FOR A LAND TAX.

Here's a Correspondent Who Would Have Radical Changes in the Land Laws.

SALT LAKE CITY, Sept. 5, 1894.

Editor Deseret News:

In a recent editorial you wrote interesting sketches of the question of the ownership of the arid lands in the several states. Allow me to present to your readers a few arguments from the standpoint of one who believes that all questions of government and legislation depend, for their correct solution, upon a few simple fundamental principles, and that one of the most important of these is that all men have an equal right to the use of the earth, not merely to such parts as they can find not in use, not merely to such parts as are so poor and worthless that even the great speculator is not tempted to venture a income to hold them out of use in order to profit by the future rise in value, but an equal right with all other men to the use of every part of the earth. But inasmuch as exclusive possession of some part of the earth is necessary to its fullest utilization, such exclusive possession should be granted only upon the condition that the grantee shall pay into the public treasury for the use and benefit of the whole community, the full value of such exclusive privilege, that is the rental value of the land.

If the rental value of all the land were paid into the public treasury, it would furnish a revenue sufficient for all the needs of government, and there would be no need of levying taxes of any kind. The sum paid for the use of land would not be a tax, it would be the appropriation by the community of a value created by the community, a value which if not so appropriated would be appropriated by the owners of land. The neglect of the community to take the value it creates necessitates the resort to taxation or the confiscation of a part of the earnings of individual labor.

But this is one of the least of the evils that result from this neglect. By leaving individuals to appropriate the rental land, a class of non-producers is created, for who will labor enough beyond the necessity of gaining a living? And then, as the increase of population and the expansion of human wants, with increase of productive power, force production to poorer lands, the rental value of all lands increases and lands which were formerly valueless come to have a rental value. This increase of value to land, which is sometimes very rapid, excites the greed of speculators, and all the lands which are likely to have a rental value, though it may not be for many years, are bought from the government and held for fancy prices in the anticipation that the increasing demand for land will enable them to obtain, for a short time, not merely the principal and interest on their investments, but a handsome profit besides. If the anticipations are realized the speculator attributes it entirely to his own superior intelligence and foresight and is eager to invest his accumulated gains in other similar ventures. Others follow his example, and soon a land boom is started and it is encouraged by schemers and speculators, by all the arts and devices that experience has taught them, to work upon the greed and ignorance of mankind. But in time the bubble breaks and prices tumble and many who thought to gain increased wealth find themselves "land poor." Then they must have a scapegoat for their sins and generally find it in some political squabble, high protection or threat of free-trade, demonetization of silver purchase, anything but the land question.

If the evils of this system affected only those who speculate we could afford to keep our hands off and let the gamblers alone. But the influence of the system is far-reaching and affects the whole social organism. It affects it through its influence upon the distribution of wealth, for it directly affects the rate of wages or the laborer's share of the products of labor. It is an almost self-evident proposition that wages are determined, in the long run, by the amount of wealth that the laborer can produce upon the best land that he can obtain rent free, which were it not for the speculator would be the poorest land in use, or the margin of production. But now the speculator steps in, gets possession of all the best land, and the landless man is forced to the use of poorer and poorer land, poorer to sell and poorer in market, while better land is lying idle. So wages are forced down until the limit of a bare living is reached and rents rise in proportion.

If this method of treating the land is to continue it matters little whether the ultimary disposal of the public lands remains in the hands of the Federal government or is relinquished to the states. Misgovernment is as fatal to prosperity when perpetrated by the states as when inflicted upon them by the national government.

But Congress has blundered in its treatment of the land question long enough. Now let the states try a hand and see if some of them at least will not adopt a more rational system. Let us see if some of them will not profit by the experience which has proven so successful in New Zealand, and instead of selling the land outright, selling the birthright of generations to come, and allowing the owner to appropriate the value created by the growth of the community, keep it for the equal use and benefit of all, allow it to be used by any one who will pay the rent, the tenant to have exclusive possession so long as he pays the rent, which is to be assessed from time to time as occasion may demand, so that the rent shall be as nearly as possible, the actual rental value of the land exclusive of improvements, to effect a periodical readjustment of the rent. This would be a social revolution.

The poorest land in use should be free of rent or tax so long as there is other land equally as good open to the use of any one who will use it, and only when increased demand for better land forced producers to resort to poorer lands should the better lands be charged a rent equal to the advantage they possess over the poorest land in use.

Let Congress repeal all the land laws, abolish the general land office and its branches, after disposing of pending business, discharge the employes and surrender the management of the land question to the states. Indian reservations and such tracts as it is desirable to reserve as national parks should, of course, remain in national control, but all lands which are to be open to the use of the people should be under state control.

The state of Texas and the original states have control of all the land within their borders, and why should not the rest of the states have the same privilege?

Why should the people be burdened with taxation for the support of this worse than useless department of government? Why should a price be charged for the use of nature's bounties which are lying idle because of their very superabundance? Should the government act as ally of the speculator in holding land out of use until the demand becomes so great that men will pay a price for its use? It may be objected that the creation of the public have to the states would be converting special privileges into some of them, that the value of the lands in different states is unequal, that the value of the public lands is unequal. Land has no value independent of the population, covers a demand for it. The entire receipts of the government from the sale of lands for the last thirty years have been only a little over one hundred million dollars, and the average for each five years has been less than five million dollars per year. It is estimated that the annual increase of land values of New York City alone is thirty million dollars per annum. Does not this show conclusively that it is population that makes land values?

If the question at issue is merely the question of the creation of the arid lands, the good-for-nothing lands, the Congressional Desert and National desert, it is scarcely worth the printer's ink that will be used in its discussion. Such a half-way measure would accomplish nothing useful. And if when the lands are ceded to the states they are to continue the policy of selling them as fast as possible, or giving them away to syndicates, or under any of the flimsy devices that are proposed to limit their acquisition to "actual settlers only," the case will not be a bit better. The question will not be settled right until a system is adopted that will recognize the equal right of all to the use of the earth.

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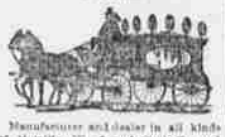

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