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A TRIBUTE TO DEAN RENNARD STRICKLAND

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[*1149]

I first became acquainted with Rennard Strickland at the University of Tulsa Law School. Rennard Strickland is widely known as a consummate legal scholar and that is true. Rennard could be aptly described as a renaissance man. He has broad interests that range far from his legal background. One only need review Rennard's collective works to find that he is not only a consummate scholar of American Indian law but also American Indian history, art and storytelling. Rennard posits interesting theoretical questions regarding legal, historic and social aspects of American Indian life. He has contributed much to the subject of American Indian law and to American Indian education, literature, art and media.

In 1970, Rennard published an article in the Journal of American Indian Education that provides insight into a side of Rennard not seen by his students or his non-Indian peers.

When I was an undergraduate it was quite fashionable, among those of us who fancied ourselves intellectuals, to laugh at Margaret Mead. I don't know if it still is. I do know that I have learned an immense amount from a little book that Dr. Mead has just published. In *Culture and Commitment*, she draws the picture of older societies in which the life of the youngest generation will be almost exactly like the life of the oldest generation - a society in which there is little change. In such a society the grandfather figure is the most important.

We, on the other hand, live in a society in which change is so rapid that none of the oldest generation has lived a life closely resembling the one that the youngest generation is living. In such a society the value of the grandfather adviser is minimized. I suggest we look to the American Indian as a grandfather figure for us all.

The grandfather in Indian society was ... the storyteller, the teacher. Such a teacher would not be outdated in Dr. Mead's **[*1150]** changing society. Using the Indian as teacher would help us through the uncertainty of change. n1

I submit that Rennard did look to his American Indian heritage for the grandfather figure to serve as his teacher and storyteller.

Rennard challenges one to think critically. He asks what might be the history of American Indians if one were to reconstruct that history based solely on data that came from the motion picture archives. Rennard suggests that the image of American Indians based on the Hollywood stereotype or the celluloid Indian is projected in this manner:

On one hand we would see the noble "Red Man," the faithful Tonto-like companion. On the other side we would see the "Indian" as a savage pillager. We would see his primary occupation as plunder; his principal recreation as overpowering and torturing the innocent, particularly women and children. We would see him as the devil incarnate, as strange, romantic, dangerous, and deceptive; as a virile barbarian. Paradoxically, the Savage Sinner portrayal is contrasted with the Native American as a misunderstood but well-meaning child, or as a Tonto figure, serving his white master in the preordained task of westward expansion - the savage giving up his life for a new and better world for

us all. Another image shows the “Indian” as the first ecologist, crying over our destruction of the Universe, or an all-knowing woodsy Christ figure: the red-skinned redeemer. n2

Rennard suggests that the Hollywood cinema or celluloid Indian is a one-dimensional, stereotypic image cast from one of two molds - either the good or bad Indian.

It is in such work that one can see that Rennard never failed to pay homage to his American Indian ancestry. He has a gift for incorporating the cultural phenomenon that is everyday American Indian life into his scholarly work. It is this work that will be his legacy - a legacy that one might attribute to his Cherokee and Osage heritage. Now, he has become that grandfather figure himself, and it is time for him to take time to tell another story.

FOOTNOTES:

n1. Rennard Strickland, The Idea of Environment and the Ideal of the Indian, J. Am. Indian Educ., Oct. 1970, at 8, 13-14 (citation omitted).

n2. Rennard Strickland, Coyote Goes Hollywood, Native Peoples, Fall 1997, at 34, 35.