UTILIZING VACANT LOTS AND LAND HELD
BY SPECULATORS IN REAL ESTATE

WITHIN the last few years the idea of civic improvement has spread all over the country, including in its scope not only organizations for better architecture, for parks and playgrounds and for the better laying out of streets and public squares in our large cities, but also comparatively humble efforts such as the cleaning up of village streets and more especially of vacant lots. This spring Professor William Bailey of Yale has conducted, by means of lectures in a number of villages and small towns, a campaign of "cleaning up," in which the inhabitants have cordially cooperated, emulating one another in the energy with which they put gardens, sidewalks and vacant lots in apple-pie order for Easter, and such campaigns are being carried on in nearly every municipality, small and large. The readiness with which people respond to a suggestion that things be put and kept in better shape, so far as lies in their power, suggests to us a plan that would materially increase the usefulness of civic improvement societies, associations for the cultivation of vacant lots and other local organizations that exist for the purpose of civic or village improvement.

This is, to take measures to give each municipality the power to require the owners of vacant lots either within or on the outskirts of a city or town to keep them clean and in good order or else to turn them over, rent free, to a local association that would guarantee to keep them under cultivation until such time as they would be demanded for building purposes. In a number of cities, notably Philadelphia, wonders have already been done through the means of these associations, which have taken over for temporary cultivation vacant lots and tracts of land that were being held as future building sites, and in the meantime were being used, like all vacant lots, for dumping grounds of rubbish of all kinds and nurseries for the prolific growth of weeds. The associations have, in the most cases, obtained permission to use these lands and then, after plowing them and getting them roughly into shape for cultivation, have parcelled them out in small allotments to people who were only too glad of a chance to raise vegetables and garden truck for their own use and such little money as they could make from the sale of them.

In Philadelphia the Vacant Lot Cultivation Association was organized ten years ago for the purpose of assisting the unemployed. They took the means which seemed nearest at hand, that of throwing open to the people all the vacant lots they could get. The success of the enterprise was amazing, because
hardly a man, woman or child abused in any way the privileges given the people, and excellent crops were harvested in nearly every instance. When there was produce for sale a market was established on the ground and a regular delivery system was carried on by the children,—ranging from nine to twelve years of age,—belonging to the various families. Each child had a pushcart and each child built up his own route and went regularly to his customers for orders, which he made up himself, loaded his own pushcart, delivered the goods and charged himself up with the separate amounts in a small book. At the end of each day's sales each child settled with the manager and was paid his commission, twenty per cent. of the receipts, in cash. The work occupied only three or four hours a day, and the earnings of the children were from three to five dollars a week apiece, so that the enterprise was not only useful in its immediate results, but was an invaluable training for the serious business of later life.

Of course, the work of the Philadelphia association has been carried on more directly in behalf of the people whom it desired to aid than for the improvement of the appearance of the city, yet both purposes have been admirably served, and there is not a city or town in the country that would not find it profitable in every sense of the word to follow the example of this and some other cities. We do not need the criticism of travelers from other countries to remind us of the unsightly slovenliness or barrenness of our vacant lots and of the land immediately surrounding our cities, a state of affairs that contrasts sharply with the neatness and well-kept look that prevails in most older countries. Every one who lives in or beyond the suburbs of a large city is familiar with the acres of barren land that lie just outside of the thickly built zone; sometimes within the limits of the city itself, and sometimes a little beyond.

Practically all of this land is being held for speculation and the expectation is that it will be built up sooner or later. Sometimes the expectation is fulfilled and the speculators reap a harvest of profit, sometimes not, but in any case the system of holding land in this way is very detrimental to the sightliness of a city as well as to the welfare of its poorer people. Thousands of acres of land that now lie idle, unproductive of all except weeds, tin cans, broken bottles, old newspapers and the like, could easily be brought under cultivation so that well-kept fields would surround the city and give welcome patches of green between the houses in the more thinly settled districts.

And not this alone, but hundreds and even thousands of people such as now fill the long waiting lists of the different vacant lot associations would jump at the chance to work all summer for the benefit to themselves and for such profit as they could make. They would be near enough to the market to deliver fresh berries and vegetables in pushcarts or hand-wagons, and the children could do this work as they did in Philadelphia. There is scarcely a housewife who would not be glad to purchase vegetables fresh from the garden, and the cumulative effect of a great number of vacant lots and small tracts being used in this way would very soon be felt in the price of vegetables and similar foodstuffs.

In many cases, of course, owners are glad to cooperate with the vacant lot associations, but in others they refuse to allow their land to be used for this purpose, preferring to let it lie idle until it is built upon. It is this dog-in-the-manger attitude that prevents the
spread of the custom to an extent where it would really work a radical change for the better, and it is to meet this attitude that we suggest that the municipality be empowered to insist that the land be utilized in one way or another, a thing that could be easily done by exacting a special tax on all land that is permitted to lie absolutely idle.

Expressions of sympathy and understanding from people who comprehend the magnitude of the task we have undertaken in endeavoring to bring about a change in the industrial situation by the introduction of handicrafts in connection with small farming, and who also believe the plan to be practicable, are coming to us now in every mail, showing that there is already a widespread tendency to thought and experiment along these lines. These letters from our friends and well-wishers are all encouraging, but now and again one comes which is more than usually significant because of a new light which it throws upon the subject. We quote here a letter from a man who is in close touch with the practical side of this question because of his personal contact with the difficulties in the way of such a movement and his personal knowledge of the success of such an experiment as we recommend in intensive agriculture, although as yet handicrafts have not been undertaken. The letter speaks for itself:

"Editor of The Craftsman,

"New York:

"Dear Sir:—The editorial in The Craftsman under the caption, 'How the Government Could Bring about a Much Needed Reform in the Industrial System of this Country,' is a most forcible argument in favor of such a reform.

"No one who is not in direct touch with the farming communities can ap-preciate what a benefit would result from the introduction of handicrafts in direct connection with agricultural pursuits. The writer is not as familiar with conditions in the east as he would like to be, but here in the middle west he has watched and studied the conditions for a quarter of a century. He has seen hundreds of strong, sturdy young men leave their farm homes and drift into the city, merely because of lack of companionship, variety of work and a promise of better wages. He has seen hundreds of men in the cities who have struggled along for years, anxious to get a farm home, but never seemed able to get enough ahead to make a start, and, when they do have the means, are discouraged by the isolation of the life before them and the possibilities of failure staring them in the face. There is no question but that the cities are overcrowded and that thousands of families in the congested districts of our large cities would be better off if they would go back to the soil, even under present conditions, but all the good advice that can be advanced either by the public press or individually can never remedy the evil unless some such proposition as that advanced by The Craftsman is inaugurated.

"To the uninitiated this declaration may appear a rather strong one. But what are the facts? The men we are trying to send to the land are, first, untried in the work we ask them to take up, and, second, they are practically without means. The man of $1,000 or more whom you send out onto the land buys some improved farm, and nothing is gained to either community, as the man who buys takes the place of the man who sells; a man who understands the city leaves it, a man who does not understand it goes to it. Both are lost within their new environments.

"The man who has taken the initiative in the development of the agri-
cultural interests of the country, from the days of the Pilgrim Fathers to the present time, is the poor man. He will have to do it in the future or the work will be taken up by corporations. The conditions that confronted the pioneer in the past and that with which he has to contend today are vastly different. Some few of the old conditions have changed to his betterment, but the most vital of all has changed to his detriment and is continually growing worse. I refer to the land itself. In the past, government land was open to him. If what the government offered was too far beyond the confines of civilization, cheap land at from $1.25 to $4.00 per acre could be picked up anywhere. Today the government land has practically disappeared, and the era of speculation that has chased all over the country, east, west, north and south, has so advanced the price of lands that they are beyond the reach of the true pioneer. In the hands of the speculators they have gradually increased in the past ten years from $1.25 to $15 and $25 per acre, and, figure as you may, the poor man's chance for a home is no better than the speculator's chance for profit, as neither can win.

"The hope of the future is in the plan proposed by THE CRAFTSMAN; the farm village idea, with an acreage limited to the means of the prospective purchaser and an opportunity for employment until he is permanently established in his new home and a living for himself and family assured.

"It may not be amiss to say that this idea is already finding favor in the West. Here in Marshfield, Wisconsin, a company of local business men have organized and established under the laws of this state what is known as the Consolidated Farm Co. They have taken a tract of sixteen hundred acres and are cutting it up into small farms of five, ten, fifteen and twenty acres. The land is all wild, but under a competent foreman it is being rapidly reduced to a condition suitable for cultivation. The families are located sufficiently close together to eliminate the isolation of farm life. The men are employed so that they have some companionship in their work, which is being varied as rapidly as new ideas can be put into practice. They have daily mail service, telephone communication, and all appear happy and contented.

"Special crops are being introduced, but better than all of this is the fact that the by-products of the land are being utilized. The amount of timber waste in a wooded country such as this is simply beyond comprehension, and to remedy this handicrafts must be introduced.

"Compared with the ideal as advanced by THE CRAFTSMAN, or the possibilities as the idea grows, the plan is crude. It has the merit, however, of being a success, and its promoters would gladly avail themselves of new ideas that would increase its usefulness along industrial as well as agricultural lines.

"Yours very truly,

"JOHN P. HUME,
Marshfield, Wis."

THE winner of the first prize in THE CRAFTSMAN competition for essays on "The Arts and Crafts Movement in America" is Mr. Charles F. Binns, Director of the New York State School of Clay-Working and Ceramics, at Alfred University. The second prize was awarded to Dr. Hugo Froelich, of the Prang Educational Company, New York; the third prize to Mrs. Helen Fitzgerald Sanders, Butte, Mont., and the fourth to Miss Jessie Wright Whitcomb, Topeka, Kansas.

A large number of essays were submitted, but these proved to be the only ones that covered adequately the
branches of the subject as indicated in the announcement of the competition. Many of the others were most interesting as showing widely varying points of view toward this somewhat vague and nebulous tendency and such significance as it may possess with relation to the art development of this country, but the points to be brought out mainly concerned the possibilities of the movement and the reasons why so much of the work done is unpractical in its nature and suited only to an artificial market.

Mr. Binns has treated this phase of the subject in a most straightforward and practical way, covering the most important features within the required space limits. The essays submitted by Dr. Froelich and Mrs. Sanders give the history of the movement in this and other countries, deducing its probable effect upon the art and industry of America. Miss Whitcomb's essay is brief and businesslike, and shows practical knowledge of the subject of which she writes. It is a matter of regret to The Craftsman that space cannot be spared to publish these three essays, in addition to the winner of the first prize, as they are full of interest and suggestion, but we feel that the greatest value to our readers gained through the competition has been the bringing of somewhat indefinite ideas concerning "arts and crafts" down to a basis of practical knowledge of what it is doing and whither it is tending.

NOTES

To sociologists and those attempting in one way or another to find some solution for the abuses of our present social system, the Exhibit of Congestion of Population in New York held recently in the American Museum of Natural History was one of the most significant of the steps that have been taken to discover the true source of many of the evils and to suggest some adequate remedy. The idea of such an exhibit was first suggested by the outcome of a discussion held by a small group of persons connected with the Consumers' League, who were firmly convinced that back of all the evils of city life lay the dominant evil of congestion of population. It seemed to that group that if the public might in some way be given a representation of this important fact the forces working for the improvement of the city might be able to achieve more permanent results. In this hope a committee was formed representing thirty-seven important organizations whose interests and work had led them to this common conviction, and this committee began its active work in April, 1907, with a three-fold object in mind: first, to express in a graphic way by means of an exhibition the causes, conditions and evils of the massing of people in New York City; second, to indicate the present methods of dealing with the problems involved; third, to point out, in so far as our present information allows us to draw conclusions, by what methods congestion may be remedied.

The exhibit consisted of a large array of maps, diagrams, charts, photographs, models and statistics, all of which had a very definite significance to the student of social conditions. These were seen and studied by thousands of men and women, including state, city and borough officials and many who are prominent in public life. The press gave much space to it, and it was considered to be so vitally important to any well organized effort to improve conditions, not only in New York, but in any of the other manufacturing centers in this country, that many requests have been made to have the exhibit taken to other cities.

The presentation was so clearly and