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In the shadow of settled society: The safety valve in nineteenth century American thought

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IN THE SHADOW OF SETTLED SOCIETY
The Safety Valve in Nineteenth Century American Thought

A Thesis

Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of History
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
John M. Coski
1982
APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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DEDICATION

This thesis (replete with its passive constructions and occasional lapses in reasoning) is dedicated to Dr. Arthur L. Tracy, the apotheosis of a mentor and an educator.
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ABSTRACT

This is a study of nineteenth century opinion on the safety valve doctrine, or the theory that the free (unoccupied) land of America's public domain served as an outlet for eastern surplus labor, and thus mitigated the negative side-effects of industrial development. The safety valve was an assumption in nineteenth century thought and carried ideological connotations that modern historical scholarship has neglected.

It is a premise of this work that the contemporary vision of a safety valve is best understood by inductive analysis, rather than by deductively imposing the historiographical definition onto the nineteenth century context. The study, therefore, begins with a working definition of the safety valve as the relationship between free western land and eastern socio-economic stability. A more precise understanding of the safety valve is derived from its association with other ideas and events.

The origins of the safety valve concept can be clearly found in the liberal traditions of classical economics and natural rights. Abstract theories found specific application in the United States, where broad expanses of public land and free republican institutions encouraged Americans to view the safety valve as an element of national uniqueness.

This thesis examines the sources, nature and impact of the safety valve concept in three of its predominant post-Civil War contexts: the formulation of public land policy, labor reform, and efforts to cope with urban overcrowding. These are dealt with in semi-independent chapters which pose identical questions and contribute to a common conclusion.

The most salient feature of contemporary opinion on the safety valve was the contrast between its assumed or "natural" existence and its actual ineffectiveness. The attempts to cope with this perceived paradox and its intellectual impact constitute the major focus of the thesis.

In conclusion, because it was thought to be a key precondition for American uniqueness and its eclipse a harbinger of the encroachment of the "old World," the safety valve was, throughout the century, an explanation, rationalization, or forecast of change.
. . . assumptions of full and free competition, which underlies this self-protecting power of labor, is wholly gratuitous (for much of the world's population); but also that, when the mobility of labor becomes in a high degree impaired, the reparative and restorative forces do not act at all. On the contrary, a new and antagonistic principle begins to operate, viz., the principle that to him that hath shall be given, and from him that hath not shall be taken away the little that he seemeth to have.

--Francis A. Walker, Political Economy, 1888

As no man can live without land, it follows that the man who owns the land owns the lives of his fellow men.

--Elizabeth Bachman Brokaw in Arena, 1894

No league between employed and employer, however cordial and faithfully carried out, could be of more than temporary benefit. Only a return to natural law, a scientific adjustment of the primal agents in production, land and labor, and the restoration of him to his natural environment, and freedom of action therein can effect any salutory change.

--J. K. Ingalls, testifying before the Senate Committee on Education and Labor, 1883

We have struck our frontier. The western wave of migration has reached its limit, and the population has been obliged to recoil upon itself. From now on there will be no outlet for the unemployed and the discontented of our cities. The conditions of life will tend to become more and more similar to those in western Europe . . .

--Walter Weyl, in an address to the National Conference on Social Welfare, 1905
INTRODUCTION

This thesis will examine the place of the safety valve concept in late nineteenth century intellectual life. It was not a formalized doctrine, but a variable concomitant of other social or economic viewpoints. There was, in other words, no monolithic safety valve; its exact sources and modus operandi depended largely upon its application. Similarly, the causes and consequences of its ineffectiveness varied according to perspective. Because of this, each chapter of this paper will explore distinct contemporary contexts of the safety valve and will constitute essentially self-contained essays. The chapters will, however, pursue a similar line of inquiry, resting on the following questions about each application of the safety valve: What were the sources and benefits of the safety valve? How well did it supposedly function? What were the perceived implications of its failure? What were the actual consequences of this perception?

In all of its manifestations, there were several commonalities in the safety valve. Foremost among these was the contrast between its assumed validity and its perceived impotence. The failure to alleviate social and economic disorders accounted for most of the attention the safety valve attracted throughout the century. Consequently, the safety valve was used to explain events or developments antithetical to American self-perceptions, promote sweeping
reforms, or rationalize departures from American tradition. Thus, in the late nineteenth century intellectual milieu, the safety valve carried a connotation of reluctant change. Since the safety valve was supposed to be a guarantor of values and self-perceptions, such a connotation was especially ironic and significant.
CHAPTER I
THE ORIGINS OF THE SAFETY VALVE ASSUMPTION

The safety valve doctrine rested on the conviction that abundant free land carried beneficial effects for the maturing American society. More specifically, the doctrine postulated a relationship between the free land of the American West and the stability of established society in the East. The doctrine, as it was formalized by historians, further emphasized the impact on the wages, conditions and contentment of eastern laborers. It assumed a dual benefit from free land: the workers who emigrated found opportunity in the West as farmers which eastern society denied them; and workers who did not emigrate benefited from a "thinning out" of the labor ranks, which kept wages high and facilitated workers' bargaining position. Although this formalized doctrine was largely the product of historical scholarship, the assumed relationship between free land and eastern industrial society was a canon of nineteenth century thought. This thesis will explore the origin and nature of this perceived relationship and its consequences in post-Civil War intellectual life.

I

In the historiographical arena, the theory that America's abundant unoccupied land served as a "safety valve for discontent" is associated with the work of Frederick Jackson Turner. Turner formulated the doctrine as part of his larger frontier thesis which
initiated a reappreciation of the role played by the West in American development. Because it drew so heavily from the post-war intellectual milieu, Turner's work stood as a pivotal point between contemporary observation and historical study. Contemporary commentaries on the changes confronting the United States because of the imminent exhaustion of its public domain were particularly salient to his essays.\(^1\) For Turner's generation, viewing the open frontier in retrospect, the perceived benefits of free land gained clarity and acceptance. Josiah Strong in his 1885 tract, *Our Country*, provided an early expression of this mentality. Strong tempered his optimistic prophecy of American destiny with the warning that when the supply of free land disappeared, "we shall enter upon a new era and shall more rapidly approximate the European conditions of life."\(^2\) Turner's writings also captured this appreciation of what free land meant for America in terms of what its absence would mean.

With this context, it was not surprising that Turner's frontier thesis and the safety valve doctrine struck a responsive chord among contemporary American scholars. In an 1896 essay, "The Problem of the West," Turner stated as an historical hypothesis what had been only years earlier reluctant speculation: "Failures in one area can no longer be made good by taking up land on a new frontier; the conditions of a settled society are being reached with suddenness and confusion."\(^3\) In a 1903 article for *Atlantic Monthly*, he best articulated his safety valve doctrine: "Whenever social conditions tended to crystallize in the East, whenever capital tended to press upon labor or political restraints to impede the freedom of the mass, there was this gate of escape to the free conditions of the
The contrast between America's former social fluidity and impending "settled" conditions carried a compelling explanatory value for the America of 1900. As an observer of America on the brink of an important transition, Turner consolidated and elevated a strain of thought that found more than a coincidence in the disappearance of free land and socio-economic dislocation.

Turner's doctrines lived without concerted opposition only as long as he himself lived. After the venerated historian's death in 1932, the safety valve thesis became a focus of intense historiographical debate. The challenges of Turner's critics and the defenses by his disciples have been largely responsible for shaping the modern historian's concept of the safety valve. Most significant were the arguments of Fred Shannon and Murray Kane who, writing in the era of the Great Depression, examined the historical role of the safety valve in mitigating labor discontent and the impact of economic depression, and found it noticeably ineffective. Kane posited the now-accepted evidence that more emigration to the West occurred in years of prosperity than depression, thereby casting doubt on the safety valve's literal meaning. Shannon took this criticism even further and declared that "a safety-valve is of use only when pressure reaches the danger point." Arch-Turnerian Joseph Schafer denied the validity of Shannon's pressure-point qualification and raised a new standard for debate--the relatively high wages of the American worker--as evidence of the safety valve's effectiveness. Schafer also josted with the contention of Carter Goodrich and Sol Davidson that few urban laborers emigrated, and emphasized instead the role of the safety valve in drawing off the potential discontent of immigrants and farm laborers.
In two important articles, Clarence Danhof supported the skepticism of Goodrich and Davidson with strong evidence that few eastern workers could afford western migration. Historians have arrived at a consensus based especially on the arguments of Shannon, Kane and Danhof, but have retained the belief that free land carried a social-psychological significance as perceived opportunity. Debate has stalemated at this point, with only a few constructive modifications offered since the 1940s. The strong skepticism raised by Shannon and Kane has not, however, overcome Joseph Schafer's last-ditch defense that a safety valve at least prevented discontent from growing much worse.

Although Schafer's arguments generally leave little room for conclusive debate, that historian did suggest one course for re-examining the safety valve doctrine. Why, he asked, do Turner's detractors insist on attributing the thesis to Turner? Why not call it George Henry Evans' or Thomas Hart Benton's or even Benjamin Franklin's thesis? Indeed, the origins of the safety valve concept are found throughout the intellectual climate of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and they do shed a different light on the safety valve. Historians have by no means neglected contemporary views of the safety valve, but, rather than analyzing them to inductively arrive at a nineteenth century concept of the safety valve, they have focused on contemporaries' supposedly blind optimism. Furthermore, historians commonly have juxtaposed the expectations of ante-bellum Homestead advocates with the disappointing results of the Homestead Act. This oversimplified the perception of what an operative safety valve was supposed to mean for America and, more importantly,
ignored the contemporary disillusionment with the Homestead Act. Observers were painfully aware of the obstructions which prevented free land from bestowing its benefits upon American society. There was in fact much consistency in attitude of the ante- and post-bellum advocates of a safety valve. Rather than being blinded and prostrated by optimism, they were concerned with implementing the changes essential to the proper functioning of a safety valve.

II

The passage of the Homestead Act was a watershed in the intellectual history of the safety valve only in the sense that the Act gave post-war land reformers a tangible reference point for their efforts. Otherwise, the existence of the law did not significantly alter the safety valve ideal articulated during the thirty year campaign for the Homestead Act. It is therefore necessary to examine the homestead movement before analyzing the safety valve in its post-bellum intellectual milieu.

The most vociferous spokesman for the homestead movement, the multi-faceted Horace Greeley, articulated a wide-ranging view of the safety valve. Greeley's view was illustrative of the contemporary context of the safety valve. In "Land Reform," an essay written in the 1840s, Greeley predicted that a Homestead Act would promote immensely the independence, enlightenment, morality, industry and comfort of our entire laboring population evermore . . . . and diminish the pressure of competition in the Labor market throughout the country, and enable the hireling to make terms with his employer as the duration of his daily toil and the amount of his recompense.14

As a form of insurance for the mobility of labor, the safety valve performed a larger function with significance for the stability of
the whole nation. The public lands were, Greeley asserted, "the regulator of Labor and Capital, the safety valve of our industrial social engine."15 Greeley was, of course, both an advocate of labor and a promoter of industry. He was a curious blend of industrial prophet and agrarian utopian, traditional conservative and labor radical, eastern urbanite and western booster. He was able to reconcile these apparent contradictions by equating the economic rewards of free western land with a benevolent industrial order.

Just as Greeley was able to reconcile contradictions in his personal philosophy by associating free land with universal benefits, spokesmen of diverse social interests also concurred on the desirability of a liberal land policy. Jeffersonian disciples, exponents of the natural primacy of labor, as well as believers in the existing American social order, cited the vast public domain as the key to the existence or establishment of ideal society. The proponents of these various perspectives shared a belief that the advantage represented by America's immense domain would guarantee social fluidity, harmony and economic prosperity--benefits that were often contrasted with the economic and social maladies of the "Old World." The rigid class lines of European society, most vividly illustrated by the system of land tenure, were antithetical to America's revered mobility. The public domain offered both opportunity and a margin for error to avoid Europe's misfortunes, to forestall indefinitely the conditions of "settled society," and, therefore, to insure the safety of America's free institutions.

America's youth, openness, and opportunity--epitomized by the vast public domain--were reinforced by a faith in natural laws which
would maintain these unique features. Not coincidentally, the theoretical basis of the safety valve involved two strands of liberal thought which emphasized the importance of freely operating laws and abundant natural opportunities. The first line of thought was classical economics. In abstract terms, classical wage and population theory was virtually synonymous with the safety valve. Political economists agreed that, if the growth rate of the laboring population greatly exceeded capital accumulation, workers had little choice but to starve or emigrate. Another canon was that the freedom of workers to emigrate or change occupation was essential to a stable system. America's free land, besides being a constant source of wealth and capital accumulation, and thus alleviating much of the population pressure, was an obvious outlet for surplus population. The theoretical emphasis on land as one chief source of wealth reinforced this role.

The connection between classical thought and the safety valve was at times more than theoretical. The last great liberal economist, John Stuart Mill, was, for example, an active proponent of emigration as a remedy for Britain's unemployment problem. New England political economist Francis Bowen applied economic theory to the United States and argued that its free institutions defied many of the restrictions developed by European theorists. Bowen's "American Political Economy" discounted the negative alternatives implied by natural laws: American workers would migrate or seek other employment, not starve. Bowen also referred explicitly to a safety valve of free land which, along with extreme occupational mobility, maintained high wages, economic opportunity and fluid class lines. The classical economic foundation was not ordinarily so overt in
the contemporary understanding of the safety valve, but was an assumption to be weighed against reality. By prescribing for economic stability the features that America supposedly had, classical theory vindicated faith in the conviction that free land distinguished America from the Old World. Conversely, the public domain rendered trust in natural laws easier.

A second strand of thought, the natural rights tradition, was the basis for the more idealistic perspectives on the safety valve. In many ways, natural rights theory resembled classical economic theory, but, because it rested on a more comprehensive critique of the social order, it was not as universally acceptable. Natural rights theory described more than a relationship between free land and ideal society, but its most important manifestations involved the distribution of "natural opportunities." As it pertained to the safety valve, natural rights theory can best be explained by the following syllogism: God endowed all men with an inalienable birthright to the soil; the soil was the source of all wealth and opportunity; only a man's labor could create wealth from the soil; thus, only the man who worked the soil could legitimately own the land, and a man could own only what he could cultivate. A logical corollary to this was the belief that monopolization of the land violated natural rights, denied men natural opportunites, and led to rampant inequality. One of the earliest statements of this philosophy was by Thomas Skidmore in 1829. Skidmore, in his radical anti-rent appeal to New Yorkers, *The Rights of Man to Property!*, deprecated land monopolists for subsisting on the labor of others. He, like many of his ideological descendents, traced his principles to the writings of Thomas Jefferson.21
Proponents of natural rights theory and of classical economics shared a confidence that, as long as circumstances allowed the proper functioning of natural laws, ideal conditions would prevail. Although the criteria for conducive circumstances varied, the desired conditions were analogous. Economic prosperity, social harmony, and the continued functioning of free institutions were contingent upon obedience to natural laws. The safety valve occupied a paradoxical position in each of these traditions of thought. On one hand, it was a natural law which regulated social and economic conditions. On the other hand, especially in natural rights theory, the safety valve was one element of the ideal order, a by-product of the natural laws. In short, the safety valve was often seen as more than a process or a means to an end; its operation was virtually synonymous with an ideal society.

Because of its connotations, contemporaries equated the safety valve with reform, or with the recovery of assumed pre-requisites for a free and stable economic system. Thus, by virtue of its most important intellectual sources, the safety valve was less a description of than a prescription for American society. Observers from a classical economic perspective were less demanding of the system than were natural rights advocates, but, throughout the century, observers from both vantage points perceived the existence of abnormal circumstances which prevented the safety valve from functioning properly. Consequently, contemporary references to the safety valve usually accompanied appeals for the recovery of a freely operating and, therefore, harmonious system.

The campaign for a public land system favoring the small settler, which culminated in the passage of the Homestead Act, reflected
these intellectual origins. The relevance of economic and natural rights theory was not, of course, limited to the public domain, but, as the apotheosis of opportunity, the domain figured prominently in both. Eastern conservatives had, by 1820, begun to subordinate their contempt for the West as a rival for people and power to an appreciation for the value of the West in dissolving social discontent. Fledgling labor groups in the Jacksonian era also considered the West in their new calculus of social justice and reform. Arising from the interest of labor in the public lands was the voice of the English-born editor George Henry Evans. In him, the natural rights tradition found its most articulate spokesman and the safety valve its first great exponent.

Evans was, perhaps, the most important figure in the development of the safety valve concept. The impressionable Horace Greeley, although the famous advocate of "Go West, young man," borrowed his agrarianism from Evans. Evans pioneered the movement which later spawned the Homestead Act and shaped the safety valve into a fundamentally anti-industrial, anti-urban ideal. Similar to William H. Sylvis, Terence V. Powderly, and other post-war figures, Evans was both an advocate of land reform and a labor spokesman. In the 1830s and 1840s he edited a series of labor journals, most prominently the New York Workingman's Advocate, and sold his land reform program to the idealistic New England Workingman's Association and the Industrial Congresses. In 1844 he forged the influential political pressure organ, the National Reform Association (NRA), to thrust the homestead movement onto the national stage.

The National Reform Platform consisted of the equal, individual and inalienable homestead, a system of land tenure which would prevent
monopoly and guarantee man's natural rights. Although Evans' personal philosophy included a blueprint for a complete "township democracy," and was applicable to all landholding, National Reform concentrated on liberalizing public land policy. One famous manifestation of agrarian-based public land reform, the 1847 "Vote Yourself a Farm" circular, was both a political polemic and an embodiment of the natural right tradition:

Are you an American citizen? Then you are the joint owner of the public lands. Why not take advantage of your property to provide yourself a home? Why not vote yourself a farm?

Are you tired of slavery--of drudging for others--of poverty and its attendant miseries? Then, vote yourself a farm.

Are you a believer in the scripture? Then assert that the land is the Lord's, because he made it. Resist then the blasphemers who extract money from His work, even as you would resist them should they claim to be worshipped for His holiness. Emancipate the poor from the necessity of encouraging such blasphemy--vote the freedom of the public lands . . . . with reform Capital with its power for good undiminished, would lose the power to oppress; and a new era would dawn upon the earth and rejoice the soul of a thousand generations. Therefore, forget not to vote yourself a farm. 24

For Evans, land played a crucial role in determining the relationship between capital and labor. Equal division of the soil would garner for the laborer the right to what he produced. Underlying this belief were the principles that labor created all wealth and that land provided all natural opportunity. The ultimate result of land reform would be a society of independent producers, freed from the chains of the wage system. The crux of land reform was the restoration of opportunity. One man may work for another, Evans explained in an 1845 debate, "but not by compulsion, as now." Herein lay his safety valve vision. Not only would men be able to take advantage of their birthright to the soil, but they would also benefit
by the restoration of the proper relation of capital to labor. The
safety valve would operate on the tangible level of emigration as
an outlet and an opportunity for laborers, and the abstract level
of adjusting society to nature.

The appeal of such a theory to ante-bellum labor reflected
the popularity of reform in general. Workers did not accept Evans'
doctrine as pure agrarianism, but as one of several doctrines asserting
the rights of labor. Evans himself embraced educational reform
and a shorter work day as concomitant causes. In the larger picture
of ante-bellum labor reform, land reform shared the platform of Anti-
Renters, Loco Focos, and Workingmen's Parties with demands for
abolition of debtor's prison, the ten-hour day, equal access to
education, and a host of other issues. This broad, often indiscriminate
adoption of reform or anti-monopoly campaigns was also a characteristic
of post-war labor reform and underscored the close association of
the safety valve with an ideal social order. Regardless of how
casually land reform may have been accepted, labor organizations
actively rallied behind Evans for National Reform. In this era, land
reform was not an anomalous issue for organized labor to support.
Historian Helene Zahler, in her preeminent work on the subject, con-
cluded that "hard-core" trade unions may have been lukewarm to land
reform, but played an important role in its development by not opposing
it.27

As land reform became a national political issue, it was not
without detractors. It could not escape the "agrarian" (synonymous
then with "communist") label and often conjured up memories of Thomas
Skidmore's leveling fanaticism of the 1820s. Pure agrarianism never
became respectable. As late as 1859, when the Homestead Act was only
three years from passage (and opposition was sectional, not ideological), Congressman George W. Julian felt compelled to qualify the "agrarianism" of the Homestead bill. Julian invoked the popular lesson of Rome's decay through monopolization of its land, and juxtaposed it with America's Jeffersonian tradition of small farms. He appealed for a distinction between agrarian hostility to property and the Homestead bill's true objective of reforming an unjust and potentially fatal land system.28

Land reform gained political respectability, but lost much of its ideological purity in the homestead movement. Historians traditionally view the Homestead Act as Congress's formal surrender of the "proprietor principle" of public land administration. Henceforth, Congress disposed of land liberally to private citizens.29 The government, it will be shown, surrendered the domain as a source of revenue, but hardly showed favoritism to the settler. Also, the long years of debate in Congress over various Homestead bills obscured the original nonpartisanship of the NRA. Political animosity between East and West resulted in debate that embodied the theoretical sources of the safety valve, but clearly subordinated ideology to sectionalism. Western statesmen accused eastern interests of opposing free land because it would draw the cheap surplus labor required for eastern factories.30 In one of the most cited speeches opposing the Homestead bill, Representative Josiah Sutherland, of New York, in 1852 warned that, contrary to its title, the act would not encourage but would harm industry and laborers by dispersing the nation's resources and attacking the sanctity of property.31 References to the safety valve in Congressional debate usually assumed a negative tack; few men dared oppose free land in principle, but advocates attributed to
their opponents a hostility to freedom. Despite such rhetorical tricks, the most divisive issue was not natural rights ideology, but whether East or West would reap the lion's share of the wealth from the public lands.

In the late 1840s, much to the disgust of the National Reformers, slavery was injected into the homestead debates. The loose rivalry between East and West shifted to the increasingly solidified hostility of North and South. With the rise of Republicanism, the Homestead became a sectional and a party issue. These developments further diluted the original ideological content of the homestead movement. As Eric Foner has written, preserving the public domain for the white settler was a veritable panacea for the infant Republican party's "free soil, free labor, free men" ideology. Perceiving that the Homestead Act had become a weapon in the Republican arsenal, the South solidified in its opposition. When the Homestead Act became law in May 1862, the southern obstructionists were conveniently in rebellion.

III

The existence of the Homestead Act placed post-war land reformers in an ambivalent position. The act was universally praised as the ultimate in liberal legislation (see Chapter II) and the inauguration of an ideal land system. What more, after all, could be demanded of a system that gave to every male head of household up to 160 acres of land? The Homestead Act, however, especially in light of other land policy developments, seriously deviated from the principles of National Reform. For example, the Act did not make the homestead inalienable or non-transferrable, and thus left
the door open to fraud and eventual monopoly. More importantly, the liberality represented by the Homestead Act was only part of a larger Congressional munificence which granted several hundred million acres of the domain to subsidize railroad construction and the establishment of educational institutions, and to reward military service. The common feature of this generosity was the desire to use the domain to develop national wealth. The common result was a land system that fostered precisely the kind of monopoly that the National Reformers sought to destroy. Rather than a society of settlers and independent producers, the actual Homestead Act envisioned an ideal of universal wealth. The settler was less the consummation of an idealistic civilization than an agent of a materialistic one.

Reformers were not oblivious to the flaws in the land system. Before his 1859 death, Evans recognized that the homestead movement had become more of a sectional than an ideological issue because of slavery. Had he lived longer, he undoubtedly would have joined the chorus that protested the dilution of the homestead ideal. Throughout the post-war era, land and labor reformers attacked the evils of the land system and sought to reconcile it with the homestead ideal. In effect, land reform after 1862 was simply an extension of the ante-bellum movement. A pure vision of the Homestead Act provided the touchstone for a generation of reformers who sought to finish the work of their ancestors. Whether these reformers believed that the Homestead Act served at least as a partial safety valve was never clear. Their activities indicated only that they did not believe that the land system fulfilled its task in guaranteeing America's future.
In many ways land reform became a more urgent issue after 1862. The evils that were thought to be inherent in an unfree situation loomed over post-war America and testified to the ineffectiveness of the safety valve. Monopoly, for example, reached epidemic proportions. Fear of monopoly had originated with the republic: monopoly was considered incompatible with free institutions; grossly unequal distribution of wealth and opportunity was a symptom of the Old World encroaching upon the new. Similar to the ferment of the Jacksonian era, the later anti-monopoly campaign embraced much more than land reform. Post-war America confronted reformers with the rapid concentration of population and wealth, the "monopolization" of the means of transportation, currency, and land, and a salient increase in inequality. Significantly, the munificent mid-century federal land policy had encouraged land and transportation monopolies. Land monopoly was thus intimately associated with the evils that threatened American institutions. In the post-war milieu, this relationship between land monopoly and its siblings was not always clearly defined. There was a two-way causal flow between monopolized land and the impact of other industrial ills. On one hand, the monopoly of land nullified the beneficent effects of free land for modern American society; on the other, it was the "conspiracy" of modern monopolies that choked off the safety valve. This duality characterized most comments on monopoly and the safety valve.

The post-war threat of associated monopolies occasioned a revival of natural-rights based reformism. This revival accounted for the most idealistic pronouncements on the relation between free land and the American laborer. Obviously, from the natural rights
perspective, the appropriation of man's common birthright by a few persons and corporations was tantamount to the enslavement of the masses. Land monopoly impeded the freedom and independence on which individuals and a stable society depended. The upsetting of the balance of society would enslave even those workers who did not intend to emigrate to the land. In this sense, free land was valuable to the worker as much more than an outlet for emigration. It was critical for his status and condition.

From this reformist perspective, the safety valve was more than a safety valve, strictly defined. It was not a pressure sensitive device, but a regulator. Rather than providing an escape from an oppressive industrialized society, it was to prevent the establishment of that very society. It was originally an anti-urban, anti-industrial ideal, and remained a vision of society free from the evil attributes of modernism that plagued British society. Rural values and self-employment would prevail over urban complexities and the wage system. The equitable treatment of labor vis-a-vis capital would eliminate the seeds of social discontent and inequality. Most importantly, free opportunity and fluidity would assure the continued health of America's free institutions and mobility for the individual. Adherents to this safety valve vision were not agrarians with plans for communistic utopias, but the self-appointed guardians of American ideals.

The perceived ineffectiveness of the safety valve carried implications for post-war society beyond its association with monopoly. Many contemporaries considered the safety valve's paramount benefit to be the insurance of social mobility and the consequent prevention of such urban problems as over-population, pauperism
and discontent. The overcrowding of eastern seaboard cities, exacer­bated by swelling immigration, clearly defied the natural laws governing population distribution. Urban crowding constituted a severe danger to all the groups studied in this thesis. Urbanism was antithetical to the Jeffersonianism of the land reformers; it impoverished workers and contributed to the further subordi­nation of labor; and it disturbed eastern conservatives who associated overcrowded cities with economic chaos and social disorder. Similarly, the encroachment of the Old World, best exemplified by alien land­holding in the West, provoked universal protest and focused attention on the impotent safety valve. Although each of the above groups attributed the impotence of the safety valve to different causes and weighed its effects in different terms, they concurred on fundamental points: the malfunctioning of the safety valve defied assumptions underlying the security of free institutions, natural laws and, hence, American uniqueness. The assumption of an operative safety valve was thus part of a prescriptive vision of American society.

The idealism of this safety valve vision has been diluted in the development of the modern doctrine. Historians ignore the intimate connection between the vision and reform, as well as the comprehensive contemporary analysis of the safety valve's actual ineffectiveness. Frederick Jackson Turner, as a contemporary of the idealism, almost defined the vision. By describing the safety valve as a mechanism for avoiding a society that had become too "crystal­lized," he captured the nomenclature. But, by focusing on the indi­vidual escaping the advancing society, he, too, failed to note the role the safety valve was to play in preventing the crystalliza­tion. In the contemporary understanding, the fate of the individual
was a barometer for American civilization. Later historians have accurately described some of the ends the safety valve was to produce, but not the means. The safety valve was to improve the condition, economic standing and bargaining position of labor, as well as to alleviate social discontent, but not simply as an outlet for population. The term "safety valve" has in fact circumscribed the modern understanding of what freeland meant in nineteenth century life.
NOTES FOR CHAPTER I


4Ibid., p. 259.


7Joseph Schafer, "Was the West a Safety Valve for Labor?" MVHR 24 (December 1937):308; Joseph Schafer, "Concerning the Frontier as a Safety Valve," Political Science Quarterly (henceforth PSQ) 52 (September 1937):420.


Lipset, Turner, pp. 187-200, made a distinction between an effective economic and an impotent social safety valve.

11 Schafer in MVHR, p. 313; Schafer in PSQ, pp. 419-420.


18 Wayland, Elements, p. 119; F. Walker, Political, pp. 34-35.

19 Mill, Principles, pp. 350-351. The British had a highly developed concept of a safety valve of intra-imperial migration.


24 Quoted in Joseph George Rayback, "Land For the Landless The Contemporary View" (M. A. Thesis, Western Reserve University, 1936), pp. 22-23.


26 Ibid., 15 February 1845, in Commons, *Documentary* vol. VIII, pp. 34-35.


33 Foner, *Free Soil*, pp. 16-32; Zahler, *Eastern*, p. 177, concurred with Foner on the contemporary perception of the Homestead as an alternative to charity.
CHAPTER II

THE SAFETY VALVE IN PUBLIC LAND POLICY

The primary requisite for the practical operation of the safety valve was a public land system that served to facilitate it. On the surface, post-Civil War land policy appeared to be the perfect vehicle for the safety valve. The undisputed centerpiece of the system was the Homestead Act, with its connotations for unbounded individual opportunity and governmental liberality. It was a canon of congressional and national thought that the actual settler was and should be the chief beneficiary of public land policy. The Homestead Act, however, was not entirely commensurate with the ideals that spawned it. Furthermore, the land system as a whole diluted the value of the Homestead Act by offering opportunities to speculators as well as to settlers, and thereby hastening the exhaustion of the public domain. In this sense, public land policy contributed to the perceived ineffectiveness of the safety valve.

The rhetorical reverence of Congress for the actual settler was deceiving, but not necessarily duplicitous. Most congressmen did not praise the Homestead Act while consciously subverting it in favor of special interests. Instead, Congress persisted in trying to legislate for both the small settler and the corporate developer. This "incongruous land system," as historian Paul W. Gates has dubbed it, controverted the principle behind the Homestead Act. Legislation allegedly intended to benefit the small settler often worked in favor
of the speculator. For example, the Timber Culture Act of 1873 and the Desert Land Act of 1877 tried to encourage small holdings in the inhospitable semi-arid West, but negligent monitoring made them a boon for speculators. The most egregious element in the incongruous land system was the direct granting of land to railroad corporations. This created a glaring contradiction between small parcels of free Homestead land and the unlimited sale of corporate land, which often led to the accumulation of vast private holdings. The land system thus alienated the settler from hundreds of millions of acres of the public domain, and, in the public mind, threw the virtuous settler to the corporate lions.

Not only did corporations and speculators monopolize millions of acres, thus artificially closing land to settlement, but also post-war Civil War America faced the possibility of the natural exhaustion of its arable domain. The unprecedented passing of land into private hands after 1870 followed closely optimistic forecasts that the domain would last between 200 and 900 years. The munificence with which Congress had disposed of land at mid-century was postulated on an "inexhaustible" domain. The disappearance of unappropriated arable land underscored the contradictions in the philosophy behind land administration. On the one hand, Congress had accepted the premise that the wisest use for the land was to bestow it liberally to private interests. On the other hand, the implicit assumption that free land was a precondition of American uniqueness depended upon conservation of the finite supply. The visibly shrunken domain increased the concern for the future of the embattled settler and exacerbated fears of a closed frontier. But, since so much of the
domain was held illegally or by corporate "middlemen," there were many who believed that land was still theoretically available for settlers. Until the closing decades of the century, reclamation of land from unauthorized holders and from the restrictions of a semi-arid climate allowed Congress to avoid the implications of an exhausted domain.

The most striking feature of land policy formulation in the late nineteenth century was the popularity of criticism and reform rhetoric. Party platforms, presidents and cabinet officers universally deprecated the chasm between the Homestead Act and land grants, and the resultant accumulation of private empires in the West. In particular, the administrations of Presidents Garfield, Arthur and Cleveland were known as an age of reform in the history of land policy because of the full-scale attacks mounted on fencing, unauthorized landholding and alien landlordism. The ubiquitousness of reform rhetoric contrasted sharply with the failure of Congress to implement reform in an enduring or significant manner. Railroads and other special interests exercised considerable influence over a conservative Senate in the 1870s and 1880s, and, more importantly, few politicians fully accepted the exigencies of reform. Recognizing the subversion of the Homestead Act was simple; comprehensively reshaping land policy around that law was not.

The best barometer for the land reform movement and, therefore, for the consistency of land policy with the safety valve vision, was the rhetoric and activity of a handful of Congressional idealists. In particular, Representatives George W. Julian and William S. Holman, of Indiana, and Lewis Payson, of Illinois, articulated a natural rights philosophy predicated on the centrality of small holdings to the
stability of American society. They adhered to the Jeffersonian dichotomy between the independence of the yeoman farmer and the miserable dependence of the homeless worker. Their philosophy was a substantive link to the ante-bellum National Reformers and a chief source of opinion on the relation between free land and American institutions.

George W. Julian was an especially vociferous speaker and prolific writer on the land question from the 1850s to the 1890s. In noted speeches in 1851 and 1868, he emphasized the relevance of homes to all reforms and to the fostering of industry, thrift, national loyalty, self-control, temperance and education. The Hoosier Representative exemplified the Jeffersonian ideal and its role in the safety valve concept when he stated in 1851 that: "It may be taken for granted, as a general truth, that a nation will be powerful, prosperous and happy in proportion to the number of independent cultivators of its soil." Ideally, free land served to alleviate urban suffering, insured free institutions, gave men access to natural opportunity and guaranteed prosperity. It was imperative that land be given to actual settlers only in small parcels, and, therefore, perform these functions indefinitely. Applying these principles in the post-Civil War era, Julian and other reformers equated the obvious subversion of the homestead ideal with the myriad of threats to American civilization. The laws governing the relation between the land and the people necessarily shaped institutions, he commented in 1873. The current "false" relations constituted the "most formidable" trial of American democracy and was inevitably associated with corruption, encroaching "feudalism" of the social order and the domination of cities.
Julian was not alone in this crisis mentality assessment of the land question. In fact, reform rhetoric, warning of the Europeanization of American society and drawing parallels between land monopoly and other social evils, became as popular in the post-Civil War intellectual climate as the avowed reverence for the small settler. Congress itself invoked both the small holdings bias and reform rhetoric throughout the era, and occasionally seemed intent on legislating this idealism. Actual reform, however, occurred only when it did not blunt western development, or when the chasm between the homestead ideal and land policy became too great. Despite its interest in reform, Congress expended more energy trying to reconcile the homestead ideal with the vision of a rich, developed West. The role of the safety valve vision in the formulation of public land policy is, therefore, best understood by analyzing the influence of land reform idealism.

I

Post-war reform attempted to re-shape policy so as to implement the homestead ideal. In practical terms, this translated into efforts to reserve the public lands for the actual settler in small parcels. This strategy had many manifestations. Congress never seriously considered withdrawing land to all except homestead entry, so the real thrust of reform was to define, preserve and extend the rights of settlers vis-a-vis their corporate rivals. Since reformers considered the public lands America's future trust, they had to assure the settler access to as much of the domain as possible. Insuring the rights of the settler, it was assumed, would also insure an operative safety valve; men would seek their natural
opportunities once they were accessible. Reformers thus attempted to extend the land available to the homestead settler and delay the day on which the nation's sacred future trust would be only a memory.

The first great land reform issue after the Civil War was the protest against railroad land grants. Railroads had been the primary recipients of Congressional munificence since 1850 and continued to be the symbol of development and civilization in the West. Much of the initial enthusiasm for railroads had been founded on the belief that they were public servants. Land grant railroads, endowed with the most sacred trust, were especially subject to high expectations. The revelation that some railroad corporations profited simply by the sale of their grants and the construction of the road, and, conversely, that others held their lands speculatively from sale and taxation, betrayed the public trust. As a consequence, the perception of railroads changed from ally to enemy of settler and civilization. Few men of 1865 denied the value of railroads or of subsidizing their construction, but many urged a halt to further generosity.

In the face of such criticism, Congress strove in its land grants both to respect the rights of settlers and to assure the rapid construction of railroads. As early as 1864, in the first Pacific Railroad bill, Congress altered the traditional provisions that prevented the homesteading of land within grants. Nevertheless, the "Homestead clause" featured in later grants did not eliminate the unlimited sale of the public lands by private proprietors. Unsatisfied with small concessions, reformers agitated for the cessation,
and then the forfeiture of land grants. Pushed by Julian and Holman, Congress hesitantly acknowledged the incompatibility of grants and the Homestead Act. In 1868, Julian sponsored a moderate resolution declaring the primacy of the Homestead and pre-emption acts and stating that further grants "should be carefully scrutinized and rigidly subordinated to the paramount purpose of securing homes for the landless poor, the actual settler and tillage of the public domain, and the consequent increase of the national wealth." When Holman, in the following year, proposed a resolution that did not compromise the homestead principle with grants, but called for their cessation, Julian substituted a more conciliatory version. Holman promptly withdrew his resolution. In March, 1870, Holman submitted a similar resolution, which the House passed, declaring itself in favor of discontinuing public land subsidies to railroads and other corporations. Congress honored its resolution only after passing a handful of grants, most notably one of eighteen million acres for the Texas Pacific Railroad in 1871.

Public sympathy reinforced this Congressional reform impulse. In 1868-69 Congress endured unprecedented public protest when it supported a railroad corporation's efforts to displace thousands of pre-emption settlers on the Cherokee Neutral Tract in Kansas. The tract had never been opened to settlement, but instead went directly into the hands of a succession of railroad companies. Widespread charges of corruption accompanied the organization of para-military protective societies among the unauthorized settlers. No other incident generated such criticism of Congress on the land grant issue.

Opposition to railroad grants spread as they became closely associated with corruption, land monopoly and the oppression of
settlers. In the Senate, Democrat Allen G. Thurman, of Ohio, armed with a resolution of his state legislature, berated the evils of land monopoly and asked whether:

this great and bountiful gift that Providence has bestowed upon this nation . . . the public domain shall be improved for the benefit of the people, of the homeless, the destitute, the suffering, or whether it shall become the great find of the speculators, or perpetual corporations.¹³

The occasion for Thurman's speech--the proposed grant to Oregon's McMinnville Railroad--also incited a revealing House debate between Indiana Democrat William Holman and Nevada Republican Thomas Fitch. Fitch and a Republican ally, Aaron Sargent, of California, appealed for the continued Western interest in the promotion of railroads, and pointed out the curious opposition of Holman and other midwesterners to the kind of grants that had so greatly benefited their region. As uncompromising as his idealist opponent, Fitch asked Congress not to strip "the good ship progress," and stated bluntly that "[i]t is better to have a railroad monopoly than to have no railroad at all."¹⁴

Holman's address was a comprehensive lesson on the evils of land monopoly and the necessity of preserving the safety valve of the West for individual homes. Throughout his opposition to the McMinnville grant, he channeled petitions from city dwellers demanding exclusive use of land for actual settlers "on the grounds that tens of thousands of the industrial classes of large cities and towns, now unemployed, must seek an outlet and escape from the poverty and distress which surround them or rapidly be driven to pauperism and crime."¹⁵ Holman, freeing himself from the compromise between the homestead and development ideals which prostrated reform, denied that the value of railroads had any bearing on the issue.¹⁶
Congress did not pass the McMinnville grant and, after 1871, concentrated its efforts on reclaiming the lands of railroad companies which failed to construct within a reasonable period. The long and complex forfeiture movement received the blessing of House and Senate committees, but ran afoul of the judiciary. Despite the ideological basis on which Holman and others placed the issue, it was the prospect of a corporation completing its road, not a wholesale recovery of land for the settler which guided Congressional action. When a general forfeiture act finally passed in 1890, it was a limited measure, reclaiming only the land of the most blatant violators.17

Congressional reformers attempted to extend the rights of the homestead settler in other ways. These efforts concentrated on liberalizing the provisions of the Homestead Act, and met with some success.18 The net effect of these modifications was to qualify more families for homesteads, to allow longer absences from the land without losing title to it, and to make it easier to turn pre-empted claims into legitimate homesteads. More substantive enlargement of settlers' rights did not seem altogether desirable. The fact that some unscrupulous settlers used the Homestead Act for small-scale speculation confronted Congress with a serious dilemma. Liberalizing the act's provisions could make fraudulent claims easier to obtain. It was, however, difficult to challenge the integrity of a few settlers, without appearing to be an enemy to all. For example, the sincere efforts of Grover Cleveland's first Land Commissioner, W. A. J. Sparks, to ferret out false claims by suspending all land patents in 1885 backfired and led ultimately to his dismissal.
This latent suspicion of settlers did not preclude more ambitious and invariably less successful efforts to proliferate settlers on the domain. The social discontent of the 1880s and the threat of a closed frontier gave this objective special urgency. Commenting on the exclusion of settlers from fertile lands by monopoly, a House report in 1886 warned that "[t]ime and events have given new emphasis to the importance of furnishing the landless an opportunity to obtain homes ... ."19 Another House report in 1888 echoed this warning: "Already we have densely populated cities, and a large class of what may not improperly be called poor people. It is a great and interesting question how we may best distribute our remaining public lands among our landless citizens."20 This strategy to recover the benefits of the safety valve by assuring the existence of homestead land could be seen in the "free homestead" movement in 1896-97. Reformers struggled in vain to allow settlers on former Indian land in Oklahoma to receive titles to their claims. They appealed for the "brave, honest settler," who lacked the money to pay for the land which the Government sold to raise revenue for the displaced Indians.21

These stillborn campaigns to bring policy in line with the homestead ideal illustrated the gap between an awareness of free land as a potential safety valve and its actual ineffectiveness, and the impotence of Congress in restoring it.

II

The revision of the Homestead Act, as well as the efforts to reclaim land from railroads, rested on the belief that expanding the land available to the homestead settler would guarantee the
security of American institutions. This expansion could be accomplished either by the extension of the homesteader's rights vis-a-vis the corporate landholders and speculators, or the expansion of the lands on which the settler could make a home. As Americans began to realize the natural limitations of the cultivable domain, this latter alternative acquired new significance.

The expansion of agriculture into the semi-arid and arid West presented reformers with both an opportunity and a problem. On one hand, the West was a potential haven for millions of additional settlers; on the other hand, its natural features excluded the settler from an indeterminable portion of the remaining land. It had been one of the chief assignments of land grant railroads to prepare and promote settlement of the new West—a task they performed admirably. Largely because of the railroads and a rainy cycle supporting their "rain follows the plow" dogma, the early nineteenth century image of the Great Plains as "the Great American Desert" seemed extinct by the 1870s.22

Nevertheless, a few dissenters, particularly General W. B. Hazen, maintained that self-deluding railroad promoters were begging disaster by planting isolated communities on land incapable of supporting them.23 Following Hazen's skepticism was the scientifically-based revisionism of John Wesley Powell, the naturalist-turned army officer who served in the government's employ as chief of the Rocky Mountain Survey.

Powell's analysis and programs had a delayed, but immeasurable, impact on public land policy. Under his guidance, the federal Government for the first time acquired accurate knowledge of its territory and was able to classify its resources and potential uses.
This knowledge, however, did not produce a consensus on how the remaining domain should best be managed. The task fell to Powell to challenge the prudence of transplanting midwestern model agricultural communities into the semi-arid West. Historian Henry Nash Smith has written that Powell's revisions posed an intolerable challenge to the prevailing myth that small farms could thrive throughout the West. For Smith, the opposition to Powell by reformers like Julian was a tragic result of this myth-induced "imaginative veil." Indeed, Powell, by questioning the efficacy of the 160 acre homestead and the wisdom of free, unmanaged settlement, trespassed against the Jeffersonian and the free-migration traditions. Nevertheless, Powell and the land reformers were in philosophical agreement on the desirability of reserving the arable lands for homes. This common interest was especially obvious when contrasted with the exponents of western development, whose opposition to Powell was ultimately the most significant.

Powell's influence was most heavily felt in his 1878 Report on the Arid Lands of the United States and the 1879 Report of the Public Lands Commission, of which he was a member. Both reports called for a classification of the remaining domain and suggested legislation for the disposal of each distinct category. This classification would, in itself, influence later formulation of policy; it allowed the streamlining of the laws and practical separation of land for the settler from land for the developer. Powell believed that there could be no uniform standard for land policy in the heterogeneous climate and topography of the West. The core of his revisionism was the plan for colonies in "irrigable districts," based on small landholding, but using co-operative water management.
His most heretical proposal was the establishment of 2,560 acre pasturage districts, also to be individually owned, but organized in co-operative resource communities.\textsuperscript{25} Despite his trespass against the sacred 160 acre homestead, Powell believed in small homesteads and his sympathies were squarely in the reformist tradition. With his insight that distribution of water would govern the future of the West, Powell anxiously considered the formulation of "capital intensive" irrigation companies:

\begin{quote}
Every man who turns his attention to this department of industry is considered a public benefactor. But if in the eagerness for present development a land and water system shall grow up in which the practical control of all agriculture shall fall into the hands of water companies, evils will result therefrom that generations may not be able to correct, and the very men who are now lauded as benefactors to the country will, in the ungovernable reaction which is sure to come, be denounced as oppressors of the people.\textsuperscript{26}
\end{quote}

Water monopoly, in other words, would subvert the homestead ideal as surely as land monopoly. If the semi-arid West was to accommodate homestead settlers, Powell believed, a new policy was required to insure their survival.

The Public Lands Commission, appointed to revise the tangle of land laws and to propose reforms, reflected and amended Powell's work. Among its other members was Thomas Donaldson, who, like Powell and the Commission, espoused a colonization Homestead Act to facilitate settlement of the Plains.\textsuperscript{27} The Commission combined a curious recognition of western interests with traditional reform idealism and Powell's revisionism. It called initially for the reservation of all arable lands for settlers under the Homestead Act.\textsuperscript{28} The arid lands, however, required different treatment.

"Poor men cannot make homes on the irrigable lands till capital
intervenes for their reclamation," the Commission admitted. It went on to recommend the sale of unlimited quantities of irrigable land to anyone (including corporations) subject to a timetable of improvement and reclamation. Unlike Powell, who preferred co-operative reclamation or government assistance to corporate land development, the Commission compromised between the homestead and development ideals. Both reports were significant for their denial of the efficacy of free settlement. Reformers, despite their concern over land monopoly and the exhaustion of the public lands, retained their faith that a just land system would enable emigration from the city to the country, and the establishment of homes in the West. They considered such revisions as enlarged holdings and co-operative settlement superfluous to reform. Although Congress pigeonholed both reports, their suggestions resurfaced in the subsequent decades.

The most tangible and immediate legacy of the reports was the recognition that the geographically heterogeneous Far West required a different policy than the Midwest. This revision in strategy did not, however, occasion a revision in ideology. For example, in 1888, William Holman, as a member of the House Committee on Public Lands, substituted a comprehensive bill for a plethora of land bills submitted to the 50th Congress. The substitute, modeled after the 1879 Commission's comprehensive bill, classified the remaining domain and specified the mode of disposal for each type. Not surprisingly, all agricultural land would be disposed according to "the most valuable purpose . . . to increase the number of homesteads and enlarge the lot of freeholders." Holman dissented from the proposal for 2,560 acre pasturage districts. Holman
and other land reformers revised their philosophies only so far as to admit that the entire domain was not suited for homesteading. They were by no means alone in their stubborn idealism.

As new methods for reclaiming arid lands were discovered, more land theoretically became available for the homestead settler. In 1893, the editor of the *Irrigation Age* argued that irrigation could facilitate the restoration of free settlement. Small irrigation farms would "revive the charm of country life," and furnish "a new outlet for the surplus population that has been passing for generations from Eastern farms, cities and seaports to find homes in the New West."

In contrast to this continued faith, John Wesley Powell grew increasingly pessimistic over the prospect of stable communities on the arid lands. This pessimism was what most clearly distinguished Powell from his contemporaries. The severe drought and depopulation of the Plains beginning in the late 1880s undoubtedly confirmed this pessimism. Powell came to accept the necessity of government regulation, not merely colonization for the settlement and development of the West. Although government supervision of settlement was certainly objectionable to traditional reformers, rationalizing the pace of development was in agreement with their concept of the domain as a sacred future trust. It was the spokesmen of western development who vehemently protested Powell's plan to slow down and regulate land disposal. When Congress included a clause to temporarily close the arid lands to further entry in an 1888 sundry appropriations bill, the western interests fought it. Western statesmen grilled Powell in committee hearings and finally lifted the closure, passing a counter measure to approve claims made during the two year moratorium.
Powell's revisionism thus appeared to be less of a threat to the ideals of reformers, who could conveniently cast aside the substance of his programs in favor of his sympathetic motives, than to the developers. In this respect, Powell was at least partially cloaked in Henry Nash Smith's "imaginative veil" of the yeoman farmer ideal. Powell's breakthrough was simply to suggest new modern answers to an old question: How could the virtues of a fluid nation of individual homes and stable communities best be insured for the future? Perhaps the imaginative veil was not inherent in the answer, but in the ubiquitous question itself. As articulated by reformers, it implied the importance of free land for settlers to the stability and prosperity of American society. The inability to find an answer to satisfy reformers, developers and revisionists was the rock upon which the safety valve vision in Congress foundered.

III

Land reform idealism (and, hence, the safety valve) enjoyed the widest unanimity in Congress when events heightened the concern over the absence of free land or the eclipse of the small settler. In the mid 1880's, circumstances coincided which seemed to substantiate the gloomy prophecies of land reformers. Labor and agricultural discontent, another economic depression following the protracted misery of the 1870s, and the revelation of a diminishing public domain invited speculation over the effects of a closed domain. The 1880 census provided the tangible link between the land question and socio-economic dislocation. For the first time, the Census Bureau furnished statistics on farm tenancy in the United States. The
nation-wide rate of 25.6 percent confirmed the reformers' worst fears that the producer-settler was fast becoming the tenant-at-will.\textsuperscript{34} Tenancy was, of course, antithetical to America's self-image and was only one symptom that the United States was infected with Old World maladies. Few polemicists in the 1880s failed to note these facts in their attacks on the growing inequality of American life. For land reformers, tenancy was both a symptom and a cause of social ills. Needless to say, it demanded a change in land policy.

The problem of tenancy and landlordism was easily traceable to the same incongruities in the land system that sparked the railroad land grant controversy. Indeed, the sale of unlimited quantities of land by railroads, holders of land-grant college and military bounty scrip was responsible for planting thousand acre farms and ranches alongside 160 acre homesteads. Also, America's relative ignorance of its immense domain allowed cattle companies to fence in thousands of unclaimed acres, excluding legitimate homesteaders. Large farms and ranches were both egregious examples of land monopoly, but the "food factory" bonanza farms were particularly revulsive to American values. While many Americans reveled in the economic might and efficiency of bonanza farms (especially after they contributed to economic recovery in 1878-79), others recognized immediately that they exploited seasonal labor and prevented the establishment of homes, churches, schools and other symbols of "civilization."\textsuperscript{35} In addition, large aggregations of property were often divided, improved, and rented as tenant farms in the image of English land tenure.
As in the battle over railroad grants, however, it was not these ideological objections to landlordism and illegal land holding that produced effective results. Rather, the close association of land monopolists and foreign corporate interests was the main impetus for Congressional action. Consequently, the movement to restrict alien land holding eventually usurped the related issues of illegal fencing and unlawful occupation of the public domain. The high incidence of foreign ownership of offending corporations accentuated the perceived evils of fencing and unauthorized occupation. In the debates over the 1885 anti-fencing bill, a chief objection to fencing was the circumscription of individual opportunity it caused. Representative William "Pig Iron" Kelley, of Pennsylvania, dramatized the fate of his impoverished urban constituents, and enjoined Congress to "interpose now and efficiently to rescue what land it may for our laborers who are yet able to escape from the growing poverty of the times to our hitherto free lands." Poindexter Dunn, of Arkansas, echoed these sentiments, contending that cattle companies "have closed and are rapidly closing all the avenues to individual effort and enterprise, and soon there will be left no hope to man except as the tenant, servant, or slave of these insatiable and merciless cormorants." 

Because of the coincidence of social and economic troubles and uproar over landlordism, Congress proved extremely receptive to land reform principles in the mid 'eighties. The House, led by William Holman, gave the privilege to bills and resolutions intended to facilitate disposal of agricultural land to actual settlers.

But, aside from the anti-fencing and alien land holding restriction
bills, little legislation passed Congress. Several bills in the House and Senate to prohibit outright the ownership of land by corporations did not receive a floor hearing. Several other alien land holding bills received the support of committees, but died of neglect. Despite the declaration that landlordism (alien or otherwise) was "incompatible with the best interests and free institutions of the United States," a total prohibition of corporate land holding was also unacceptable.

This duality was salient in the passage of the alien land holding restriction bill. Not surprisingly, debate over this bill invited clear juxtapositions of what was alien and what was American. Indeed, the essence of the contemporary safety valve vision rested on this contrast. Proponents of the bill presented it as insurance for maintaining individual opportunity and preventing the establishment of an American aristocracy. Embraced in the report of Representative Lewis Payson, the bill's House sponsor, was almost every element of the safety valve vision. The original homestead principle, he asserted, was "to aid the actual settler whose labor would make the land fruitful and productive, giving added wealth to the locality, and stability and strength to the country . . . ." Threatening this was the spectre of land monopoly and the eventual exhaustion of the domain. Finally, in a passage reminiscent of George Julian's earlier speeches, Payson advocated that reclaiming land from alien monopolists would

not only foster . . . the home sentiment and individual prosperity, . . . but, in addition, . . . there is no greater safeguard against public disorder, tumults, and riots than a generally distributed ownership of lands and homes.42

The bill became law, but did not exactly result in the wholesale
reclamation of land for settlers. Similar to the moderate railroad forfeiture act, it sought to retain the benefits without the evils of foreign capital. It succeeded more in soothing nativism than in combating tenancy. Nevertheless, the alien land holding issue generated the most explicit Congressional testimonies of faith for the safety valve, and the widest public interest in any post-war land reform issue. The coincidence of agricultural, labor, land, and alien problems in a single issue seemed to threaten the safety valve with extinction. Such threats invariably drew wider attention to the safety valve and made it a more compelling concept.

IV

Regardless of how confused the vision of a safety valve was in the formulation of land policy, it was perfectly clear in Congressional rhetoric. Free land could, if unimpeded by monopoly, insure the stability of American institutions as well as individual mobility and opportunity. Land reformers considered the safety valve as an adjunct to the homestead ideal and its Jeffersonian source, and a gauge of American values. Perhaps even more clear were the consequences of the absence of free land. Free institutions would give way to Old World ills, fluidity and mobility would be stultified, prosperity would turn to widespread poverty, and harmony to strife. Although it was not always certain whether Congressmen urged reform as a present necessity or a future expedient, the most ardent reformers felt that the vanguard of a Europeanized America had already arrived.

The failure of land policy to embody this safety valve vision reflected its ambitious, unequivocal idealism, as well as
the incongruous land system. Since the existence of some free land did not qualify as an effective safety valve, the reformers' concept of a safety valve obviously transcended a mere outlet. Presumably, only the uncompromised reservation of arable land for the settler could attain the social vision that comprised the safety valve. Only with the security of homesteads assured could free land be of value to eastern society. Because idealists made little concerted effort to institute such fundamental reforms, it was inevitable that land policy would not embody this safety valve.

The absence of fundamental reform contrasted sharply with the ubiquity of reform rhetoric. Although few Congressmen articulated a comprehensive ideology of land and society, many sincerely adhered to the sanctity of the homestead settler. This reverence transcended the differences between idealists, interests of western development and the new generation of revisionists heralded by John Wesley Powell. The support for the settler also extended far in longevity. The 1904-1905 Public Lands Commission, for instance, sought, like its predecessor, to define and insure the rights of homesteaders to the largest possible extent. Also, reflecting the conservationist context, it advised against the enlargement of the Homestead to 640 acres, since it would controvert the original principle. Along with the occasional currency given to the effects of a closed frontier, these testimonials for the primacy of the actual settler indicated the existence of Congressional sympathy for land reform principles. Despite this sympathy, Congress often produced ineffective or self-defeating reform legislation.

The solution to this enigma may lie in the dual vision of the Homestead Act that existed from the Congressional perspective.
It was unlikely that Congress as a whole legislated for the settler envisioned by Julian, Holman and Payson. Instead, the settler as chief agent of development more than as the epitome and bulwark of American ideals predominated in the formulation of policy. The former conception shared with the latter the belief that the settler was a source of prosperity, but was not restricted by the devotion to homestead idealism. Thus, the homestead could exist alongside the corporation and work effectively towards the national good. Because this more utilitarian concept of the settler obviously guided Congressional action, the safety valve and its ideological connotation was a dissenting voice in land legislation. Nevertheless, it sobered enthusiasm for the generous bestowal of land to developers, contributed to the concern for the actual settler, and, perhaps most importantly, formulated a compelling warning on the consequences of the inaccessibility of the public lands.

The failure of land policy to embody the safety valve reinforced the urgency of these prophecies. It also contributed to the general acknowledgement that the safety valve did not produce the benefits it was supposed to. Because it did not insure the accessible, inexhaustible domain on which the safety valve was contingent, public land policy was an obvious target for criticism from all segments of American life.
NOTES FOR CHAPTER II


9David M. Ellis, "The Homestead Clause in Railroad Land Grants," Ellis, ed., Frontier, pp. 48-49; for the most comprehensive single work on land grants, see John Bell Sanborn, "Congressional Grants in Aid of Railways," University of Wisconsin Economics, Political Science and History Series, v. 2, no. 3 (Madison: Univ. of Wisc., 1891).
10CG, 40/2, p. 97.

11Ibid., 41/2, p. 424.

12Ibid., 41/2, p. 2095.

13Ibid., 41/2, appendix, pp. 113-115; for similar resolutions and bills, see CG, 40/2, pp. 637, 2380-86, 4428.

14Ibid., 41/2, pp. 3105-3107.

15Ibid., 41/2, p. 2361.

16Ibid., 41/2, Appendix, pp. 310-314.


24Smith, Virgin, pp. 196-200. Smith's work remains the best study of the image of the West, and there is little in this thesis to quarrel with him. The nature of his study, however, stresses the idealism surrounding the safety valve over the clear perception of its impotence.


26Ibid., p. 41; see also John Wesley Powell, "Institutions For the Arid Lands," Century Magazine, May 1890, pp. 111-112.


29 Ibid., p. xxviii.


33 Ibid., pp. 318, 329, 331.


37 Ibid., pp. 4781-4782.


42 Ibid.


CHAPTER III
PRODUCERS VS. MONOPOLISTS: WORKINGMEN, LAND REFORM
AND THE SAFETY VALVE

In the theoretical construct of a safety valve, the existence of free land is the requisite element and labor the primary beneficiary. Following from this, in the late nineteenth century, the failure of public land policy to embody the safety valve vision reinforced a concern for the land question within the larger sphere of labor reform. Post-war labor reform inherited the natural rights based ideology of the Jacksonian era, and agitated for the same causes as Congressional land reformers. Although the land issue was, for most workingmen, ancillary to other more immediate ones, reformist labor spokesmen insisted on the centrality of land to the condition of the laborer. The wide variety of explanations by economic theorists and labor spokesmen on the relation between land and labor, however, took into account workers' paramount interest in their immediate conditions.

The nature of the land-labor link was, in the main, abstract and not contingent upon the emigration of workingmen to the public domain. There was a noticeable paucity of concern for the actual mechanism of emigration, inviting the conclusion that the labor safety valve was a passive one. On only a few occasions did labor organizations develop schemes for emigration to the land, and these were rarely carried out. Actual emigration was, instead, subordinate to the re-establishment of opportunity for emigration. The process
of men taking advantage of their birthright to the soil was implicit in an ideal social order in which no obstacles stood between the individual and the land. Not coincidentally, the restoration of such an ideal society was the paramount objective of the larger labor reform movement. It was in the struggle to restore to labor its natural opportunities that the safety valve vision was most salient from labor's intellectual perspective.

The post-war situation confronted American labor with serious threats to its economic condition and social status. A perceived growing chasm in inequality between the privileged and the worker compounded the already strong resentment of "monopoly." The natural rights theory attributed these evils to the perversion of the natural order of society and the denial to labor of its natural opportunities. Because the right to the soil was chief among these opportunities, the ineffectiveness of the safety valve became part of labor's case against "capital." But, the ineffective safety valve was only one element in the dislocations of industrial society and only one explanation for the degradation of the laborer. Land monopoly was among a litany of crimes attributed to the oppressors of "the producing classes." All of these charges delivered at capital focused on the alleged theft from labor of its proper share of the wealth, and the enslavement of workers to a compulsory wage system. The interest of organized labor in the land question was thus inseparable from these general grievances.

This specific relevance of the land question to the worker contributed to the passivity of the labor safety valve. Land reform, to be compelling, had to guarantee the amelioration of the workers'
condition as wage earners, and not simply as potential settlers. The implied necessity of some workers going to the soil, as opposed to the dependence upon migration to thin out the labor supply, subordinated actual emigration to opportunity, and prevented the safety valve from becoming a mere agrarian emulation of farm life. Reformist labor spokesmen, even while encouraging emigration, realized that most wage-earners could not or would not leave their occupations and become farmers. Consequently, those schemes for emigration actually formulated usually included appeals for financial aid or plans for colonization, both of which were strategies accounting for the impediments to emigration. An even more common result was the statement of the land question as an issue somehow providential to the immediate condition of the wage-earner.

Throughout the post-war era, labor spokesmen emphasized land as a gauge for the freedom and independence of the worker. It was a canon of belief that total monopolization of the land would force workers to sell their labor cheaply and on the terms of their employer. Whether labor reformers fought land monopoly as a tactic to abolish the wage system is a debatable point. William Sylvis, Terence Powderly and other prominent spokesmen explicitly desired the co-operation of labor and capital in the same hands, but often acted more for the improvement, not the abolition of wages. Abolition of the wage system, it will be seen, became an increasingly unrealistic demand and somewhat superfluous to improving workers' conditions. Nevertheless, there was no ambiguity in the belief that land monopoly portended the oppression of labor and the establishment of a social order antithetical to America's free institutions.
Exponents of land reform pursued at least two lines of reasoning in their rationalization of land's relevance for workers. In the first, land was, under free conditions, the last resort for the dissatisfied worker or the man who desired to become his own employer. Invariably, this "outlet" function for the land was coupled with ideological overtones of labor's rights, and the effective subversion of them by land monopoly. For example, labor editor and patriarch John Swinton, who had emigrated to Kansas in the 1850s, observed the monopoly, unemployment, immigration, and labor violence on the 1890s and mused that "there would still be hope for everybody if good land were, as it was in the days not far off, within everybody's reach." Secondly, reformers stated the significance of land to labor by the implications of its absence. The permanent subordination of labor to capital, the unmitigated impact of labor-saving machinery and immigrant competition, and the rise of an American aristocracy were all raised as inevitable results of an exhausted or inaccessible domain.

Significantly, both of these explanations of land's relevance for labor focused on the actual impotence of the safety valve. Although reformers never surrendered to a new "unnatural" order, they clearly perceived that the natural order, of which the safety valve was an integral element, had broken down. Because the safety valve was both a part of the natural order and a mechanism for its insurance, the crises facing the safety valve and the crises facing labor were intimately related.
In the wake of the Civil War, American labor again became a more active and militant force in the social and political arena. While pure and simple unionism, with its strategy of wage consciousness and immediate objectives would grow predominant in the post-war decades, the reformist tradition remained strong within a broad-based movement known generically as Labor Reform. The principles of Labor Reform were remarkably consistent despite their application by city and state trade assemblies, radical intellectuals, farmer organizations, and a few trade unions. The philosophical foundation for the movement was summarized by an 1868 resolution of the National Labor Congress Executive Board: "Resolved, that the producing classes, agricultural, mining, mechanical, intellectual and moral, are the most important portions of all communities; and that all distributors, financiers and statesmen, together with their aids, civil and military, are of secondary importance . . ."2 The goal of Labor Reform, stated simply, was the reassertion of the proper relationship between producers and non-producers. American labor leaders, it should be noted, unlike their European Marxist counterparts, did not believe that this would be achieved as the violent culmination of a long historical process, but as the simple readjustment of laws and institutions to an assumed, pre-existent, natural order. Labor Reform spokesmen attempted to convince workers of the solidarity of the producing classes. An 1866 editorial in the Workingman's Advocate, the primary organ of the movement, stressed that "a wrong done to one is a wrong done to the whole, and must be understood and so treated if we ever obtain our rights."3 The
movement's objectives reflected this all-inclusive vision of the fate of producers.

Labor Reform stressed the relevance of the land question, currency reform, co-operatives, and the eight-hour day to all workers largely because of this broad ideology. In addition, the land question fit squarely into the producer-nonproducer dichotomy because it was considered an element in the improper balance of forces. Labor Reform attributed salient social and economic inequality to "class legislation," oppressive organizations of capital, and the Old World tendency toward aggregated wealth. The public land system, by fostering land monopolies, created all these evils. Consequently, the Labor Reform movement advocated land reform, often echoing Congressional land reformers and rallying round their standards. In particular, the struggle against railroad land grants caught the attention of Labor Reformers. Spokesmen and journals lambasted the evils of corporations "stealing" the public lands and—especially as illustrated in the 1868-69 Cherokee Neutral Tract incident—driving settlers from their homes with Government consent.4

The National Labor Union (NLU), the chief organizational embodiment of Labor Reform between 1866 and 1870, gave consistent support to land reform in its annual platform. The NLU resolved that Congress had no right to grant the public lands to corporations, and that the domain was a "sacred trust" to be parceled out to actual settlers only. Continued monopolization of the land, warned the 1869 platform, would result in "the subversion of free institutions, as also the social and political well-being of the laboring masses."5
The NLU's declarations on land reform owed much to William H. Sylvis, who was, until his death in July 1869, the key figure in the International Iron Molder's Union and the NLU. Sylvis often expressed almost agrarian sentiments for the virtues of life on the soil, and was steeped in the natural rights tradition. "Wherever we find the land in the hands of the few," he wrote in 1868, "we find the masses of people reduced to poverty and want; and wherever we find the rights and principles of the people equal, and the land divided fairly among all, we find prosperity, contentment and happiness." On other occasions, Sylvis stressed the opportunity to emigrate as a measure of workers' freedom. He struck a note of monopolistic conspiracy in an 1867 speech to Boston workingmen: "Capital feels unsafe waging war against labor so long as workingmen have access to the land. The object is to get possession of it and thus cut off all retreat." Perhaps the best summary of Sylvis's philosophy was expressed in an 1869 editorial:

The Land is God's Bank and the only cheques upon it which are honored are those drawn by the hands of Labor .... Wisely used, its funds are inexhaustible for any amount properly withdrawn increases rather than lessens its wealth-producing power .... The best interests of the community yet demands that those laborers who are best able to perform such duties, should now use the land fully for the common good of us all.

Land monopoly thus denied men their natural opportunities. It was, in other words, another nail in the coffin of the proud, independent worker who was a dying species in industrial America. The objective of land reform was to provide the opportunity for emigration—an exercise of the worker's freedom—and preserve that critical link between land and labor on which the status of the worker and the prosperity of the nation depended.
Aside from Sylvis, the NLU and the larger Labor Reform movement mustered wide support for land reform. The NLU's emphasis on producer solidarity invited diverse interests, including farmers and agrarian reformers, into its ranks. The Union's official organ monitored the establishment of the Washington, D.C. "Pre-emptor's" Union, and the New York Free Land League Committee. The latter organization, sponsored by the multifarious Frenchman, George Francis Train, developed a "Workingmen's Free Land Chart" which anticipated the placing of all land in the hands of cultivators by 1900.9 Despite the quirks of each group, all adhered to the fundamental principles that no corporation should get between Congress and the settler, and that land properly belonged only to the laborer who gave it value.

Another strain of Labor Reform was the intellectual utopianism of the Connecticut, later the New England, and National Labor Reform League. Labor historian David Montgomery has dubbed this collection of well-known activists "sentimentalists" whose alliance with the NLU pushed the latter towards a "higher and holier than all trade unions" philosophy.10 The Reform League shared with the NLU the producing class rhetoric and natural rights theory, and held to an even stronger condemnation of "usury."11 By 1873, when the NLU had already perished, the Reform League went as far as to declare that all property in land was wrong and must be abolished before the producing classes could be ascendant.12

The chief land theorist for the Reform League was Joshua K. Ingalls, a self-styled philosophical anarchist who was one of the original ante-bellum National Reformers.13 Ingalls presented his
views before the 1883 Senate Committee exploring the relations of
labor and capital, and in an 1885 tract, Social Wealth. Testifying
before the Senate committee, Ingalls represented the National Land
Reform Association, which was in spirit and substance, George Henry
Evans' NRA. The Association's memorial called for the reservation
of the public lands for homesteads only and reiterated the appeal
for ownership based solely on occupancy. In presenting the
Association's demands, Ingalls articulated the philosophical as­
sumptions of Labor Reform: "Only a return to natural law, a scien­
tific adjustment of the primal agents in production, land and labor,
and the restoration of man to his natural environment, and freedom
of action therein can effect any salutary change [in the relations
of capital and labor]." Ingalls' personal philosophy became a
total hostility to ownership in property. In Social Wealth, he
reiterated the premises of man's common birthright to land, and
land as the basis of all wealth, and concluded: "Ownership of
land is sovereignty over the domain and whoever owns the land upon
which a people live and toil is their sovereign and ruler." Although
Ingalls harbored fundamental disagreements with Henry George's
theories, his work recalled agrarian antecedents and was similar to
George's analysis. Both theorists agreed on what workers would
lose should access to land fall beyond their grasp.

Agrarianism, or the utopian vision of communitarian life on
the soil, was by no means dead in the post-war decades. William
West, Lewis A. Hine, Joseph R. Buchanan, Lewis Masquerier, and NRA
counder Thomas A. Devyr continued to propagate their ideas. Hine
presented a minority report on the NLU's 1868 platform, dissenting
from the statement that the money monopoly was the "parent" of all others. The root of all monopoly, he asserted, was "in the soil," and money would always be oppressive so long as there was land monopoly. Masquerier wrote an 1877 polemic worshipping George Henry Evans and illustrating the feasibility of township democracies for industrializing America; Thomas Devyr and Joseph Buchanan were more guarded in their statements that utopian communities could provide remedies for industrial maladies.

The influence of agrarianism was not directly felt in post-war land reform. Instead, reformers emulated the independence of farm life and the virtues of egalitarian communities without advocating their establishment. This indirect influence could be seen in the work of Edward T. Peters, whose pivotal writings harkened back to Evans, anticipated Henry George, and resembled the contemporary idealism of Congressmen Julian and Holman. In an 1870 lecture, Peters joined the attack on railroad grants, pleading the case of the "poor man" who may some day wish to claim his inheritance. "Where is it that we chiefly find dependence and servility," he asked

but among the landless poor of our great cities furthest away from our public domain? ... Reserved as homes for the masses, the public lands are a guarantee for physical comfort, intelligence, self-respect and true manly and womanly character in millions of our people, and through those things they are a guarantee for the performance of our republican institutions. On the other hand, if turned over to the ownership of vast monopolies, they will constitute the greatest danger to our freedom as a nation.

Peters, however, entertained doubts whether simply reserving the lands, or even workmen becoming farmers was a sufficient safety valve for an ideal society. He expressed these doubts at the 1870 NLU Congress when he suggested an alternative to the Union's usual land
resolution. He proposed the reservation of one-fourth of all remaining land for artisans and mechanics; rather than becoming farmers and thus surrendering their livelihood, these men would obtain enough land to pursue their trades profitably. Critics denounced Peters' plan as "purely agrarianism" (which was hardly accurate) and overwhelmingly defeated it.²¹

Still later, in a series of 1871 articles, Peters found a new relevance of land for workers in the theories of John Stuart Mill. Peters again stressed the insufficiency of reserving farm land for potential settlers, and further noted the irreversible urbanization of the United States. Concluding that the public lands would be of little value to the urban masses as long as there was private property in land, Peters espoused Mill's "unearned increment" theory of land rent and a land tax that Henry George would soon popularize.²²

Peters' skepticism on the relevance of land reform to the urban laborer was not uncommon. He did not repudiate the theoretical basis of land and labor reform, but sought a more tangible link. As the Labor Reform movement succumbed to the depression of 1873-79, the attractiveness of its philosophical foundation also suffered. The depression underscored the vulnerability of workingmen to economic dislocation and re-emphasized the primacy of wages and conditions. Although land reform continued to be a salient concern for labor reformers, workingmen found it most compelling in terms of their immediate demands. The experiences of Terence Powderly and the Knights of Labor illustrated this emerging tendency.
The Knights of Labor inherited the philosophical position of the pre-depression Labor Reform movement and with it (or despite it) carried the American labor movement to its apogee of power up to that time. The Knights, like the NLU, had an all-inclusive "producer" membership, but, unlike the NLU, was in its early years an effective organ of trade union interests. After several successfully-prosecuted strikes in 1885 swelled its membership with rural producers and unskilled labor, the trade union presence declined, sapping its strength. Most eventually bolted to the newly-organized rival, the American Federation of Labor (AF of L). The Knights then drifted into the hands of a militantly anti-trade clique, became the industrial appendage of the National Farmer's Alliance and Industrial Union, and began a slow death into the 1890s. The split made permanent and institutionalized the long-standing schism in American labor between reformist and pure and simple unionism. Thus, the Knights of Labor was from its inception an unstable balance between broad reformist principles and trade unions concerned with ameliorating conditions within the existing wage system.

Terence Powderly, who presided over the Knights from 1879 to 1893, personified this duality and endured its consequences. Historians have criticized Powderly's leadership as vacillating and out of step with the movement he led. Although he was by no means inimical to the trade unions which formed the initial core of the Knights, Powderly's anti-strike philosophy and overall passivity was anachronistic in the militant 1880s. Powderly shared with Labor Reformers a vision of the solidarity and the supremacy of the producing classes, yet often resigned himself to the expedients of working
within the existing system. Powderly was perhaps a tragic transitional figure, whose role as Grand Master Workman of the Knights was often no more than a faint voice of conscience. Among the reform causes he championed, temperance, co-operation and the land question were paramount. Although the Knights occasionally acquiesced in adopting measures reflecting Powderly's views, his tenure was usually spent in frustrated effort to make the land question compelling for workers.

Powderly exhausted the supply of theoretical explanations why the status of land was significant for labor. He often gave consideration to the prospect of assisting the unemployed to the land, but could not overcome his own doubts of its feasibility (see part III, this chapter). He was a consistent advocate of natural rights doctrine and a firm believer that land monopoly directly impacted on the condition of the urban wage-earner.

With these rationalizations, Powderly was entirely consistent with the principles ostensibly guiding the Knights of Labor. The Knights, in their secret and ritualistic first decade, had adopted the reformist preamble of the defunct Industrial Brotherhods. The first important General Assembly in 1878 endorsed this preamble which embodied the producer vs. monopolist mentality. Included in the preamble was a demand for the reservation of public lands for actual settlers. In his book, Thirty Years of Labor, Powderly rationalized the inclusion of this (modest) land reform resolution: "It was not that there was a dread of scarcity of land that this demand was made . . . it briefly expressed the sentiments of those who endeavored to attract the attention of the wage workers to greater
issues than the wage question." Powderly continued his effort to draw attention to higher issues, especially co-operation and land reform, in later addresses to the Knights General Assemblies.

His reverence for the independent producer and association of land with the survival of this ideal was at the core of his plaintive appeals for attention to the land question. In urging the land question as the "all-absorbing" issue around which all others revolved, he told the 1882 Assembly that "if I ever come to believe in individual ownership in land, I must, in order to be consistent, believe that the man who owns the land owns the people who live on it as well." Land monopoly, he warned, would enslave even the wage-earner at home and render the labor question "harder of solution than it is at present."

The land reform planks which the Knights did adopt were, in contrast to Powderly's urgency, moderate and non-binding. They were in fact the same demands that were ubiquitous in political platforms and public opinion and did not incite the Knights to activism until 1886. At that time, the Knights became involved in the most popular land reform movement, the campaign against alien landlordism. At the Cleveland General Assembly in February 1886, the Knights established a three man lobby in Washington, and the Special Committee on Legislation recommended a plethora of land reform causes. The lobby worked for an end to tenancy, reservation of land for settlers, taxation of land held in parcels over 160 acres, forfeiture of railroad grants and unpatented lands, removal of fences from the public domain, and restriction of alien ownership in the territories. In addition, the Knights spearheaded a mass petition campaign for the restriction of alien ownership.
This burst of political activity coincided not only with nation-wide agitation over landlordism, but also with the transition of the Knights into a less pure and simple, more politicized organization. The "Great Upheaval" of 1885-1886 diluted the strength of the Knights' trade union membership and was followed by a polarization of reformist and pure and simple unionism. The pure and simple bodies deliberately excluded attention to the land question. As Samuel Gompers told an 1882 convention of the Federation of Trade and Labor Unions, the land question did not control wages; wages controlled everything else. The activity of the Knights, in contrast, was less wage conscious than before. In this light, it does not seem likely that the 1886 land reform campaigns represented the sudden acceptance of Powderly's rationale for the primacy of the land question. In fact, Powderly commented repeatedly in later years on the opposition with which he always contended in his efforts to "take advanced ground on the question of land monopoly."

II

The labor upheavals of the late 1870s and 1880s, in conjunction with the salience of landlordism, reinvigorated land and labor theory. Although the new wave of theory was consistent with the natural rights tradition and still reflected classical economic origins, it was clearly applicable to an urban-industrial context. In this sense, the works of Henry George and his contemporaries were more compelling to the wage-earner. George's *Progress and Poverty* was the focal point for discussion of the land question after 1880, and even when other reform theorists dissented from his remedies, as many did, they could not escape his analysis.
Of George's contemporaries, William Godwin Moody was perhaps the most noteworthy. In 1879 Moody traveled extensively throughout the West, building a case against the evils of land monopoly. His 1883 tract, Land and Labor in the United States was influential and his testimony before the 1883 Senate Committee on Education and Labor reappeared in government reports throughout the decade. Moody traced the problems of labor to a conspiratorial coincidence of technological unemployment, cheap immigrant labor and land monopoly which created a suicidal competition for employment among workers. He was particularly critical of the bonanza farms of the Red River Valley which, he asserted, drove small farmers out of markets and denied opportunity to thousands of would-be producer-settlers. Rather than emphasizing the inaccessibility of land to workers, Moody believed that land monopoly drove small farmers into the pestilent, overcrowded cities, thus compounding the workers' plight. Land reform, achieved by proliferating smaller parcels of land, would encourage mass return to the farm and properly redistribute natural opportunities.

While Moody warned of land monopoly "planting upon our soil a social system that is in utter and direct conflict with all our institutions," W. A. Phillips in Land, Labor and Law (1886) detailed the effect of monopoly from antiquity to the insidious establishment of an American aristocracy. Both polemicists envisioned a safety valve that would restore to labor its natural opportunities and, hence, its proper position superior to capital. In his remedies for the oppression of labor, Phillips clearly reflected classical economic as well as natural rights sources: "Free facility ought to
be given for the exchange of occupation, as a necessary condition of independence, and any man should be able to cultivate his share of the soil when he desired to do so." Conversely, he assigned the impoverishment of the working class to two causes which impeded operation of free laws: land monopoly and usurious profits of accumulated capital. Together they robbed the worker of his natural opportunities and portended cataclysmic change for America. Like many of his contemporaries, including Frederick Jackson Turner, Phillips pondered the impact of a wholly appropriated (or monopolized) public domain: "When all unoccupied land is taken and a dense population confronts us, the lines of society will grow more inflexible and the disparity of condition will be greater and more clearly defined." Such a situation would result in either: 1) the destruction of popular freedom; 2) the finding of peaceful remedies to secure perfect equality and rights; or 3) the overthrow of the aristocracy by anarchy and violence. For Phillips, if an effective safety valve did not aid in restoring a naturally ordered society, drastic change was inevitable.

Henry George, like Moody and Phillips, combined classical economics and natural rights perspectives on land and labor reform with an appreciation for the problems of an urban-industrial society. There is a temptation to view George's theories as an innovative departure from those of his predecessors. His ideas, though, were clearly consistent with those of Sylvis, Powderly and others who tried to draw tangible links between the land and labor problems. George also saw in his remedies to the land problem the fulfillment of a larger social vision. His apparent modernity rose from the
application of his theories to urban property and his concern with socially-generated inequality. His doctrines suggested cures to improve the masses' conditions. Because this improvement rose from the readjustment in the relations between labor and nonproducers and the weakening of economic middlemen, George fit squarely in the reformist current that propounded the labor safety valve.

In a restatement of Labor Reform philosophy, George wrote in 1887: "That what is called the labor question is simply another name for the land question; that all ills which labor suffers spring from the appropriation as private property of the element without which labor is useless—becomes evident upon any honest attempt to trace these ills to their sources." George differed from most of his antecedents (save notably Edward T. Peters) in his explanation of this relationship. In Our Land and Land Policy (1871) and more explicitly in his seminal work, Progress and Poverty (1879), George confirmed the suspicions that land and labor faced a common threat. He argued that rent from speculative land holding absorbed all of society's material progress, depressed profits and wages, and caused the frequent (and, hence, avoidable) "paroxysms" of industry. Following from this, the cure for all social ills was the confiscation of rent for benevolent use by the state via what became known as the "single tax."^40

George's doctrines served as a touchstone for all contemporary land and labor theory and were often misrepresented. Many labeled the single tax a measure for the nationalization of the land—an alternative George denounced in Progress and Poverty.^41 The 1883 Senate Committee on the relations of labor and capital
asked many of its witnesses their opinions of George's ideas and grilled George himself in extended interrogation. In his testimony, George spoke of land monopoly in terms of the ability of workers to employ themselves and in terms of the level of wages. He, like his predecessors, obviously emulated the independent producer, yet recognized the primacy of wages to most workers. In clarifying the relation between land and wages, he borrowed from both the natural rights tradition and classical economics:

Where there is free access to the soil wages in any employment cannot sink lower than that which, upon an average, a man can make by applying himself to the soil—to those natural opportunities of labor which it affords. When the soil is monopolized and free access to it ceases, the wages may be driven to the lowest point on which labor can live.42

In developing his doctrines, George considered land in the abstract form, but he applied his ideas to the status of America's public domain. Monopoly on the public domain and in California was in fact a wellspring for his initial analysis. His pronouncements on the inevitable results of unreformed land policy echoed Julian and Holman and anticipated Frederick Jackson Turner. George articulated a clear vision of what free land meant for American society. In 1871, he wrote that America had striven to be wealthy and great through administration of its public lands. "But will it be as great in all that constitutes true greatness?" he asked. "Will it be such a good country for the poor man?"43 Rather than the mindless munificence which had characterized land policy, George recommended that the land be distributed to actual settlers only in 40-80 acre parcels which, he believed, should "give every man an opportunity of employing his own labor."44
In later years, he became decidedly pessimistic in his appraisals of land policy and emphasized the need for retrenchment. Besides affirming the existence of a serious tenancy problem in an 1886 article, he warned of the increased pressures in American cities, especially from immigration, with the near-exhaustion of the domain. In *Progress and Poverty*, he cited the existence of the open domain as contributing to "[a] ll that we are proud of in the American character, all that makes our conditions and institutions better than those of older countries . . ." With the domain nearly gone, George concluded, "[t] he republic has entered upon a new era, an era in which the monopoly of land will tell with accelerating effect."

George's concept of land was, however, all-inclusive and his analysis applicable to much more than the public lands. He adhered to the conception of land as common property, and defined it as "all natural opportunities or forces;" it was this phrase of course, and not simply "the public lands" that dominated labor and land reform in the nineteenth century. George's theories proved more politically influential in regard to urban property holding and most popular in Great Britain. In the 1880s and 1890s, a broad-based "single tax movement," which attracted intellectuals and reformers, propagated his theories. Adherents to the movement advocated that the paramount benefit of the single tax solution was the elimination of inequality. Land, in the abstract connotation, represented all opportunity, and its monopolization caused all involuntary poverty. The consistency of this reasoning with natural rights theory should be evident. B. O. Flower's journal, the Arena,
was virtually a single tax organ in the 1890s and early 1900s. A number of writers associated single tax reform with the re-establishment of a nation of independent producers and the elimination of "Old World" tenancy.49

By applying George's doctrines to an urban-industrial context, the single tax movement was not always circumscribed by traditional safety valve concerns. For example, S. B. Riggen defended the relevance of the single tax for the urbanite in 1894 by denying the necessity of emigration. The single tax (applied to urban property as well as western monopolies) did not anticipate the transformation of artisans, mechanics and professional men into agriculturalists, he clarified. "It would simply result in a natural and free subdivision of Labor, wherein each person could choose the kind of employment for which he was best suited or qualified, and in which he saw the best opportunity for promoting individual welfare."50 This of course had been the position of Edward Peters in 1870 and was an adaptation of the safety valve to the urban, "closed frontier" world of the 1890s. Similarly, Louis Post, George's later-life protege and spokesman for New York City's Central Labor Union, told an incredulous Senate Committee in 1883 that the single tax did not necessarily envision the resurrection of the independent producer. "Independence" of a different sort, he asserted, would come from a labor market favoring higher wages. "Wages as such are not objectionable; it is the amount of the wages that workingmen object to."51 Such an application of land reform to the level of wages was a predictable revision of ideology, but obviously represented a dilution of the original safety valve vision. Nevertheless, it did address
the usual concern with the status, condition and independence of the worker.

The single tax movement quickly grew beyond George himself. After his encouraging second-place finish in the 1886 New York City mayoralty election, George's followers formed a permanent New York United Labor Party in 1887. Also in 1887, the movement acquired support from grassroots "Land and Labor Clubs," its single tax title, a weekly journal, and a diverse following. With Father Edward McGlynn, a Catholic priest excommunicated for his single tax beliefs, George also formed the Anti-Poverty Society. The object of the Society was, according to its platform of principles to spread, by such peaceful and lawful means as may be found most desirable and efficient, a knowledge of the truth that God has made ample provision for all men during their residence upon earth, and that involuntary poverty is the result of the human laws that allow individuals to claim as private property that which the Creator has provided for the use of all.52

The Anti-Poverty Society, despite its lofty principles, proved ephemeral. A series of schisms over ideology squeezed out the socialist contingent and, in 1888, George himself from the Society and the United Labor Party.53 Both organizations survived a few more years and adhered religiously to George's doctrines.

The United Labor Party in fact ran a candidate in the 1888 presidential election on a platform reminiscent of George's personal campaign of 1886. The platform rested on the familiar principle of man's right to "the use of the common bounties of nature," and also included (unlike George's campaign) strong allusions to the safety valve of the public lands. "We see access to farming denied to labor," the Party resolved, "except on payment of exorbitant rent or acceptance
of mortgage burdens, and labor, thus forbidden to employ itself, driven into the cities. 54 The statement was a logical application of the single tax principle to traditional land reform rhetoric. In the course of the campaign, the United Labor Party attempted to merge with a more traditional Chicago-based farmer and labor party (which espoused a full slate of political, economic and social reforms in the interest of "the wealth-producers"), but the latter declined to join on a single tax platform. 55 In the election, both parties fared poorly outside their areas of origin. 56 The United Labor Party of New York expired soon afterwards, but the single tax movement gained strength in intellectual circles and in local reform movements.

The campaign that spawned the single tax movement warrants special consideration, since it indicated the attractiveness of Henry George to New York City wage-earners. George accepted the candidacy for mayor late in September, 1886 after a petition drive garnered 36,000 signatures. The platform and the party were clearly emanations of George's philosophy (applied to urban property), but the campaign was more of a mass rally against privilege and monopoly. Naturally, the movement frightened propertied interests. The New York Times denied, however, that George's candidacy posed a threat to property. Its editorials commented that even should George win, he would be powerless to implement his reforms. The paper also stated, with probable accuracy, that workingmen were ignorant of his theories. 57 George's candidacy was largely symbolic for New York's workingmen, not theoretical. It attracted all elements of dissidents, reform and labor groups, and even involved the usually non-ideological, apolitical
Samuel Gompers in the party organization. "Political action had no appeal for me," Gompers wrote in his autobiography, "but I appreciated the movement as a demonstration of protest."58

Workers accepted George as a symbol of protest against their capitalist nemesis and, in the process, misrepresented a canon of George's philosophy. He stated explicitly in Progress and Poverty that "the antagonism of interest is not between labor and capital, as is popularly believed, but is in reality between labor and capital on one side and land ownership on the other..."59 Workers clearly did not perceive the distinction between capitalist and landowner; the value of his ideas was symbolic. He explained logically, and not only to workers, why inequality was so pervasive and, more germane to this thesis, why the land question was significant for labor.

III

There was an obvious consistency in the rationalizations of land's relevance for workers. The inaccessibility of labor's natural opportunities on the land was a forecast and an explanation of the wage-earner's unsatisfactory wages and condition. Although the necessity of emigration was superfluous in these rationalizations (and often a liability), labor spokesmen occasionally addressed the feasibility and means of emigration.

When labor spokesmen encouraged emigration, they were concerned with more than an emergency outlet from overstocked labor markets or pestilent cities. Migration represented an exercise of freedom, taking advantage of natural opportunity, or was a means of establishing a co-operative society of independent producers.
Significantly, labor reformers throughout the era recognized the impediments to active emigration. Not only did land monopoly render the public domain inaccessible to most workers, but also many workers did not wish to leave their occupations for a life on the soil. Because of this, the encouragement of emigration—the active element in the operation of the safety valve—usually included an appeal for government aid.

The frequency with which demands for government aid accompanied the encouragement of emigration supports historian Clarence Danhof's research on the prohibitive costs of migration. Perhaps more importantly, it represented a compromise of the free migration assumption inherent in political economic thought and American tradition. From labor's perspective, this compromise was not difficult to justify. Land monopoly, fostered in part by public land policy, hindered free migration. Appeals for assistance did not, therefore, represent labor's surrender to omnipotent monopoly; they were demands for equity and the restoration to labor what naturally belonged to it. This tendency could be seen in the resolutions of William Sylvis and Terence Powderly before their respective organizations. Sylvis prefaced his 1868 demand for $25 million for assistance to emigration and other programs to benefit labor with a synopsis of Congressional generosity to "the special benefit of railroads and other monopolies ..." Powderly's 1885 demand for congressional aid was likewise founded on the past generosity to corporations, and on the belief that, in the future, "the duty of the government must be to build up and guard the interests of the common people."

Powderly was also haunted by the fear that workingmen would not emigrate if given the opportunity, or would prove incapable of
being successful farmers. On several occasions, he sought to assuage his own doubts by declaring that government assistance would ferret out those workers who would and could become successful farmers:

I have heard it said that if land was offered to men who live in large cities they would not avail themselves of the opportunity to go upon it and make homes for themselves. I admit the truth of the assertion, and go a step further and say it would do them no good to go upon it unless they had some assurance of succeeding. The majority of men who live in large cities are not adapted to the life which a farmer must lead, and the minority, no matter how well adapted they may be to such a life, may be lacking in the experience necessary to the successful operation of the farm. But whether experienced or not, if the most careful, thrifty man be placed on the farm, admitting that the land, dwelling, barn and out-houses are given to him free of charge, if he is lacking in the capital necessary to defray the cost of implements, seed and stock, he will fail unless help is extended to him in this direction also . . . . There are in all of our large cities and towns a number of men and families who would make excellent farmers if they were provided with sufficient means to give them a start in agricultural life, but they are deficient in means, and they must remain to compete with others in our crowded centers in the race for life.62

Powderly's doubts were not unique. Edward Peters' program for "artisan homesteads" took into consideration the reluctance of workers to become farmers. Most labor reformers however, maintained that many workers (enough to balance the labor markets) would take advantage of their birthright if given free opportunity or the assistance to do so.

The most explicit confessions that workingmen could not afford to emigrate came in the shadow of the 1873-79 depression. The International Workingman's Association (the American affiliate of the First International) sent a memorial to sympathetic Congressman Benjamin F. Butler in December 1873, urging support of a doomed bill
giving emigrating workmen free transportation and one year's subsis­
tence. The IWA stressed the benefits of such a scheme to the national
wealth, as well as for the "starving, homeless citizens." In 1877-
78, Butler was among three Representatives who presented bills to
the House for assisting workingmen to the public domain. While
Butler proposed an elaborate plan for the establishment of military
settlements on the frontier, another Civil War political general,
Nathaniel P. Banks, proposed the establishment of a government funded
private corporation to assist emigrants. Both bills failed to garner
substantial support.

The third bill was the brainchild of Pennsylvania Democrat-
Greenbacker Hendrick B. Wright. Before its eventual defeat in
1879, Wright's "plan for permanent relief" of the workers was in
the public arena for two years and stirred widespread agitation
for government assisted emigration. The bill proposed $500
Treasury loans to families with property valued at less than $300
who wished to take up a homestead. The loan, to be repaid at 3
percent interest over ten years, would secure the emigrant's owner­
ship of the property. According to Wright's scheme, the Treasury
would appropriate up to $10 million in this manner. From 1877 to
1879 Wright flooded the House with memorials of support from major
cities, labor organizations and state legislatures.

In addition to Wright's personal lobbying effort, represent­
atives from several labor organizations and political parties embraced
the scheme in word and spirit before the House Select Committee
investigating the depression. Unlike Wright's own rhetoric, which
was consciously moderate and "respectful," labor spokesmen made
belligerent appeals for equity. Anticipating modern historical research, Peter Logan, "a representative of the working classes," told the Select Committee:

Now you have a homestead law today, but what use is it? . . . We can't go to the land, nor we can't get any place where the government land is, without having the means to go there. If the government desires the prosperity of the country it will appropriate a certain amount in order to bring out the working classes of the country and settle them on the land.69

The Workingmen's Industrial Association, in asking for $100 million for emigration of surplus labor, commented: "As we created all the wealth you can boast of, you would only be giving us our own."70

These reassertions of labor's rights should not obscure the probable source of agitation for this bill; the depression created genuine desperation in the ranks of labor and among the urban poor. Indeed, only as a depression relief measure could this bill have drawn such support from workers ordinarily opposed to emigration. The spectre of starvation and pauperism obviously subordinated demands for the reconstruction of society according to a natural order to the necessity of finding immediate relief. This realization brought workers, philanthropists and conservative urbanites into a rare consensus on the utility of a safety valve. More significant for historians was the association of a depression relief safety valve and appeals for assistance. Nineteenth century observers noted the opportunity offered by free land in hard times, but obviously found it unrealistic.

Although the depression experience planted seeds of skepticism over the feasibility of emigration, there were later manifestations of desire to colonize workingmen on the land. The most notable of these
rose from the ideal of a co-operative social order. One ostensible principle of the Knights of Labor was an "industrial reorganization which contemplate[d] placing land and machinery in the hands of the workers, to be used for their own benefit and not for capitalists." Acting on this principle, an unauthorized colony, the York Society of Integral Co-operators, was established in Missouri in 1883. Although the Knights espoused the merits of co-operative colonization, the Executive Board in 1884 reprimanded the founders of this ill-fated "propagandist styled" colony. Echoing the undercurrent of skepticism over the feasibility of colonization, the Board concluded from the fiasco "that in establishing our co-operative institutions we must not forget that men reared under the condition of wage service cannot jump at once to the much higher level of co-operation."  

Co-operative colonization was the focus of a later emigration scheme, developed by Socialist Party founder Eugene V. Debs. Reacting to the depression of the 1890s, Debs formulated a program of establishing Social Commonwealth colonies on the western lands. The plan infected the Social Democracy in 1898, precipitating a split in the party ranks. As late as 1908, the Socialist Party adopted a platform plank calling for the reservation of public lands for model state farms and other forms of "collective agricultural enterprises." The 1910 platform repudiated this demand, and banished the last trace of the safety valve from the Socialist program.

IV

Thus, while emigration or colonization was an attractive theoretical alternative, it proved singularly impractical as a tool
for labor reform, even as an emergency outlet. Since the monopoliza-
tion of the land was the key to labor's interest in the land question,
the inaccessibility of the land was a logical corollary to the
ideological basis of the safety valve. The discovery of the feeble-
ness of free migration no doubt compounded the urgency of the land
question, but its roots were in the ideological explanations of
land and labor. The status of the public domain in fact was a
rationalization for the problems facing workmen; the failure of
actual emigration vindicated the theoretical links between land
monopoly and the oppression of labor.

It is, unfortunately, a moot point whether the degradation
of American labor and an open, accessible domain could have co-existed.
As it was, the coincidence of land monopoly and a dissatisfied
working class generated a safety valve vision that found in it
more than coincidence. Because adherents to the vision accepted
at least the partial closure of land to workers, the uselessness of
emigration was only to be expected. The real importance of the
vision was its view of how American society had deviated from the
natural order and the consequences flowing from this disparity.

The influence of these perceptions on the temper of American
labor was ambiguous. On the one hand, by making aggregated capital
a scapegoat for the inaccessibility of land (among other problems),
the labor safety valve vision exacerbated social tension. This
hypothesis of course runs against the concept of the safety valve
as a pacifier of labor. On the other hand, the ideology with which
the safety valve was associated assumed that the natural conditions
in the United States favored labor. If monopoly and other unnatural
impediments could be removed, the safety valve and other assumed
forces would operate to assure labor its natural rights. This ideology steered labor towards reforming the system in the image of an ideal free society, rather than towards its overthrow. Thus, it seems that belief in a safety valve led to an activist, but not a revolutionary working class.
NOTES FOR CHAPTER III


4. See for example "Three Thousand Men in Arms!" WMA, 12 June 1869; letter of J. Wallace, WMA, 21 August 1869; "Not Another Acre," WMA, 14 June 1870.

5. "Platform of the Labor Reform Party," WMA, 11 September 1869; for proceedings of all NLU conventions, see Commons, Documentary, vol. IX, pp. 139-268.


15Ibid., p. 36.


17Ibid., pp. 165, 283; Ingalls reprobated George for his distinction between the capitalist and the landowner, insisting that "landholding is but the fulcrum of the capitalist lever."


20Reprinted in WMA, 25 June 1870.


22"The Land Question," WMA, 1, 8 July 1871.

23Gerald Grob, Workers and Utopia (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1961), pp. 39-43, argues that there was a wide cleavage between the pure and simple trade unions and the Knights; Norman J. Ware, The Labor Movements in the United States 1860-1895 (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1929), pp. 42, 81, 189 and passim, asserts that the Knights was a primarily pure and simple union until the "Great Upheaval;" Montgomery, Equality, pp. 181-185, refutes Grob's thesis, insisting that because the NLU was never vital to trade unions, there was no subsequent schism within its ranks.

24Ware, Labor, pp. xvi, 80-91, characterizes Powderly as a "windbag" who should have been ousted from the Knights; Grob, Workers, pp. 63-73, notes a hostility of the Knights rank-and-file to Powderly's leadership; Vincent J. Falzone, Terence Powderly: Middle Class Reformer (Washington, D.C.: United Press of America, 1973), passim, supports the assessment of Powderly as vacillating, and emphasizes his personal conflict between careers and alternatives.
25 T. V. Powderly, Thirty Years of Labor (Columbus, Ohio: Excelsior Publishing House, 1890), p. 335; "Constitutions," Proceedings of the First General Assembly, 1878 (Terence V. Powderly Papers, 1864-1937, Catholic University of America Archives; microfilm ed., Glen Rock, N. J.: Microfilming Corporation of America, 1975), reel 67; Ware Labor, pp. 11-18, argues that the preamble was never the Knights' guiding principle.

26 Proceedings of the Sixth General Assembly, 1882, pp. 282-283, Powderly Papers, reel 67. Powderly was not consistent in denouncing private property; his favored remedy was land limitation.

27 Ibid.; Powderly, Thirty Years, pp. 338, 362. Powderly tried to assuage workers' reluctance to actively support land reform, urging them in 1882 not to be deterred by the "communist" label, and in his memoirs to ignore the "hayseed" stigma.


31 T. V. Powderly to E. Kimball, Esq., 11 December 1889, Powderly Papers, reel 53; Powderly, Thirty Years, p. 340.


34 Ibid., pp. 979, 988; Moody, Land, pp. 76, 290-291.


36 Phillips, Labor, p. 443.

37 Ibid., p. 468.

38 Ibid., p. 23.


George, Progress, p. 340.


Ibid., pp. 99.


George, Progress, pp. 326-327.

Ibid., p. 136.


Young, Single Tax, p. 108.


Labor Party anticipated the "traditional" land reform demands of the 1892 People's Party, which called for the reservation of land, the "natural source of all wealth" and "the heritage of the people."

56Fine, Parties, p. 55.

57"Mr. Henry George," "The Labor Candidate and Platform," NYT, 30 September 1886, 25 September 1886; labor historian Selig Perlman, in Commons, et. al., History, vol. II, p. 449, states that "the single tax was hardly understood by workingmen."


59George, Progress, p. 191; he exemplified the Labor Reform view when he told the 1883 Senate Committee that the conflict was not between labor and capital, but capital (a tool of labor) and monopoly. Report Upon Relations, vol. I, p. 467.

60Commons, Documentary, vol. IX, p. 188; also Sylvis, Speeches, pp. 316-319.


63"They Want to Go West," Troy (New York) Morning Whig, 8 January 1874.


67Ibid., pp. 3127, 3305, 3530.

68"Aid For the Unemployed."

70 Ibid., p. 89; see also pp. 47, 51, 656-665.


72 Ibid., pp. 650, 646; Irwin Murray Marcus, "The Knights of Labor: Reform Aspects," (Ph.D. dissertation, Lehigh University, 1965), pp. 85-86, cites the efforts of several local assemblies to establish colonies or encourage emigration.


74 Ibid., p. 272.
CHAPTER IV

THE SAFETY VALVE AND THE IDEOLOGY OF MOBILITY

The impotence of the safety valve was also of great concern to eastern conservatives who attempted to cope with a myriad of challenges to America's revered "open" society. Few easterners denied that the safety valve was not functioning properly, but there was no consensus among economists, business spokesmen, charity officials and other urban interests on the implications of the ineffective safety valve. Although conservative organs did join at least rhetorically the popular appeal for reform of public land policy, the typical response to the ineffective safety valve was to endeavor to restore or even replace it. Since the circumscription of opportunity represented by the impotent safety valve did not impact directly upon eastern conservatives as it did on the labor force, conservatives did not accept the exigency of fundamental social or economic reform. Instead, the conservative response was dictated by a concern with the closed safety valve's visible effect on urban life, and the consequent implications for open society.

The mobility of its society was perhaps the most fundamental self-perception of nineteenth century America. It derived its strength from the contrast with the Old World, and was reinforced by the belief that America had all the attributes required by a free society. The political economist Francis Bowen articulated this
assumed truism in an 1856 treatise in which he applied the laws of classical economics to the United States. Bowen repudiated the theoretical association of wage level and population, declaring that if England offered alternatives for self-employment to its wage-earners, as America did, population control would not be necessary for higher wages. The standard for American labor was that of the independent laborer and the small capitalist, Bowen asserted. Men used wage work to accumulate capital and to pave the road to self-sufficiency. "If nothing better can be done," he wrote, "there is always the resource of removing to the West, and becoming a pioneer in the settlement of government lands."2

America's "mobility ideology"3 of course transcended the opportunity represented by free land. This larger ideology dictated the contours of the conservative safety valve vision. A paramount presupposition was that the abundant opportunity underlying a mobile society should not benefit all persons. Opportunity was a selective process that rewarded only the virtuous and industrious. There was no greater sin against individual character or society than indiscriminate charity. Free land, therefore, was available only at the expense of hard work and thrift. For this reason, the profoundly conservative New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor rejected assisted emigration for relieving the victims of the 1870s depression, since the West did not want the "chaff" of the East.4

A related assumption underlying the safety valve, derived from the belief that the industrious American could accumulate significant capital, was that the destitute could not emigrate to
the West. Mustering sufficient financial resources was an acid test of character. Horace Greeley warned in 1859 that without "liberal means," or $5,000, the settler would have to endure four to five years of self-denial to succeed in the West.\textsuperscript{5} After the Homestead Act made land free of cost, western boosters continued to discourage the physically, morally or financially unprepared from emigrating. An 1882 booster recommended that, with the utmost thrift, a man needed at least $500 ($1,000 if he had a family), along with youth, health, industry and determination to make a living.\textsuperscript{6}

There were other connections between the mobility ideology and the safety valve of free land. Land, as the fundamental element of production, lay at the heart of America's wealth and unbridled opportunity for its citizens. The ability to continue expanding westward was crucial to the expansion or preservation of opportunity. Expansion and the affording of opportunity to industrious settlers were mutually reinforcing processes which effected growth, production, consumption, and, hence, more wealth. Free land facilitated the geographic and occupational circulation of labor, which classical economists deemed so crucial to harmony and prosperity. From these hypotheses, it became apparent that the safety valve was an assumption of economic theory and, therefore, an indispensable element in the ideology of the existing socio-economic order. Not surprisingly, eastern conservatives found the safety valve theory difficult to repudiate, even when circumstances clearly revealed its ineffectiveness.
From the conservative perspective, the safety valve was a natural law which linked workers with available opportunities. Unlike labor reformers, conservatives generally made the distinction between the safety valve as a mechanism of distribution and as a synonym of opportunity itself. This carefully-tailored conception of a safety valve allowed a continued faith in the existence of opportunity, even while acknowledging the lack of mobility. Such a distinction became imperative when urbanites tried to cope with what appeared to be the symptoms of a "settled" society. Eastern cities were the most sensitive barometers for mobility and suffered the worst from its stultification. The subtle change in urban attitudes towards poverty, and the explicit recognition of chronic population pressures, indicated that either opportunity was in short supply or something obstructed the pursuit of opportunity.

Observers noted a plethora of sources for the stagnation of urban population, and persistently urged that available opportunities be seized upon. The New York Times incessantly deprecated immigrants and migrant workers for lingering in the city, and the city charities for not encouraging or compelling the idle to go to western or southern lands. "Let not another season go by," urged an 1861 editorial, "in which we have neglected the natural remedy Providence has afforded to this country for pauperism and the idleness of the able bodied and strong handed." The editors of the Times felt that the burden of urban population could only be removed by facilitating the "natural flow" of migration. Other urban newspapers shared this conviction, and co-operated with state governments
Similarly, the business organ, the Commercial and Financial Chronicle tempered its enthusiasm for immigration with the caveat that immigrants must not congregate—as they did—in cities. It advised immigrants in 1865 to "shake from your feet the dust of our great cities the moment you arrive, and without hesitation, without delay go westward or southward and invest what you have in broad acres of good land." For the next half-century, the Chronicle considered proper distribution of immigrants a necessary concomitant to unrestricted immigration. Efforts to facilitate the natural flow of population in fact constituted the chief conservative reaction to the impotent safety valve.

Complicating the interruption of the natural flow of population to opportunities on the land (or simply away from the cities) was the "reverse" migration from country to city. As early as 1875, the editors of Scribner's Monthly noted that not only was agricultural life anathema to city dwellers, but also the "social starvation" of country life drove rural dwellers to the cities. Reverse migration was, the editors warned, "one of the greatest evils of the time . . ." and could only be cured by removing the stigma of rural blandness and extolling the virtues of "independent" farm life. This remedy of course anticipated the back-to-the-land movement with which later efforts to force open the safety valve were allied. Rural refugees exacerbated the population pressures of immigration and accentuated the existence of a class of permanent poor. Although the reactions taken as a result of these conditions were, as will be seen, rather homogeneous, there was a diversity of opinion on their implications.

In one camp of opinion were the stalwart conservatives who maintained not only the existence of opportunity, but also of an
operative law of distribution. As William Graham Sumner told the House Select Committee investigating the 1870s depression, "common sense and right reason," not assistance or conscious distribution would take men to the land.\(^1\) More importantly, conservatives argued that the reality of a poor class did not invalidate natural economic law. Economic theory allowed for a certain measure of suffering, whether a result of individual indolence or economic slump. In the latter instance, the industrious poor—although blocked from migrating during the worst of times—would be able to weather the storm and emigrate when the situation improved.\(^1\) conservatives advised that the appearance of a closed safety valve was deceiving. During the depression of 1890s, the editor of *Review of Reviews*, Albert Shaw, wrote that, in the United States:

> despite all assertions to the contrary, there is generally work enough for everybody who is willing to work, at wages which the proper economy will enable the worker to lay aside something for a rainy day. The operation of natural economic laws will tend to draw a part of the temporarily congested population of the towns back to the land, and out to the newer parts of the country, where there is still room for millions of people, and a fair chance by hard work and frugal living to secure a livelihood.\(^1\)

Edward Atkinson, the spokesman of the New England textile industry, concurred with Shaw. He told the 1883 Senate Committee on Education and Labor: "If men are poor to-day in this land, it is either because they are incapable of doing the work which is waiting to be done or are unwilling to accept the conditions of work."\(^1\) Thus, the failure of the safety valve and other mechanisms for insuring free mobility owed to the workers' resistance to economic laws.

Opposing this retained faith in the economic system was an evolving awareness of a distinction between poverty and pauperism.
This awareness had its genesis in the recognition that the economic system victimized otherwise virtuous individuals. Chronic depression, declining real wages, and the scientific and statistical study of the poor led to the "discovery" of unemployment as a phenomenon distinct from idleness. In other words, the assumption that failure indicated personal flaws was not always true. Professor J. J. McCook reflected this revised philosophy when he suggested to the 1895 National Conference on Social Welfare that the best remedy to the tramp problem (traditionally associated with individual vice) was to "abolish industrial booms, financial crises, business slumps and hard times." Significantly, the recognition of involuntary poverty did not alter the attitude toward indiscriminate charity. Adherents to this new gospel of poverty in fact tried to reinforce traditional values and facilitate mobility by fostering conditions conducive to remunerative virtue.

The new awareness generated attempts to recreate the benefits of a freely operative safety valve. These efforts blended smoothly with a universal concern with distributing surplus labor to available opportunities. Although the many manifestations of this remedy had a common respect for the traditional assumptions of mobility, they emanated from different motivations. Many advocates of distribution sought merely to rid the cities of surplus population and thus remove the "blight" from sight and conscience. Others felt that distribution was necessary to compensate for the unwillingness of laborers to leave city attractions and access to charity for the hard, but rewarding life on the land. There was also a notable decline from the traditional safety valve emphasis on free land; distribution often took the form
of labor exchanges. This was a logical reaction to the proven in-accessibility of western land, and an outgrowth of the conservative perspective's emphasis on opportunity in general. All these manifestations reflected the conviction that urban crowding and poverty were symptoms of a stagnant society antithetical to America's free and open ideal. Whether distribution could carry the ideological burden placed on the safety valve was not certain. Clearly, distribution was an exigency, a substitution for an ineffective natural mechanism.

Distribution schemes tried to synthesize the natural selectiveness attributed to free opportunity. For the sake of the host destination and for the people of good character, schemes stressed the necessity of assisting only the worthy. Advocates comforted themselves with the belief that this was possible because the truly indolent would not leave the city under any circumstances. The most genuinely philanthropic schemes were formulated by New York City citizens in the 1860s and 1870s. The model for emulation was the Children's Aid Society, which began assisting well-conducted orphans to farmers' homes in the 1850s. The Citizens' Association of New York, led by the wealthy friend of labor, Peter Cooper, corresponded with western Governors in 1868-69 to arrange assistance for the migration of worthy poor to western lands. The Citizens' Association, and a similar effort a decade later, the Co-operative Colony Aid Association, expired without substantive achievement. The Colony Aid Association, however, drafted an ambitious plan to solicit loans for the establishment of colonies of unemployed on western lands. The Association acknowledged in its constitution the existence
of a poor class independent of business depression, and tried to sell itself as an investment in the employment of idle industry. These schemes for outright assistance suffered from the same cultural antipathy that frustrated others proposed by representatives of labor.

Although these schemes were virtually unique in their empathy with the laboring poor, the emphasis on traditional values, and on the exigency of colonization (as opposed to the isolation and tenuousness of individual settlement) reappeared in later proposals. Francis Peabody wrote in *Forum* in 1894 of the need for colonies for the poor during depressed times. Citing the intolerable "evil" of idleness, he urged that farm colonies were best suited for inculcating appreciation of work. The Salvation Army employed similar reasoning in its ultimately unsuccessful effort to establish farming communities for the unemployed at the turn of the century. A curious offshoot of the association of land with virtue and opportunity was the "garden plot" movement of the 1890s. Several cities, initially Detroit, selected a handful of unemployed workers to cultivate vacant city lots in an effort to give them remunerative employment and foster an appreciation for rural independence. These programs and proposals were similar in intent to public works programs, but were less controversial because they carried the overtones of being substitutes for "natural remedies," not imitations of European "socialism."

The worsening urban conditions and continued failure of population to move to the country convinced some easterners that more drastic measures were required. The New York Charity Organization
Society led a sustained struggle for mandatory colonization of the idle in rural areas. Such a demand originated of course in the belief that the poor themselves, not the economic system were responsible for idleness. The appeal for active distribution of immigrants or the unemployed continued well into the twentieth century. It illustrated the stubborn belief that opportunity had not disappeared and that society, despite the illusions of stagnation, was still open. The failure of the safety valve did not occasion an immediate surrender of these assumptions.

Confidence in distribution, though, was not without critics. Walter Weyl, later an editor of the New Republic, told the 1905 National Conference on Social Welfare that faith in distribution was self-deluding. The failure of free migration and mobility could not be compensated; immigrants as well as rural dwellers flowed into the cities without regard for natural laws. Weyl's pessimism and his consequent call for restriction of immigration rested on his adherence to a notion that had gained wide currency in the preceding decades. "We have struck our frontier," he warned.

The western wave of migration has reached its limit, and the population has been obliged to recoil upon itself. From now on there will be no outlet for the unemployed and the discontented of our cities. The conditions of life will tend to become more and more similar to those in western Europe. The same mentality of course had prompted Frederick Jackson Turner to declare the frontier closed a dozen years before. In conjunction with events that challenged assumptions of opportunity, the closed frontier mentality caused fundamental changes in the perceptions of American society. This revisionism by no means supplanted all faith
in natural laws, but it clearly relegated the assumption of a safety valve of free land to the past tense.

II

By the end of the nineteenth century, America's equation of the West with opportunity had become tenuous. Since the 1870s the visible shrinkage of the unappropriated arable lands had cast a shadow over the future, if not the present prospects of migration. Of more immediate impact were the upwellings of discontent that transformed the eastern image of the West from virgin land to hotbed of radicalism. The post-war agricultural depression and discontent culminating in the Populist Movement illustrated that farming in the West was not necessarily a remunerative living. In addition, the cross-country march of "Coxey's Army" of unemployed wage-earners in 1894 destroyed the myth that the West was exempt from industrial depression.25

The eclipse of western opportunity exemplified by the exhausted public domain carried as much significance for the East as for the image of the West. Those easterners who were strongly committed to free land as an irreplaceable element in the mobility ideology saw in its passing the necessary revision of the ideology. One obvious example of this was the invoking of closed frontier rhetoric in the push for immigration restriction. The availability of free land was usually peripheral to other concerns in the restrictionist debate. Nevertheless, because the nation's capacity to absorb limitless immigrants was thought to be contingent upon an undeveloped West, the question of free land invariably crept into restriction debates. Opponents of free immigration found the closed frontier
a convenient rationalization. Arch-restrictionist Henry Cabot Lodge, for example, wrote in 1891 that restriction was essential because:

[w]e no longer have endless tracts of fertile land crying for settlement . . . . The conditions have changed utterly from the days when the supply of vacant land was indefinite, the demand for labor almost unbounded, and the supply of people very limited.26

Advocates of free immigration found it necessary to refute these rationalizations. Laissez-faire stalwart Edward Atkinson wrote in 1892 that opportunity was not as circumscribed as it appeared. There was, he asserted, "incalculable room for immigrants" on the public domain; simply because good homestead land was scarce did not preclude the industrious immigrant from buying farms from railroads or other private land holders.27

Many of Atkinson's peers dissented from his casual dismissal of the closed public domain. Its impact, they asserted, would be felt most noticeably in the ranks of labor. Liberal economist David Ames Wells, writing in 1877, considered the imminent exhaustion of free land. Combined with labor-saving machinery, the passing of free land would steal from workers the opportunity to make themselves small capitalists. This opportunity of course had been the premise of Francis Bowen's mid-century optimism. The exhaustion of the domain, Wells concluded, would bring the United States a new social order resembling that of the Old World, "in which the tendency for a man born a laborer, working for hire, to never be anything but a laborer."28 Similarly, Francis A. Walker, who wrote in his Political Economy of the necessity of a mobile labor force for economic prosperity, offered a gloomy assessment of conditions in 1896. The
coincidence of agricultural depression, mass immigration of "beaten races," and a closed frontier threatened the security of American labor, and, therefore, economic stability. "No longer is it a matter of course," Walker concluded in a startling revision of economic doctrine, "that every industrious and temperate man can find work in the United States." 29

A closed frontier would cause the United States to stagnate in other ways. The check placed upon territorial and commercial expansion represented by a closed frontier would subvert another key link between free land and economic stability. For many easterners, the modus operandi of the safety valve was the opening of new markets by the producer-settler. The industrial journal *Age of Steel*, for instance, dubbed the West an "outlet for idle people, for the surplus capital, the machinery, manufactures, and surplus products of the looms and shops of our region." 30 Many observers felt that this assumed mechanism had malfunctioned before the closing of the domain, and this development only generated a deeper pessimism.

Historians, including Frederick Jackson Turner, have noted the ramifications of a closed frontier on the role of the government, especially as it pertained to implementation of an aggressive foreign policy. 31 The existence of this seemingly insurmountable obstruction to expansion implied far more than the buildup of the "energies of expansion" Turner noted. Senator John A. Kasson, who had earlier sponsored land reform legislation, articulated the contemporary view on the economic consequences of a closed frontier:

Our surplus will roll back from the Atlantic Coast upon the interior and the wheels of prosperity will be clogged of the very richness of the burden which they carry, but cannot
deliver . . . . We are rapidly utilizing the whole of our continental territory. We must turn our eyes abroad, or they will soon look inward with discontent.\textsuperscript{32}

C. Wood Davis, an observer of western agriculture, formulated the most comprehensive and apocalyptic vision of a closed frontier economy in a series of articles in the 1890s. He foresaw the necessity of importing foodstuffs, or the tempering of extravagant American lifestyles because of a neo-Malthusian calculus of increasing population and a finite supply of arable land.\textsuperscript{33} In addition, the halt to American expansion, coupled with the new rivalry of European machine-producing nations, would necessitate the penetration of new commercial markets. The same halt to expansion signaled the choking of "an existing safety valve in the arable public domain" which had heretofore prevented a dearth of employment opportunities.\textsuperscript{34} The closing of the safety valve would increase the pressures created by labor-saving devices, stagnate individual enterprise, foster a few personal fortunes, and possibly require a Europeanized militaristic state to avert anarchism.\textsuperscript{35} Davis' assessment was not, however universally pessimistic. These same limits to expansion would improve the economic standing of the American farmer (by preventing overproduction and making his products more dear), make him a more regular consumer of industrial goods, and thus mitigate the impact of machine-induced unemployment.\textsuperscript{36}

III

Despite his innovative approach to the dilemma, Davis's views were consistent with the thinking of his predecessors and his contemporaries on the general implications of a closed frontier. Because of the absence of free land, and the development of urban-industrial
society, America would grow to resemble the Old World. Significantly, Davis' description of these consequences resembled strongly the warnings of land and labor reformers who pondered the ineffective safety valve. This consistency underscored the similarity of opinions—regardless of varied assumptions on the nature of the safety valve—on the role of free land.

Even those who retained confidence in the openness of American society and insisted that the safety valve was only a replaceable link to available opportunity, could not ignore the physical features of a settled society. Not coincidentally, the notion of a closed or less fluid society also commanded serious attention by 1900. In this sense, the perceived validity of a safety valve passed with the establishment of a "crystallized" society. This truism points to the subtle error of Frederick Jackson Turner in his concept of a safety valve as an outlet from a settled society. Obviously, contemporaries considered it an element of an open society which served to preserve the outlet of opportunity; settled society and a safety valve were incompatible.
NOTES FOR CHAPTER IV

1"Land Monopolies in the West," NYT, 4 August 1869; Morrill Heald, "Business Attitudes Towards European Immigration, 1880-1900," JEH 13 (Summer 1953): 300, quotes the American Manufacturer (1885) warning businessmen of "squandering" the domain while inducing immigration.

2Bowen, Political, pp. 200, 194, 199.


4Samuel Rezneck, "Distress, Relief and Discontent in the United States During the Depression of 1873-78," Journal of Political Economy 58 (December 1950): 506; Hannah Leah Feder, Unemployment Relief in Periods of Depression (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1936), pp. 34-35, notes that the NYAICP also rejected migration during the 1857-1861 depression; H. H. Hart, "Interstate Migration," in National Conference on Social Welfare, Proceedings, 1898, pp. 248-255, discussed measures to prevent the migration of paupers and dependents; conversely, Theodore Dwight in the 1820s (quoted in Welter, "Frontier West," pp. 601-602) and Francis Walker ("The Causes of Poverty," Century, December 1897, p. 211), perceived the function of the wilderness frontier as drawing the restless men uncomfortable with civilization; Emmons, Garden, pp. 86-87, asserts that the East used the West as a "dumping ground" without protest. This may have been true in reality, but misrepresents contemporary attitudes.


7"Work Instead of Alms," NYT, 11 September 1861; see other editorials 16 August 1861, 2 December 1866, 3 January 1869, 3 October 1869, 4 June 1880, 14 January 1882.

8The Chicago Tribune, New York Tribune, and Boston Advertiser were the most active promoters of western emigration, Emmons, Garden, pp. 84-85; Rezneck, "Distress," p. 506.


11House Select Committee, Investigation, p. 183.


13Albert Shaw, "Relief for the Unemployed in American Cities," Review of Reviews, January 1894, p. 29.

14Report Upon Relations, vol. III, p. 344; the New York Times often reprobated workers for defying the call of opportunity for the "city attractions." (see editorials, note #7).


18"Emigration to the West," NYT, 29 August 1868; Emmons, Garden, p. 79.

19"The Surplus Labor Problem," NYT, 24 April 1879; "A New Colonization Plan," NYT, 6 June 1879; Emmons, Garden, p. 83; underscoring the close alliance in sympathy between philanthropists and labor, J. K. Ingalls was the Association's secretary.

21 Ringenbach, Tramps, pp. 119-121.


23 Ringenbach, Tramps, pp. 124-128.


26 Henry Cabot Lodge, "The Restriction of Immigration," NAR, January 1891, p. 34; Samuel Gompers, "Schemes to 'Distribute' Immigrants," The American Federationist, July 1911, p. 527, used the same tactic in opposing free immigration.

27 Edward Atkinson, "Incalculable Room For Immigrants," Forum, May 1892, p. 364; the editors of the CFC ("'Assisted' Emigration," 25 June 1887 and "Immigration and Immigrants," 28 May 1887) explicitly disagreed with Atkinson, citing the "clanishness" of immigrants and the diminishing domain as justifications.

28 David A. Wells, "How Shall the Nation Regain Prosperity?" NAR, July-August 1877, pp. 128-130.


30 quoted in Emmons, Garden, p. 81; the CFC ("The Sale of Public Lands," 24 October 1885, and "Falling Off of Land Sales," 25 January 1890), also noted that land sales translated into increased production and consumption.


CONCLUSION
THE NEW AMERICAN CALCULUS

The existence of a safety valve was, above all, a fundamental assumption in nineteenth century America. It was synonymous with fluidity, opportunity, harmony, and prosperity, qualities on which the young republic prided itself. The vast public domain, even without its economic and ideological connotations, encouraged a confidence in freedom and openness. This innate confidence blended smoothly with a natural rights tradition, and with classical economics to flesh out the contemporary vision of a safety valve. Natural rights theory and classical economic thought were firmly entrenched in the American credo, and thus reinforced faith in the existence of a safety valve. Significantly, the most optimistic appraisals of the safety valve, presented by Francis Bowen and William Graham Sumner, outlined a future of unlimited opportunity for Americans. It was entirely likely that most Americans considered the safety valve a valid assumption until the "closed frontier" era. But, if the adage that institutions only attract attention when they break down is accepted, the safety valve assumption was a tenuous one throughout the nineteenth century.

As argued throughout this thesis, the persistent malfunctioning of the safety valve did not impel contemporaries to abandon faith in its inherent validity. Because its effectiveness depended upon
the existence of normal or "natural" circumstances, its ineffectiveness was easily blamed upon "unnatural," and, hence, ephemeral conditions. The criteria for abnormal conditions varied according to perspective: monopoly for land and labor reformers, a malevolent economic system for urban liberals, a simple violation of economic laws for conservatives. Regardless of perspective, there was a consensus on the reality of social maladies resulting from a faulty natural mechanism. Henry George, although a partisan of labor, articulated the ideological consensus when he wrote that social evils "spring solely from social maladjustments which ignore natural laws, and that in removing their causes we shall be giving an enormous impetus to progress."

Advocates of any of the safety valve strains could not subsist forever on discredited assumptions. They were not hesitant to admit that fundamental problems existed in American society, or to prophesize an even more gloomy future. Indeed, for reformers, warning of the consequences of an inaccessible or exhausted public domain was a potent weapon. In particular, summoning the lessons of Ancient Rome or contemporary Europe served to heighten the sense of crisis in American society. The safety valve assumption, as a significant point of contrast with the Old World, was a major source of American identity. It was, therefore, a sensitive gauge for social and economic evolution.

These prophecies of American decay antedated the closed frontier mentality that has been enshrined in historical scholarship. The very concept of a safety valve in fact invited a negative perspective on its role in American civilization. The safety valve
explained what America was in terms of what it was not; it was not a long step to explaining the impact of its absence in terms of what America would become. George Henry Evans, for instance, associated the inaccessible and unjustly distributed domain with the enslavement and oppression of workers, and the stultification of eastern cities. For Evans, with his 900 year plan for township democracies, the imminent exhaustion of the public domain was hardly a major concern. In short, the descriptions of America without a safety valve that gained such wide currency at the close of the nineteenth century were a product of the concept itself, and were first propagated by the land and labor reformers who perceived not a permanently closed frontier, but merely an impotent safety valve. These ideologues in turn bequeathed the vision to the late nineteenth century intellectual milieu, to the businessmen and urbanites, and to modern scholars via Frederick Jackson Turner.

The closed frontier mentality did, however, convince many observers of the painful truth of these prophecies. The fear of a closed frontier was not, as many historians have pointed out, a post-mortem product of the 1890s. Several Newburyport, Massachusetts newspapers in the early 1850s predicted virtual class war with the "imminent" exhaustion of the domain.² Most commentators in the 1850s were concerned more with the inaccessibility of the public land, but certainly, by the 1870s, there was much uneasiness over America's immediate future. This uneasiness owed of course to the labor agitation, economic troubles and general social malaise of the post-war decades. The safety valve, as an intellectual force, held little importance outside of this context. All signs in the late nineteenth century pointed towards fundamental change. As
Goldwin Smith commented in the wake of the Great Railroad Strike of 1877: "the youth of America is over; maturity with its burdens, its difficulties, its anxieties, has come."³

The passing of the United States from carefree youth to troubled maturity was the dominant metaphor used to describe change in the late 1800s. Turner described the transition to a "settled" society; Josiah Strong, Walter Weyl and countless others feared the Europeanization of the American way of life. Regardless of terminology, all observers who countenanced the notion of a closed frontier or an impotent safety valve anticipated change. Land reformers berated land policy and predicted the eclipse of free institutions; labor reformers used land monopoly to explain undesirable changes; immigration restrictionists and commercial expansionists cited the closed frontier to rationalize change. The United States, so long sheltered from the grim realities of the modern world, would have to turn and meet the enemy. America not only had grown to resemble the Old World, but would also have to act like the Old World.

In the twentieth century, the existence of the inoperative safety valve and a closed frontier has become a veritable truism. Historians, journalists and even policy-makers cite the transitions of a closed frontier era to explain or justify change. A commentator in 1914 wrote that America had become subject to the laws of "diminishing return."⁴ Frontier historian Frederic Paxson wrote in 1930 that the passing of the public lands meant that industrialism had caught up with the United States.⁵ More interesting, and perhaps more significant, have been the continuing resurrections of the safety valve in government policy. The effort to compensate for the loss of the frontier and the safety valve underscores the dogged
strength of the safety valve assumption. Hugh Johnson, Director of the National Recovery Administration, for example, in order to rationalize the expanded role of the Federal Government in the New Deal, cited the effectiveness of a safety valve in relieving the distress of earlier depressions. Statistical evidence and historical scholarship have been unable to prove or disprove Johnson's casual statement, but, according to most contemporary opinions, the safety valve was no more able to relieve distress in the 1890s than it was in the 1930s.

An even more illustrative example of the safety valve assumption appeared in a 1919 report prepared for Secretary of Labor William Wilson. Wilson harbored plans to use labor and farming opportunities on the public domain to mitigate the impact of returning veterans on the post-World War I economy. The report offered a guarded assessment of the domain's capacity to fulfill such a role, and accounted for the recognized difficulties of unassisted emigration and farming in the semi-arid West. "The problem which the United States now faces," the report urged, "is to provide for its population opportunities equivalent to, or better than those at one time afforded by an expanding public domain." Similar recommendations, of course, accompanied emigration schemes as early as the 1860s. The report, however, left no doubt that the safety valve was once a free and effective force before the closing of the frontier:

The existence of unoccupied land acted as an outlet for whatever pressure excess numbers of population might from time to time produce. The evil effects of the panics, 1813, 1837, 1857, and particularly 1873, were minimized by reason of the uncultivated lands of the West acting as a refuge to those ruined in business or thrown out of employment.
Secretary Wilson and his colleagues shared with nineteenth century observers a belief that a safety valve should be a real force in American life. They also perpetuated a well-established tradition by attributing the heyday of the freely operative safety valve to an earlier generation, and making its recovery contingent upon a new calculus.
NOTES FOR CONCLUSION

1George, Progress, p. 455.

2Thernstrom, Poverty, pp. 55-56.

3Quoted in LaFeber, New Empire, p. 16.


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