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# Imre Sutton

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“To best understand the field of Indian land tenure one must take into fullest account our national land history and our relevant laws... [and] put the Indian and his land in the context of time and place within the changing American scene” [Imre Sutton, 1975].



**I**MRE SUTTON, PROFESSOR EMERITUS OF geography at California State University, Fullerton and a pioneer of indigenous mapping, died of prostate cancer on October 25, 2012. He was 84. He was a teacher and bibliographer, a loving father and husband, an amateur pianist and composer, and an editor and consultant. An energetic and exacting man, he brought his expertise in cartography and environmentalism to bear on Indian policy and law. In the rapidly changing panorama of late twentieth century Indian country, Imre recognized the pivotal importance of Indian land tenure. Imre was

nothing less than a visionary to his colleague in Indian Affairs Patrice Kunesh, who has said that Imre “had the sense of changing impulses, particularly around land tenure, the heart and soul of the American Indian identity and history” (personal communication, Dec. 27, 2012).

Imre Sutton was born June 5, 1928, and grew up in the Depression years. As his daughter Heidi Sutton recalled (2012), he “spent a lot of time as a child exploring the city as he rode the subway system from one end of town to the other; he didn’t know that he was sowing the seeds of his future geography career.” In 2008,

he published a ‘geographical’ memoir of his childhood, *Back to East 29th Street*, about growing up on the lower east side of Manhattan in the mid-1930s. Like Wallace Stegner, Imre Sutton developed a profound appreciation of place from his travels during his childhood. The Sutton family left New York in 1938 and frequently relocated, Imre navigating as his father drove. The Suttons lived in Chicago, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, among other places. Imre graduated from Hollywood High School in 1945, and attended Los Angeles City College after the war. Initially he studied music with the intention of becoming a composer or conductor, but his work in the Angeles National Forest for the U.S. Forest Service during his undergraduate years drew him to a career in geography. He also worked in libraries, on planning committees, and ultimately served as map curator for the Geography Department at UCLA from 1955 to 1957.

In 1957, Imre entered graduate school in the geography program at UCLA. John Caughey in history and Ralph Beals in anthropology were on his Ph.D. committee, which suggests the interdisciplinary nature of his development. His dissertation, *Land Tenure and Changing Occupance on Indian Reservations in Southern California*, was completed in 1964. This unpublished work, which focuses on the 31 small reservations in the Mission Indian Agency, is perhaps not as well-known as his published contributions, but for those interested in the Southern California region, it is an indispensable, foundational scholarly work. With its dozens of excellent maps, it is an invaluable reference work that addresses far more than the land tenure of indigenous people in Southern California; it also includes a great deal of information about cultural, political, and historical developments and such factors as intermarriages and residential shifts among reservation communities. This well-researched and comprehensive dissertation is a serious and thorough overview of the much neglected and misunderstood indigenous people of Southern California.

Imre would have agreed with archaeoastronomer Anthony Aveni (2008:12), who once commented that fresh insights are “to be gained by looking down the cracks between the disciplinary floorboards of the house of knowledge.” With his flexible mind and sympathy for the underdog, Imre fortuitously attended UCLA at a generative period for native scholarship. Imre Sutton

was one of the vanguard—along with Lowell Bean, Tom Blackburn, and George Phillips—that challenged prevailing stereotypes and reinterpreted the experiences of Mission Indians. The articles and maps present in his unpublished dissertation are still authoritative today, and they continue to be used by many people for a wide array of purposes.

While completing this groundbreaking work, Imre also taught at Ohio State University (1958–59), Appalachian State University in North Carolina (1959–60), and Oregon State University (1962–64). In 1964, he was hired at California State University, Fullerton, where he was a professor for more than three decades before retiring in 1995. Sutton taught cultural geography, conservation and ecology, law and environment, water resource planning, geographic writing and research, natural hazards planning, and Indian law and land. He was a department chair, and also a founding member, instructor, and director of the Environmental Studies graduate program.

In his publications as well as in his teaching, Imre was tireless in his determination to apply the insights of mapping and cultural geography to practical problems. He worked to unlock the complexities of Indian land tenure and to make the information accessible to a wide array of students, Native Americans, and public servants. His major work, *Indian Land Tenure* (1975), consisted of a number of bibliographic essays. Patrice Kunesh, Deputy Solicitor of Indian Affairs in the Department of the Interior, sees Sutton’s work as having a real and lasting impact on Indian policy (personal communication Dec. 7, 2012). Imre edited or co-edited two other major works on indigenous lands: *Irredeemable America: The Indians’ Estate and Land Claims* (1985), and *Trusteeship in Change: Toward Tribal Autonomy in Resource Management* (2001). He served on the editorial board of UCLA’s *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* from 1984 to 2001. He contributed 46 book reviews and many articles; he also created maps, and edited symposia in *Journal of the West*, *California Geographer*, and the *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*. Many of his publications are now available online.

After his retirement, Imre Sutton continued an active life as a writer, consultant, and editor. As a consultant, he advised academic and legal scholars, students, public officials, and Indians, as well as book and

journal editors. I was fortunate to become personally acquainted with Imre in his last years, and was among those who experienced his generosity as a colleague at first hand. Imre volunteered to guest lecture; he shared primary and secondary source material freely; he helped with mapping projects; and he willingly commented on manuscripts and shared his contacts to further the research and careers of others. At the time of his death, Imre was working on a third co-edited work with Daniel G. Cole, GIS Coordinator of the Museum of Natural History, entitled *Mapping Native America: Cartographic Interactions between Indigenous Peoples, Government, and Academia*. *Mapping Native America* (2013) will be published posthumously by the Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press and will be dedicated to Imre Sutton.

Imre is survived by his wife Doris, his wife of 53 years. He will be dearly missed.

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