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*Joseph Fels of Philadelphia
and London*

BY

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JOSEPH FELS, maker of Fels-Naptha soap, told a select gathering of Chicago's business and civic leaders in 1910: "We cannot get rich under present conditions without robbing somebody. I have done it, you are doing it, and I am still doing it. But I propose to spend the damnable money to wipe out the system by which I made it. If any of you have the courage to do the same thing, for God's sake let us cross hands."¹ Fels had already warned his listeners that "the mere making of money" must never become a businessman's most vital concern. Now, however, he was attacking the very foundations of the economic order upon which depended the material well-being of all who were present, and appealing for their help in the bargain. That an industrialist of his prominence should have behaved so strangely was perhaps remarkable enough, but that his audience undoubtedly expected him to do so was stranger still. His reputation had obviously preceded him to Chicago. It was well known that businessman and reformer had been combined in Joseph Fels to an astonishing degree.

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¹ Speech of Joseph Fels before the City Club of Chicago, Ill., Mar. 9, 1910, *City Club Bulletin*, III (Mar. 16, 1910), 244.

Joseph Fels was born in 1854 at Halifax Court House, Halifax County, Virginia.² He was the fourth of seven children. His parents, Lazarus and Susannah Freiberg Fels, were Jews from near Kaiserslautern in the Palatinate who had fled together with their first three children from the hard times accompanying the revolutionary turbulence of 1848. In America Lazarus Fels had begun his life anew as an itinerant peddler of household wares. He traveled extensively throughout the South before settling down to operating the general store, where he doubled as postmaster, in the little village of Yanceyville, North Carolina. The Fels family remained in Yanceyville until 1866 when Joseph was twelve. Then the defeat of the Confederacy and the ensuing derangement of southern society combined to wipe out their modest living, and forced them to move again, this time northward to Baltimore.

In Baltimore Lazarus Fels launched a domestic kitchen enterprise, manufacturing and retailing soap. Joseph continued in school until he was fifteen, when he willingly laid aside his textbooks to enter his father's business. Again, however, economic catastrophe struck. The little business failed in 1870, even though Lazarus Fels strove desperately to ride out the storm. Joseph, now seventeen, became a coffee salesman traveling for Fester & Sellman, a firm of commission agents. A year later he and his father became traveling agents for the Philadelphia soap house of William Marks. Then, in 1873, as panic swept the nation and depression set in, Lazarus and Joseph Fels moved to Philadelphia to undertake traveling commissions for the larger soap firm of Charles Elias & Company, and the family joined them there shortly afterward.

In the highly competitive world of soap, Joseph Fels had found his calling. He quickly demonstrated his merchandising ability, but he was ambitious to become his own master. In 1875 he entered a partnership with Thomas Worsley & Company, an established

² As yet, no other biography exists of Joseph Fels than the two versions of essentially the same eulogistic material published by his widow. Although issued in her name, Earl Barnes, Harold D. Laski, Frank W. Garrison, and John Willis Slaughter, among others, are known to have done much of the actual writing. Mary Fels, *Joseph Fels, His Life-Work* (New York, 1916); and *The Life of Joseph Fels* (New York, 1940). Citations in this article are to the 1916 edition. The most useful materials for the biographer, however, are the letters, speeches, and public pronouncements of Joseph Fels himself. These at present number more than 900 items, and have generously been made available to this author. They will be cited as the Joseph Fels Papers.

Philadelphia manufacturer of toilet soaps. This connection terminated late in 1876, when Joseph Fels bought out his partner and took over the business. It is noteworthy, in view of Fels' eventual wealth, that the purchase price was four thousand dollars and that the check was the largest he had ever written. Thus was founded Fels and Company of Philadelphia, manufacturers of soaps, initially a partnership of father and son in which the younger man, now twenty-three, was the driving spirit. Joseph Fels traveled constantly as his company's outside representative, purchasing raw materials, and serving also as chief sales agent. His friendly, confident manner and cheerful good humor fitted him splendidly for the salesman's role. Meanwhile, his youngest brother, Samuel, who had been associated with Fels and Company since its beginning, became a partner, and gradually assumed from Lazarus Fels the responsibility for manufacturing. In 1881 Joseph married Mary Fels of Keokuk, Iowa, a distant relative whom he had met eight years earlier while beating the bushes of the hinterland for buyers of soap.³

Fels and Company prospered steadily, with each year marking a gain over its predecessor. Nonetheless, competition was almost intolerably keen. Small firms and intensive rivalries for markets were the outstanding characteristics of the soap industry.⁴ The successful vendor of toilet soaps had to anticipate every shifting current of popular whim. He had to carry endless varieties in quality, color, and fragrance. These, in turn, had to be packed in pleasing wrappers

³ This account of Joseph Fels' early career is pieced together from various items in the Joseph Fels Papers, including early family letters and documents, newspaper obituaries and memorial addresses; also Mary Fels, *Joseph Fels*, 1-16, and Earl Barnes, "The Evolution of Joseph Fels," *Ground Hog* (Cleveland, Ohio), Feb. 20, 1915. Of particular use among the Joseph Fels Papers is an unsigned draft of the first two chapters of Mary Fels' biography. Though it is apparently the work of another, it nevertheless contains many enlightening corrections and deletions in her own hand, and will be cited hereafter as "Joseph Fels," Joseph Fels Papers.

⁴ Still for the future were the giant soaps and fats combinations with their intricately organized purchasing and marketing networks designed to flood the world with heavily advertised products. The great expansion of Procter & Gamble Company dates after 1907, and the world-wide scope of the Lever enterprises is also early twentieth century in origin. Furthermore, only passing attention was paid by the ubiquitous Industrial Commission in 1900 to any allegedly monopolistic tendencies in the soap industry. See testimony of G. Waldo Smith in United States Industrial Commission, *Preliminary Report on Trusts and Industrial Combinations . . .*, I (Washington, 1900), 59, 65-66 and *passim*; and also its *Reports*, XIII and XIX, *passim*.

inside exactly the right boxes, with the whole assortment engagingly displayed and advertised.⁵ A line of soaps must not become stereotyped, yet at the same time its distinctive identity was essential for a continuing demand. A new variety upon which high hopes were placed might prove to be disastrously unsuccessful for what seemed the slightest of reasons—its wrapper wrong, the box unattractive, the price too high or even too low. Fear of waste was another constant factor, the margin of success narrow and insecure. By 1890 the competitive struggle for a market governed by such fickle and shifting currents was imposing demands which were increasingly difficult to satisfy. Joseph Fels perceived the necessity of specializing upon a single variety to stabilize his enterprise.⁶

So it was, then, in his quest for an exclusive product, that Joseph Fels encountered that familiar yellow laundry soap which was destined to become indelibly associated with his name. Housewives and soap manufacturers alike had for a long time been endeavoring to increase the grease-cutting qualities of laundry soaps. It was common practice to add a few drops of kerosene to the family wash especially if the tubs contained the begrimed clothes of a man of toil. An obscure Philadelphia soap manufacturer named Stanton had finally succeeded in fixing a naphtha or benzine solvent into laundry soap, but his business was grievously mismanaged and serious losses had been suffered. Joseph Fels became convinced that Stanton's process was technologically sound. He persuaded his partners of its possibilities. In 1893 they bought an interest in Stanton's company, and one year later they bought out the old directors, completely absorbing the business into Fels and Company. For some time Fels-Naptha was simply added to the firm's established line of toilet soaps. Lazarus Fels, in particular, just before his death was extremely reluctant to risk everything upon the fate of a single product. But soon the success of the naphtha soap was certain and phenomenal. A product for which a demand already existed proved irresistible when manufactured and distributed by a business organization thoroughly tested and hardened by years of competition. Before long, the partners discontinued their extensive line of toilet soaps to

⁵ A jobbers' list of the toilet soaps being manufactured by Fels and Company around 1890 indicates no less than 107 varieties of general toilet, castile, transparent glycerine, medicinal, and shaving soaps. Joseph Fels Papers.

⁶ Mary Fels, *Joseph Fels*, 7-8.

concentrate upon Fels-Naptha. Henceforth, Joseph and Samuel Fels were destined to travel with comparative ease along the road to great wealth.⁷

Thus, by 1895, while millions of Americans were still mired deep in the depression of the nineties, Joseph Fels in middle life had acquired the financial means which were to make his future career possible. With his fortune assured, he was able to play an active role in an increasingly broad variety of philanthropic and reform enterprises. At first these proved to be scarcely more than alluring side lines to his business career. Then, for ten years or more, the two sides to his personality vied for control, until the businessman in Fels began at last to give way noticeably to the social reformer. What was there within him to produce such an outcome? He had always been half businessman and half apostle, according to those who knew him best. From this time forward, the story of his life becomes a tale of metamorphosis from the one to the other.⁸

The major environmental influences which had worked upon Joseph Fels as a boy were those of a poor and typically close-knit Jewish immigrant family, somewhat diluted by the culture patterns of a small southern town remote from the main streams of national affairs. His home supplied the ancient traditions of Judaism as interpreted through the German tongue, his schools the basic tools for literacy in English and proficiency in business. Yanceyville, Richmond—where he attended school—and Baltimore added their human components to his formative background, a highly stratified world of white and black Christians. Yet his deeper instincts blended Jewish humanitarianism with democracy, being intensely individualistic and naturally equalitarian from the beginning.⁹ A good deal of Joseph Fels' character as a young businessman can be gleaned from fragments of his letters to the youthful Mary Fels. In one exchange, she had written him of books she was reading which opened new and exciting vistas, and he gently rebuked her newly presumed wisdom as the characteristic vice of the bluestocking. In another, he preached against the cardinal sin of snobbery with that same whimsical non-

⁷ *Ibid.*, 8-10; interview with Harold W. Pile, Mar. 31, 1953.

⁸ Mary Fels, *Joseph Fels*, *passim*; Frederic C. Howe, "Joseph Fels," *Survey*, XXXI (Mar. 28, 1914), 312.

⁹ Mary Fels, *Joseph Fels*, 14-24; Earl Barnes, "The Evolution of Joseph Fels," *Ground Hog*, Feb. 20, 1915; "Joseph Fels," 1, Joseph Fels Papers.

chalance that made him so excellent a companion. Elsewhere, she had written that her mother regarded her as too headstrong. "Tell her," came Joseph Fels' reply, "I wouldn't care a fig for you if you hadn't a soul of your own." Here was the same cry for individuality that would echo so fiercely from him in later life, that every man should stand firm in his intrinsic worth, making the most of his own manhood.¹⁰ For the passing years served only to fortify his heartfelt conviction of the fundamental equality of all men, to renew his dislike of artificial social distinctions, and strengthen his democratic faith. Long afterward, George Lansbury took pleasure in recalling the occasion of his first encounter with Fels in 1903 when he escorted Fels to his train. As the train pulled into the station in London, Lansbury asked Fels which class he was traveling. Like a shot came the reply: "Third, because there isn't any fourth!"¹¹

Undoubtedly, Joseph Fels' long devotion to business affairs was equally important in shaping his character. For more than thirty years after 1870 he was engrossed in the bustling world of soap manufacturing and sales. His business was scarcely ever out of his mind. Day and night, at his office, at home, and on the road, he schemed and planned and dreamed. He grew obsessed with his efforts to utilize all available resources, human as well as material. "He was anxious to prevent misdirected energy. He was angered at the waste of things. . . . He was always talking of the things lying idle that might be used." He believed that his successful exploitation of the previously mismanaged laundry soap which became his trademark illustrated perfectly the need to release human talents for the benefit of all mankind. He learned that the success of a business venture may depend solely upon its ability to capture the imagination of the market. That was, he was certain, the key to his own fortune. He had made extraordinary claims for Fels-Naptha soap. People were intrigued by these claims. They bought the soap, and continued to buy it, testifying over and over again that the claims were not farfetched.¹²

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 23-24.

¹¹ George Lansbury to Mary Fels, June 30, 1914, Joseph Fels Papers. The last page with the signature has disappeared from this letter, but since the nine remaining pages deal extensively with easily verifiable relationships common only to Lansbury and Joseph Fels, the letter's identification seems clear enough.

¹² Mary Fels, *Joseph Fels*, 1-13.

In later years, Joseph Fels drew regularly upon his business advertising and promotion experiences to win public support for his reform schemes. Then, instead of comprehensive approaches beyond his means, Fels sought educational programs which advertised the way to brighter futures by his personal example.¹³ From his business dealings, also, he developed a practicality of mind that was at once shrewd and evident in all his affairs. He liked to sound out his rivals, sometimes holding them up to the last penny before consummating a deal. He once remarked: "I am two men. With my right hand I can skin a man for five cents, while with my left hand I can give away five thousand dollars."¹⁴ In his dual capacity as businessman and reformer he did both.

In fields other than his soap business, Joseph Fels moved more slowly. He seemed content for a long time to absorb the ideas of others rather than express his own. Yet he continued to drift away from the service of the synagogue, eluding more and more its appeals to historic tradition and ancient custom. Then, in 1884, the character of the Fels home was drastically changed. Their only child, a son, was born and quickly died, and to fill the gap in their lives Joseph and Mary Fels invited an ever-widening assortment of young artists, social thinkers, and public figures to their hearthside in Tioga. The Fels home assumed the aspect of a salon, a haven for new thoughts, unfulfilled hopes, and strange panaceas.¹⁵ Its hostess, Mary Fels, now emerged as a refined and sensitive *petite femme* with a compellingly magnetic personality and a consuming passion for novel enlightenment, though preferably by glamorous personalities.¹⁶

Joseph Fels was also small in stature, but full of nervous energy, quick in his movements, racy and incisive in speech, alert, intuitive,

¹³ *Ibid.*, 198; Joseph Fels to G. Lowe, Dec. 12, 1905; to Lord George Hamilton, July 3, 1907; to Dan Kiefer, June 19, 1909; to C. H. Ingersoll, June 27, 1911, Joseph Fels Papers; Joseph Fels to Booker T. Washington, Sept. 25, 1907, Fairhope Colony Archives (FCA).

¹⁴ Mary Fels, *Joseph Fels*, 10, 254-255; John Paul to Joseph Fels, and Fels' notation thereon, Dec. 5, 1910, Joseph Fels Papers.

¹⁵ Mary Fels, *Joseph Fels*, 16-17, 19; "Joseph Fels," 27-28, Joseph Fels Papers. See also the Fels' "Visitors Book" for their home at Bickley, Kent, *ibid.*

¹⁶ An unpublished and undated memoir by a woman who lived for some time in the Fels' home at Bickley affords some unusually intimate glimpses of Mary Fels: Elizabeth S. F. Kite, "A Conversion Story: from Quakerism to the Catholic Church," 10-11, 14-17, 310-345, in Mount Saint Agnes College Library, Baltimore, Md.

and decisive.¹⁷ He appeared to be searching restlessly for solutions to problems which were still but imperfectly defined in his mind. Whatever faith he possessed centered about his belief in the fundamental brotherhood of man. Hence, the visitors who commanded his closest attention were those who viewed mankind's future optimistically, with overtones of utopianism.¹⁸ Some of these belonged to the Society for Ethical Culture, gleaning grains of eternity from centuries of institutionalized theology.¹⁹ Others followed the way lighted by Henry George, pronouncing anathemas upon all monopolistic expropriators of the unearned increment in land values while prophesying the coming kingdom of the single tax.²⁰ Still others were worshipful disciples of Walt Whitman, energetically developing their higher faculties of mind and soul at the Camden bedside of the good gray master himself.²¹ For some time, Joseph Fels was content merely to hear them all with sympathetic interest. "They were trying," he later recalled, "to understand themselves without any of the damned nonsense of trying to understand their grandfathers."²²

Thus, Joseph Fels, a successful middle-aged businessman, was undergoing a transformation by which he would become a full-fledged social reformer, thereby joining his own generation's glitter-

¹⁷ Lincoln Steffens remembered Fels as "a little bit of a twinkling man—his eyes twinkled, his mind twinkled, his very feet twinkled." *The Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens* (New York, 1931), II, 641-644. But Beatrice Webb, bitterly disappointed because of her inability to capture Fels' "golden soap-suds" for the Fabian Society, could see only "a decidedly vulgar little Jew with much push, little else on the surface." *Our Partnership*, ed. by Barbara Drake and Margaret I. Cole (New York and London, 1948), 291.

¹⁸ Mary Fels, *Joseph Fels*, 18-19; "Joseph Fels," 27-28, Joseph Fels Papers.

¹⁹ For a considerable time at least Fels himself was a member of the Ethical Society. In 1890 he was elected to a three-year term as a trustee of the Philadelphia group, and served actively in that capacity. *The Conservator*, I (May, 1890), 20; IV (October, 1893), 119; IV (January, 1894), 170-171. The Ethical Society following among highly assimilated Jews is discussed in James Waterman Wise, *Jews Are Like That!* (New York, 1928), 133-136.

²⁰ It is difficult to date Fels' final conversion to the single-tax philosophy, because he held improperly defined Georgeist views long before he discarded all but single-tax goals. Yet his social thinking from the outset centered about the land question.

²¹ Playwright Israel Zangwill, who came to know Fels very well indeed, believed that Walt Whitman and Henry George were the outstanding influences in Fels' life. Israel Zangwill, "Joseph Fels," *Fortnightly Review*, CVII (June, 1920), 922, 925. Moreover, Henry George's ideas mingled freely with various ethical and humanitarian reform currents in Whitman's latter-day Boswell, Horace Traubel, who published *The Conservator* for a following which included Joseph and Mary Fels. See *The Conservator*, VI (April, 1895), 25-26; Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (Philadelphia, 1953), IV (ed. by Sculley Bradley), 8; "Joseph Fels," 28, Joseph Fels Papers.

²² Mary Fels, *Joseph Fels*, 18-19.

ing company of wealthy men who also turned to philanthropy. His interests in soap manufacturing and sales were now challenged by a growing compulsion to banish poverty from the lot of mankind. At first, he entered almost timidly upon his new adventures. Yet there was much even at the outset that seemed clear. From his business experience he had learned of the crushing and impersonal workings of industrial competition, and he was certain that exclusive monopoly rather than frenetic competition offered the only guaranteed avenue to great wealth. He believed, however, that the concentrations of private wealth produced by the profits of monopoly entailed more hazards than blessings, even threatening the essential fabric of democratic society. Most important, perhaps, Fels had convinced himself that whatever else might be his true mission on earth, he was at the very least his brother's keeper, and that his brothers were all mankind. And though he had not yet embraced Henry George's single-tax panacea, he believed without a qualm of doubt that the master solution to society's enigmas of unemployment, poverty, and human degradation lay in the broadest possible utilization of the land and its resources for the benefit of all. By 1899, Joseph Fels could be seen emerging as the leading figure in two experiments, which, though distinctly different in their approach to the problems of the day, were akin in placing primary emphasis upon land as the key factor for individual economic improvement. These were the Philadelphia Vacant Lots Cultivation Association and the Fairhope Single Tax Colony on the shores of Mobile Bay.

The vacant lot cultivation movement was launched in Detroit in 1894, when it occurred to the city's mayor, Hazen S. Pingree, that a measure of depression relief might be achieved if the jobless could secure food for their families by cultivating unused land. He thereupon appealed to the owners of vacant city lots to make them available as vegetable gardens for Detroit's unemployed. Their response provided nearly five hundred acres for immediate utilization. "Pingree's potato patches," as these relief plots were promptly dubbed, attracted wide attention. Their manifest success and popularity soon inspired similar projects elsewhere. About twenty cities and towns took up Pingree's scheme in 1895, either under municipal auspices, private philanthropy, or the two variously combined.²³

²³ For an early summary of this movement, see Frederic W. Speirs, *et al.*, *Vacant-Lot Cultivation* (New York, 1898).

Philadelphia joined the growing list in 1897 with the organization of the Philadelphia Vacant Lots Cultivation Committee by a group of fifty self-acclaimed "practical philanthropists," among whom was Joseph Fels.²⁴ Fels, however, performed only a minor role until 1899. Then he began to underwrite the work of the association substantially, contributing heavily to its cause, and being elected at once to the board of directors.²⁵ He instigated a scheme of giving at this time which was to remain characteristic, that of proportionately matching the donations of others as a neat device for stimulating broad voluntary support. Thus at the annual meeting, January 16, 1902, it was recorded that Fels had "agreed to give ten cents for every dollar contributed to the association during the ensuing year." Again in 1904 he had "offered to contribute \$500. or less if the balance of the board [of directors] would contribute a like sum, which offer was accepted."²⁶ The progress of the association was steady and its benefits apparent, although the results were ameliorative rather than remedial. Many of the gardeners were able, after storing their own larders with vegetables, to sell what surplus remained for a modest cash income. In addition, such intangible blessings accrued as improved health and recovered hope, aspects which so greatly appealed to Joseph Fels. "How many men," he once asked his associates, "have we lost through lack of the medicine nature provides, fresh air and vigorous exercise?"²⁷

Fels' connection with the Philadelphia Vacant Lots Cultivation

²⁴ "Memoranda of Phila. Vacant Lots Cultivation Committee, 1897" (Mar. 2, 1897), 2; *Report of Philadelphia Vacant Lots Cultivation Committee for the Season of 1897*, 13 and *passim*, Philadelphia Vacant Lots Cultivation Society (V.L.C.S.) Papers, The Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Philadelphia's experiment was dominated from the outset by conservative philanthropists, with great care taken to disassociate it from any taint of radicalism either of the municipal "socialism" of Pingree's Detroit or of Henry George's single-tax heresy. See *Philadelphia Record* and *Philadelphia Ledger*, Mar. 4, 1897; and even the single-tax *Justice* (Wilmington, Del.), Mar. 20, 1897.

²⁵ Minutes of the Philadelphia Vacant Lots Cultivation Association (Philadelphia V.L.C.A.), Apr. 6, 1899, ff.; *Vacant Lot Farming*, third annual report of the Philadelphia V.L.C.A.; *Farming in the City*, fourth and fifth annual reports of the Philadelphia V.L.C.A., in Philadelphia V.L.C.S. Papers.

²⁶ Minutes, Philadelphia V.L.C.A., Jan. 16, 1902, and Sept. 16, 1904, *ibid*.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, *passim*; Mary Fels, *Joseph Fels*, 22-23. Detailed statistics of acreage and plots under cultivation in Philadelphia, as well as the number of gardeners, their produce, and cash income, are contained in the association's annual reports. In general, from a start of one hundred gardens in 1897, an upward trend began which reached a climax in 1908 of 1,000 gardens. Comparative statistics for the years of World War I are misleading, however, because of the movement's mingling with patriotic "Victory Garden" impulses.

Association proved of a continuing nature, but once he became swept up by matters of greater moment, its importance for him waned noticeably. As early as 1905 he had come to regard this cultivation of vacant urban lots as scarcely a basic solution either for unemployment or for land monopoly itself. "My idea," he told a reporter, "is to pave the way back to the land. I attach very little importance to the work of the Vacant Lots Association as such. The whole land question is what concerns me. . . . But unfortunately the earth belongs to a few people."²⁸ Nevertheless, this initial experiment inspired by Mayor Pingree's example held an enduring appeal for Fels, and he continued to propagate the scheme. It served to clarify and focus certain hazy ideas, as his widow later recalled, "which for some years had been uppermost in his mind." He had long been aware of the social possibilities inherent in a wider utilization of the good earth. Now he was certain that his awareness was extensively shared, that there existed a genuine popular hunger for the land.²⁹

Simultaneously, in early 1899, Joseph Fels also became interested in an experimental colony at Fairhope, Alabama, which was devoted to the doctrines of Henry George. This tiny, remote, and impecunious settlement had been established in January, 1895, by an ardent group of Iowans.³⁰ Through the columns of the *Fairhope Courier*, the colony's newspaper edited by Ernest B. Gaston, Fels had apparently learned of the enterprise and its intention to demonstrate the soundness of a single-tax society, and had written offering his financial assistance.³¹ For ten years thereafter, from wherever he chanced to be, Fels maintained a close watch over Fairhope's progress. For him

²⁸ Mary Fels, *Joseph Fels*, 22-23; *Philadelphia Press*, Mar. 7, 1905. It is ironical that the Vacant Lots Cultivation Association was dissolved less than one year before the great Wall Street crash, because "the financial situation of the workers [had] become better and the number who wish to work on the vacant lots . . . fewer." Samuel S. Fels to former contributors, Dec. 2, 1928, Philadelphia V.L.C.S. Papers.

²⁹ Mary Fels, *Joseph Fels*, 23-24. As late as 1908, for example, he inquired of Mayor Tom L. Johnson: "Can't you influence the starting of Vacant Lots Garden work in Cleveland?" Joseph Fels to Tom L. Johnson, Mar. 17, 1908, FCA.

³⁰ Ernest B. Gaston, *Quarter Centennial History, Fairhope Single Tax Colony, 1895-1920, with Added Material Bringing Story to August 1932* (Fairhope, Ala., 1932), *passim*.

³¹ Already reformist impulses were becoming entangled with Fels' business affairs. To his first letter to Gaston he had appended: "Give me the name of your local grocer also." And in the next exchange, after having offered an initial contribution of up to \$500 to construct telephone lines for the colony, he continues: "My firm will write Mershon Bros. [of Fairhope] regarding Fels-Naptha soap, which we would like to get introduced through at least one grocer in each town." Joseph Fels to Ernest B. Gaston, Mar. [?] and Apr. 25, 1899 [?], FCA.

the colony's very existence was its primary significance, affording a beacon of hope toward a future built upon strong foundations of social justice. He was invariably sharp with those whose impressions of Fairhope seemed myopically limited to the dusty drabness of a small southern town. He wrote from England to Cleveland's Mayor Tom L. Johnson, who was himself an enthusiastic single-taxer, though skeptical of Fairhope's possibilities: "I have never in the remotest sense suggested that this colony is going to upset things, . . . [but] it is a first class beginning." Fairhope was much more valuable, Fels continued, than Johnson's famous campaign for three-cent fares or any of the similar reformist efforts against "gas rings" and traction "combines" which were then writing so turbulent a chapter in municipal politics. Fairhope was a truly basic approach because it attacked land monopoly as the root of the matter, the others were superficial because they did not. After all, Fels concluded, you have only to count the blessings which result from the administration of Fairhope along single-tax lines to become convinced of the enduring truth of Henry George. "If free water, free schools (in addition to the State half-time schools), free library, free bathhouses, free telephone service, and the best roads of any small community in the south, free wharf for foot passengers, and other public utilities, all paid out of land rentals, are not nearly what we are after, I would like to know what is!"³² Outwardly, his enthusiasm for Fairhope remained high for many years. In 1908 he wrote from England to a friend in Austria: "If I were not interested in so many other social experiments both here and in America, I should most certainly want to be an active member of the colony living on Fairhope land and doing my share to force the experiment to the front in the eyes of the world. . . . I believe Fairhope is destined to become historical, even tho' so feeble and small as yet in actual and material results."³³

³² Joseph Fels to Tom L. Johnson, Mar. 30 and May 2, 1906; to N. O. Nelson, May 2, 1906; to George E. Lee, Nov. 11, 1907, *ibid.* However, in his enthusiasm Fels glossed over the essential fact that Fairhope would scarcely have been able to provide so many public services had he not invested heavily in its future. The library, the telephone service, the wharf and its barges and launches, the *Courier's* modern press, as well as the nationally famous Organic School, were each in turn largely made possible not by the income from the community's land but by Fels' own generosity. In fact, he even donated much of the land itself.

³³ Joseph Fels to John W. Ettel, June 24, 1908, *ibid.*

Yet developments at Fairhope had already begun to discourage Fels. There had always been an endless train of minor troubles, petty grievances, and annoying backbiting among the settlers, but he surmounted each of these in turn with his goal of Fairhope's survival unshaken. Nonetheless, he could not but begin to concede that Fairhope's existence was precarious at best, handicapped as it was by poor soils and the remoteness and general poverty of the entire region.³⁴ Still more serious was the presence in the colony of a growing number of avowed opponents of the Henry George gospel, so powerful, in fact, by 1908, as to elect a new mayor in direct opposition to the single-tax "Fairhope Plan."³⁵ And worst of all was the growing criticism by various malcontents of Fels himself. "Everything that I have done in the direction of investing capital there and in helping other people in their business," he wrote gloomily in 1909, "has been most disastrous, and I have got the reputation among some people of being nothing but a 'money bags,' and some even imagine that I may swallow up the place." This was too much for him after all—to stand accused of being a land monopolist.³⁶ Henceforth, he gradually drifted away from Fairhope's affairs to concentrate upon fairer hopes elsewhere.

In 1901 Joseph Fels had moved to England. Business affairs had taken him there so many times before that at last it was agreed he ought to settle abroad more or less permanently and establish a European sales outlet for Fels-Naptha soap. His youngest brother, Samuel S. Fels, thereupon assumed full responsibility for the firm's American manufacturing and distributing operations, although he remained technically the junior partner. For all concerned, the next three years were fully occupied launching this English venture, so much so that, except for his continuing support for both the Fairhope colony and the Philadelphia vacant lots cultivation program, Joseph Fels was forced to attend almost strictly to business. By late 1903,

³⁴ Joseph Fels to N. O. Nelson, May 2, 1906; to Dr. Rowe, June 29, 1906; to Ernest B. Gaston, July 26, 1906; Dr. Leverson to Ernest B. Gaston, Aug. 9, 1907; Joseph Fels to Ernest B. Gaston, Sept. 3 and Nov. 11, 1907; to George E. Lee, Nov. 11, 1907; to Ernest B. Gaston, Aug. 3 and 22, 1908, and elsewhere, *ibid.*

³⁵ P. A. Parker to Joseph Fels, Jan. 12, 1906; Joseph Fels to P. A. Parker, Jan. 17, 1906; to N. O. Nelson, May 2, 1906; H. S. Greeno to Joseph Fels, July 14, 1908, *ibid.*

³⁶ Joseph Fels to H. S. Greeno, July 31, 1908; to Messrs. Van Bavel & Koopman, July 9, 1909, *ibid.*

however, success was apparent. Fels-Naptha soap had caught on satisfactorily in England, and was selling well.³⁷

So once again, this time from his offices in London's East End, Joseph Fels began looking about for old evils to scourge and new causes to embrace. Indeed, England was full of both, and the East End proved precisely the right place to begin. For there amid some of the direst poverty on earth lay the dreary wastelands of Bow and Bromley, Poplar and Deptford. Moreover, it was the period of severe depression following the Boer War. For six or seven years the statistics for unemployment registered extraordinarily high levels, while private charities exhausted their resources and the traditional system of Poor Law relief proved woefully inadequate to cope with spreading distress.³⁸ The temper of the poor was growing sullen and explosive, when Joseph Fels decided that London, like Philadelphia, needed a program of vacant lots cultivation to employ idle men at tilling idle land. It was George Lansbury who persuaded him to promote instead a farm colony designed expressly for the rehabilitation of able-bodied paupers from the London Borough of Poplar.³⁹ Lansbury demonstrated conclusively that Britain's Poor Law offered nothing beyond the stigma of pauperism and what amounted to penal servitude in a local workhouse in company with the aged, infirm, depraved and insane.⁴⁰ Thereafter, from late 1903 through 1908, Fels became in-

³⁷ Mary Fels, *Joseph Fels*, 25-26 and *passim*.

³⁸ The full measure of economic and social distress in England for this period is unobtainable. However, the available statistics for pauperism as well as the Board of Trade's monthly returns in the *Labour Gazette* are extremely enlightening. For "evidence of abnormal distress," consult London County Council, *Lack of Employment*, being the report and minutes of the first and second meetings of the Conference of Representatives of Administrative Authorities in London, held at the County Hall on Feb. 13 and Apr. 3, 1903, respectively, London County Council Records (LCC).

³⁹ George Lansbury to Mary Fels, June 30, 1914, Joseph Fels Papers. Fels, however, eventually established a Vacant Land Cultivation Society in London, Nov. 8, 1907, which inspired similar organizations elsewhere in Great Britain and Ireland. Joseph Fels to G. H. Stearns, Oct. 30, 1913, and "Vacant Land Cultivation in England," Joseph Fels Papers; Joseph Edwards, ed., *Land and Real Tariff Reform, Being the Land Reformers' Handbook for 1909* (London, 1909), 90-91.

⁴⁰ Consult the monumental studies of Sidney and Beatrice Webb for the labyrinthine workings of England's Poor Law: *The Break-Up of the Poor Law* and *The Public Organisation of the Labour Market*, being parts I and II of the Minority Report of the Poor Law Commission (London, 1909), and *English Poor Law Policy* (London, 1910). Useful, also, is Raymond Postgate, *The Life of George Lansbury* (London, 1951). The Webbs achieved such an impressive success in their description and analysis of Poor Law relief that an otherwise fertile field for research has unfortunately been considered as closed.

volved in a succession of farm colony schemes. Each in turn was designed to afford some substantial measure of immediate assistance while indicating the way to enduring prosperity and social justice through land reform.⁴¹

The most important of these enterprises were three colonies at Laindon, Hollesley Bay, and Mayland. The Laindon Farm Colony in Essex and the Hollesley Bay Colony in Suffolk were the joint products of Joseph Fels' purse and George Lansbury's long experience as an administrator of relief for the Borough of Poplar. The experiment at Mayland, Essex, however, was characterized by Fels' own ultimate disappointments at Laindon and Hollesley Bay.

Laindon Colony was launched late in 1903 when Fels offered to the Board of Guardians of Poplar Union, of which Will Crooks, M.P., was chairman and Lansbury a leading member, the use of a one hundred and one acre farm rent-free for three years with the option to purchase at cost upon the expiration of that period.⁴² Fels' offer was accepted, and the formal arrangements were completed by March, 1904, for an experimental farm labor colony at Laindon to provide a novel program of productive rehabilitation for upwards of one hundred unemployed inhabitants of the Poplar Workhouse. For nearly two years, progress at Laindon seemed to justify the optimistic hopes of Lansbury and Fels that a fundamental remedy for industrial unemployment had been discovered. Fels busied himself happily in buying up more farms to expand the work in which they

⁴¹ No comprehensive study exists of the "land question" in Edwardian Britain with its "back to the land" appeal. However, George Bernard Shaw gleefully ridiculed Joseph Fels' conviction that agriculture afforded any plausible escape whatever from urban distresses. "I know of no trick that you can play with the land outside his [Sidney Webb's] scheme [of socialism] that will be of any use except to make small masters, of large ones, out of monsters with a depraved taste for the revolting pursuit of agriculture, against which Nature herself protests by immediately striking down with fever the man who first strikes pick or spade into her virgin bosom. How you, who have prospered by the blessed & beneficent work of making men's clothes clean (men with clean clothes need no washing—would that Mahomet had understood this instead of preaching ablutions!), how you, I say, can deliberately set to work to make their clothes dirty as agriculture alone can do, passes my understanding. But it is always the same: the lunacy of country life always attacks the manufacturer first." Shaw to Joseph Fels, Mar. 23, 1909, Joseph Fels Papers.

⁴² Poplar Union Board of Guardians, *Minute Book*, LI (1903-1904), 130, 256, 290, 381, 401, 474, LCC. The various boards of Guardians, whose sole concern was the operation of the Poor Law, stood apart from the general administration of local government, maintaining their own elections and taxes, as well as a separate connection with the Local Government Board. As Mary Fels observed, the boards served less as guardians of the poor than of the funds appropriated for their relief. *Joseph Fels*, 45.

were engaged. Then the blows began to fall. The Local Government Board, which held the ultimate power of veto over the Board of Guardians, came under the unfriendly domination of John Burns and demanded that traditional Poor Law principles governed by the test of destitution be applied to the colony at Laindon as elsewhere. Fels and Lansbury were outraged but helpless as they watched their high hopes expire. Near the end, Fels wrote bitterly to the Poplar Guardians: "I desire to emphasize that my offer of the farm in the first place was not for the purpose of establishing a branch workhouse and in that way perpetuate stoneyards, oakum picking, corn grinding, and other useless tasks. . . . On the contrary I hoped that your Board would be allowed to try to reestablish men who were down on their luck."⁴³

Late in 1904, while still reveling in their first flush of excitement over Laindon Colony, Fels and Lansbury had once again pooled their resources and talents to establish Hollesley Bay Colony. This time their governmental "sponsor" was the London Unemployed Fund, which had been hastily organized at the instigation of Walter H. Long, M.P., to cope with temporary unemployment. The terms of the arrangement were familiar. Fels leased rent-free to the Central Committee of the London Unemployed Fund an estate of some 1,300 acres and buildings, formerly the site of an agricultural training college, with the option of purchase at cost at any time.⁴⁴ Like Laindon, the new colony was designed to combine relief and rehabilitation, but

⁴³ Poplar Guardians, *Minute Book*, LI (1903-1904), 471, 493, 546; LII (1904-1905), 494; LIII (1905-1906), 52, 287, 550-554, 585; LIV (1906-1907), 236, 349-350, 405-406, 480, 519, 570-571; LV (1907-1908), 552-553, 993, LCC. The bias of the Local Government Board was revealed by its chief inspector's sole official reference to Fels as "some well-meaning but mistaken person [who] allowed pocket money of 6d. per week to each inmate." J. S. Davey, *Report to the President of the Local Government Board on the Poplar Union* (London, 1906), 32; see also Postgate, 79-86.

⁴⁴ London Unemployed Fund, *Preliminary Statement* . . . (London, 1905), 3-11, 34-37; The Central (Unemployed) Body for London, *Particulars as to the Hollesley Bay Colony* . . . (London, 1909), 1-5. George Lansbury later revealed the extent of his and Fels' responsibility for the new colony. First, much of the agitation by the unemployed which forced the creation of the London Unemployed Fund was paid for by Fels. Second, it was Lansbury himself who wrote the letter from Fels to the London Unemployed Fund offering the loan of the estate at Hollesley Bay. Then, recalled Lansbury, who was present as the delegate of the Poplar Guardians: "I rose and quietly moved that this generous offer be accepted, and [C. H.] Grinling of Woolwich, to whom I had previously spoken, seconded it, and before we knew where we were, the motion was carried. I don't believe a single man on the Board except Grinling and I realized what he was doing." Lansbury to Mary Fels, June 30, 1914, Joseph Fels Papers.

on a more grandiose level. Three goals were to be kept in view: (1) the provision of special work such as road making, land reclamation, and building repair to meet the exigencies of exceptional distress; (2) continuing agricultural work for men who demonstrated "a marked aptitude" for rural life, with their families being housed meanwhile in cottages on the estate in order to prepare all concerned for agricultural work; (3) the placing of suitable men and families in rural industry, either as farm hands or market gardeners, through emigration, or most ambitiously by means of the settlement of picked men on small holdings of their own. This small-holdings plan was by then becoming dear to Fels' heart as perhaps the most promising way out of the dilemmas posed by depression and unemployment, because it emphasized the rehabilitation of the individual through his permanent stake in the land. To further it, he quickly provided for the construction of twelve family cottages, and proposed that more be forthcoming before long.⁴⁵

However, the same fate which befell Laindon soon forestalled the goals of Hollesley Bay. The semiofficial London Unemployed Fund was taken over by the Central (Unemployed) Body for London under the terms of the Unemployed Workman Act of 1905, and Hollesley Bay Colony was promptly purchased from Fels according to the original agreement. Then, in October, 1906, the Local Government Board, holding true to the spirit of the old Poor Law, destroyed "the stimulus of hope" represented by Hollesley Bay. It ruled that no more cottages should be erected, that no part of the estate be reserved for small holdings, and that—in spite of the intent of the Unemployed Workmen Act of 1905—no further expenses be incurred to assist men already trained to become securely established on the land. The workhouse principle had prevailed once more.⁴⁶

Twice balked by the Local Government Board's reluctance to train men for the land, Joseph Fels determined, as "a public object lesson," to concentrate upon his community of small farms which had

⁴⁵ London Unemployed Fund, *Preliminary Statement* . . . , 34-35; The Central (Unemployed) Body for London, *Preliminary Report . . . to May 12th, 1906* (London, 1906), 29-31; Mary Fels, *Joseph Fels*, 50-77.

⁴⁶ The Central (Unemployed) Body for London, *Minutes of Proceedings*, I, 136-137, and *Tenth Report* . . . (London, 1930), 42-43; and Working Colonies Committee, *Minutes of Proceedings*, II, 106-110, 151, 173-174, 213, LCC. See also Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *The Public Organisation of the Labour Market* . . . , 133-149.

been started late in 1905 at Mayland. He still intended to demonstrate that the most feasible solution for related problems of unemployment, poverty, and social justice lay in a mass return to agriculture. Mayland consisted of twenty-one small holdings of five acres or more of land, each with a substantial cottage, outbuildings, and fruit trees. The colonists had been carefully selected for their intelligence and eagerness from more than twelve hundred applicants. Some few came from Hollesley Bay, but more were metropolitan tradesmen of modest circumstances, less than one quarter of whom had any previous commercial experience on the land. They were to live rent-free at Mayland for the first year, to pay half rent the second year, three fourths the third year, the full amount the fourth year, and subsequently make up their earlier deficiencies. Each holder was permitted to cultivate according to his own tastes, but every effort was to be made to encourage the settlers to co-operate toward their mutual benefit. To educate his settlers, Fels planted extensive orchards, fostered animal husbandry, and introduced French *petite culture*, or intensively cultivated market-garden produce, the substance of which lay in heavy manuring and irrigation.⁴⁷

For the first time in many months, Fels had but one major project underway. He was able to concentrate his resources almost exclusively upon Mayland, although he began to support Israel Zangwill's Jewish Territorial Organization (I.T.O.), giving both time and money to its schemes. But rather than Jewish nationalism, Fels was always attracted by the land potentialities of the new Zion, and endeavored in vain to impose his views upon its dreams. Still more remarkable, in retrospect, was his financial rescue of the delegates—among whom were Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin—to the Fifth Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Party in London in 1907. Yet these were no more than diversions, side shows to the main attraction. As a result, Fels' activities began to crystallize at last into systematic patterns, while his reformist ideas assumed an unusual unity of purpose.⁴⁸ In

⁴⁷ Joseph Fels to Lord George Hamilton, July 3, 1907, Joseph Fels Papers. A contemporary account by Fels' overseer is Thomas Smith, *French Gardening* (London, 1909). See also *Kelly's Directory of Essex, 1906* (London, 1906), 376, and *ibid.* (1912), 418; *Essex Naturalist*, XV (1907-1908), 280-282.

⁴⁸ Zangwill, "Joseph Fels," 918-928; Joseph Fels to Zangwill, July 16 and 31, 1906, Joseph Fels Papers; E. I. Aroslavskii, ed., *Protokoly s'ezdov i Konferentsii vsesoiuznoi Kommunisticheskoi partii (b). Riatii s'ezd RSDRP, May-June 1907*, 2nd ed. (Moscow, 1935), 696 ff.; H. N. Brailsford, "When Lenin and Trotsky Were in London," *The Listener*, XXXIX (Jan. 1, 1948), 29-30; D'Arcy Cresswell, *Margaret McMillan: A Memoir* (London, 1948), 128-129, 139.

a valiant effort to demonstrate his point, he lavished £25,000 to £50,000 upon Mayland, sparing neither his purse nor his energy. But in the end the results were most unsatisfactory. His vaunted "public object lesson" provided instead just another costly experience for Fels, like Laindon and Hollesley Bay. What had gone wrong was clear enough. For small holdings to succeed, three things were essential: good land, cheap rents, and proximity to markets. Mayland lacked all three. Besides, the comparative handful of small farms at Mayland by themselves could contribute little if anything toward a genuine solution for industrial unemployment and poverty. It was all deeply frustrating. Ten years of expensive experimentation had apparently reached a dead end.⁴⁹

Deeply discouraged by his lack of clear-cut success as a social reformer, Joseph Fels now took over the doctrines of Henry George, lock, stock, and barrel. It was true that he had long supported the single-tax idea at Fairhope Colony, and since 1906 had subsidized *The Public*, Louis F. Post's single-tax organ. Yet before this time, Fels had only been, as he himself later confessed so pungently to Dr. Solomon Solis-Cohen of Philadelphia, "a kind of half-ass single-tax man." In fact, he had disdained George's panacea as utopian, giving it neither close scrutiny nor careful reflection. Indeed, he had but recently written to W. H. Gregg: "I am a firm believer in the philosophy of Henry George, *which is that I do not believe in private ownership of land.*" Now, however, as the direct outcome of his unsuccessful experiments, Fels was convinced as never before that land monopoly was the root cause of every social misfortune, and that its destruction was his paramount concern. He had converted the ultimate promise of the single tax into his own *sine qua non*. Not unlike Henry George before him, Joseph Fels had experienced his revelation.⁵⁰

As a full-fledged single taxer, Joseph Fels had at last completed the transition from businessman to reformer. His soap enterprise soon became little more for him than the means of providing for reformist ends. For the first time, in the single-tax panacea, Fels possessed "a

⁴⁹ Mary Fels, *Joseph Fels*, 57-77; John Lindsay to George Lansbury, Aug. 28, 1910, George Lansbury Papers, The British Library of Political and Economic Science.

⁵⁰ Joseph Fels to Dr. Solomon Solis-Cohen, Aug. 14, 1912; to W. H. Gregg, Jan. 13, 1906 (italics mine), Joseph Fels Papers; Mary Fels, *Joseph Fels*, 118-141; Henry George, *Progress and Poverty: An Inquiry into the Cause of Industrial Depression and of Increase of Want with Increase of Wealth . . .* (San Francisco, Calif., 1879), *passim*.

faith which was compelling and adequate." The single tax for him was more a matter of ethics than economics, as it had been earlier for so many others. It made feasible his idealistic hope of a new and moral social order, rooted in justice and dedicated to the triumph of harmonious individualism, and he devoted himself unflaggingly to the fulfillment of his new dream. To Gaston he wrote: "I am kept horribly busy these days. The land question of course. What else is there worth working for?"⁵¹ Fels quickly moved to the forefront of the growing movement in Great Britain for the taxation of land values, speaking, writing, and agitating tirelessly in its behalf, and annually contributing upwards of £10,000 while persuading others to match his efforts. In fact, he reputedly supplied the greater part of the funds expended to promote the wave of opinion for the famous Budget of 1909 with its revolutionary land taxation provisions. As he wrote to Senator Robert M. LaFollette from London: "I really use my business agency as an excuse to live over here a good deal of my time because England is now the fighting point of the world on the economic question, and I am engaged in helping in the fight."⁵²

Fels also emerged now as the leader of the world cause. He sponsored single-tax movements in France, Germany, Spain, China, Sweden, and elsewhere, while aiding existing campaigns in the United States, Canada, and Denmark. He began to divide his time and resources more equitably between Europe and America, expending each more extravagantly as the demands upon him grew. Before long he was distributing no less than \$100,000 annually to promote the single tax. He became veritably an itinerant missionary. During the winter of 1909-1910 he spoke throughout the American Middle West, he toured the South in the following winter, and 1911-1912 found him traveling through Canada and the Far West.

Between these American journeys, however, he returned to England and ventured forth from time to time onto the Continent, where

⁵¹ Mary Fels, *Joseph Fels*, 118-141 ff.; Joseph Fels to the members of the National Conference of Charities and Correction, June, 1911, Joseph Fels Papers; Joseph Fels, *The Religion of Joseph Fels* (n.p., n.d.), *passim*; Joseph Fels to Ernest B. Gaston, Aug. 24, 1908, FCA; Zangwill, "Joseph Fels," 918-919, 925-926.

⁵² J. O. [John Orr], "A Leader in the Movement," *Land Values*, XII (February, 1910), 183-184; John Paul, "The Passing of Joseph Fels," *ibid.*, XV (April, 1914), 454-455; "Joseph Fels," *Single Tax Review*, XIII (January-February, 1913), 43-46; "Joseph Fels Memorial Number," *ibid.*, XIV (March-April, 1914), 1-26, 45, 46; Joseph Fels to Robert M. LaFollette, Nov. 30, 1909, Joseph Fels Papers.

he braved language barriers to convey his message. He lost no opportunity to make himself heard. In 1910 he successfully invaded both the Free Trade Congress at Antwerp and the International Conference on Unemployment in Paris. Each time, Fels deviously inserted his propaganda into the meetings, first with a stirring tribute to Richard Cobden which became more eloquent still as he transformed it into a eulogy for Henry George, and second as he diverted deliberations upon unemployment statistics, labor exchanges, and social insurance to consideration of the single tax. He derived a peculiar satisfaction from inaugurating France's first Single Tax League, hearkening back as he did so to the physiocrats of the eighteenth century and *l'impôt unique*. His last European tour took him to Ronda, near Granada, Spain, in 1913, where he found himself the central attraction at a single-tax conference for Spanish-speaking countries.⁵³

While yet in England, some months before his first American speaking tour, Fels had sensed the vitality of the Progressive reform spirit in the United States, and initiated a program "to put over the single tax somewhere" to induce more American communities to fall into line. Early in 1909 he established the Joseph Fels Fund Commission, and pledged \$25,000 to it annually for five years for single-tax campaigning. Bolton Hall, a New York City single taxer, together with George Foster Peabody, Louis F. Post, Henry George, Jr., Lincoln Steffens, Jackson C. Ralston, Frederic C. Howe, George A. Briggs, and Daniel Kiefer were chosen as commissioners for the fund, their first task being to match Fels' contributions by appeals to single taxers everywhere. Fels himself held aloof from the actual management of the Commission, standing to it only "in the relation of an interested spectator who cared profoundly for its success." This time, however, there was to be no support for land colony schemes, but rather propaganda for political action. The commissioners, therefore, immediately set out to subsidize men, not institutions. They planned neither to initiate nor to manage single-tax undertakings, but proposed instead to "seek out workers for the single tax already on the job somewhere, anywhere, and give them money only, not advice, no interference with their methods and programs." Thus, the

⁵³ Mary Fels, *Joseph Fels*, 156-182; "Joseph Fels," *Single Tax Review*, XIII (January-February, 1913), 43-46; Joseph Fels to Mauricio Jalvo, June 16, 1913, Joseph Fels Papers.

Fels Fund commissioners backed the political fortunes of U'Ren and Eggleston in Oregon, Garvin in Rhode Island, Hill and Moser in Missouri, Pastoriza in Texas, and many others. They distributed single-tax literature in enormous quantities, including special editions of the works of Henry George, and speakers were sent forth trained to preach the message among the unconverted. Not since the death of Henry George himself had there been so much agitation in his name, and never before had the single-tax movement in the United States known comparable national direction.⁵⁴

Meanwhile, Fels devoted himself to personal appeals for his cause. His headquarters were in Philadelphia once again, at his former Chestnut Street home, now occupied by his good friend Earl Barnes. Only rarely was he to be seen at the offices of Fels and Company. Instead, he was to be found on speakers' platforms wherever an audience would gather. He once linked the single tax to "Franklin and Freedom" before Philadelphia's Poor Richard Club. He discussed the English budget in Washington with the Women's Single Tax League. He told the citizens of Edmonton, Canada, when asked about the effectiveness of his soap, that corporation lawyers and backwoods politicians were the only two things "which won't wash," and then urged the single tax for a complete cleansing of human society. There was similar sound and fury in all that he uttered. Yet it was invariably permeated with sound common sense, which embodied a patient though optimistic appreciation for the slowness of progress in human affairs. Less than one month before his death, he wrote of his cherished single tax: "Of course it's all a matter of education. . . . It takes time to convert people to so drastic a reform." And it was time which eventually ran out on Joseph Fels before his task was done, the end coming suddenly from pneumonia on Washington's Birthday, 1914.⁵⁵

Significantly, his beloved cause died about the same time, at least in the United States. Moreover, it was apparent by then that the Fels Fund had hurt the cause of the single tax as much as it had

⁵⁴ Mary Fels, *Joseph Fels, 183-1918*; Steffens, *Autobiography*, II, 641-644; Proceedings of the Second Annual Singletax Conference held in Chicago, Nov. 24, 25, and 26, 1911 (Chicago, 1911), *passim*.

⁵⁵ Joseph Fels, "Franklin and Freedom," Jan. 6, 1910; Joseph Fels to W. H. Lilwall, Jan. 27, 1914, Joseph Fels Papers; *Washington Times*, Dec. 1, 1910; *Edmonton Journal*, Jan. 19, 1911.

helped, by softening the fighting zeal of its old-time adherents. As Lincoln Steffens recalled: "With money to use as a force, they did not depend so much on persuasion. Even the fanatics slackened their propaganda. . . . By the time the Fels Fund was through, the single tax movement was through—for a long while."⁵⁶ Yet it seems more likely that it was less the fault of the Fels Fund than of the changing times, which Joseph Fels and countless other zealots like him had helped to anticipate. The way of the future lay with Woodrow Wilson, the New Freedom, and the World War. By 1914 the single tax in the United States was a dead horse except for a nostalgic minority.

It had been a long and eventful journey that brought Joseph Fels to his Chicago denunciation of himself and his audience as bigands. By then, of course, he had become an evangelistic single taxer, above all else convinced that only he and his cohorts were dispensing the supreme social truth. Yet he continued to think of himself primarily as an ordinary businessman, although one to whom the universal truths had been revealed. He liked to refer to himself as "Soap Fat Joe," and he addressed many of his single-tax arguments to business groups and points of view.⁵⁷

Actually, however, the reformer in him had triumphed over the businessman long before the end. Furthermore, the reformer had jeopardized his business by neglecting its vital affairs and by inordinate extravagances. But he would not have done otherwise. As he wrote Gaston at Fairhope in 1906: "I have been doing too much reform work of late to have any other result. I'm not kicking though,

⁵⁶ Joseph Fels to Solomon Solis-Cohen, Aug. 14, 1912, Joseph Fels Papers; Steffens, *Autobiography*, II, 643.

⁵⁷ Joseph Fels and Arthur H. Gleason, "The Inside of a Business Man," *World's Work* XXIII (March, 1912), 564-569; Joseph Fels to Meyer Lissner, July 16, 1912, Meyer Lissner Papers, Stanford University; Joseph Fels, "Industrial Scientific Management," *Everyman* (May 30, 1913), 196-197; Joseph Fels, "An Open Letter to an Enterprising Businessman," Joseph Fels Papers. This last item was widely reprinted. Fels' ideas were summed up in the following: "It seems to me that we single taxers, in advocating our reform, do not lay sufficient stress upon the importance of getting at hard-headed business men and ramming down their throats the great benefit that would accrue to them if industry and industrial improvements were exempted from taxation. The average business man considers the single tax agitation as a rather cranky idea, even in these late days." Joseph Fels to George Fowlds, Sept. 15, 1911, Joseph Fels Papers.

and would do it again." In the process he had alienated some of his brothers and sisters who were dependent upon the Fels company's fortunes, although he believed it was not he who had erred, but they in their blindness. He once insisted to Louis F. Post in a moment of pique that his single-tax fund be known as the Joseph Fels Fund "because there are other Fels, and my brother and business partner is not particularly sweet on my taking up the work. I would not for the world have anybody think he is saving his immortal soul by doing something *very* useful. . . ."⁵⁸ Yet for all his sarcasm, he revealed himself as not entirely transformed. To a Philadelphia businessman whom he had unwisely loaned \$40,000 he wrote in 1913: "It was not until I had overdrawn my own account by several hundred thousand dollars, and had really been unfair to my brother and partner in doing so (and, I might add too, had even risked my own standing in my firm) that I came and spoke to you about your paying me some of this money."⁵⁹ Perhaps Joseph Fels was, after all, still that intriguing mixture of men, as Margaret McMillan once described him, "small like St. Paul, curious like Nicodemus, impetuous like St. Peter, full of traits and eccentricities which estranged and bewildered, but consumed by a burning thirst for righteousness."⁶⁰

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⁵⁸ Joseph Fels to Mrs. G. Rosenthal, Aug. 5, 1913, and to Louis F. Post, Sept. 14, 1911 (italics his), Joseph Fels Papers. Samuel S. Fels had followed his brother into the Philadelphia Vacant Lots Association, becoming its president in 1907, but subsequently embarked upon philanthropies of a more conventional pattern. Report of the Samuel S. Fels Fund (Philadelphia, 1951), *passim*.

⁵⁹ Joseph Fels to Marshall E. Smith, July 17, 1913, Joseph Fels Papers.

⁶⁰ Quoted in Cresswell, 139.