

Larry Elliott

McLemoresville, Tennessee

Shop name: Elliott Sign & Design **Shop size:** 3500 sq. ft. **Age:** 64 **Staff:** Larry and his wife, Kay **Graphics equipment:** Ioline Studio-7 cutter, 4x8 EZ-Router CNC, and “one old brain circa 1948” **Web site:** www.elliott-design.net



I started drawing as soon as I was big enough to pick up a crayon and just kept trying to improve from there. I never had any formal training, but was fortunate to have some very talented mentors. Through their patience and tutoring I was able to learn the basics. My step-father worked as a display artist and window dresser for some major department stores in Nashville, TN, back in the ‘60s—he was also a great sketch artist, pictorial painter and sign artist. With his instruction on composition, perspective and shading, I received a good foundation in art that greatly enhanced my natural talents.

Most of my school years were spent drawing cartoons in class or making posters for my teachers in place of studying the Three R’s. After high school, I figured my artistic

endeavors were never going to make a living for me so I went to work in a factory—and hated most every minute of it. But I kept drawing, studying and painting a few signs on the side to feed my creative needs.

Finally I got fed up with the factory job, made a drawing that showed my dissatisfaction with the work, left it on my work station and walked out. I went into business for myself without knowing anything about business and not much more about making signs.

But I had determination and a desire to learn. I searched out all the local sign makers and offered to help around their shops just to learn a few tricks and tips. I have never regretted my move from factory worker to self-employed sign painter, though things did get slim sometimes. But it was worth the peace of mind that comes



48-by-60-in. double-faced sign in a wooden frame, skinned and edge-wrapped with Alucobond aluminum composite material, mounted on PVC posts, sign face painted with lettering enamels, vinyl graphics



36-by-50-in. double-faced panel built from three panels of 1/2-in. overlaid plywood; enamel paint finish with a hand-painted pictorial and vinyl film graphics



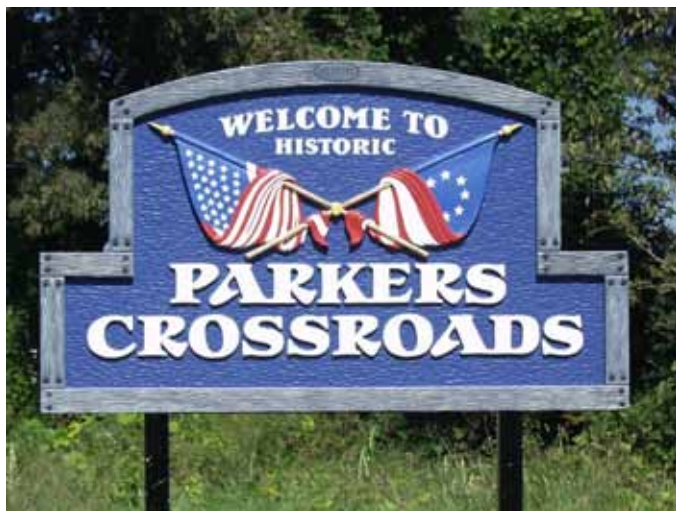
3-by-32-ft. LED backlit sign; letters are cut from 2-in. EPS foam and coated with Chem-Coat 2538 two-part urethane. Backs of letters are routed out to provide a space for the low-voltage high-output LED lamps. The letters are mounted 2-in. off the aluminum composite material surface, which is painted flat white to amplify the halo effect at night.



52-by-60-in. double-faced EIFS monument with water-jet cut Gemini letters (www.signletters.com); pedestal and monument provided by builder



Monument for double-faced sign provided by builder; 8-in. formed Gemini letters with logo is cut from 2-in. EPS foam and coated with Chem-Coat 2538 two-part urethane, mounted on monument sign provided by builder. The acrylic latex finished logo wraps over the top and around the front edge of the 12-in.-thick sign structure.



36-by-60-in. single-faced HDU sign panel finished in acrylic latex paint, mounted on steel posts with an aluminum backing frame. Letters are hand-carved from HDU; border and panel are carved from HDU board and applied.



16-ft. cargo trailer lettered with computer-cut cast vinyl film and a digital print of the logo



3-by-8-ft. double-faced HDU sign panel with a raised HDU border and framed with treated lumber



3-by-8-ft. single-faced 1-in. HDU sign panel with applied HDU letters, oval panel, graphics and border

with doing what you love.

Back in the late 1960s, Bud “Scotty” Scott was the best sign painter around for color combinations and snappy layouts. He shook like a mutt in winter but his signs had a style that far outweighed his wiggly edges and not-so-neat stroke ends. I studied his layouts and watched him for hours as we talked, or should I say, as he talked and I listened.

Another outstanding sign artist that helped me along was my friend Frank Brown. He had the smoothest script and most perfectly shaped letters of anyone around. His use of color and a tight formal layout style was classic, and he taught me so much about signs, life and business. His wife, Wilma, and sons Craig and Mark, still run Brown Sign Company in Paris, TN. Another mentor was Earlie Clenney, who had a shop in Milan, TN. In addition to being a sign painter, he was an inventor, musician and all-around great guy with knowledge on many subjects. Many of the tips he shared with me still help me out today.

I opened my first shop in the corner of an old vacant store in 1968. I couldn’t afford to rent the whole space so the landlord let me use one corner and used the rest to stow his own junk. About six months later, a building became available that was previously a body shop and garage. It was in horrible shape but had a bay door where I could get a vehicle in. I was in heaven. I rented that building for over 20 years, along with a few additions the landlord added. In the ‘90s, I got the opportunity to purchase the property. I used to laugh about it with my previous landlord that I had bought the building at least three times—twice in rent and once for keeps. It’s grown from a 1200-sq.-ft. un-insulated tin building to an over-3800-sq.-ft. shop with a sales office, computer room, photography studio, paint and material storage room, and production shop with a 14-ft.-tall bay for large projects.

My business, and the sign industry itself, has changed so much since 1968, when everything was done by hand, to the digital age that we’re in today. The early time in my career provided me with a good foundation in the fundamentals of design, and that made working with computers easier. A computer is just a tool, and you need those basic layout skills to be able to make it do what you want.

When first learning some of the software programs, I was intimidated and often let the computer lead me off my intended design. In time, I took control of the computer and made it follow me. I still wanted my signs and designs to look hand-made. It took a while to accomplish this, but it really helps set our shop apart.

Kay, my wife of 31 years, is my right hand here in the shop and in my life. She’s my secretary,



26-by-192-in. aluminum composite panel framed with aluminum box tubing, CNC-routed PVC letters over a Black Beauty sandblast slag background



48-by-62-in. aluminum composite panel with cast vinyl film letters and a digital print



Larry developed this logo for a mold eradication company; the logo-and-sign project has since grown into work for other divisions of the parent company and includes decals, vehicle wraps, brochures, sales folders, business cards and multiple website designs.

office manager, janitor, “weedy-girl”, chef and groundskeeper, and takes care of everything else that needs to be done, including installations. We’ve grown the business together, and she’s put in lots of long, hard hours doing work that most other women would find demeaning.

To keep a small business going we all have to sometimes do things that are not fun, but are necessary. I recall years ago we were lettering a billboard in a hog pen along I-40. We were stretched out to the top of the ladders when some curious hogs came around and started scratching their backs on the ladders. We both were swaying in the air before I could get down and run them off. Ever since, the only hogs Kay likes are on the breakfast menu as bacon.

All the sign shops in this area are more associates than competitors—we all borrow materials and help each other when we can. We use each other’s skills and equipment to provide our own customers with products and services that would normally be beyond our capabilities. This is proof that networking has many benefits and opens up new possibilities. Craig and Mark Brown of Brown Sign Company help us with illuminated projects and crane service for larger installs, and Bruce Ottway of Ottway Signs & Stripes in Murray, Kentucky, does our digital prints. I, in turn, have a CNC machine to cut letters and router-carve signs for the other shops. We have a great working relationship that is beneficial to us all.

When your business is out in the sticks, you have to provide your limited client base with everything they need. Our shop is located in a town with a population of 260, and the whole county has only about 29,000 residents. Our client base covers customers from all surrounding counties, and we still do business the old-fashioned way, face to face.

Our web presence is an online portfolio that lets us show prospective clients our abilities. All sales are made in our shop or at the customer’s location, except for regular repeat customers. We refer new prospects to our website where they can view samples of actual signs we’ve produced and to read our company policies. If they are interested in our services, then we will meet and discuss their project.

I still hand-letter, pinstripe, hand-carve and sandblast some signs but most of my time is at the computer, designing logos, print work and websites or creating files to run on the CNC. I like the sign business and how it has evolved with the computerized equipment, but still enjoy wetting a brush for a special letter style to be used in a logo or for a quick knock-out sign.

I have every issue of *SignCraft* from the first one back in 1980. I often go through back issues to look for ideas and inspiration. There is a world of

education within the pages of this magazine for anyone desiring to study and learn great design, color combinations, business procedures and so many things. They can help any sign maker, no matter their skill level.

Being in the sign business for many years has helped with learning the skills necessary to work with many types of materials and the various techniques involved with each. The enjoyment of learning something new keeps the spark of creativity going strong. This has been a labor of love that at times was a pain in the butt, but the end is in sight and the benefits for our community will last long after I'm gone.

Giving back to the community, town or county you are in by serving on committees or boards is a great way to build public relations for your business and do something positive for the people who support your business. Kay and I volunteer for lots of community projects, and I think this has helped keep our name at the top of the list when someone needs a sign. I'm certain that it's kept our name at the top of the "Volunteers" list. •SC

—From an interview with John McIltrout



CNC-cut PVC letters and graphics finished with acrylic latex paint



18-by-48-in. HDU panel finished in acrylic latex paint. The "weathered plank" effect leaves the primary lettering raised.



48-by-60-in. aluminum composite panel on PVC posts. The hand-carved HDU artwork represents the rock formation for which the town was named. Cast plaque by Grandview Aluminum.



A logo we created for a local auto body repair shop, this was used on a large sign mounted on their shop building and on marketing materials. The '34 Coupe graphic is hand drawn, scanned into the computer, auto-traced, cleaned up a bit and colored with only five colors—red, maroon, black and two shades of gray. The version used on their large business ID sign was 62-by-70-in., including the circle background, and was hand painted.