

from the editor's notebook

Public Land Report

Amid the myriad federally commissioned and funded task force reports that either never seem to appear, or do appear and are ignored, there is now the Public Land Law Review Commission Report, which has been subjected to considerable scrutiny and criticism.

The report itself is 342 pages long, and somewhat remarkably, The Natural Resources Council of America has turned out a 342-page critique of it. This leads one to believe that any difference between the prose styles of these two documents and that of *The Last of the Mohicans* is not specious.

The Resources Council study is basically an in-depth procedural analysis of the commission's operations and the presentation of its findings. But the most vocal criticism has come from other quarters, and much of it would please Henry George, for it is grounded in the contention that public lands should serve the needs of all people, that public use and benefit should be the guiding principle in their management.

Angus McDonald, active conservationist and former research director of the National Farmers Union, charges that the report, entitled *One-Third of the Nation's Land*, would be more aptly called: *A Blueprint for Corporate Take-over of 72.4 Million Acres of Land Which Now Belongs to All the People of the United States*. His arguments are more precise than his grammar.

The PLLRC report calls for "a policy of large-scale disposal of public lands towards the end that future disposals may be restricted and lands held in federal ownership where values must be preserved so they may be used and enjoyed by all Americans."

McDonald's commentary, published in *Not Man Apart*, assails this seemingly contradictory statement for meaning: "All Americans can enjoy whatever is left after the special interests get through."

These "special interests," McDonald says, are cattlemen, who pay only a few cents a head for grazing; mining companies, that pay \$2.50 to \$5.00 an acre; and timber companies that pay only the nominal value of the timber they cut. The cost of restoring the land after their activities is to be borne by taxpayers. Such also is the meaning of the term "dominant use" which appears frequently in the report—a term which has also come under fire from the editors of *American Forests*.

Their recent editorial says not only that lands should not be dedicated to any "dominant" commodity use, but recommends further that: total acreage of public lands now held in trust should not be diminished; the Mining Law of 1872 should be repealed, and all exploration and extraction of minerals and oil from public lands be placed under a mineral leasing system; there should be no special funding or separate corporation procedures for timber sales or for timber production on the National Forests or public domain; those permitted to graze cattle on public lands should pay a fair market value for the privileges.

McDonald concludes his barrage by asserting that the solution to problems of congested cities is "not a bankruptcy sale of the whole nation's western lands and resources to greedy absentee landlords and corporate giants who, in the past, have just about ruined this country."

If the attention that *One-Third of the Nation's Land* has received is refreshing, it is a refresh that gives pause.

Cut in Property Tax is Assailed

Move over Tennessee. Michigan may be moving South, according to Benjamin F. Smith, who has called Governor Milliken's proposal to halve the Michigan state property tax "the worst mistake in American history."

In a signed letter to the Grand Rapids Press, Smith warned that if the proposal succeeds, "Michigan will drop in rank from ninth in internal personal income to around 40th," perhaps supplanting Tennessee in that dubious slot. If the tax were eliminated entirely, he estimates, the rise in land price in the state would total \$9.1 billion.

The Michigan engineer assailed state politicians for battling over what taxes would be substituted for the reduced property tax, instead of examining the consequences of the reduction itself. Milliken has proposed a 2.3 hike in the state's personal income tax and a new value added tax to pay for school operating expenses.

After land speculators make their killings, Smith predicts, Michigan residents will reasonably be able to compare their poverty with that of residents of the world's most underdeveloped nations.

All of the prosperous countries, he points out, have land taxes of some sort, though some, like Sweden's capital tax, are tagged with disguising names. The land tax, says Smith in a choicely mixed metaphor, "is the one anchor line that holds all civilization from declining."

George Adherent Reduces Site Tax

Is it possible to keep the faith with Henry George and still reduce a tax on land?

Such was the dilemma that confronted San Diego Assessment Appeals Board chairman Tom Sherrard in June. When a dispute between the county assessor and the owners of a shopping center arose out of a discrepancy in their land value appraisals, Sherrard, a student of George, dissented in favor of the owner's lower figure, essentially lowering the tax.

Although neither Sherrard nor the owners (The May Department Stores Company and Plaza Camino Real) could take issue with the county assessor's \$8 million valuation for improvements, both disagreed with his \$3 million land appraisal and the technique he used in arriving at the evaluation.

Employing the "land residual" method, the assessor capitalized the income from the shopping center, deducted the replacement costs of the buildings, and assigned the difference to the land.

The owners applied the market data technique, showing that raw acreage comparable to the ground underlying the shopping center could be purchased for \$250,000.

Citing the *General Appraisal Manual's* recommendation that "the land residual technique is not reliable in areas where land values are low . . . or where the proper improvement is a large proportion of the total value . . ." Sherrard called the owner's figure more reliable and cast the only vote on the three-man board in favor of it. Afterwards, Sherrard reasoned that his action would be less abhorrent than permitting the land value to remain higher than comparable vacant land. He asks, nevertheless: "What would you do?"

EMANUEL CHOPER

Emanuel Choper, long-time student of Henry George and co-director of a School extension, died on June 20.

An outspoken proponent of George's social and economic philosophy, Choper instructed at the New York Henry George School from 1938 until 1945, when he moved to Syracuse to co-direct that extension with the late Bette Breese Bille. In 1967 he opened another extension school in Albany where he also worked as attorney for the state of New York.

A man of many facets, Choper also served as a social worker and was an ardent dancer and hiker. He was stricken by an apparent heart attack following a hiking trip in the Adirondacks. He received degrees from City College and Fordham Law School, and attended Columbia University's School of Social Work.