

GOOD EARTH OR PAY DIRT? *

By HERBERT SAWIN

Loose talk, usually from sources uninformed or misinformed, is heard from time to time in connection with mining operations and land surface destruction. A favorite theme is that "good earth" is destroyed and farm lands laid waste. Such a cry has an emotional appeal and has been used by newspaper writers, editors and speakers wishing to play upon public opinion for one reason or another, without care for facts or thought of real harm to many of our citizens and communities. Earth, be it good or otherwise, at times becomes too valuable for farm use even in the face of high land values for specialized farming. Pay dirt is not necessarily gold-bearing gravel although the term seems to have originated with gold placer miners. Pay-dirt is any land which, for one reason or another, returns an income greater than if used for agriculture, grazing or other purely surface production.

Land on which a cross roads store formed the beginning of a large city becomes pay-dirt. City lots are laid out

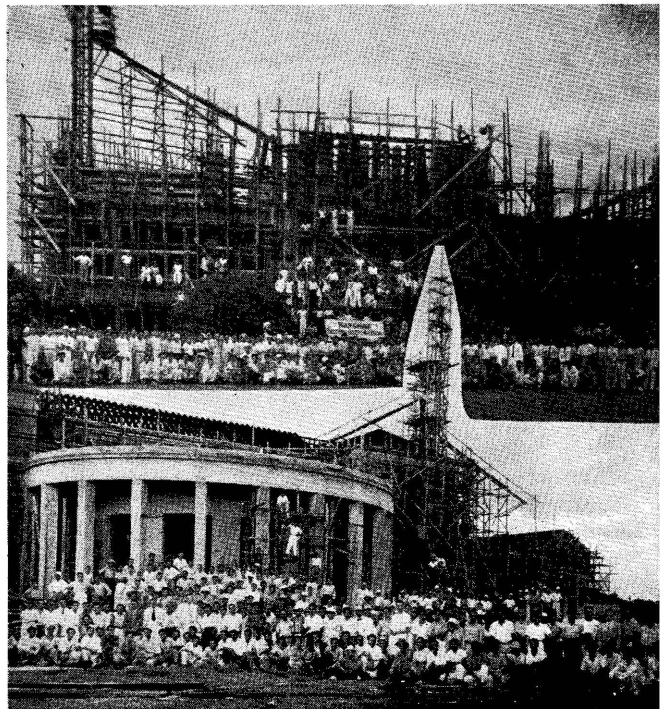
and sold. Central sections of large cities become pay-dirt in comparison with dwelling areas. High buildings are erected and ground rent mounts creating pay-dirt in a very material sense. Harbor tide flats are filled, becoming pay-dirt as its value for wharfs and warehouses becomes too high to permit more humble uses. Many acres of pay-dirt can be listed including ball parks, football stadiums, railroad, highway and pole line rights of way, and factory and refinery sites.

Farm land overlying well-washed and even-sized gravel is pay-dirt. It acquires a value too high to permit farming in the face of demand for aggregate. Our modern concrete structures, highways, buildings, bridges and dams for water storage require sand and gravel in tremendous quantities. Sand and gravel suitable for concrete is hauled many miles to serve our needs, but the land surface is necessarily destroyed.

Farm lands, and city blocks even, with underlying oil sands, become pay-dirt.
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* Reprinted from the Western Mining News.

Marsman Building Corporation Employees participate in Labor Day parade. Top view in front of new Marsman Office Building. Bottom view is the High Commissioner's Residence.



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dirt. Farming nearby stops if an oil or gas well comes in. The land is too valuable for farming. In densely drilled regions producing those essentials of modern life, natural gas and crude oil, the surface is sometimes destroyed by seepage and waste.

Without going into detail, it is easy to think of many other mineral substances contributing to our economic welfare, our material comforts and our national life which cause good earth to become pay-dirt. Iron, ore, copper ore, lead and zinc ores, tin, clay, coal, lime and other stone products are among the basic materials on which our civilization is built. All of these, at least in part, are mined from the surface and the surface is destroyed. Repairing the scars is costly and of little value except to please the eye. In most instances mother nature, in time, repairs the damage done to some extent, making the scars less noticeable, which from an esthetic sense, is all that is necessary. In very few instances is it necessary or even desirable to attempt complete replacement of top soil. In the Orient, from whence the good earth idea seems to spring, land surface is needed to grow food stuffs and has a high value. Much of the land there, disturbed by mining, is of character that can be readily leveled, graded and used again for planting. The fine material therein is of a percentage high enough to support plant life. In many cases, it is periodically flooded and top soil renewed by rivers overflowing their natural channels.

Coming home to our native land, we find much misinformation being constantly spread by people of high ideals who have little actual knowledge of conditions governing an important branch of mining known as placer dredging. In California, Montana and other states, gold dredges destroy land surface within limited areas. In so doing the dredge owners produce millions of dollars in gold which quickly finds its way into channels of trade and, through our credit structure, forms the basis for many times its own value in dollars in

circulation. California dredges, since 1900 have produced over 10,000,000 fine ounces of fine gold from land most of which is river bottom and foothill grazing land of comparatively little worth and on which a farmer could only gain a poor living. The average value per cubic yard of land dredged in California during the history of the industry is under 12 cents. Even on this low grade ore, which is the proper term when mining, the lessors of land dredges, from royalties paid them by dredge owners, have found it possible to make good investments which return a higher yield than the land could have earned as farms. Many of these same landowners and their families have also been employed on dredges at good wages. At present there are probably 2,000 men working on or directly maintaining mining dredges in California and 10,000 to 15,000 more working in manufacturing plants which supply parts for dredges. Dredges themselves are the largest consumers of manufactured material in the mining industry, and dredge owners pay huge sums in taxes of all kinds.

In the final analysis, much material purchased to be consumed in any industry is produced by labor from raw good earth somewhere. Back of the thousands of men working on dredges and supplying parts, there are many more thousands working in iron ore and coal pits, steel mills, limestone quarries, copper mines, foundries, electrical manufacturing plants, rubber and cotton fabric mills and oil refineries. Good earth, so-called, through the magic touch of labor, becomes pay-dirt which can be sold at good prices, providing jobs for a large number of men and women. Pay-dirt keeps families off relief. Pay-dirt sends children to school. Pay-dirt must be moved from place to place and causes need for transportation. In place and ready to operate, say as a dredge, this good earth or pay-dirt now in the form of steel plates and beams, buckets for digging, rubber belts, motors, switches, pipe and fittings, needs the spark of life. Electric power is bought and transported from our California hills to operate the dredge which now becomes another

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wheel of industry, and a vital one in California.

There is no way to calculate the ultimate value of a new dollar; a brand new gold dollar recovered from nature and started on its way in an intricate credit structure. Let your mind follow the desirability and continued great need for gold such as dredges produce. Gold flows to the United States almost daily from abroad for safe-keeping. Gold, its inherent value bred into us from ages of training and appreciation, has been the life blood of civilization and its use in arts and trade is known to have existed prior to written records. More than 60 per cent of the world's supply of gold was mined since 1900. Even though gold coins do not circulate in trade, our national store of gold is the source of our confidence in our paper money and our basis for trade.

Coming again to California land surface, in figures which can be understood easily, dredges in this state, according to the last reports available, have turned over about 30,000 acres, only a small part of which was arable. Gold bearing land which can be dredged is prob-

ably under 20,000 acres, of which perhaps 6,000 acres could be classified as crop land. The last available United States census bureau reports show that in 1934 California idle crop lands totaled 1,625,097 acres. This total may be higher today. There were also available in California, according to the same source of information, 2,967,526 acres of plowable pasture lands suitable for crops. Hundreds of thousands of dollars are paid to farmers for relief and under crop control agencies. The natural question is, why ruin a great industry like gold dredging because of a mistaken conception of the value of land in the form of gold earth for farming? The percentage of land to be dredged, as compared to land low valued enough to be used for farming, is so small as to be negligible. The total acreage of crop lands in California is estimated at 30,437,995 acres. With this large acreage available, it seems little short of ridiculous to be concerned with the surface destruction of a few thousand acres by gold dredging operations. Our state is fortunate in having "pay dirt" as well as "good earth" in vast extent. Let us use both for the welfare of all our people.

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