

continued from p. 3

Chicago in 1835 by stage coach. He finds the town populated by 180 persons in shanties and cabins. There are only two major occupations in the town — the saloon/dive keeper and the land jobber. The land surrounding the town is a swamp dominated by the odor of wild onions. The day after his arrival, Ogden is standing dependently ankle-deep in swamp water, contemplating the dim prospects of recovering his brother-in-law's \$100,000.

To his complete amazement Ogden finds that by law his merely having *platted* (staking out subdivisions and presenting them to a land office) large acreage in the standard grid pattern and holding an auction, he can recover the entire investment just by selling one third of his brother's land. Returning several months later Ogden finds to his further amazement that he can dispose of the unsold land at enormous profit. Land prices have tripled, new streets have been built; the town is rapidly growing.

In the same year Chicago was incorporated as a city, Ogden became its first mayor. Somewhere along the line Ogden had acquired an intuitive sense for town-building. He went on to sell stock, travelling by horse and buggy, for a projected Galena & Chicago Union Railroad. Once the railroad was built it became an overnight success, later becoming the Chicago & North Western Railroad. Until Ogden's Chicago was built, Cincinnati, Ohio, had been known as "Porkopolis." Chicago soon wrested this title for itself. What had once been a shanty town at best, soon became a thriving metropolis, as Ogden made good on his brother's "bad" investment.

Both Reys and Holbrook, in their respective books, relate many similar stories and incidents. And both give sometimes startling alternative views to our quaint notions about the development of our country. Perhaps Holbrook sums it up best, saying:

*For generations we have cherished the romantic idea that in colonial times, and early days of the republic, all a man who wanted land had to do was to strike out in any direction into the wilderness to cut himself a clearing, build a cabin, then lay a fence... This pleasant myth, based on the solitary American squatter, is one of the most satisfying we have. It has, however, little substance of fact, for it usually turned out that land sharks in one shape or another had got there ahead of him, not necessarily in person but in the form of a grantee-lord of whom he never heard, or of a corporation he did not know existed. In either case, the [would-be] squatter was heading into trouble.*

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## Reclaiming the Commons: the Diggers and the Covenant of Earth

David Domke

Among the effects of the land enclosures in 17<sup>th</sup> century England was the rise of radical agrarian movements, groups of peasants, small farmers and tradesmen left landless or otherwise disenfranchised by the enclosure act. One of these groups, the Diggers, held ideas about land ownership and the production of wealth very similar in spirit to those of Henry George. One of their leaders, Gerrard Winstanley, wrote: "The Earth, with all her Fruits of Corn, Cattle, and such-like, was made to be a common Store-House of Livelihood to all Mankind." He railed against the ruling class of landowners, saying "England is not a Freed people, till the Poor that have no Land, have a free allowance to dig and labour the Commons, and so live as comfortably as the Landlords that live in their Enclosures."



A still from the movie *Winstanley*

One of the effects of the large-scale enclosure of common land was the introduction of land into the open market, and this led almost immediately to a rise in land speculation and the dispossession of those families

who for generations had worked the land and considered it their natural birthright. Much of the newly "freed" land was not used for the growing of crops but for the grazing of sheep, whose wool was sold to the European mainland for enormous profits. A consequence of this change in land-use was the creation of a scarcity of corn and wheat and a subsequent steep rise in prices for those staples, putting them almost beyond the means of the poor.

The Diggers sought to organize the poor and indigent into collectives that would retake what had been common lands. Their activities, which included public preaching and pamphlet writing, alarmed the Commonwealth government and provoked the hostility of the large landowners. In April of 1649, a small group of Diggers claimed common rights to a once-common piece of land called St. George's Hill, outside London, set up a colony there and began to cultivate the land. By the end of April, their number had risen to fifty and the Diggers

*continued on p. 8*

continued from p.7

planned to eventually have five-thousand people in that one colony alone. Plans were already being developed to have additional farming colonies in Oatland Park, Windsor Park and other places that were once commonly held land.

At the beginning of this land confiscation, Winstanley issued a manifesto which included these words: "The Earth (which was made to be a Common Treasure of relief for all) has been hedged in to Enclosures by the teachers and rulers, and others have been made Servants and Slaves: And that Earth that is within this Creation, made a Common Storehouse for all, is bought and sold, and kept in the hands of a few..." The Diggers' mission is a restoration of common rights to the land: "That every one that is born in the Land, may be fed by the Earth his Mother that brought him forth."

The choice of St. George's Hill was symbolic as well as strategic. It has been said by historians that had the Diggers founded their commune in some out of the way, rural area, they would have most likely gone unnoticed. But they chose a plot of land close to the heart of the Empire whose very name had connotations of "dragon slaying," of throwing off the yoke of old bondage. Indeed, Winstanley's manifesto rises at times to visionary, even apocalyptic heights: "Bondage shall be removed, Tears wiped away and all poor People by their righteous Labours shall be relieved and freed from Poverty and Straits." Along with the language of redemption, Winstanley sees the reclamation of the the land as the founding of a new Jerusalem: "All the Prophecies, Visions and Revelations of Scripture concerning the restoration of Israel, and of making the People the Inheritors of the whole Earth, doth seat [itself] in this work." Indeed, what the Diggers thought they could ultimately reclaim was an original covenant with the Earth, proclaimed, as they saw it, by the Deity in the Old Testament and ratified by his Prophets.

Continuing his allegorical polemic, Winstanley compared landowners with "Pharoh, who is their type" and the clergy to "Scribes and Pharisees" because they served the interests of the ruling class of landowners. He blamed the church of his day for helping to maintain private land ownership. He further urged landowners to "give up the Pharonic

bondage of the people and "disown this oppressing Murder, Oppression and Thievery of Buying and Selling of Land."

The Diggers had been occupying St. George's Hill for less than a month when the British Council of State,

the Justice Department of its day, received an alarming letter charging that certain individuals had begun planting vegetables on the Hill and that they had "invited all peoples to come and help them." With due haste, the Council dispatched a report to Lord Fairfax, then the lord general of the British Army, stating that "a disorderly and tumultuous sort of people" had gathered on the Hill, were planting vegetables and "that conflux of people may be a beginning whence things of a greater and more dangerous consequence may grow." The Council further ordered Fairfax to disperse the group by any means necessary.

When confronted by the army, Winstanley defended the group saying they did not intend to knock down enclosures or violate anyone's property but to simply till the Earth until all men joined them. The Diggers had pledged themselves to what today we would call non-violent civil disobedience.

The group was ordered to disperse, but Lord Fairfax did not have his heart in it. Indeed, his chief officer wrote to the Council: "this business is not worth the writing nor yet taking notice of." But the Council and local landowners perisited and began to harrass the settlers over the next few months. The group found itself under siege. At one point, two lo-

cal landowners gathered together a small group of men, some dressed as women, and physically assaulted the settlers. At other times, the Diggers' tools and carts were broken apart and there were further beatings. At one point Winstanley and several others were arrested for trespassing. Despite harrassment and arrest they stood their ground

Finally, in early 1650 the local Lord of the Manor, Parson Platt, had had enough and he assembled a small group of vigilantes who stormed St. George's Hill, attacking the group, burning all their belongings and driving them off the land. Platt hired several guards to stand watch over the Hill and threatened the Diggers with death should they return. This effectively ended the movement, though there were a few attempts to start up again by settling other parcels of land nearby.

While the events surrounding the Digger movement might seem to be of little historical significance or consequence, historians and scholars have continued to publish books and papers about the movement and Winstanley's writings defending it. In fact, the rate of publication of Digger studies has increased over the last twenty years. There was even a movie called *Winstanley*, made in the 70s, about the movement. This may suggest there is a strong message, even inspiration, in the appeal for the common use of land and a call for an original, social covenant with the Earth.

"Though a man be brought up in the Land,  
yet he must not work for himself but for him  
that bought the Land; He that has no Land  
must work for small wages for those who  
call the Land theirs."

*Gerrard Winstanley*

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