

S.F.'s Forgotten Economist

By Jerry Burns

A knot of dedicated followers will gather today in Union Square to honor the memory of San Francisco's most overlooked great thinker.

It is the 127th anniversary of the birth of Henry George—sailor, journalist, a founder of the San Francisco Public Library and author of the all-time best selling book ever written in the field of economics.

His book, "Progress and Poverty," has sold more than three million copies since its first printing in 1879 and his theories have had wide impact in many countries, but to most San Franciscans his is a forgotten name.

PLAQUE

In 1930, when people still remembered, the city unveiled an appropriately laudatory plaque on the site of Henry George's former home at 420 Second street.

"Here," it read, "in 1878-79, Henry George, 'the prophet of San Francisco,' wrote 'Progress and Poverty,' expounding natural laws that, breached, cause poverty, but, obeyed, assure us all peace, progress and plenty."

The site is now a speck of concrete beneath the James Lick Freeway and the plaque is being held by the Henry George School of Social Science until the city can be convinced to find a new place to put it.

PHILOSOPHY

The basis of George's philosophy is that land, like air and sunlight, is the property of all the people.

He looked around California in the last half of the 19th century—at the giant, undeveloped land holdings of the railroad barons and others—and decided that land must be used, not hoarded, if it is to benefit society.

He argued that a tax on land would force landowners to develop their property, creating jobs, homes and income.

George proposed that tax on land be the only tax and



HENRY GEORGE
An anniversary tribute

that no one pay tax on buildings, income or anything else.

IMPACT

George's theories have had little impact in this country, but a form of his single tax on land has been widely used in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.

There are hundreds of Henry George Schools across the world, including the San Francisco branch at 833 Market street, which give free classes in economics. The schools are financed by an eastern foundation and by donations.

The do not give doctrinaire courses advocating the ideas of Henry George. Instead, they offer a free ten-week course in economics with the hope that the student will compare philosophies and find Henry George the most convincing.

SUPPORTERS

Not unexpectedly, many of the more than 100,000 graduates of Henry George Schools in the United States have enrolled as sceptics and emerged as zealous supporters.

There are probably no more pleasant—and no more zealous—graduates than Robert Tideman, executive secretary of the local school, and Meighen van

Nieuwstadt, his administrative assistant.

"I admit that when I started I thought these people were nuts," said Mrs. van Nieuwstadt. "After a year I realized, 'my God, they're right.'"

Tideman is a tall, pleasant man who gave up a promising career as an electronics engineer to establish the San Francisco school in 1949.

VIEWS

He is a friendly, convincing speaker who cautions himself, "I'm talking too much," and frequently points out that his views on economics are his alone and do not represent any official view by the School, which has no fixed viewpoints.

If the single tax were applied in San Francisco, he said, the tax burden would shift from highly developed sites to underdeveloped sites.

"Assessor (Joseph) Tinney has admitted that vacant parcels in the city are greatly under-assessed. These would be taxed much more, and the owners would have to develop them, for everyone's benefit."

If only land were taxed, said Tideman, slum landlords could no longer afford to keep run-down ramshackle buildings on their property.

Under present taxing methods, they pay relatively low taxes because while their land is valuable, their buildings are not.

Assessor Tinney told The Chronicle that a single tax on the land "would seem to be an ideal answer for a community with a limited budget."

For cities needing vast amounts of money, he said, "it is impossible to resist taxing improvements."

He acknowledged that some vacant land in the city is "grossly under-assessed," but added that this will be corrected in the reassessments which will be conducted in the coming year.

At present, he said, San

Francisco's \$1.5 billion tax roll includes land valued at \$382 million, improvements (buildings) valued at \$917 million and personal property (inventory) valued at \$367 million.

The assessor said he has no exact idea what the effect of a single tax would be here. Nevertheless, he suggested, "it would be disastrous."

This view does not shock Henry George's followers. Many of them do not expect land rent to meet all the needs of both local and national government. However, as an economics historian has written:

"They do hold that the rental value of land—what its location and other advantages are worth apart from the yield attributable to improvements—is the most ideal source of general public revenue."

Every year at this time, the people who remember Henry George hold some sort of ceremony in his memory.

The Philadelphia-born George lived and worked in San Francisco from 1858 to 1880.

He was, among many things, one of the first members of the Bohemian Club, managing editor of The Chronicle and editor-founder of the San Francisco Post, an anti-railroad daily which died after a brief life in the 1870s.

Today's noon ceremony will highlight Henry George Day, proclaimed by Mayor John F. Shelley and the Board of Supervisors.

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