

MY MEMORIES OF DESERT SUN SCHOOL (1930'S)

This is a story -- a story about two courageous people, Edith and Richard Elliott who decided to home school their own children and built a thriving private school. Desert Sun School started in 1929 and lasted until 1990 after the death of the founders.

The Coachella Valley was one of the last frontiers of the American west. The inhospitable climate -- summer temperatures that rose to 125 degrees F in the shade and scarce water resources -- made it difficult for humans to survive. Only a few Indian tribes eked out subsistence around canyon oases. However during the winter months, the temperature moderated and the sand and sagebrush became an attractive place for winter vacations.

The Southern Pacific Railroad had been built across the valley in the late 1800's closely following the wagon trail from Yuma Arizona to Los Angeles. It opened up land to settlers and travelers looking for a dry climate.

Edith Hammond and Richard Wharton Elliott came to the desert after their marriage in 1923 and established a date ranch near Mecca, north of the Salton Sea.

They seemed predestined to start a school. Only two weeks after they were married, a relative sent them an eight year old boy to raise and six weeks later, a prominent educator gave them a second boy to "straighten out."

The Elliott's obviously weren't just an ordinary young couple. They came from families with a strong sense of moral purpose, educational priorities and civic responsibility. Let me explain a little of their family background.

The Elliott's were an old and distinguished family from Tennessee. Richard's grandfather, William Yandell Elliott, was born in 1827 in Rutherford County, Tennessee and died in 1893 in the town of Murfreesboro in the same county. He was elected to the Tennessee

House of Representatives in 1865, right at the end of the Civil War at the time of the Reconstruction in the South. In two years, when his term of office ended, he won a seat in the State Senate from 1867 – 1869, where he represented Rutherford and Williamson Counties. Elliott was a Unionist (surprise). He was an ardent Whig before and a strong Union man during the Civil War. He became a delegate to the Republican National Conventions of 1868, 1872, 76 and 80. Elliott was appointed Pension Agent from 1873 – 1877. He was Ruling Elder of the Presbyterian Church, Master Mason and Knights Templar.

William Yandell Elliott married Margaret Graham Johnson from New Castle, Pennsylvania rather late in life. She was born in 1852, his junior by 25 years. They had four sons. The oldest, William Yandell Jr. was born in 1871. He married Annie Mary Bullock and they had two sons, William Yandell III born 1896 and Richard Wharton Elliott born 1899 in Murfreesboro. Both boys attended Webb School in Bell Buckle, Tennessee. The Webb's were related to the Elliott's.

The first son, William Yandell was destined for national distinction as an American historian and political advisor to six (6) US Presidents. After serving in WWI as commander of an Artillery battery, he attended Vanderbilt University where he was a member of a group of poets and literary scholars known as the Fugitives. As a Rhodes Scholar, he attended Balliol College, Oxford, England, where he read philosophy, politics and economics; and where he knew the poet, William Butler Yeats, the Indian nationalist Krishna Menon, John Marshall Harlan, future member of the Supreme Court of the US, among others. His dissertation "The Pragmatic Revolt in Politics" condemned fascism and communism as amoral and despotic. The work proved to be very influential. Many important people admired Hitler and Stalin believing the ends justified the means, but Elliott saw them both as without moral principle.

Harvard President, Abbot Lawrence Lowell, hired Elliott to come to Harvard University. He taught for 41 years. During that time, he was also a member of Roosevelt's Brain Trust, Vice President of the war Production Board in charge of Civilian Requirements in WWII and accompanied Roosevelt to Yalta. Post war, Elliott served on The National Security Council and as a State Department advisor to Kennedy and Johnson.

When he became Dean of Harvard Summer School, he established the Harvard International Seminar, directed by his student and protégé, Henry Kissinger. Many attendees went on to become heads of state or in government in their respective countries; including Yigal Allon in Israel, Yasuhiro Nakasone in Japan and Pierre Trudeau in Canada. William Yandell sent his two sons, Bill and Paul Elliott to Desert Sun while I was there.

William Yandell's brother, Richard Wharton Elliott, may have had a difficult time living in the shadow of his brilliant and distinguished sibling. Richard left Tennessee and went to California where he met and married Edith Hammond in Ventura. They started their life together on Richard's ranch in the desert 150 miles east of Los Angeles.

Edith had graduated from the University of California at Los Angeles, UCLA, and was a school teacher. She taught for awhile at a local public school, teaching 40 – 80 children in one class where many of the children spoke hardly any English.

Richard and Edith had two children, Richard Jr., was born in 1924 and Anna Mary in 1927. The Hammond grandparents and Edith Hammond Elliott's brothers and sisters lived on a ranch nearby. Little Richard Jr., couldn't pronounce their names properly when he was learning to speak, and the nicknames stuck for life: "Bagdad" for granddad, "Munga" for grandma and "Ong" for Aunt Helen Hammond Jayne.

It was natural for these families who were so involved in education (Helen Jayne was also a teacher) to decide to educate their children at home and start their own school. When Richard Jr., was ready to start school, the two sisters opened Desert Sun School in 1929 with four students: Nancy Russell, Victoria Gonzalez, Richard Elliott and Bob Weber. To keep the family atmosphere, the Elliott's chose to be called "Edie" and "Dickie" and Helen Jayne was "Ong".

Quote: "There in the beautiful Coachella Valley surrounded by the desert hills on the North and East, the Salton Sea on the South, and the San Jacinto and San Bernardino Mountains on the West and Northwest the Desert Sun School began." (Dickie Elliott's writings)

The obvious advantages of the school attracted more parents and the following year Edie and Ong were teaching 12 children. The two classrooms were in a tent house built on a cement pad with open screening all around and canvas flaps that provided shade and could be closed in inclement weather. Edie taught grades 1 through 4 on one side of a book shelf divider while Ong taught 5 through 8 on the other side. The Elliott's daughter, Anna Mary, soon became part of the home school and Ong's two sons, Joseph and Peter, came along a little later.

Edie and Ong used the curriculum of the Calvert School of Baltimore. Their Home Instruction Department was a world wide phenomenon in the 1930's. The Calvert courses are still used by dependents of soldiers at the US government military installations and of missionaries in far away places. The US Foreign Service recommends it as a way to get a complete American education for children wherever they are living. The Calvert program at Desert Sun reflected Calvert School Headmaster, V M Hillyer's shining belief that "the whole realm of knowledge is the true field of study and that school is not the preparation for life - it is life."

The local ranchers in the Coachella Valley, like my parents, were eager to place their children in this home school environment. After six months of teaching me kindergarten and First Grade at home, using the Calvert Method, my mother was happy to have my father drive me to the bus as a day student at Desert Sun.

And what at bus! It was a Dodge screened delivery truck with padded benches on each side. We referred to it as the "dogcatcher." The children were picked up and dropped off after school in the village of Thermal at the center of the 40 mile long valley. The worst part of the commute was the unpaved "washboard" road that ran beside the railroad tracks, the last few miles from Mecca to the school. The rough road rattled your teeth and the dust in the open back of the pickup truck was choking.

In spite of the roads and the dire economy in the worst of the Great Depression, the little home school grew and prospered. There was little ready cash for tuition, but parents and friends volunteered their time, talents and labor to keep the school going. My father contributed alfalfa hay for the riding horses and vegetables for the table from the crops he grew for market. The produce helped pay for the tuition for his three children.

When the tent houses were in need of replacement, Edie and Dickie were determined to make the necessary improvements. They turned a corrugated iron date packing shed into a dormitory. With the help of an unemployed contractor and a generous lumber yard, the first stucco frame building was constructed. This house contained a bedroom suite for Edie and Dickie, an office, a kitchen and large multi-purpose room used mainly for dining but doubled for square dancing, ballroom dancing, singing, music appreciation and plays. There was also a classroom for the upper elementary Grades 6, 7 and 8th. The school continued to add dormitories

and a frame and stucco school building, 30 ft x 50 ft, for the lower grades. All this was done before I graduated from grammar school at Desert Sun in 1939.

While Dickie was overseeing the date ranch with the horse stables and the construction, Edie and Ong were guiding their students' young minds with learning about the world we live in. Their passion and commitment inspired us. They made the basics -- reading, writing and arithmetic -- fun. In the lower grades, they used the Calvert Method phonics and books; V M Hillyer's A Childs' History and A Childs' Geography of the World. These books were copyrighted in 1929 so they were the latest thing in education. (I found a copy of A Child's Geography at the AAUW book fair.) With the advances in scientific knowledge, some of the information is now dated, but the method of questioning and creative thinking is as fresh today as it was then.

We were given little stamp books and packets of stamps from around the world and built our own stamp collections. We traded our duplicates ^Klive baseball cards.

Dickie began teaching classes in 1936 when I was in the 6th Grade with Ong as my teacher. There were now more boarding pupils; and the sisters needed an additional teacher, someone to give Edie more time for administrative duties. As I remember, he taught my younger brother, Allan, in the 4th through 7th Grades.

The school day began with everyone standing outside around the flagpole and two designated children unfolding, attaching and raising the flag. We said the Pledge of Allegiance, sang "My Country Tis of Thee" and then went inside to begin class. The day ended with the flag being lowered, folded properly and put away. Patriotism was taught but not uncritically "Does might make right?" My country right or wrong? These were questions discussed in Civics.

The lower grades learned together from a number of large pull down wall maps of the world, the eastern and western hemispheres and the various states and their capitals. We were taught to make maps with latitude and longitude.

Memorization was considered to be a very important part of our education. We memorized poems like the Owl and the Pussycat to the Destruction of Senacarib, Ozimandius and Abu Ben Adam to If by Rudyard Kipling. I had to memorize Teddy Roosevelt's second Inaugural Address which took ten minutes to deliver at graduation ceremonies from 8th Grade.

I remember Edie read Homer's The Odyssey to all the children in the first four grades, and the teacher read Sir Walter Scott's Ivanhoe to the upper grades one year.

We started learning Latin in the 6th grade under Ong's guidance. By the 8th Grade we wrote a play in Latin about Cornelia and Her Jewels. We were confident enough to memorize it and perform it for our parents.

At Christmas, Desert Sun put on an original Nativity play in which every student had a part. One year the school performed Pyramus and Thisbe from Midsummer Night's Dream. The children made the sets and costumes and performed it outside for the parents.

I don't remember any homework and although there were tests, there were no grades given except "satisfactory" or "unsatisfactory" and rarely an "excellent." The children weren't frightened by tests and had no fear of failing. They were always encouraged to try and told never to say, "I can't".

Boys and girls were treated alike. Ong's frequent reminder to me was, "Patience is a wonderful virtue." The school's mission was to have a close association between the student and educator to provide moral, spiritual and intellectual guidance. The goal was to develop self reliance, independence and co-operative behavior. "Always remember who you are and what

you represent” was a reprimand for bad behavior. “You can’t have freedom without responsibility” was impressed on us. Desert Sun School’s mission was to develop leadership based on the confidence and courage of the individual’s own sense of self-respect and social responsibility.

Meals were taken together at tables for 8. Lunch was a hot lunch for boarders and day students usually brought bag lunches from home. We all memorized a nondenominational grace which we repeated together before we sat down. It went like this, “Let the Reign of Divine Truth, Life and Love be established in me and rule out of me all sin. And may thy Word enrich the affections of all mankind and govern them.”

After lunch, there was a half hour rest period on canvas cots outside in the shade of the date palms.

Recess was outdoors in the morning while the air was still cool and we all played group games together. Baseball was the favorite sport, but synchronized marching was also popular.

The father of one of the day students taught ballroom dancing one year. After we had learned the waltz and foxtrot, there was a formal dance. The girls wore long gowns and the boys wore white gloves as we danced around the all-purpose room floor.

The whole school, including parents, enjoyed occasional field trips in the area. A geologist led us across the San Andreas Fault and through Painted Canyon with its pink orange and lavender walls. We circled around at the end of the canyon and back through a cave where the sides were so narrow, we sometimes had to crawl in the dark because only the leader had a flashlight. I saw my first tarantula spider just after we exited the cave. We had learned how earthquakes happen, how you stay out of canyons in a rainstorm and what mica schist, which the old prospectors called “fools gold” looked like.

Another time, we all went to the mud pots at the other end of the Salton Sea where geothermal action caused the clay soil to boil and bubble in rainbow hues. There was a dry ice plant there at that time, and I believe they now harness the geothermal steam to make electricity.

The school went several times to the Salton Sea which was 200 feet below sea level and had no exit to the ocean. It was so salty you couldn't sink and you had to scrub off the salt scum when you got home.

It took real passion and commitment for Edie Ong and Dickie to start from home school beginnings and grow the Desert Sun School into a thriving private school. But grow it did even at the worst of times.

My family made great sacrifices to send me and my younger brother and sister to Desert Sun. The school exemplified the love of learning and moral values our parents wanted us to absorb. Early on other parents, some with greater means, from Los Angeles and beyond sent their children to board for the school year because of the family atmosphere. I didn't think of it at the time, but the sisters and Dickie spent every minute of the day and night caring for those children. After school, there were horseback riding lessons and trail rides across the desert. Sometimes, the rides ended with a supper around a campfire and finding constellations in the night sky or looking for shooting stars.

This is longer than I had expected. Memories kept multiplying. I recognize now that this was a classical education typical of the best of the early 20th Century. Education today has expanded greatly, especially in science and technology. But I believe the skills we learned are still valuable in today's world.

This is the end of Part I of the Desert Sun School. Part II will deal with the move to Idyllwild a mile high in the San Jacinto Mountains. The school started a summer camp at

Hi Castle in 1932. It was very popular. Over the years it became apparent that the best way to conserve the school's resources was the combine winter school and summer camp in one place. The Elliott's bought Saunders Meadow Lodge with 40 acres in Idyllwild.

The summer camp originally took grammar school children some as young as five years old; but as the Elliott and Jayne children grew up, the school changed its emphasis to older children. In Idyllwild, the winter school was for high school also.

The Lodge held the large open all purpose room, the kitchen and dining areas, offices and living quarters for the Elliott's and Staff. Many buildings were added: dormitories, stables, gym, swimming pool, ball fields.

I was a camp counselor when I was in high school and a tutor in the summer while I was in college.