



Photo: Earl Denny

A Plot of His Own

The King Without a Title

by Fred Roeder

The possession of land, however small a plot, has been an age-old aspiration of man, and unrestricted ownership in fee simple is regarded as one of the fundamental rights in a free society. There is, of course, always the limit set by our ability to pay for what we want, a handicap that keeps us from amassing huge tracts in excess of our needs or our resources.

In any case, possession is strictly temporary. It is ours to enjoy for a time, to use or abuse it as we see fit, then to pass it on to the next occupant; after all, you can't take it with you.

But there is a piece of land that we are destined to occupy for a very long time; one might almost say that we are taking it along. Lack of clear title to it could be embarrassing some day,

when we are no longer able to argue about it and ought to be left alone to enjoy our eternal reward.

With this somewhat awkward introduction, I will tell you how title problems resulted in one of history's most undignified funerals.

You have probably read about William the Conqueror, Duke of Normandy, and his attempt to establish a cadastral record of England, most of which he owned by right of conquest. In Normandy, he was not so lucky; there, he had to pay for what he wanted like everybody else, or face the consequences.

If he owned much, he also gave much away—in part, because that was how he paid his debt to those who supported him and who kept him on the throne; in part, to make friends and influence people; and in part, to prepare the hereafter for his immortal soul. ►

A DUBIOUS GIFT

It was this latter consideration that caused him to donate a piece of land to the Abbey of St. Stephen at Caen, along with funds and instructions to construct a monastery there. Believing it to be bad manners to look a gift horse in the mouth, the grateful monks paid no attention to how William came to own the land, or to whether he had proper title to it. Be that as it may, the obedient servants of the Lord commenced construction and built a chapel.

The Conqueror returned to that place sooner than he had expected to and sooner than was convenient. A man of huge frame and not yet 60 years old, he was terribly overweight and suffered from gout, the medieval curse of those that ate too well, too often.

While this did not keep him from making war on Philip I of France in 1087, his sorry physical condition was the main reason for the accident he incurred when his horse shied while entering the burning town of Nantes.

He was thrown forward with great force on the pommel of the saddle and sustained internal injuries that soon proved to be fatal.

THE KING SUCCUMBS

The stricken monarch was taken to his castle at Rouen, where he died shortly thereafter, utterly abandoned, robbed of everything that was not nailed down, and left lying naked on the stone floor. There was considerable confusion about what to do with him, but, in the end, the archbishop of Rouen ordered that he be buried in the chapel at St. Stephen's.

The incredible odyssey of the dead king on his way to Caen, less than 70 miles away as the crow flies, is a long story all by itself. There were so many delays that, although it was already the middle of September, the bloated body was riper than a Limburger cheese by the time it arrived at St. Stephen's.

The chapel at St. Stephen's was filled with many onlookers, and even a few mourners, as the body was brought in on a bier. The monks eagerly swung their incense lamps in a vain attempt to mask the unpleasant odor, as William was carried to a spot in front of the altar where a hole containing a stone coffin had been dug. There was understandable haste to bring the ceremony to a speedy conclusion.

NOT ON MY LAND

Suddenly there was a commotion in the aisle and a voice protested loudly, "You can't bury him here; the land is mine—it belonged to my father, and I have not sold it, nor forfeited it, nor given it. In the name of God, I forbid you to cover him up with my ground!" The officiating bishops conducted a hasty investigation which confirmed that the man was correct. He had clear title and could prove it; the monks had built the chapel on land they didn't own.

The bishops went into a huddle: this was a state funeral and the uproar was very embarrassing. The man could not be bullied; there were too many dignitaries present and too many opportunists itching for an excuse to rise in rebellion under the guise of taking up the cause of the people.



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The man had rights, they agreed. It was apparent that the monks would have to pay him for the land, and he wanted his money right away. A quick collection was taken up and the money was counted. It was not enough.

"We'll pay you tomorrow."

"Then you can bury him tomorrow."

"We haven't got it."

"Pay me now, or get him off my property!"

HE WON'T FIT

While all this was going on, the attendants were busy transferring the dead king from the bier to the subterranean coffin. To their horror, they discovered that the coffin was too small for the bloated body. In their attempt to force it into the narrow crypt, the body burst, filling the chapel with a stench that took away the last vestige of dignity. People were scrambling for the door as if the place had been set on fire.

The negotiations were still in progress, but the landowner would not yield.

"For heaven's sake, get it over with!"

"Will you accept payment for a tract the size of the grave? Here it is, we'll pay you for the rest of the land first thing in the morning."

"All right, I'll take it, but hurry, I need some fresh air!"

The money for the tiny plot changed hands. "Cover him up boys, the land is ours, let's get out of here! Dominus vobiscum."

And so it went and was duly recorded in history (with, of course, portions of the dialogue added by the author). □

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Fred Roeder is a retired surveyor living in Tularosa, N.M. He emigrated from Germany in 1957, and spent most of his career working in the Southwest for the U.S. Forest Service. He began writing a regular column for the New Mexico Professional Surveyors newsletter in 1988. Selections have been compiled into a book titled Antepasados, available for \$10 postpaid from NMPS, 1615 University Blvd. NE, Albuquerque, NM 87102. Proceeds support surveying scholarships.

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