

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE HENRY GEORGE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE - CHICAGO

by Sam Venturella

Formal classes in *Fundamental Economics & Social Philosophy* using Henry George's *Progress and Poverty*, unabridged, were begun in Chicago sometime in 1934. A gentleman, whom I believe was Francis Neilson, asked Henry L. T. Tideman to conduct a class in the offices of Swift & Co., meatpackers. The students would be employees of Swift. From then until 1936, the school was a vestpocket operation; that is, it was located wherever Henry happened to be.

Henry told the story of his first class session: when he arrived at the scheduled conference room, he faced a room full of hostile faces. He surmised these were middle-level executives who "willingly volunteered" to enroll for the class - of course, and pigs fly.

By the fourth session, hostility had turned to eagerness. By the sixth or seventh session, there were questions about what can be done to bring about George's reform.

In 1936, John Lawrence Monroe was sent back to Chicago by New York HGS Director Frank Chodorov to head up the Chicago extension. In Chicago, additional funds were raised from among the members of the Single Tax Club, from Francis Neilson and perhaps from Gustavus Swift. In 1939, Edith Siebenmann organized the Henry George Women's Club, which for some years made an annual money gift to the school. The Women's Club also organized volunteer work, and two major money-raising activities each year: a Christmas Bazaar and a picnic.

An exemption from the income tax under section 501 (c) (3) was granted the HGSSS in 1943.

My association with the school began inauspiciously in the fall of 1942. I enrolled in a class held in Des Plaines (Illinois), after a number of conversations with my brother Joe during the summer. He had attended the spring term class at the Englewood YMCA in Chicago.

The school prospered for some years, achieving a high point in 1948, when some ninety volunteer teachers helped get, and service, 100 class locations in Chicago and surrounding suburbs. Francis Neilson came to Chicago and delivered an inspirational oration at a supper for those volunteer teachers. He launched a fund-raising campaign with a promise to match donations dollar for dollar.

That was my one and only meeting with Francis Neilson. This one-time actor had lost none of his thespian's art. His opening line was that he thought there were not a hundred Georgists in Chicago, and he was amazed to be in a room with a hundred teachers of George's philosophy.

Imagine the English yeomen under the spell of Henry V hearing "into the breach for dear old England, St. George and Harry," and you'll have some idea how it felt to hear Neilson's "We can have victory if we will."

In the ensuing years, the Chicago HGS, like other Henry George Schools throughout the world, began to experience difficulty in getting and holding students. The expected post-WWII slump did not happen. A number of federal and local government programs had been initiated to subsidize education, job training, and housing. These programs added fuel to pent-up desires to resume such peacetime pursuits as completing education, getting jobs and starting families. It was an era of abundance. Who needed to learn about the causes of depressions and poverty? Anyway, who had time to read?

John Lawrence Monroe then embarked upon a series of experiments in getting students, and in presenting George's ideas. In 1962, Monroe changed the name from the Henry George School of Social Science to the Institute for Economic Inquiry. Under this name, he maintained the Illinois charter for some years afterward, possibly in anticipation of a promised bequest. That he

may not have been as successful as he hoped speaks more about the temper of the times than about John's program.

Efforts to revive the school's activities were made during the mid-sixties by New York HGS Director Bob Clancy, and a group of Chicago stalwarts including Mina Olson, Claire Menninger, Edith Seibenmen, Til Forte, and Harry Tideman. Unfortunately, however, the Illinois tax exemption was allowed to lapse, complicating their efforts - but a new not-for-profit charter was obtained in 1970. Classes were held through the 70s in various public library branches; Mina Olson and Claire Menninger were key figures in keeping the school alive.

Nevertheless there was, in effect, a hiatus in the operation of the Henry George School in Chicago from 1950 to 1988. John Lawrence Monroe took some records of graduates and donors with him to San Francisco in the early 60s; the rest were razed with the old Chicago school building. The only extant list in 1988 was Mina Olson's list from the Henry George Women's Club. The average age of Georgists kept rising, while their number kept dwindling.

Since 1988 the school's task has been to rebuild. The average age of the governing board has been lowered by twenty years; volunteers have been cultivated and contributions have increased significantly: a good beginning.

In 1990 the school hired Scott Walton as a part-time assistant; we hope to make him a full-time assistant, but we must increase the school's income to do so. During the summer of that year, we found a vacant store in an area that had appealed to me for some time as a location for the school - and we moved into our new quarters on September 24th. Inquiries are up - and enrollments are up; and the time has come to take the Chicago HGS to its next phase.

In 1986, when I undertook the task of directing the Henry George School in Chicago, I set for myself the goal of finding a candidate to assume direction of the school from among those who completed the three-course program of study. Not only has such a candidate come forward, but two of our board members have come from our current graduates. Now that there is some assurance that others beside myself will conduct the classes in our basic program, it is time to move into the next aspect of our educational program: engaging in the public dialogue on major issues. It is necessary to place examples of Georgist analysis before the public, and this is the area in which I had hoped to spend my time after I retired.

Whoever becomes imbued with a noble idea kindles a flame from which other torches are lit, and influences those with whom he comes in contact, be they few or many. How far that influence, thus perpetuated, may extend, it is not given him here to see.

- Henry George, Social Problems