Five and Twenty School Years

by Robert Clancy

1957 is here — and with it the twenty-fifth anniversary of an institution devoted to bringing the world a knowledge of the Georgist message. The Henry George School of Social Science enters its second quarter-century with mingled pride and humility. Pride in the greatness of the Georgist philosophy, the vision of the founder, Oscar H. Geiger, and the progress that has thus far been made. Humility in the face of all that yet remains to be done and the knowledge that "we do not see it all." But we know that this institution will go on and that truth must ultimately prevail.

I. Founding of the School

"There is an enchanted, hidden spot in the human soul," wrote Stefan Zeromski, "fastened with seven locks, which no one and nothing but that picklock, bitter adversity, can open."

If there ever was a time of bitter adversity it was surely in the dark depression days of 1931 and 1932. January first, 1932 was the most cheerless of New Year's days. And it was on just that day that the soul of a man was unlocked and a brightness came forth. The man was Oscar H. Geiger and the brightness was the Henry George School of Social Science.

For many years Geiger carried the school idea within him. He was an ardent follower of Henry George and watched the emergence of the movement under its leader's guidance, saw it flourish for a while, then decline and become all but extinct. He participated fully in the movement's activities, its propaganda, politics and pamphleteering. But within him he knew that something more canny, more concentrated was needed than these brave gestures. He knew that Henry George was the bearer of a profound message, a philosophy of life, of which the fiscal means, though very important, was but an outward manifestation. He knew that this philosophy called for nothing less than the re-education of mankind.

But during all those years there were too many distractions, a disastrous war, revolutionary upheavals, the noisy prosperity of the 'twenties, and all sorts of new fads and "isms" competing for attention. Geiger himself was fully occupied with running a business and raising a family.

But by January first, 1932, things were different. The Georgist movement had all but spun itself out. The world was bewildered and chastened by a long depression. And Geiger who had become jobless as a result of the depression was living on his savings.

It was thus that in this time of Georgist, world and personal adversity, Oscar Geiger made his decision and brought his school into being.

Now on that New Year's day there was nothing conspicuous to see except perhaps a man's New Year's resolution. But soon there were developments.

Sometime in January a lecture was given by Oscar Geiger in a rented room, the first meeting under the name Henry George School of Social Science.

In February, a letter went out to Georgists all over the country inviting them to form into an advisory council. Most accepted.

On April fifteenth a board of trustees was formed.

Weekly lectures were conducted by Geiger and by guest speakers at the Pythian Temple, Manhattan.

The Pythian Temple lectures were suspended for the summer. At the final meeting in June the younger members expressed a desire to see something done about the Georgist message they had been hearing. Geiger's response was, "For forty years I have been watching young minds opening up to the truth and never have I been so touched as tonight." And he added, "you are the nucleus of a movement that will some day spread around the world."

The "nucleus" continued in a private home in the Bronx during the summer.

In October, the Friday lectures at the Pythian Temple were resumed, and the Bronx meetings were continued on Sundays. There were also meetings at the home of John Luxton in Brooklyn on Wednesdays.

Besides his three-a-week lectures, Geiger did considerable work at his home in West 154th Street, and I well remember several visits to his home, with pleasant Mrs. Geiger presiding over refreshments. These visits were rich experiences for me. Never before or since have I met anyone with both the spiritual depth and mental acumen of Oscar Geiger. It seemed to me that the things he said were just so.

Besides Geiger's home, there was also the tiny office of Land and Freedom at 150 Nassau Street, which served as the official mailing address of the school. Land and Freedom was the leading Georgist journal in the U. S. for many years, edited by the kindly sage, Joseph Dana Miller. Geiger served as its treasurer and also wrote much of the editorial matter.

Between his five bases of operation, Geiger had to keep a lot of scattered threads together. "The school needs a home," said he, and when friends asked him how he expected to acquire such a home, his own as well as general prospects being what they were, he replied, "a door will open."

Another need was beginning to make itself clear, and that was the formation of some educational program. A smallish group of people came to the lectures fairly steadily, others came and went, but there was not enough growth. Geiger, having conceived the idea of a course based on George's *Progress and Poverty*, went through his copy of that masterpiece, marking it up extensively and making up a series of questions based on the book. These emerged as a ten-lesson course to be given in weekly two-hour sessions.

Two trial classes were held in the spring of 1933 at the Pythian Temple attended by a total of about fifty students. The marked success of this experiment pointed the way to the future program. With some slight revisions from time to time, Geiger's outline of the course has since become the basic teachers manual and the course has become the school's chief teaching activity. Other courses have more or less followed the same pattern.

The need for a home was seen by one of Geiger's students, Leonard T. Recker, and he offered to pay one full year's rent for a location to be selected

by Geiger. "A door has opened," said Geiger, and on July first, 1933, Oscar Geiger and the Henry George School moved to 211 West 79th Street.

A fund appeal was sent out to Georgists that summer but the results were pitiful. Geiger's faith remained strong, but he was sorely tried by the difficulties. He believed that if he did the right thing, help would come. He did not plan for the future but he was determined to make the foundation solid so that others could and would continue the school.

In the fall of 1933 the first term started in the new headquarters — indeed it was the first full-fledged Henry George School program ever launched, in a regular school with a classroom and a course of study. Eighty-four students enrolled. There were several classes a week, and Geiger taught them all, besides doing all the work of directing. The only staff help was from a young lady, Edith Salkay, who was taken on as secretary. He might have turned over some of the teaching to others, but such were his standards that he felt he had to blaze the way all by himself. The work and anxiety naturally told on his health.

To the ten-week course in *Progress and Poverty* was added another five-weeks of *Protection or Free Trade* with *Social Problems* as collateral reading. The length of the course, fifteen weeks, was mainly to suit the requirements of "alertness credit" for public school teachers.

Following this, an advanced fifteen-week course was given, based on *The Science of Political Economy,* and *The Philosophy of Henry George,* by Oscar's son, George R. Geiger. There were 84 students for the first term and 75 stayed through the entire course of study.

One of the students was Helen D. Denbigh, an assistant principal of a Brooklyn public school who had come, not for alertness credit, but to find the cause of poverty — and she saw much of it. At the Henry George School she learned the reasons for it and, pure and unselfish soul that she was, she dedicated herself to the cause. In the spring of 1934 she arranged a meeting with her fellow students and urged them to form into a group in order to help the director in his pressing tasks. Again Geiger was deeply moved. A fund appeal was prepared, signed by Miss Denbigh on behalf of the students, and sent to Georgist friends.

To Geiger this initiative taken by Miss Denbigh and her fellow students was significant; it proved that the school was solidly established, that others could and would carry it on.

Indeed, not much more time remained for Oscar Geiger in this sphere of life. The spring term was over. A well-attended dinner was held on June 7th at the Town Hall. Plans were started for the next school year. During the summer Geiger was to enjoy a long-overdue rest by being a guest at the summer home of Miss Denbigh. Alas! his rest came in another way. All during June he was ill; and early Friday morning, on June 29, 1934 he died of a coronary thrombosis.

His shocked and grief-stricken students gathered for the funeral which was held at the school on Sunday, July first. They were totally unprepared for this calamity. They knew, though, that this was not the end.

(To be continued)

Sydney Mayers

VIEWS THE NEWS

A recently-deceased financier left a net estate of $10,186,299, but after federal and state inheritance taxes are deducted, his heirs will share only $4,098,099. The inevitability of death and taxes seems especially poignant when the two calamities are so closely connected with each other.

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Not long ago we enjoyed viewing again, on our television screen, an amusing film called "The Senator Was Indiscreet," in which the eminent statesman depicted bravely states his stand on the money question. He is against Inflation and against Deflation — but in favor of "Flation."

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A friend of this column complained bitterly that Christmas trees which bring twenty-five cents each at the forest cost from eight to ten dollars in New York. When we remarked it was his privilege to travel some 2000 miles, buy a tree for two bits, and transport it home, he sheepishly acknowledged that production obviously is not complete until the goods reach the consumer.

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Congress appropriated $3,650,000 for the Commerce Department's International Trade Fair Program, to encourage and increase two-way foreign trade—and then promptly and bitterly fought every tariff-reduction program designed to promote freer trade between our country and others. We don't get it!

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When a strike of dock workers stopped all shipping at East and Gulf ports, the Administration urged both sides of the dispute to recognize their obligations to the United States, saying "the strike has repercussions which spread far beyond the maritime industry." Almost seventy-eight years ago, Henry George pointed out that a stoppage of production at any stage unavoidably affects *all* production.

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The Du Pont Company announced a reduction of $30 a pound in the price of silicon, and also announced plans for the construction of a new silicon plant. To the student of political economy, the relationship between these two independent announcements will be quickly apparent.

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Packaged cake-mixes, a comparatively new convenience for the home baker, have caught on so successfully that countless new producers have rushed into the field, resulting in feverish competition and lower prices. Given sufficient freedom, the market will in due course determine which mixes shall survive, and what prices will be paid — and the consumer (aren't we all?) will reap the benefits.

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Economic effects stemming from the Suez Canal crisis have brought European countries shortages, inflation, hoarding and threats of rationing. The Wall Street Journal quotes a Belgian housewife, struggling home with her shopping bags bulging with canned goods: "I hope we will have a proper black market soon, so I won't have to fight this mob!"

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Advertisers recently offered "for the man who has everything" a 14-carat gold toothpick in a genuine leather case. There must be some economic significance in this; probably proof that "there is no limit to man's desires," as George suggested.