Arizona will always remember Jim Elmore as the founding dean of the College of Architecture at Arizona State University. Nurturing a non-existent department at Arizona State College in 1949 into a nationally prominent design school in less than two decades is nothing short of miraculous. Yet Elmore’s stewardship of the ASU College of Architecture is so towering in its vision and achievement, it momentarily distracts us from his accomplishments as a distinguished soldier, practicing architect, devoted family man, author, and civic leader of bold ideas.

Born September 5th, 1917, in Lincoln, Nebraska, Elmore’s father was a lumberyard manager. Oddly, his interest in becoming an architect came from his best friend’s older brother, who was studying architecture. Finishing the University of Nebraska’s BA degree in architecture in 1938, he went into active duty with the US Army in 1940 and spent six years with the Corps of Engineers in Washington DC, New York, Philadelphia, London, Paris, and Frankfurt. Interestingly, late in WWII, at the Chief Engineer’s Headquarters in Paris, Elmore’s desk was right next to the yet to be famous architect Gordon Bunshaft. One day Bunshaft announced he was going out to visit the great master architect Le Corbusier! Elmore laughs as he recalls that at the time he had not yet heard of Corbu! Later during his tour of duty in France, Elmore was awarded the prestigious Bronze Star and after WWII continued his service with the Army reserves Corps of Engineers, achieving the rank of Colonel in 1964.

From 1946 to 1948, he was a draughtsman / designer for the New York office of Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill [SOM] before, during, and after his graduate studies at Columbia University. He and his wife Ann decided upon his graduation that they would move to Phoenix and would likely accept a position with Hugh Jones, formerly of SOM and then a partner with Fred Guirey, FAIA. But first, Elmore planned to pass his licensing exam in New York state. On loan to Harrison and Abramovitz Architects from SOM, Elmore worked briefly on the United Nations Secretariat building when he received word of passing his architectural licensing exam. Arriving in Phoenix in 1948, he worked with Guirey & Jones and also with Edward L. Varney, FAIA and began his own private practice in the Fall of 1949. Noted Arizona architect Bennie Gonzales, FAIA was one of his staff draughtsmen during this time. In 1950, college president Grady Gammage offered Elmore a full time teaching position at the college for $3,800 per year. Elmore says, “I was delighted...”.

Continuing his small consulting practice while he and Ann raised two children, Elmore set about building one of the best architecture faculties at ASU, drawing talent from prestigious American universities and academic institutions from around the globe. At one point, the ASU College of Architecture was jokingly referred to as “the Harvard of the West.” As an instructor, founder and Dean of the ASU College of Architecture for more than 36 years, Elmore left a legacy of academic excellence while spawning visionary civic plans. Known widely as the “Father of the Rio Salado project,” a 55 mile long urban enhancement for the Salt River bed, Elmore has also been a leader in promoting innovations in urban transportation with landmark freeway studies in the 1960’s and insightful planning proposals of elevated light rail mass transit concepts in the late 1990’s.

As a dedicated practicing architect, educator, father, devoted husband, distinguished soldier, author, lecturer, and civic activist, James W. Elmore, FAIA is arguably one of the most accomplished members of the American Institute of Architects College of Fellows.

-Bio facts as told to James Abell, FAIA in Spring of 2002 in an extensive interview with Jim Elmore, FAIA. This bio was checked by Jim and approved for an upcoming publication on Arizona Architects who have been elevated to the national AIA College of Fellows.