

Railroad Land Grants Assailed

Somebody ought to tell Sheldon Greene about Henry George.

Sheldon Greene is the general counsel of California Rural Legal Assistance, which in June filed claim with the Department of the Interior against the land monopoly of Southern Pacific. CRLA is representing the National Coalition of Land Reform and the California Coalition of Seasonal and Migrant Farm Workers, who say that the railroads have not fulfilled the objectives of the land grant laws as originally set forth. The idea was to finance the construction of the railroads, and to encourage the purchase of granted land by small farmers.

"The railroads have developed these lands in a way that was not intended," asserts Mr. Greene. "This land was intended for the dispossessed and the powerless, now more than ever, not the land conglomerates the railroads have become. The Southern Pacific is the largest private landholder in California.

"The cry is, 'Get them off the welfare rolls.' This could be done by selling sections of land to small farmers who could then join in farming cooperatives. The land could also be used for public parks and the income from the mineral and timber rights could be used to improve educational facilities."

The two coalitions are joined in their claim by 13 Congressmen, led by Senator Fred Harris (D., Okla.), onetime presidential candidate. This group has added to the complaint a list of questions about the railroads' violation of the land grants. The Secretary of the Interior will have a hard time answering the questions, because 17 acts of Congress, numerous investigations, and several Supreme Court cases have already failed to clarify the post-World War II status of the land grants.

Southern Pacific contends that its exploitation of the land is only "prudent management," given the rate of return in the railroad industry, and that the government was repaid ten times over the value of the land in reduced pre-war and special wartime shipping rates and impositions. When these rates were changed after the war, it appeared that the railroads relinquished claim to the land, but now they say that post-war legislation gave them full title.

The coalitions claim that Congress delayed in taking the land back after the war because the railroads had indeed taken losses by doing business with the government, but that by now, 27 years later, they have been sufficiently compensated.

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