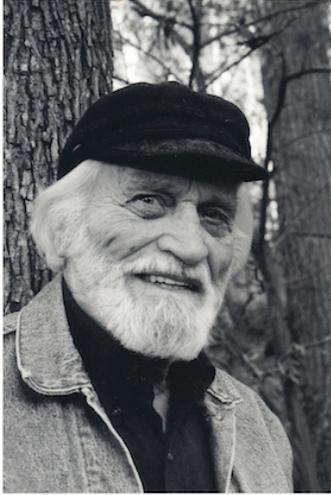


*Portrait of Elliott*



By  
ROBIN BERMAN THOMPSON

*Elliott Thompson's life story proves you can always reinvent yourself. Despite struggling with alcohol addiction and multiple failed marriages, Thompson embraced life with courage and optimism, relocating geographically and making career changes again and again during his 103 remarkable years...*

## **PORTRAIT OF ELLIOTT: The Life of Elliott Thompson**

by Robin Berman Thompson

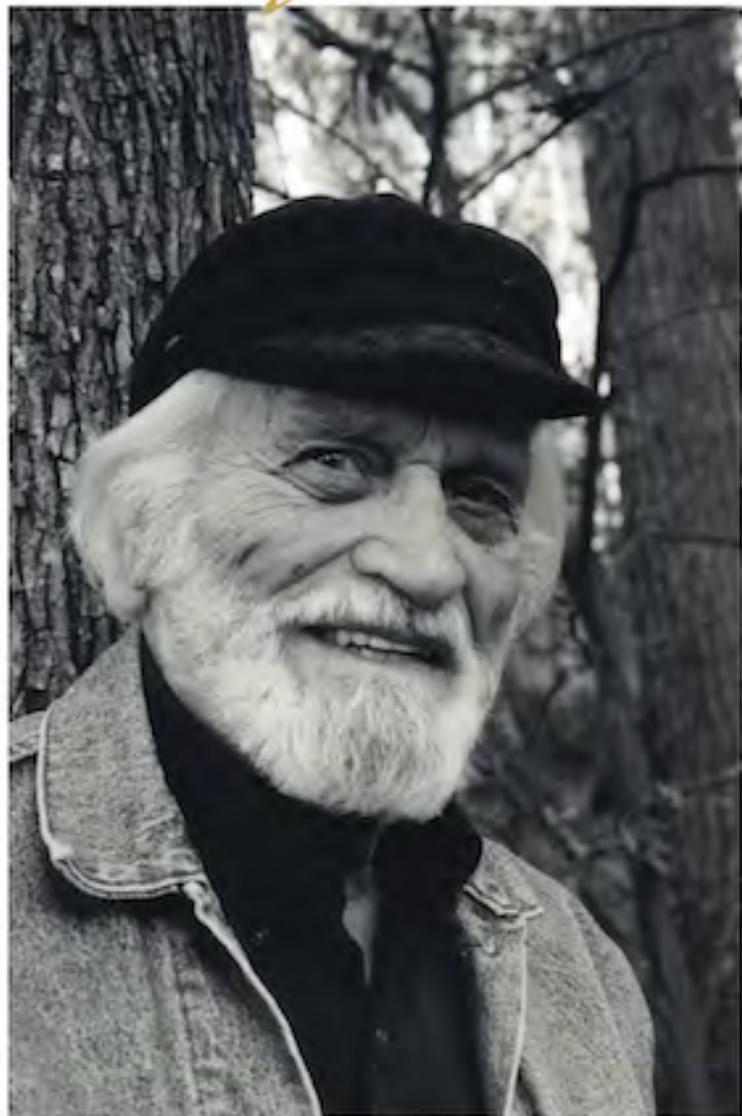
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By  
ROBIN BERMAN THOMPSON

# **Portrait of Elliott**

**The Life of Elliott Thompson**

**Told By**

**Robin Berman Thompson**

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First Edition

Grateful acknowledgment is made to *The Washington Post* for permission to reprint the image of Elliott Thompson in front of one of his “Z” paintings, taken by Frank Johnston in 1971.

Cover photograph by Robin Berman Thompson  
Author photograph by Elisa Thompson Cheslak

Just for fun, here's a quick one-question quiz to see how much you know about Elliott Thompson. Complete the following sentence with the best answer.

Elliott Thompson was

- a. a sailor
- b. a budget analyst
- c. an artist
- d. a teacher
- e. a full-time stay-at-home dad
- f. all of the above

If you chose "f," you're correct. As you'll see from this book, Elliott Thompson had a way of constantly reinventing himself over the course of his 103 years.



## Table of Contents

Prologue.....	vii
Part 1 – The Early Years.....	1
Part 2 – Starting Out on his Own.....	35
Part 3 – Off to Paris .....	75
Part 4 – The Artist .....	101
Part 5 – Life in the South of France .....	139
Part 6 – A New Life in Virginia .....	173
Epilogue: 2007.....	189
Photographs (through 2006) .....	193
Final Brushstrokes .....	221
Elliott’s Roaring Nineties .....	223
99 and Doing Fine .....	229
Celebrating a Century.....	233
Life in the Second Century.....	235
A New Reality .....	243
Final Months.....	249
Remembering Elliott .....	253
Photographs (2007-2016) .....	259
Appendix .....	273
Notes.....	275
Bibliography.....	277
Acknowledgments .....	279

## Chapter 3

Rain, and more rain. It has been raining for six straight days. Water is running swiftly through the streambed, I note to Elliott. He peers through the window and nods with satisfaction. This was his solution to a problem we discovered during our first year at the house in Fairfax. During heavy downpours, water would flow through the yard, following the downward slope of the land, and wear away muddy trenches. Elliott devised a solution to channel the water, which entered primarily from a neighbor's property and cut a diagonal path across the yard. He drew a picture and gave it to a landscaper contractor, who dug a swale and lined it with river stones. The streambed is usually dry, but on days like today, it does its job well.

Elliott watches the wind sculpt the heaps of leaves that cover the ground. I know he wants to go outside with his leaf blower and restore order to the backyard. If he had his way, every wayward leaf, every broken twig, and every fractured branch would scurry back in its assigned place. But the rain keeps us inside, so we sit here and let memories sift downward like the dappled leaves.

The rains remind Elliott of the time it rained so much in Washington, back in the 1930s, that the Potomac River rose up and flooded the city. Once he showed me a marker on a National Park Service building on Constitution Avenue, around 15<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> Street NW, that indicated how high the water got. It was probably six or seven feet high at that point. Parts of Georgetown were completely submerged, and the area from K Street up to M Street was all under water.

Then he remembers a snowstorm from the early 1920s that paralyzed the city. The weight of the snow caused the roof of the Knickerbocker Theater to cave in. His father, who was still in the Navy at the time, was one of those who tried to rescue the people trapped inside. Of course, the snow was great fun for the children. They built caves and tunnels in the street. It took days to clear the snow. Most of the street cleaning equipment was still pulled by horses.

Soon, it's dark enough to light the candles for the Sabbath. The Hebrew words of the blessings may still feel awkward in his mouth, but Elliott, a Jew-by-choice since 1989, warmly welcomes this respite from the mundane concerns that occupy our time and minds during the week. The enthusiasm of his chanting compensates for any mispronunciation, and we retreat into the soft glow of the candlelight.

If you look at the childhood photograph of Elliott in his choir robe, you see a sweetly angelic face. But looks can be deceptive. Elliott's adolescence got off to a pretty rocky start. By the time he reached his fifteenth year, he had gotten drunk for the first time, he had started smoking, he had driven a car without a driver's license, and he had gotten tattooed.

Prohibition was still going on at this time. Young people were exposed to lectures about the dangers of alcohol, but bootleg liquor was readily available. On Friday evenings, Elliott and his friends would see the bootleggers driving across the bridge from southern Maryland into Washington, their cars loaded with illegal booze. There was some excitement as the bootleggers came down Pennsylvania Avenue with police cars in pursuit.

When Elliott was about fifteen, a boy he considered a friend invited him to the circus. Right after they started out, the other fellow pulled a pint bottle out of his pocket and offered Elliott a drink. Elliott remembers taking the drink, but nothing after that.

“I guess I went to the circus,” he says, “but I don’t remember it. I don’t remember going to it. I don’t remember coming home. All I remember is waking up in my own bed in the morning, scratching my arms, and finding out I’d been tattooed.”

His mother had no sympathy for him. When she saw his condition, she simply said, “You did it, so don’t complain. If you do things you’re not supposed to do, that’s what can happen. You’ve got nobody to blame but yourself.”

Elliott lightly touches the scars on his forearms, reminders of the tattoos that he later had removed. On his right arm was a heart, and on his left arm was a dagger. “My plan was to go to the circus and to enjoy myself,” he reflects. “I certainly had no intention of getting tattooed on both arms. But that’s what can happen to anyone who starts drinking at an early age, or to excess, or when their system can’t handle it.”

Finally, October’s dismal skies have fled, and we awake one morning to an unheralded expanse of pristine blue. I’m trying to finish up a roll of film before we leave on our trip, and I turn once again to Elliott, my favorite subject. I interrupt him while he’s raking out front in a futile attempt to gather up the mountains of leaves that have fallen these past few weeks. He stops and leans against the rake. Damn, he’s handsome, standing in that sea of gold, red, and deep pumpkin-orange. His trademark cap is pulled down to block long, early morning rays of the sun. When I zoom in for a close-up, I see a few more wrinkles, even deep furrows alongside his nose, and dark, ruddy purplish pouches under his eyes. But at ninety-three, he still has that magnetic male attractiveness. After I take a few snaps, he gives me an expression of amused impatience, as if to say, enough of this already—I know I’m good-looking, but I want to get back to work.

Looking over a series of photographs from Elliott’s younger years, I can’t help but envy him his good fortune. By his teens, he was a fairly tall, broad-shouldered young man with slim hips, a flat belly, wavy blond hair, and clear blue eyes. Not only was he blessed with classical good looks and the self-confidence they often engender, but he also got an easygoing disposition and an outgoing nature

thrown into the deal. With this combination, it's no wonder he always had an active social life.

Actually, he started getting interested in girls when he was in the fourth or fifth grade. There's a lilt in his voice when he tells me about Marjorie, or maybe it was Marguerite. Later on, perhaps in eighth grade, he noticed a very pretty girl in one of his classes. When they happened to be alone together in the cloakroom for some reason, he impulsively gave her a kiss on the cheek.

"What did she do?" I ask.

Elliott laughs. "She turned around and slapped my face. So I decided that kissing girls was not good."

While he was still in school, Elliott didn't have too many dates in the traditional sense, but he socialized in other ways. About once a month, the Norwegian Society or the Sons of Norway had a dinner and dancing at the lodge. "It was a real family affair. First there would be a good Scandinavian meal, then some kind of business meeting, and afterwards, music for dancing. Sometimes it was an accordion, maybe a piano, or someone played the violin, maybe once in a while more of an orchestra."

"Did you know how to do those dances?"

"No, but we would do them anyway. You didn't have to know how to dance. You just got up there and jumped up and down."

At these events, Elliott danced with and got to know several girls.

"It wasn't really dating," he insists. "Dating cost money."

But eventually, he had a few dates with a Swedish girl named Catherine. Her father was with the Swedish Embassy, and she lived on Massachusetts Avenue NW. When Elliott invited her to the movies, they would meet at a movie house on F Street, such as the Palace, the Columbia, the Metropolitan, or another of the theaters that teenagers favored in the 1920s. Elliott paid for the tickets, which cost about twenty-five cents. After the show, they would go across the street to an ice cream parlor. Each would have a dish of ice cream, which cost a dime a piece. Then the young pair would take a walk up and down F Street. At the end of the evening, Elliott would walk her to the streetcar stop, and she'd get on and go home.

"And that's it," Elliott says of his date. "I'd just get on my streetcar and go home."

We have several road trips on our agenda this year: to Harrisonburg, where Elisa is in school; to Baltimore to visit Elliott's daughter, Marie-Claude, and her family; and to Yorktown, to see Tyler and his mother, Jean. When we go places nowadays, I'm the designated driver, but it wasn't always that way. When we first met, I didn't own a car, and I rarely drove. One day when Elliott was visiting me in Boston, I rented a car so we could drive to Newport to visit a friend who was there for a few days. I was nervous about getting behind the wheel and driving an unfamiliar route.

But with Elliott by my side, we made it to Newport and back safely. When we lived in France, I was happy to let Elliott do all of the driving. The roads were narrow and twisting, and the recklessness of the French drivers terrified me. Being a passenger was scary enough! Besides, our little Peugeot 205 had manual transmission, and I felt fairly certain I'd strip the gears. But during the years we have lived in Virginia, I have had to adapt to the car-oriented way of life.

In his tenth decade, Elliott still drives, but only during daylight hours. He's been driving for years, since he learned to drive at age fourteen or fifteen, in a most unorthodox way. This is one of the best road trip stories I've ever heard. It began innocently enough, in 1926 or 1927, on a Saturday morning that started out like any other. Here it is in Elliott's words.

"I got up and did my chores, and then for some reason, the thought of taking a hike occurred to me. I didn't know where I would go but decided I might need some money, so I emptied my piggy bank and put the money in my pocket. It was summertime, nice weather. My mother asked what I was going to do. I said, 'I think I'll take a hike.'

"That wasn't unusual for me. I used to take a lot of hikes in the city. I would start and walk and walk and walk. Sometimes I would have a destination in mind, and sometimes I wouldn't. Many a time I've walked from where I lived on Potomac Avenue up to the White House, and that is a long walk, three miles or so. Sometimes I might hike to Chevy Chase and go to one of the golf courses and caddy for a day. I might go to the amusement park in Glen Echo or to the swimming beach next to where the Jefferson Memorial now stands. It could be any place, and my parents, if they had any objection, never said anything. I was just inquisitive."

"And energetic," I add.

Elliott nods in agreement. "Anyway, I told my mother I was going to take a hike. She didn't ask me where I was going or what I was going to do, and off I went. I went down to a friend's house, a guy named Dart Williams. I asked Dart if he wanted to take a hike. He said, 'OK.' I guess we decided to go to Alexandria. We may have caught the streetcar up to 14<sup>th</sup> and Pennsylvania Avenue (NW), or we walked. 14<sup>th</sup> Street led out of the city, and when you crossed the bridge, you were on U.S. 1 headed south. When we got there, we put our thumbs up for a hitch."

"Hitchhiking?" I can't keep the shock out of my voice.

"Yeah," Elliott says calmly. "Our thumbs went up and a guy stopped and asked us where we were going. And we said, 'Where are you going?' He said, 'Richmond.' So we said, 'We're going to Richmond.' He had this little speedster, a roadster, an open car. Both of us got into the front seat. We got to a point and he said 'I'm turning off here.' We said, 'Fine.'

"The trip only took us a couple of hours. Then Dart said 'I've got a cousin or uncle or aunt in Jacksonville.' So off we went to Jacksonville (Florida). We got another ride, this time in a truck. There were two guys in the front, so we sat in the

back of the truck. They took us from Richmond to South Hill, Virginia, near the border. That was as far as they were going. We were trying to figure out what to do. By that time, it was getting to be kind of dusky, dinnertime. So we went into a café and got a sandwich.”

I interrupt again to ask how much money Elliott had.

“Not much, a few dollars. I had more than Dart had,” Elliott says. “We got something to eat. Then the question was where are we going to sleep? There was a church right across the street. So we walked into the churchyard and tried a couple of doors, but we couldn’t find anything open. So we slept out on the grass in the churchyard, in the cemetery. We woke up early and went over to a gas station across the street to wash up.”

“You didn’t call home?” I ask with maternal concern.

Elliott just smiles and continues his tale.

“A woman was filling up her car with gas and wiping the windshield. She either had Florida or Maine tags on the car. But she was coming from Maine and going to Florida. We asked her if she’d give us a ride and she said yes. We got in and then, next thing, we’re crossing the border into North Carolina. We’re on US 1, and US 1 in North Carolina at that time was a dirt road. A lot of places had dirt roads. A lot were washboard roads. It would rain and the rain would go across the road and make gullies, like a washboard. Anyway, at some point, she asked if one of us could drive. And I said, ‘Sure.’ ”

“You must be kidding,” I say. “Had you ever driven before?”

Elliott shakes his head no. “I got behind the wheel. Dart was sitting up front with me. I didn’t know how to shift gears, but I’d watched how she did it when I was in the front and Dart was in the back with her daughter. I almost stripped the gears of the car. When I started going from side to side on the road, she started screaming from the back. She was telling me to stop. I was telling her everything was OK. I finally got the car straightened out and off we went. I drove for maybe an hour or so.”

I interrupt to ask about speed limits.

“It wasn’t very much—maybe 35, 40. I don’t even know if they had speed limits in some of these places.” Back to the story, Elliott continues, “At some point she got behind the wheel again. We were on a very bumpy part of US 1, and we had an accident. It was with a Ford pickup truck. The minute the accident happened, a couple of guys got out and jumped out of the front seat and into the back of the truck, and started taking out gallon jugs of corn whisky and running over to the side of the road and putting them in the bushes.”

“A couple of minutes later the sheriff showed up. I don’t know whose fault it was. These guys in the truck blamed the woman. She said it was their fault. I was trying to tell the sheriff these guys had taken these bottles over to the side of the road.”

Elliott relays the conversation that followed, mimicking the sheriff's Southern accent.

"He said 'Oh, no. I know these boys. They wouldn't do anything like that.' And I said, 'Go over and look.' He said, 'I don't have to look. These are nice fellas.'

"It ended up that she had to get her fender pulled out. There was a big black guy there, and he was twice as big as anyone in the crowd that had gathered around, even though it was outside of this little town. The guys in the truck said it would cost about five dollars to get their car fixed. So the sheriff said, 'You people will have to pay the five dollars.' We couldn't argue with him. Otherwise he said he'd put us in jail. So she said to us, 'Do you boys have any money?' I had a couple of dollars. That's all I had. I gave that to her. Dart didn't have any money. She added to it and paid the five dollars. Then she gave the black guy a dollar because with his bare hands he'd pulled up the fender so it wasn't rubbing against the wheels.

"So we take off, and our next stop is Columbia, South Carolina. She was going to visit some friends. They had a daughter and her name was Lafitte, Lafitte Ray. They didn't invite us to dinner, but we were told we could come back later on and spend the night."

After all this traveling, Elliott and his friend must have been starving.

"Right," he says. "Dart and I started walking around town. We walked to the Capitol building. We saw a drugstore and went in. We were going to get a sandwich and a glass of milk. The sandwich cost ten cents and the milk cost a nickel, and I had thirty-six cents. We also spotted a Western Union office. We decided we'd go there and wire home for money after we got something to eat."

"You know, you've got incredible *chutzpah*," I interject.

Elliott ignores my comment. "The man in the drugstore told us he didn't serve food. But if we wanted something to eat, we should go down the block to the Primrose Cafeteria, and the lady there would give us something to eat. So we went to Western Union and I sent a telegram to my parents telling them where we were, where we were going, and asking them to send me five dollars that I would pick up at the telegraph office. Dart sent a similar message to his folks and he asked for five dollars, too. Then we set off for the Primrose Cafeteria.

"The minute we got inside, we knew we weren't going to get anything for thirty-six cents. But this woman said, 'Aren't you going to eat?' And we said, 'No, we just wanted a sandwich and a glass of milk.' She said, 'Where are you from, and where are you going?' We told her, and she said, 'Just sit down.' So we sat down.

"The first thing you know, we each had a full chicken dinner, and a big glass of milk. We told her that we only had thirty-six cents, but that we had wired home for money, and as soon as it came in, we would come back and pay her. She said, 'That's fine.' So we had the chicken dinner. She even brought us apple pie for dessert. So we finished the dinner and walked back up to Western Union and my five dollars was there. But there was no response from Dart's message to his folks. I

think we'd told our parents that we had arrived and were going to continue on to Jacksonville."

"Do you remember if there was any message that your parents sent along with the money?"

"I don't remember. But at least it told us our parents knew where we were and where we were going. So we went back to the Primrose Cafeteria and gave the lady the five dollar bill that we'd gotten. She gave me change and she only took out thirty-six cents. And I said, 'You've made a mistake. You didn't take out enough money.' And she said, 'You had thirty-six cents when you came in here, and that's all you're gonna have to pay.' Her name was Mrs. Rainey. I'll never forget that because that was the first time in my whole life that I'd seen Southern hospitality in operation.

"So, we went back to the Ray house, spent the night, got up in the morning, and drove all the way to Jacksonville. When we were let out, Dart looked up the name of his aunt or uncle in the phone book and we called them. They were expecting us. I'm not sure exactly how we got to their house, but we got there. In their yard they had fruit trees growing. That was the first time I'd ever eaten an avocado. We each got a half of an avocado. And we told them about our adventure. Dart's uncle informed us that we were going to go back to Washington on the bus the next day, and that's what we did."

"And all that time, it never occurred to you to call your parents?" I ask, shaking my head in disbelief. "Did you have a phone in your house?"

"Oh, yes," Elliott assures me. "Not everyone had a telephone, but we did. We had a party line, a four-person party line, which was about the cheapest you could get."

"But you didn't call."

"No, no. They knew where I was. I told them I was going to take a hike. We got on the bus the next day and sometime later we got off the bus in Washington and went home."

"Were you at all nervous about going home at that point?"

"I wasn't," Elliott says. "Dart was. Dart was reprimanded by his folks. I think my mother told me I should have been more explicit about what I was going to do, where I was going to go. I should have called them up, contacted them, before I got to Columbia, South Carolina and sent them a telegram asking for the money. But I don't think I was allowed to play with Dart for the rest of the summer. That was not *my* parents, but *his* parents. They said I had led their son, who was older than me, astray, I guess."

Eventually, Elliott got his driver's license, and that's another story in itself. It was later that summer or the following summer, and he was still below the legal driving age of sixteen. However, he went along to the D.C. License Bureau when a slightly

older friend, Mel Smyser, went to get his driver's license. First, Mel had to fill out some papers. Then he had to take a written examination to show he knew all the rules. The policeman in charge asked if Elliott was there to get his license, too. With typical aplomb, Elliott said, sure.

Both boys took the written exam and passed. But before the officer would issue licenses, he demanded to see a birth certificate from Mel, who was rather short and very youthful in appearance. An argument ensued, with Mel explaining that the document was at home, and the officer repeating that he would have to go get it if he wanted a license. Finally, Elliott stepped in.

"That's OK," he said. "We'll go home and get the birth certificate."

Later that day, Elliott returned with his friend to the License Bureau. He successfully demonstrated his driving skills to the officer by driving Mel's car around the block and was rewarded with his very first driver's license.

"They must have asked for *your* date of birth," I insist.

"I guess they did."

"And you gave them the wrong one?"

"I may have," Elliott admits with some reluctance.

Let's review what we've learned so far about the early years of Elliott's adolescence: he got drunk, ended up with two tattoos, hitchhiked to Florida, drove a car without a license, and lied to a police officer. He certainly doesn't sound like the model choirboy anymore. Rather, he seems like a young man whose life was rapidly spinning out of control. I ask him if he thinks this might have had something to do with his parents' decision to send him to boarding school.

"I guess so," Elliott says, somewhat grudgingly. "I think there were a number of reasons. I was having problems in school with kids. I got into fights for various reasons. Some of it was prejudice. I wasn't always fighting, but I guess I was hotheaded in some respects. And as I said before, I don't think I was the best student. My parents were interested in seeing that I had more opportunity in a different atmosphere."

His parents nearly shipped him off to Antarctica instead. It all began when Commander (later, Admiral) Byrd, an acquaintance of his father's, offered Axel a position on the team being assembled for an expedition to the South Pole. Elliott's father was eager to accompany the explorer, but Elise would hear nothing of it. When Byrd mentioned that he'd like to take a young man along, Elliott jumped at the chance to go. Unfortunately, the National Geographic Society, which was underwriting the expedition, specified that the young man would have to be a Boy Scout. So, instead, a disappointed Elliott packed his bags for the Briarly Hall Military Academy, a boarding school located about thirty or forty miles from Washington, in Poolesville, Maryland.

Elliott claims he doesn't remember how he felt when he learned he was being sent to Briarly. He says he didn't see it as a kind of punishment for his less than exemplary behavior, but I can't imagine that he was very happy about the idea. He was quite content living at home. Furthermore, the Elliott I know is the antithesis of the military man. He is an individualist, not one to blindly accept orders. I wonder how he managed to adjust to life at a military school.

The daily routine was well regimented. The boys lived two to a room. They got up in the morning and did certain chores. The students were responsible for keeping their rooms clean. "Beds had to be made properly, clothes had to be hung up and arranged, and everything had to be in its place," Elliott explains. "There were weekly inspections and occasionally unannounced inspections at other times."

I look at him skeptically, thinking of the jumble of papers, books, and assorted stuff on his desk.

"It was routine, you know," he adds. "You got used to it."

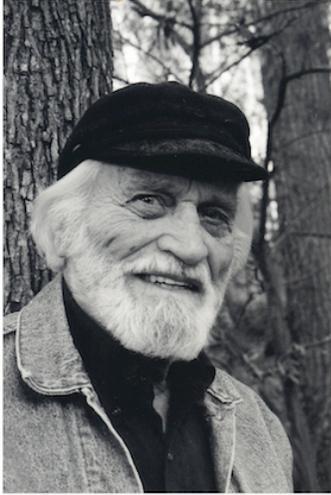
The students had to be in uniform when they reported to breakfast. After breakfast, they went to classes until lunchtime. In the afternoon, there were more classes. When classes ended, there were a variety of activities to choose from. Elliott enjoyed having an opportunity to participate in sports. He was interested in track and field. When he tried out, he made a junior team.

Academics were not Elliott's forte. He describes himself as an "okay" student. For foreign language, he chose to take Spanish rather than French or German, but his language studies were limited to one semester. Since art classes were not offered, he couldn't continue the mechanical drawing he had begun in junior high. On his own, he did a few colored ink drawings, but he never expressed any desire to study art seriously.

Living away from home for the first time might have made him homesick, but Elliott recalls that the separation didn't bother him much. He was independent-minded and adventure loving, and he viewed the new situation with a mixture of resignation and acceptance. He only went back home for school vacations, not on weekends, and his family never came to visit him at school. Elliott admits that there were times he daydreamed about sitting at the kitchen table and talking to his mother while she made cookies. Fortunately, he found it easy to make friends at his new school.

In the spring of 1929, at age seventeen, Elliott left Briarly for the last time, although without a high school diploma. Finally liberated from an academic environment, he was ready to embark upon a new phase of his life.

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