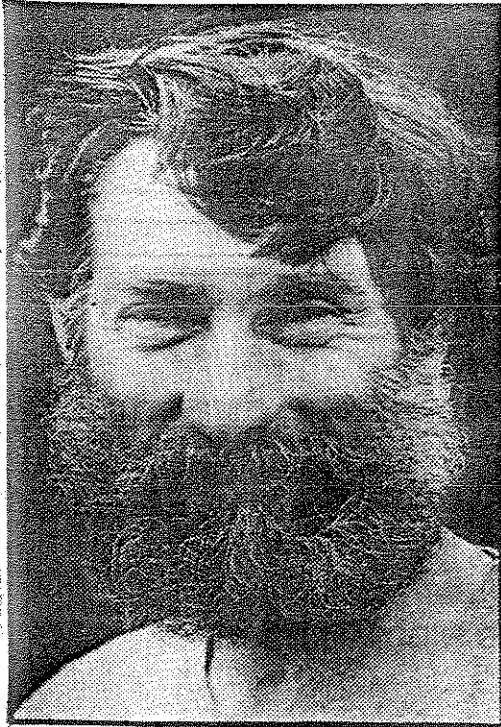


He pushes hard for a single tax — on land

JUN 17 1983

Uphill battle recognized in selling its value, need

By GARY SOULSMAN
Staff reporter



Michael K. Curtis

IN HIS SPARE TIME, this arborist — he's a tree doctor for Winterthur Museum — is teacher, headmaster, and chief zealot of the Henry George School of Social Science in Delaware.

And while some might say Michael K. Curtis is fighting a battle worthy of Don Quixote — by attempting to change people's way of thinking about the meaning of land and taxes — he is passionately dedicated to espousing the "fairness" of the single tax.

For he fears that if nonviolent economic changes are not made in this society, the American system will one day collapse.

"I don't know when, but ultimately it will decay," said Curtis, who looks as lean and healthy as a young sapling. "It will become like every other empire that has not ascended to justice."

The single-tax theory, stated in an overly simplistic manner, goes like this: All men

are entitled to land, from whence all wealth derives; but the present system of taxes encourages monopolists to hoard land — to keep it for speculation. If, however, land were taxed at its true value, at 100 percent of its potential — and all taxes that taxed men's labors were abolished — monopolists would no longer hoard land for speculation. They couldn't afford to. Land taxes would be too high. Instead, land could be acquired and used in a productive way by those who are presently disenfranchised.

"There is no question in my mind that taxing land values would eliminate unemployment and poverty and could make the American dream a reality," said Curtis, who usually teaches the Georgist theory in 10 1/2-hour evening sessions for a fee of \$25.

Despite the passion of his beliefs, this Arden resident does not expect change overnight. He knows better.

For one thing, Henry George's most famous book, "Progress and Poverty," in

which he set forth economic theories for changing taxes, was published in 1879. It drew widespread support, including the praise of men like Leo Tolstoy, George Bernard Shaw and Upton Sinclair.

But those men are dead, as are many of George's most faithful followers — including the band of Georgists who tried to sway 40,000 Delaware voters in 1896 to elect Georgist candidates. (They were unsuccessful and were tossed in the Dover jail instead.)

"The theory was more popular years ago," said Curtis.

THAT MAY BE because the theory is too radical — too threatening to established interests like universities and governments — to be seriously taught, according to Curtis.

Still, the 40-year-old Curtis is philosophical about his mission. He says he is not trying to lead people to political action. He is simply passing on the flame of knowledge, hoping that single taxers will one

day be elected to public office.

"I know now that there are hundreds of people who know this that didn't 10 years ago," he said, whose full brown and grey beard swirls about his face as softly as his voice.

Furthermore, for the public to accept these ideas — for there to be real and lasting change along Georgist lines — Curtis says the public will have to first understand these ideas. And that's where he can be of service.

The Henry George School, which Curtis calls an "extension" of the Philadelphia "extension" — the main office has a swank Manhattan address — is one of about a dozen schools scattered around the world.

In Delaware, its mail comes to an evergreen-colored mailbox outside Curtis' rustic Arden home. But it's more appropriate to think of the school as existing within Curtis. Whither he goeth, there goeth the school.

He has taught in Newark and Wilmington. He has also found that inmates at Delaware Correctional Center are especially receptive to Georgist ideas.

For instance, he points out that under the

See SINGLE TAX — E3

Sunday News Journal

May 8, 1983

Single tax

• Continued from E1

present system 90 percent of the land is owned by 3 percent of the people. Such statistics help prisoners understand why they have fared poorly in society, says Curtis. And he admits that in one sense he is telling prisoners the present tax system favors the haves over the have-nots.

Curtis' fervor for the ideas of this Philadelphia-born reformer burns with a passion even he does not always understand. But then his past is a bit odd for a school headmaster.

For example, Curtis dropped out of school in the eighth grade because of dyslexia. (He hated school, but did not know he had a learning disability at the time.)

He now realizes he has a high degree of conceptual intelligence but a low degree of functional intel-

ligence because of the dyslexia. Still, even this is not all bad.

"It has made me a good teacher," he said. "I have a lot of patience."

After leaving school, he joined the Marines, then came back to Delaware to take a job in his brother-in-law's tree service. Eventually he bought a home in Arden, settling near the homes of his parents and grandparents.

"One never knows really why something turns them on," he said.

"My grandparents were followers, exponents of Henry George. That's why they came to Arden in 1911."

Arden is one of a handful of communities founded on the single-tax principle. But Curtis was ignorant of what that meant until 15 years ago when a friend encouraged him to run for the Arden board of assessors.

After he won the post, he decided he should know something about the single tax and began reading George's books. He also took courses on Georgist thought in Philadelphia.

"I realized Arden is a small insignificant part of what this theory is about," said Curtis. "It can, in a small way, demonstrate some of the principles. But its application here will not really cure any of the problems that face the world today. These problems have to be addressed with a broader audience."

Believing George's theories have the power to transform the world, he decided to share them with others.

"I won't feel I'm a failure if it [a more equitable world] doesn't come to pass in my lifetime," he said. "Each time someone learns this, I think 'Well, that's one more person.' The feeling may be comparable to what a Christian feels in converting one more person to Christianity. He knows he's enlightening people."

Or, as Henry George said: "Let no man imagine that he has no influence. Whatever may be, and wherever he may be placed, the man who thinks becomes a light and a power."