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Daniel W. Shinn

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A VIEW FROM THE 1980s

DANIEL W. SHINN*

When Gena Trueblood, the chairman of the *Missouri Law Review* Dedication Committee, asked me to discuss the Willard L. Eckhardt of the 1980s, a wave of self-doubt engulfed me: words on paper seemed a meager embellishment to a life dedicated to the University of Missouri-Columbia School of Law. After reflecting on the approach to this tribute, I realized it would not be a treatise, but rather a chapter in a continuing story.

My relationship with Professor Eckhardt began by chance. Just before I registered for my first semester, Mike McCausland, Class of 1981, recommended that I sign up for section one. Since, by the fall of 1979, he was a battle-tested veteran, I took his advice. Little did I realize what good advice he had given me, for teaching section one Property was Willard L. Eckhardt. Many events since my good fall semester of 1979 have convinced me that the School of Law also had a good fall semester, forty-one years before, when Professor Eckhardt began teaching.

On August 29, 1979, I started my first of five courses with Professor Eckhardt. After the first day, I approached him to ask where I could obtain a copy of Brown, *The Law of Personal Property*, which he had recommended. Before I could ask the question, he had retrieved the seating chart, found my place on the chart, spotted my last name, and asked if I were related to the William Shinn from Kansas City. I told him that the Shinn to whom he referred was my father, and I was impressed that he had remembered a student so readily from a class that graduated thirty years before mine.

The second day of Property set the tone of my relationship with Professor Eckhardt. Although my notes for that day consume barely one-half page of wide-lined notebook paper, the class is etched in my memory. The class began with Professor Eckhardt announcing that he had taught property to my father and wondering if there were other parent-child/lawyer-law student combinations in the class. There were few. Nonetheless, this distinction won me the opportunity to recite the first case of my law school career. I spent the rest of the hour trying to unravel the problems raised in the case, which involved ownership of a meteor that fell on leased premises and was removed by the lessee's licensee. In the relaxed (to put it diplomatically) frame of mind of a third year student, I view that class as a rite of initiation into the legal world.

The Willard L. Eckhardt of the 1980s is renowned for providing extensive practical advice in class. Often he explains a case in the casebook and

* Editor in Chief, 1981-1982, *Missouri Law Review*; B.A., 1978, Northwestern University.

then asks a student to explain how the problem could have been avoided. From my perspective, he exemplified his concern with practicality during Property II. I had passed all of my first semester courses and had landed a job for the summer of 1980 with a very good Kansas City firm. Having accomplished these two feats, I decided that I could separate the wheat from the chaff in Property II. During the last two weeks, we covered implied easements, a subject that seemed to be ninety percent chaff. "When are we ever going to have to understand implied easements in practice?" I wondered. I don't think I even need to divulge the topic of my first memorandum for the law firm that summer. Thank you for covering implied easements, Mr. Eckhardt.

In addition to a wise choice of course material, Professor Eckhardt's teaching genius lies in his ability to make a student feel that it is personally important to him that the student learn property. Professor Eckhardt's door is always open to students having trouble with the material. He even holds special office hours to allow the numerous question and answer sessions that precede every examination. Even after all the years of hearing the same questions, he answers each one as though it were being asked for the first time.

In addition to concern for the students' learning, Professor Eckhardt is eager to be with students outside class. I remember vividly the hours the Future Interests class of Winter 1981 spent with Professor Eckhardt in Michaels, a local sandwich shop, after the last class. It seemed so natural to be sitting and talking with Professor Eckhardt. In attendance was half the class, from a class that most took not so much because of an overwhelming desire to study precocious toddlers, fertile octagenarians, or magic gravel pits, but because of the teacher, Willard L. Eckhardt.

In addition to helping students in class, Professor Eckhardt is always willing to help students obtain employment. His phenomenal memory for students' names has been a great asset to those seeking his help. He has always been available to write recommendations and make references. For example, Jani Spurgeon, Class of 1982, told me that Professor Eckhardt's recommendation was instrumental in securing her clerkship with The Honorable Scott O. Wright, district judge for the United States District Court for the Western District of Missouri. I, too, can attest to this willingness because Professor Eckhardt helped me secure my first postgraduation job. I hope that Professor Eckhardt does not think that retirement marks an end to the requests for help in obtaining employment.

Professor Eckhardt also has been extremely helpful to the *Missouri Law Review*. It would be difficult to estimate the number of student Comments and Casenotes for which he has been the advisor. Countless attorneys will reap the benefit of this advice whenever they read a *Missouri Law Review* article for which he was the advisor. Not content only to advise, he also has written numerous articles for the *Missouri Law Review* that attest to his contribution to the school. His untiring effort to contribute to the section entitled

“The Work of the Missouri Supreme Court” epitomizes this effort.

If Professor Eckhardt bears any hard feelings to the students, it may be for their failure to coin an apt nickname for him. While students have occasionally referred to taking “Eckuity” with “The Eck,” this shorthand, in my opinion, has not shown the imagination and insight of other renowned nicknames. No animal ever epitomized the Eckhardt classroom style. He was not a Fox to his students, although I do remember that one question in Future Interests required the student to imagine a statute’s effect on the devise of a life estate to the testator’s dog. He was not a Bull in the classroom, although he had ample opportunity. Nor did he ever seem to be a member of the family as was Robert “Uncle Bob” Howard, Glenn “Mother” McCleary, and Roy “The Boy” Proffitt.

I don’t know how best to thank a person who has dedicated forty-four years of his life to ensuring excellence in the profession that I soon will enter. Perhaps the most fitting tribute will be the continued reference to Professor Eckhardt’s thoughts and written works in the years to come. He can rest assured that the dedication of his life to the profession has put those fortunate enough to have been his students in his debt. As one of his debtors, I believe that my career in law has been improved immeasurably because of Willard L. Eckhardt.