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A History of the Public Land Policies

By

BENJAMIN HORACE HIBBARD

Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. 1965.*

Pp. xxvii, 579, \$7.50 (cloth), \$2.95 (paper)

“A land office business” is a phrase which continues to flavor American speech, though it must now be a rare person who has firsthand knowledge of the volume of business those offices did at one time. Benjamin H. Hibbard’s book, *A History of the Public Land Policies*, quite appropriately catches the spirit of that period. He himself knew what people who had obtained land through the operation of some of the early land policies felt about them. He also made extensive use of newspapers to obtain reactions from the earlier periods. The research produced the following eye witness report of an encounter which took place during a weekend in 1857 among those trying to be first to be served by the land office the following Monday morning. People had begun to line up outside the door as early as six o’clock on Saturday evening. As the crowd grew, there was scuffling and fighting for advantageous positions and little or no let-up through Sunday. The report concludes in the following manner :

At 9 o’clock the door opened, and many fell prostrate and nearly helpless upon the floor. To sum the matter in brief, we have never seen a more distracted and desperate set of men than were about that office. All were armed and resolved to defend themselves to the last. Mr. E. M. Downs of this place had a leg broken; a gentleman from Ohio had some two or three ribs broken . . .¹

Hibbard’s accounts of the operations of claim associations, land speculation, grants of land for schools and internal improvements, and of the abuses of the various land policies are all made more real by the use of contemporary comments and the expressions of concern of a variety of people. He also used tables and maps which indicated quantities and values of the lands involved as well as their locations.

But there is more than description here. Perhaps the most important part of the work is found in the last two chapters in which

* This book was first published in 1924; the 1965 edition contains a foreword by Paul W. Gates.

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he examined the effects of the land policies on agriculture and made a critical examination of the land policies. One of his comments here is of particular interest today considering the various efforts to achieve land reform, particularly in Latin America: "Giving land away does not permanently revolutionize a land system."²

Hibbard refused to be drawn into a discussion of what the earlier land policies might have been. "It was not possible to get a view of what was destined to happen to the country for any great number of years in advance, although, looking back over the achievements, they seem to have been inevitable and natural."³ Although he would have held the remaining lands after 1900, which were largely nonagricultural, and he felt the political power of the frontier had diminished enough that a major change in land disposal policy might have been achieved, "there was no widespread understanding of the relationship of grazing land to national welfare, and without this understanding the plans made were destined to be short-sighted, individualistic, and destructive."⁴ If the grazing land could "have been sold, leased or given away in tracts suitable for that purpose, its usefulness might have been increased greatly and many people saved the expense and grief of a hopeless homestead."⁵

The following observations should be read, remembering that Hibbard was writing in 1924:

In the past the government and the states have paid out good money, and much of it, to induce people to settle on raw land. The right to spend money in this manner has hardly been called in question. Should it be seriously proposed to spend money to get people off undesirable homesteads and other similar lands not affording a livelihood, objections would be raised at once. . . . Overproduction of farm produce has been the bane of farming during the last half century, with the exception of a few years—abnormal years during the War. How to limit agricultural production is a conundrum not yet solved, but in any case the government, states included, may well cease helping to create from year to year a new crop of submarginal farmers.⁶

Hibbard's history made its first appearance in 1924 and was soon established as the leading work in its field. It needs no introduction

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today to anyone concerned with land and other resource problems with the possible exception of those who, though generally familiar with the book, do not have ready access to it. No one with an interest in the Conservation Movement or in agricultural policy should ignore the book because of its age. True, the story had by no means ended in 1924 when Hibbard wrote, but the studies which have appeared since then have complemented rather than replaced Hibbard's work. Even after acknowledging the errors, to which later writers have called attention, the book has stood the test of time and has achieved the status of a classic in the literature.

Hibbard wrote in his preface that his aim was to "put into one moderate-sized volume, a sketch of the historical development and operations of our federal land policies."⁷ He accomplished this goal, even though the book in truth is much more than a sketch.

The very welcome new printing of the book contains a bonus for those who secure a copy of it. An interesting and useful introductory essay has been prepared by Paul W. Gates, a friendly critic of Hibbard and a student of land policies who himself has made substantial contributions to a better understanding of those policies. Gates provides an understanding of the setting in which the book was written and relates it to other works and to other persons.

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