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Operation of the Revenue Law Reveals its Injustice

Law-breaking is always a serious thing, but when engaged in by public officials it becomes intolerable. The State Board of Equalization and Assessment of Nebraska has just completed its work. That we have sown the wind and are already reaping the whirlwind none will doubt who will take the time to investigate the new revenue law and its enforcement or non-enforcement by our public officials.

That the people tolerate what is being done is amazing. Let me cite a few facts. In 1903 the total assessed value of the state, including railroads, was \$188,458,379.44; in 1904, \$294,779,244.65; in 1905, \$304,470,475.35. A steady increase each year.

But if you must know whether or not taxes are going to be increased or decreased you must not only take into account the assessed value, but also the mill levy. In 1904 the state made a six mill levy. This year, 1905, a seven mill levy has been made. With an increase in the assessment and an increase in the levy, taxes are bound to be higher.

But why must taxes be higher? Here is the reason. The legislature of 1899-1900 appropriated \$2,591,373.10. The legislature of 1902-3 appropriated \$2,875,289.51. The legislature of 1904-5 appropriated \$3,740,280.70. Here also is a constant increase. I say without fear of successful contradiction that these appropriations grow larger all the time because of almost criminal extravagance in nearly every branch of the state government.

In 1905 the state officials will collect about \$375,000 more taxes from the people than they collected in 1904. This means that the people of the state will pay about \$1,000 a day more taxes than they paid last year.

But the interesting inquiry is, who pays these increased taxes? In 1904 the railroads in Nebraska were assessed nearly \$47,000,000. This year they are assessed at \$47,294,976.35, a slight increase over last year. This is supposed to be one-fifth of their real value.

According to a recent report of the United States Census Bureau, the average value per mile of all railroads in the country is \$57,144. Nebraska is credited with having 5,816 miles of railroads. This would make all the railroads in the state worth \$332,349,504. One-fifth of this is \$66,469,900, which should be the assessed value of the railroads in this state based upon this census report. Or in other words, according to this report the railroads are assessed nearly \$20,000,000 less than they should be.

On another page will be found a table showing how the state board treated the personal property of the farmers of the state. I notice that mules in Hooker county are increased 100 per cent over the assessment placed upon them by the county assessor of that county. In Sherman county they are increased 120 per cent; in Garfield county 100 per cent; in Deuel county 100 per cent, etc. Horses are increased in different counties all the way from 5 per cent to 30 per cent. Cattle are increased all the way from 5 per cent to 25 per cent. What does this mean? It means that, if a farmer living in any of those counties has given in his horses, mules and cattle at what they are worth, he is compelled, by the action of the state board, to pay taxes on twice what they are worth. Every taxpayer in the state can make his own deductions from the table given on another page.

As I understand it, the state board did not raise any of the merchandise in any county in the state, except in Douglas county, where it was raised 15 per cent. Under the new revenue law, as originally passed two years ago last winter, the state board could not raise one class of property without raising all at the same time. The

legislature last winter, however, amended the law so that the state board now can raise any one class without disturbing the assessment on the other property. Now note the result. The only property raised in the entire state is the personal property of the farmers, which is raised all the way from 5 per cent to 120 per cent. Also the merchandise in Douglas county was raised 15 per cent. According to the census report the railroads should be assessed \$20,000,000 more than they are, yet no raise was made.

This is not all. I know of poor people who own real estate worth \$1,000 that is assessed at its full value, \$1,000, while I know of prominent politicians who own real estate worth \$6,000 that is assessed at one-half of its value.

I cite these things for the one purpose of showing that all the claims made for the new revenue law are a fraud upon the people. When agitation for a new law first started it was urged that under the new law all property would be assessed at its true value, which, it was claimed, was not done under the old law. Last fall, from a hundred platforms, I denounced this law as a railroad measure and told the people that the scheme was to make them pay more taxes and let the corporations and favored individuals escape. From every platform I read the names of taxpayers in the counties where I spoke, and showed them how in many instances their taxes were actually doubled in 1904 over 1903. I told them that their taxes would continue to increase. The opposition, however, told the people that their taxes hereafter would be lessened. I have already shown how this year in state taxes alone the people will pay \$1,000 a day more than they did last year.

What intolerable conditions these are! When one man or corporation pays less than his or its share of taxes some one else will have to pay more. This means that by operation of law money is taken from the pockets of one man and placed in the pockets of another. This is larceny. That it is committed in the form of law and by officers of the law only adds to the enormity of the crime. Every county assessor and member of the state board has taken solemn oath that he will assess all property at its true value. Have you done this, gentlemen? What excuse have you to offer for failing to do your sworn duty? You have broken down your boasted new revenue law. You have forfeited the confidence of the people. The people have lost faith in the law and in your administration of it.

What is the remedy? Abolish the county assessors and give back to the people the right to assess their own property. Compel all property to be assessed at its real value under penalties of fine and imprisonment. The county assessor plan is only a scheme to place the taxing power in the hands of the politicians and the railroads. In the city of Lincoln not one of the deputy assessors appointed by the county assessor would have been elected by the people. They were nearly all boys, and you can trace every appointment to machine influence. I am not saying one word against any of these young men. It is the method of their selection I condemn. They have not the judgment of the values of property that older men would have, neither have they the strength of character to resist all influence and use their own best judgment in the assessment of property. What we need above all are honest and courageous men in the offices, who still will enforce the law without fear or favor and who are not the tools of the political machines and the corporations. The new revenue law and those charged with its enforcement stand condemned before the people of Nebraska.

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