

Bob Swann: An Interview

Community Economics: Would you talk about how the community land trust model was developed, and how your own experience led to the development of the model.

Bob: As a conscientious objector during World War II, I spent two years in prison. It was a great chance to get your head together and learn about a lot of things that you never get a chance to on the outside. I was lucky because there was a group of us — 40 COs, down in Ashland, Kentucky — and we put together a sort of post graduate course for ourselves on economics, with a heavy emphasis on the kinds of things that Ghandi was doing in India, things related to non-violence and the peace movement. Also we had a correspondence course with Arthur Morgan, who at that time had left TVA and returned to Yellow Springs where he had

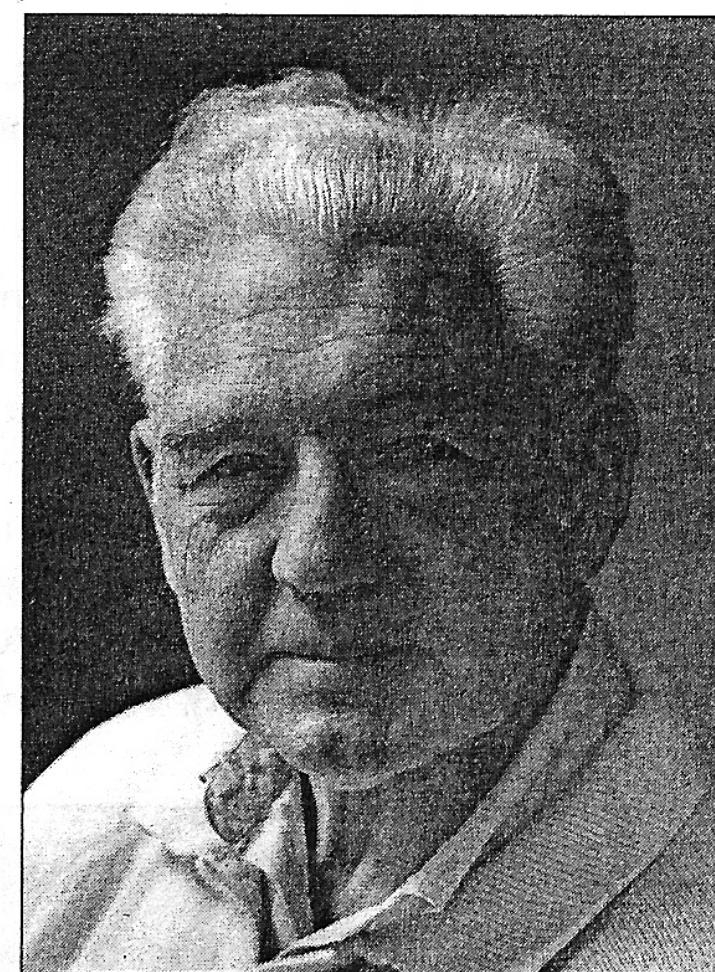
“I proposed to Slater King that we start a movement out of the civil rights movement that would break the pattern of land-holding in the South.”

been President of Antioch College. He had set up a course at the college in what he called “the small community.”

Partly as a result of that course, I learned about things like Celo Community in North Carolina, which Arthur Morgan had helped to found. There were several Henry George communities, too, in Fairhope, Alabama, and Arden, Delaware. Also I learned about Ralph Borsodi’s work in setting up several communities of this kind. Suffern, New York, was the first one. I think the second was Bryn Gwelled, outside of Philadelphia.

All of these communities had a similar approach to land ownership — using a leasehold approach rather than individual ownership of land. Later, after the war, the leasehold concept kept intriguing me. But the thing that stuck with me was, well, these were nice communities; they were good for the people there, and they

A founder of ICE, and its Executive Director until 1980, Bob Swann is the source of many of the ideas that have kept the Institute busy for the past 25 years. Since 1980, he has lived in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. He is a founder and board member of the Community Land Trust in the Southern Berkshires, and is President of the E. F. Schumacher Society — in which capacity he continues to promote community-based approaches to basic economic issues. In the interview published here we asked him to talk about the experience and thinking that shaped the community land trust model and to comment on the state of the CLT movement today.



were interesting experiments for the time; but they were what I call *enclaves*. There was no effort at reaching into the larger community with the concepts — and that kept bugging me.

After Ghandi’s death, one of his followers, Vinoba Bhave, began a movement in India which came eventually to be called the Gramdan, or Village Gift, Movement. What was interesting about this movement was that it was reaching out constantly and growing larger and larger, and had the element of true land reform in it. Vinoba wasn’t just setting up enclaves; he was getting whole villages to adopt his concept — that the land should be held by the village and leased to the members of the village — and that seemed to me to be what was needed.

I moved to Yellow Springs shortly after getting out of prison. Arthur Morgan had asked me to work with him, but I was more interested in building and architecture. I got interested in Frank Lloyd Wright’s work, so I left what Morgan was doing and got into the building field for a while. I moved to Michigan and built some houses for Frank Lloyd Wright, and then to Chicago where I designed my own houses. That experience gave me a lot of direct experience with the high cost of land and the high cost of financing. All of that was sort of grist for the mill. I kept thinking that something ought to be done about those costs.

Then in 1956 I moved back to Philadelphia to work with Morris Milgram on

the first inter-racial housing project in the country — at least the first one built by a builder. What Milgram was doing was only a stone’s throw from Bryn Gwelled, so I learned more about that community at that time also.

Then came the whole peace movement. My wife and I moved to Connecticut and through most of the ‘60s we were mostly occupied with the peace movement. We were given a tract of land and building outside of Norwich, Connecticut, in the town of Voluntown. We set up a kind of land trust to own the property, and it became the base for the Community for Non-Violent Action — CNVA.

One of the focuses of CNVA was the effort to bring together the peace movement and the civil rights movement, the non-violent aspects of them. In 1963 CNVA organized a walk from Quebec to Guantanamo — that was the plan anyway. We had sponsored many walks, including the San Francisco to Moscow walk, but part of the purpose of the Quebec to Guantanamo walk was to break down segregation along the way. And one of the points where that effort came to be focused was Albany, Georgia, where one of Martin Luther King’s co-workers, Slater King — in fact he was also a relative — had been leading an effort to break down segregation. Members of the march — and I wasn’t on the march at the time — spent a month or more in jail in Albany and went on a fast, which helped to cement the relationship between the mem-

bers of the walk in CNVA and the members of the black civil rights movement in Albany.

I became acquainted with Slater King through all of this, and I proposed to Slater that we start a movement out of the civil rights movement that would break the pattern of land-holding in the South. There was a growing awareness of the whole problem of blacks being pushed off the land. Slater was very interested and agreed to help in any way he could.

CLT in the Southern Berkshires

Founded in 1980 by Bob Swann and others, the Community Land Trust in the Southern Berkshires addresses a range of housing and land use issues in southwestern Massachusetts.

Initially the CLT acquired ten acres of land, on which there are now four owner-occupied homes. Zoning restrictions prevented the development of more homes, but a portion of the parcel, including an old apple orchard, has been leased to a farmer for production of asparagus, berries, fruits, nuts, and other organically grown produce. The ground lease in this case allows the farmer to build equity through improvements in the productive capacity of the land itself.

In the mid-80s, the CLT purchased another 21-acre parcel, where it developed a cluster of 18 new homes, most of them in multi-unit buildings. Built without public subsidies and sold with bank financing for 80% of the price, the homes were kept within reach of lower income families with the help of the CLT's "Fund for Affordable Housing." The Fund was capitalized with low-interest loans from local people, including owners of summer homes who recognized that many year-round residents were unable to purchase homes in this expensive market. Through the Fund, the CLT was able to offer second mortgages to help purchasers cover the gap not covered by bank financing. ■

I had become familiar not only with the Gramdan movement but also with the Jewish National Fund, which had acquired large areas of the land in Israel and leased it to individuals and groups like the kibbutzim. I was interested in that situation because it not only had the communities like the kibbutzim, but a larger entity holding the land. There was a much larger process going on. I talked to Slater about that and he agreed that it was the kind of thing that was needed in the South. So we organized a trip to Israel and got some small foundation backing for it.

Six of us, including four black civil rights leaders, spent two weeks in Israel in 1967. There was an awareness of the accusations of discrimination by Jews against Arabs, and the black members of the group were all skeptical about that aspect of the Jewish National Fund, but they agreed that the land tenure system was one they could use. So when we went back we organized a number of meetings around this idea and got more and more people interested and involved, and set up the organization called New Communities.

Eventually a 5000 acre tract of land was found on the market — an old plantation owned by two men who were retiring. The price was a million dollars. In the end most of that had to be borrowed, and that was a tragedy, because the land then had to generate a lot of cash to service the mortgage — about \$100,000 a year — a terrible burden.

We were able to get a \$100,000 grant from the federal government to do a full-scale proposal on how to develop the land. The planning grant was supposed to guarantee \$1 million for the land from a special fund in OEO that Bobby Kennedy had set up for high impact projects, which didn't have to get approval from the State. It looked like we were going to get that money, but then Nixon took office before the whole thing came through, and it was killed.

With the \$100,000 that we did get, we had worked out a proposal that included a large housing development. We had set aside about 500 acres for housing — only ten per cent of the tract, but still a lot of land, and the plan called for about 500 houses. But that never happened, partly because they were scrambling all the time to raise the money to pay off the mortgage.

Five thousand acres is a tremendous amount of land — a big piece to try to chew off. It was probably a mistake to try

to chew off such a big one in the beginning, but the thought behind it, at least on my part, was that to get the kind of publicity and the kind of impact that we wanted we had to have something pretty big. You couldn't do it on ten acres. Even a hundred acres wouldn't make much of a difference. But 5000 acres could make an impact. At any rate New Communities was the first project that could be called a community land trust project. It had the elements not only of the Jewish National Fund but of the Gramdan Movement.