



Erickson, Reed (1917-1992)

by Ruth M. Pettis

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A twentieth-century trailblazer for the transsexual community, Reed Erickson is best known for his philanthropy. While his enigmatic life as an early female-to-male transsexual has been the subject of conjecture, it is his establishment of the Erickson Educational Foundation that secures his reputation as a transgender pioneer.

Early Life

Erickson was born Rita Alma Erickson in El Paso, Texas on October 13, 1917. She grew up in Philadelphia, daughter of the owner of a lead smelting business. She graduated from the Philadelphia High School for Girls and enrolled in secretarial studies at Temple University, but showed little aptitude for that occupation. Her family relocated to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where she obtained a degree in mechanical engineering from Louisiana State University in 1946, the first woman graduate from that department.

Erickson pursued an engineering career in Philadelphia until her early thirties, then returned to Louisiana. She worked for her father and subsequently launched her own business constructing bleachers for stadiums. She inherited her father's business upon his death in 1962, which at the end of the 1960s she was able to sell for "several million" dollars.

From Lesbian to Male

Erickson lived as a lesbian through the 1950s. During this time, she was under surveillance by the FBI for participation in leftist groups, but she does not appear to have developed any serious political affiliations. Her file for 1954 reports that she refused to become an informant for the agency.

In 1963, when he was 46 years old, Erickson, as a patient of Dr. Harry Benjamin, began transitioning to male and changed his given name to Reed.

The Erickson Educational Foundation

In 1964, using his own fortune, Erickson established the Erickson Educational Foundation. He dedicated the new foundation to funding unconventional research. Its goal was "to provide assistance and support in areas where human potential was limited by adverse physical, mental or social conditions, or where the scope of research was too new, controversial or imaginative to receive traditionally oriented support."

Erickson Educational Foundation grants supported the work of homophile, New Age, and transsexual organizations. ONE, Inc. of Los Angeles, for example, received during the 1960s and 1970s in excess of \$2,000,000 from the foundation. Researchers in homeopathy, acupuncture, dream research, and dolphin communication studies were also some of the beneficiaries.

The Erickson Educational Foundation was a primary source of funding for incipient transsexual programs in

the 1960s and 1970s. While sex reassignment surgery had been performed in Europe since the 1930s, American surgeons were apprehensive about their legal liability, given the absence of a recognized diagnosis justifying it. The Johns Hopkins Gender Identity Clinic (the first such facility in the United States) was established with financial backing from the foundation to provide the necessary medical and institutional authority. As a result of these developments, sex reassignment surgery began to be performed in the United States in the mid-1960s.

The Harry Benjamin Foundation, the publications of Dr. John Money and many other pioneers, and international conferences on transsexual and gender issues were among other recipients of grants that the Erickson Educational Foundation distributed between 1964 and 1975.

The foundation was run from Baton Rouge by its iconoclastic director, Zelda Suplee, until its demise in 1977. During those years Erickson maintained a low profile, subject to constant rumors about his eccentricity, but as the foundation's sole voting member he made ultimate decisions on what was funded, a situation that sometimes created friction with medical colleagues.

In addition to philanthropy, the Erickson Educational Foundation also functioned as an information and counseling resource for transsexuals, creating a referral network of physicians and psychologists. It published educational pamphlets for transsexuals and their families--work that was continued by the Janus Information Facility after Erickson's death--and conducted outreach to medical professionals, clergy, law enforcement personnel, and academics.

Erickson revived the foundation for one year in 1983. By that time, the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association had published its Standards of Care for transsexual transition. The Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association had been conceived largely at Erickson Educational Foundation-supported symposia held in the late 1970s.

Erickson's Later Life and Death

Erickson went on to acquire an immense personal fortune, said to exceed \$40 million, and a luxurious home in Mexico. He married three times and became father to two children. By the 1970s, however, he had developed a drug dependency and was plagued with persistent emotional problems.

After living in Ojai, California for several years, he returned to Mexico to avoid prosecution for drug possession. Erickson died there on January 3, 1992, aged 74.

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