

Creative Georgism

WILBUR JOHNSON lives on South Wabash Avenue in Chicago, U.S.A. He is a cook who has been employed by the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad Dining Car Company for the past 32 years. In his own words he represents "that great mass of people who seem never to find the time, patience, curiosity, interest, money, energy or aptitude to seek the truth or the voice to tell the truth, . . . those families where everyone but the dog is working in order to survive in a decent manner."

His time is so limited that he cannot make the contacts with people that he would like to make, in order to tell them about Henry George. So he decided that if he could not find the time to talk he would write. And that is how "The Needle" was born.

The Needle is a mimeographed letter which he gives away free. He started using newsboys to distribute the copies but found it was better to deliver them himself so he could become acquainted with the people.

The cost is about \$12 a page per 1000 copies, and as there are about 1000 families in his neighborhood he orders just enough for that area. That, he says, solves his correspondence problem. People sometimes come for additional copies to take to work or give to friends. On the last issue it seemed desirable for him to identify himself as a member of the community so he included his street address. The result was that he had to order an additional 500 to fill requests. What significance this had he says he does not know, but he seems "to

have become quite popular all of a sudden."

Mr. Johnson has no regular publication date but writes whenever he gets an inspiration. He says he tries to find the current discussion, problem or neighborhood issue and fit it in with an analysis of economic justice.

In Chicago, where there are a number of community improvement organizations, he raises the question "who determines the current community project?" When the members follow his suggestions he points out that it is no one-man-show, and what he has to offer will benefit the whole community instead of the whims of any small group. Since every community project calls for funds he urges people to find out how to make the funds available. He hopes to get a competition started between block clubs or whole community areas based on the ability of the members to understand what they read (economics, of course, says he).

Anyone who wishes may copy any of Mr. Johnson's material and modify it to suit the characteristics of any other community. He is now adopting a program of self-criticism in which he intends to get a lot of pointed remarks across, relating to his shortcomings and those of his neighbors, all in the interest of economic enlightenment.

In the September 20th Needle he dreamed up the term "symbolic logic," explaining it as an objective, accurate and scientific method of reasoning bringing order out of the chaos of conflicting opinions, just as Robert's Rules of Order and Procedures establish precedents

for conducting meetings. "Symbolic logic," he wrote, "has enabled The Needle to apply the methods of exact science to an analysis of our poorly functioning economic system."

His amused comment on this some weeks later was, "I frighten my more intellectual neighbors when I mention symbolic logic. It is amazing how this reduces opposition to George's theories—what was a stumbling block is now smooth sailing."

The \$500 Wager

Perhaps the most surprising activity in this one-man publishing venture is a wager which permits anyone to pick his own three judges and still qualify for a \$500 wager offered by Mr. Johnson. All the winner has to do is to disprove "that the only permanent scientifically correct solution to the problem of involuntary poverty is that proposed by Henry George in the economic classic *Progress and Poverty*."

This, says the author and publisher who has shown unique individuality in his approach, "has played an important part in popularizing The Needle." He is also now writing a column called The Needle in a community bi-monthly newspaper with a circulation of 5000. "I don't consider this too bad for just three issues of my newsletter," says Mr. Johnson. And this modest comment is certainly an under-statement. He says he would advise every Georgist to try a similar project and would be glad to

assist if possible and if he can find time.

In each issue of his letter he refers interested citizens to the Institute for Economic Inquiry (formerly the Henry George School) 236 North Clark Street, who will provide discussion group leaders for any study group of ten or more. With the September first Needle he included a condensed version of *Progress and Poverty*.*

This interesting and successful operation proves, certainly to the satisfaction of all, that the avenues of creativity are still open, even to persons of limited economic means. The very fact that readers and inquirers can be numbered in the thousands in so short a space of time should be a spur to anyone casting about for an individual means of expression. This would seem to be an excellent undertaking for one or more retired persons, possibly working together in a closely knit unit. Perhaps the fact that it is being deliberately and specifically addressed to the surrounding neighborhood offers the clue for its quick acceptance. What we need to do, undoubtedly, when working independently and alone, is to limit our attempted influence to a reasonable area. This can later be enlarged and extended as a response is felt, and it's less discouraging than our efforts to reform the nation or the world.

* This is the "super condensed" version of *Progress and Poverty* (10 pages) by Professor James L. Busey of the University of Colorado, available from Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, New York, at 15 cents a copy.

"The French make the single tax more logical and more elegant, but it is still the single tax, it will not impose itself, it is not of this order of conceptions which impose themselves. You will see, multiple taxation will be one of the chief instruments by which humanity gladly imposes on itself the slavery of the state."

—Rebecca West in *The Fountain Overflows*