

Alive and Well in America

"HENRY George Lives." This was a frontpage headline in the December 12, 1969 Wall Street Journal. The lengthy story that followed dealt mainly with the efforts of Sacramento County Assessor Irene Hickman to put land value taxation up to the voters of California in the next election.

"The end result of her plan," so read the second paragraph, "would be higher taxes on underused land but lower taxes for owners who have poured money into property improvements, only to see their taxes climb accordingly."

It mentions Robert Hutchins, director of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions in Santa Barbara, California, as making the comment on the current property tax that "too often it makes it more profitable to misuse and underuse land than to use it wisely and fully, more profitable to let buildings decay than to improve them."

The article associates Mrs. Hickman with the Henry George movement, mentions the Henry George School of Social Science, and gives an interesting, if abbreviated, history of George and his literary and political career.

Of George's ideas the author said, "the land tax theoretically would force the best possible use of the land and eliminate the type of unproductive speculator who lets land stand idle to increase in value — especially, for instance, if a nearby governmental project like a highway is causing the rise." Much of Dr. Hickman's effort is grounded on this view. She claims her Henry George approach is the only tax reform that carries with it antipoverty provisions in the form of new jobs and a building boom.

"Top thinkers now are borrowing

liberally from Henry George in the struggle with problems in big cities," the author states, quoting C. Lowell Harriss, economic professor of Columbia University and consultant to the Tax Foundation: "Heavy taxation of new buildings must stand as a tragically apt example of mankind creating needless obstacles for itself. Cities which urgently need to replace obsolete, decayed, degrading buildings nevertheless put powerful tax impediments in the way of progress."

Regarding Mrs. Hickman, the Journal reported her anti-speculation attitude toward the land question and her claim that the Henry George approach is "the only tax reform that carries with it antipoverty provisions."

"At this point," the newspaper comments, "it's impossible to make a firm assessment of Mrs. Hickman's chances for success, but some observers think she has at least a fair chance for getting her plan on the ballot and, if she succeeds in the first step, for winning passage."

Dr. Hickman spoke at the HGS annual conference in Chicago in 1969 telling her plans for collecting 520,000 signatures necessary to implement new legislation in California. The campaign by the "White Hat Committee for Tax Reform," though not formally begun, has attracted wide attention. In Irene Hickman's logic this name sets them apart from "the bad guys in black or grey hats."

(Governor Reagan was presented with a brown hat instead of a white one at a cattlemen's convention in Los Angeles. The leader said the white hat was being used by a "group that would raise taxes." He did not mention that while the proposed legislation would increase taxes for some it would decrease them for a large group of homeowners.)