

LAND MONOPOLY IN THE UNITED STATES

The extent to which land in the United States is monopolized can be told in a few figures. These are so stupendous as to pass belief.

The Original Public Domain, according to Professor John Bell Sanborn, consisted of 1,835,017,692 acres of land exclusive of Alaska. Out of this vast total, 741,702,365 acres have already been "appropriated" and 132,441,774 acres "reserved." In 1899, 591,343,953 acres were supposed to be "vacant."

This appears no insignificant area, but most of it is inaccessible.

The Federal grants (according to a remarkable report entitled, "Lumber Industry, Part 1, Standing Timber, January 20, 1913, Department of Commerce and Labor, Bureau of Corporations") given to railroads amount to 190,000,000 acres of land—considerably more than the entire area of the States of Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and several of the New England States. In addition to the generous Federal land grants which the railroads of this country have received, individual States have donated to the railroads other enormous tracts. For instance, Texas has kindly given to railroads 32,400,000 acres of its best lands. The State of Florida, the entire area of which is less than 35,000,000 acres, has given away 19,000,000 acres. In Minnesota the State has parted with 5,670,000 acres.

The Northern Pacific Railroad has grasped 57,920,000 acres of land on its main lines and an additional acreage of 42,500,000 on its branch roads—102,000,000 acres in all.

In most of the grants of lands to railroads, the Federal government imposed a specific condition: that the roads should be built within a certain time. Otherwise, the grants would lapse and automatically become government property again. Though many roads failed to comply with these conditions, the government has never brought suits to reclaim the lands in question.

Though much of the railroad land has been sold, there yet remains an enormous acreage in the hands of the various companies—estimated at at least 200,000,000 acres, including State as well as Federal land. On page 233 of the Government Report on Standing Timber above referred to, this sentence appears:

“The fact that today out of 17,000,000 acres of land granted nearly 50 years ago to several then distinct corporations as much as 13,888,000 (or about 80 per cent.) is still retained in a single ownership is of great significance to the public—for its one holder, by virtue of its retention of land grants, is today the largest owner of timber in the United States.”

Much of the land sold at 16c. an acre is now worth \$200.00 an acre, or more. H. H. Schwartz, former Chief of Field Service of the General Land Office, stated officially in 1909 with reference to the sale of certain lands: “These lands brought to the people or general government a gross sum of \$30,000,000. At the date of sale they were reasonably worth \$240,000,000. The profit of over \$200,000,000,” continues Mr. Schwartz, “went, not to the needy settler engaged in subduing the wilderness, but to the wealthy investors.”

The Government Report further states:

“There has been created not only the framework of an enormous timber monopoly but also an equally sinister land concentration in extensive sections. This involves a great wealth in minerals. The Southern Pacific has 4,318,000 acres in Northern California and Western Oregon and with the Union Pacific, which controls it, millions of acres elsewhere. The Northern Pacific owns 3,017,000 acres of timber land and millions more of non-timber land.”

The report of the bureau of corporations upon the vast holdings of the lumber lords of the United States, furnishes material for thoughtful consideration for the friends of equitable industrial development. The report shows that “1,694 timber owners hold in fee one-twentieth of the land area of the United States—105,600,000 acres, or an area two and one-half times the size of New England.”

Sixteen men hold 47,800,000 acres; three railroads hold enough

to give every adult male 15 acres in the nine States where their lands are located. In the upper peninsula of Michigan 45 per cent. of the land is held by thirty-two persons.

One-third of the entire State of Florida is held by fifty-two timber lords. Most of these vast holdings were obtained illegally through the bribery of congressmen and other public officials. The vast grants of public lands made to railroad and other corporations were obtained through official corruption. It was understood, at the time the grants were made to the railroads that the land would be redistributed to small holders. Of the 82,500,000 acres granted to the Pacific roads in the sixties they still retain about forty per cent.

The only way now left for the people to get back these lands is through the taxation of land values, irrespective of improvements, in the States in which these holdings lie.

The report of the United States Commissioner of Corporations show how concentrated is the ownership of timber lands.

In the Southwestern part of the State of Washington, 40 per cent. of the timber lands is owned by two holders.

In the western part of Oregon, five individuals own 36 per cent. of the timber lands.

In Northwestern California six individuals own 70 per cent. of these lands.

In the redwood district, ten individuals own more than half.

In the North central part of Iowa, four persons own 56 per cent. of the timber lands.

One-twentieth of the entire land area of the United States is owned by 1,694 proprietors of timber lands, that is, they own 105,600,000 acres. Sixteen individuals of the 1,694 own 47,800,000 acres.

A few instances of individual landholding may be given:

Washington—In the Southwestern part of this State two persons own forty per cent. of the timber lands.

Texas—A landholding syndicate owns land valued at \$3,000,000. The Taft Ranch includes 80,000 acres valued at \$2,000,000.

Oregon—Southern Pacific R. R. in Oregon owns nearly

3,000,000 acres of land. In the western part of the State 5 persons own 36 per cent. of the timber lands.

North Carolina—Mrs. Vanderbilt sold Pisgate Forest, 87,700 acres in four counties to the U. S. for \$5.00 per acre.

New York State—James W. Wadsworth, known as “the baron of Geneseo,” owns 29 miles from Rochester to Geneseo.

Kansas—A British land company owns 300,000 acres.

Mississippi—Lady Gordon and others own 2,000,000 acres.

Florida—One-half of the State of Florida is owned by 182 men whose combined holdings amount to 16,990,000 acres. Sir. Edward Reid is said to own 1,000,000 acres of this.

It is to the cities, however, that we must turn for the most striking instances of concentration of land ownership in a few hands, not in these cases in area but in value. The Society to Lower Rents and Reduce Taxes on Homes furnishes the following interesting figures:

The total assessed value of taxable land in Greater New York is \$4,643,414,776.

Thirteen families, out of the one million, one hundred thousand families in the city, are the owners of record of land in Manhattan alone, assessed for \$205,404,875. These families are known to own much valuable land in the other boroughs of the city. Their total land holdings in Manhattan average \$15,800,000 per family. These thirteen families own nearly one-fifteenth of the assessed value of the land of Manhattan—\$3,184,441,505—though there are at least 560,000 families in Manhattan, forty-three thousand times thirteen.

These thirteen families are: The Astors, the Vanderbilts, the Rhinelanders, O. B. Potter properties, J. P. Morgan, E. H. Van Ingen, Wendels, Goelets, Ehret, Gerrys, Chas. F. Hoffman Est., Wm. R. H. Martin, Eugene Hoffman.

The assessed value of the so-called “improvements” of these thirteen families in Manhattan is only \$59,212,775—a little more than one-fourth of the value of the land. The average small home owner has three times as valuable an improvement as his

land, but the total assessed value of land owned by the fifty odd thousand small home owners of the city is less than that of the Astor family in Manhattan, though their improvements are worth several times as much as those of the Astors, and the small home owners as well as all tenants of the city are taxed for the benefit of these and all other big land monopolists in the city.

Careful study of New York City indicates that less than two thousand persons own the major part of the land value of the city, and a very large proportion of the acreage. Their land is worth several times as much as their buildings, even in the built-up part of Manhattan.

A book much larger than this would have to be made to include similar figures for all the great cities of the United States. But they would tell the same story. Those who wish to pursue the subject further will find it admirably treated in Gustavus Myer's *History of Great American Fortunes*. In the Appendix to this volume will be found statistics relating to cities well worth the careful study of the reader.—EDITOR.