is which of the two major parties offers Georgists the best point of departure for their own aims. It is here that incongruity sets in. For while practical Georgists have found the Democratic party more rewarding to work with, the philosophically-minded Georgists, in stressing their free-enterprise leanings, have apparently not faced the fact that of modern society's politically active "free enterprisers", most are little concerned with abolishing any special privileges, let alone the landed one. In allying themselves, even if just verbally, with such a point of view, they are being "anti-government" to a degree uncharacteristic of George himself.

Besides the annual conferences there are other Georgist gatherings: dinners at some of the Schools, meetings of international Georgists, occasions marking a project such as the restoration of George's birthplace in Philadelphia, anniversaries of various kinds. Although she doesn't attend the conferences, the commemorative events are often graced by a climaxing address by George's granddaughter, the choreographer, Agnes de Mille.

Miss de Mille is a piquant, refined and independent person who always says exactly what she means, and when she stands at the rostrum, a pungent feeling of conviction suffuses what she has to say about her grandfather. Although he died before she was born, it is clear that his spirit, closely transmitted to her through family ties, is as vivid to her as if he were living. She believes him to have been an authentic genius, and her acceptance of his basic idea about land, and its tremendous importance for the present, is wholehearted.

Yet she is an artist whose main commitments lie elsewhere. Though a trustee of the School, she doesn't have much occasion to mingle with its personnel, to study its methods or to form any clear plan as to how to make the Georgist enterprise progress further. When asked if its more conservative tendencies might not have hampered it, she seemed astounded, saying that—since the George family were all Democrats—the thought that it was thus oriented had never occurred to her. Bracing as her personal appearances are, and loyal and effective as she may be in otherwise drawing some attention to Henry George's work, her influence adorns and honors rather than permeates the actual movement.

What seems to be the value of the whole movement as reflected in the conferences and other gatherings of these twenty years? Has it succeeded as an educational force; as an instrument of legislation; or in some intangible yet important impression it has made on people?

Its primary purpose was to be an educational force, and relative to this goal its success at best is ambiguous. On the one hand, despite the 125,000 or more students the School has graduated, relatively few ever return to Georgist gatherings or ally themselves with the work. On the other hand, the small proportion who really do this have imparted George's ideas with persistence, serving to keep the movement afloat for generations.

This leads into the second question of how well it has succeeded legislatively. By far its greatest success lies in the preliminary, secondary area of assessment-raising. Georgists as elected officials or as assessors have been instrumental in getting land assessments raised to nearer their true market values, thus capturing more rental value for the government. But when it comes to the movement's primary aim of enacting heavier land taxes, one must recognize that its influence has been negligible. The 1913 legislation in Pittsburgh and Scranton took place almost twenty years before the School started, as did some land value taxation in the irrigation districts of Cal-

ifornia. Some slight legislation in Hawaii and the repealed effort in Southfield, Mich. complete the record of any actual shift to land value taxation throughout these two decades.

If the movement has not really reached its educational goal, and its legislative goal, so far, still less, has it nevertheless had some valuable side-effects, both on the outside world and on the Georgists themselves?

Besides the assessment-raising, occasional moves to levy taxes on land values enhanced by new public constructions reflect a possible Georgist influence. In a more general sense, many people including the graduates who drift away, as well as municipal officers and others newly contacted, have at least been struck with the justice of taking the profits from Land for the public treasury.

The greatest intangible influence, however, is apparently still an ingrown one: that upon the Georgists themselves. Through all the years, thousands have found in the movement an ideal that fills their lives, and gives them something unique and satisfying to work for.

The summer conferences draw to a close with a banquet addressed by some much-honored Georgist; and an Auld Lang Syne spirit prevails, with many personal anticipations for the next year's meeting. When asked what was the value of these gatherings, a longtime officer replied:

"It's an opportunity for Georgists to come together and renew their faith. You go away feeling, 'I'm working for a going concern' and get ready to start spilling your blood for it again."