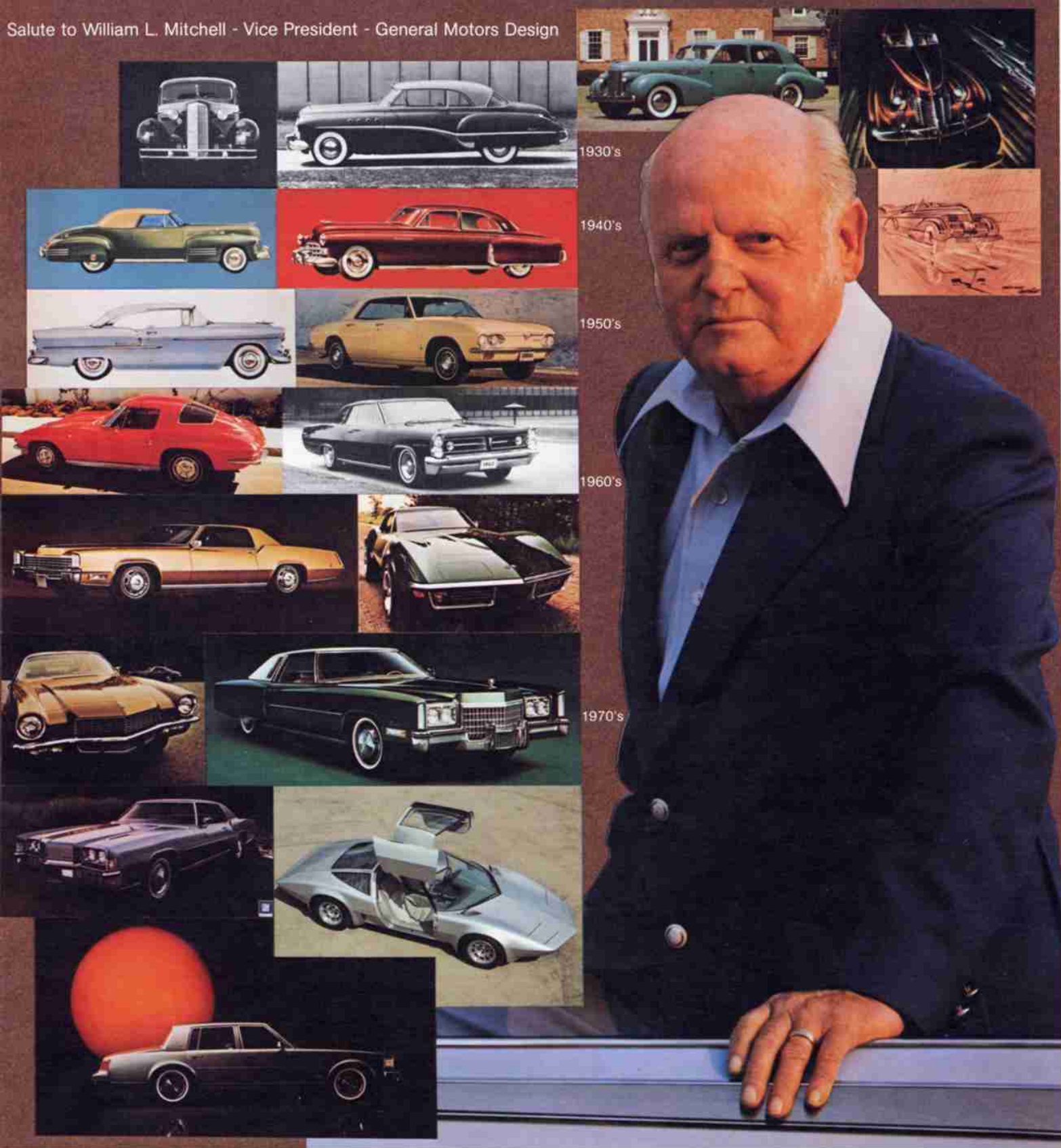


July 1977

General Motors Design

impact

Salute to William L. Mitchell - Vice President - General Motors Design





BILL MITCHELL at the beginning of his career.

Biography

William L. Mitchell, Vice-President in Charge of Design Staff, is retiring this month after 42 years of service to General Motors and the American driving public. Mr. Mitchell developed a love for automobiles and a talent for sketching them at an early age. His father was an automobile dealer for many years and young Bill enjoyed studying and admiring these cars as well as the Stutzes, Mercers, and Temp-lars which his father owned at various times.

To broaden his horizons and allow him to develop his inclination toward a designing career, he enrolled at Pittsburgh's Carnegie Institute of Technology. Later he studied at the Art Students' League in New York. While strolling along 57th Street and Park Avenue, Bill Mitchell could admire the Isotta-Fraschini, Rolls Royce, Hispano-Suiza, Mercedes-Benz and Duesenberg cars displayed in the showrooms. These were the styling pacesetters of the day.

Fresh from art school, young Mitchell joined the Barron Collier advertising agency where he prepared layouts and advertising illustrations. He met the Collier brothers, Miles, Sam, and Barron Jr., who founded the Automobile Racing Club of America (ARCA)-the forerunner of today's SCCA.

In 1931 Bill became the official illustrator of the ARCA, driving and sketching races at Briarcliff and later at the Sleepy Hollow Ring in New York. These sketches, displayed on the walls of the ARCA clubhouse, eventually came to the attention of Design Chief Harley J. Earl, who offered Mitchell a position at General Motors in 1935.

As Mitchell tells it:

"I initially worked on the 1937 LaSalle, Buick, and Cadillac as a designer. At that time they were all done in one room. Then I was put in competition on a 1938

Buick, and right after that they divided the cars into studios and named chief designers. "Mr. Earl put me in charge of Cadillac, and Paul Meyer was chief designer of LaSalle. I'd been there less than a year. I was 24.

"The first car I worked on in 1936 was the 1938 Cadillac 60-Special. It actually started out as a LaSalle, and it was our intention not to make it look like any existing Cadillac of that time. We wanted to give it a younger image—a sportier look. LaSalle was meant to give a youthful image to Cadillac, and the 60-Special was meant to be like an Eldorado or a Seville is today."

In 1941, the Cadillac, with its horizontal egg-crate grille and wider front end, began to dominate U.S. auto design, and its influence definitely became greater after the war.

Cadillac still takes a large measure of its design identity from that 1941 grille. Says Mitchell, "That's when we really changed around and did the broad front. That's when we had everyone else in the automobile industry turn and follow us." The 1941 model marks Cadillac's passage from the classic era to modern times. On May 1, 1954, William Mitchell was named Director of Styling under Vice-President Harley Earl and was serving in that capacity when he was selected to head the Styling Staff upon Mr. Earl's retirement in 1958.

During the 1960's, William Mitchell exerted a tremendous influence on US automotive design. He introduced the clean look and sharply defined features seen in the Pontiac Grand Prix and Buick Riviera image cars. He felt that each GM division should have an "image car" - an automobile that captured the spirit and thrill of driving. The Corvette Stingray, front wheel drive Oldsmobile Toronado, and classic Eldorado resulted from this design vision.

The following decade saw the development of the Chevrolet Camaro and Pontiac Trans Am. Designed to capture and reflect a youthful, sportier driving image, these cars are already judged as classics and one of the all-time "great" designs. More recently developed under his supervision was the "sheer look" of the luxurious Cadillac Seville, the design of the future. In addition to designing all the automobiles, trucks and buses for General Motors, Mr. Mitchell conceived the idea of locating designers in overseas operations coordinating world-wide automobile designs. They are responsible for Opel, Vauxhall, and Holden cars and a smaller activity in South America. Exchange programs for designers, frequent visits and constant liaison characterize the relationship.

Never out of touch, Bill Mitchell is a familiar figure at the International Auto Shows and maintains current awareness of world-wide developments in the industry.

Marian and Bill Mitchell





William Mitchell chats with his friend, famed Italian designer, Sergio Pininfarina. Speaking of Mitchell, Pininfarina remarked: "My father knew Harley Earl very well and I, William Mitchell. Responsible for the designs produced by the largest motor company in the world, Bill Mitchell has had the conviction and strength to support the importance of car styling as the most aggressive means available to the auto industry for the promotion and sale of its products. He is the person to whom all auto stylists in the world owe the most. I feel grateful to him because he always appreciated and praised the Italian style and the sports and luxury cars of our country. I have always admired his human qualities, stamina, and courage, the way he considers his work a challenge, and his love for beautiful things, both old and new, in every field."



Celebrities from every walk of life, including the military, eventually find their way to the Technical Center, and the glamorous and colorful Design Staff. Here, General Curtis Lemay discusses the Mako Shark I with Bill Mitchell during his visit to Design Staff. The General appreciated the powerful engine and the bold clean lines of the experimental Corvette.

GM Executives Cole, Gordon, Donner, Goodman, and Mitchell greet astronaut Alan Shepherd in front of Design Staff after his successful flight into space.



Major General Berengovoy, Russian Cosmonaut, receives an explanation of a design feature from Bill Mitchell. As a part of his state visit, the Cosmonaut also visited Research Laboratories and Engineering Staff after meeting with Mr. Mitchell and other dignitaries.



John Claude Killy, French Olympic skiing champion, is shown a Corvette lineup on a Design Staff tour by William Mitchell.

Killy appreciates speed and good form, whether he is racing down a ski slope or driving a sleek sports car.





1938 Cadillac 60-Special

Within the realm of car design, we see periodic changes of body shapes, changes of style, touches and ornamentation that come to influence the entire industry. These changes arrive first with specific cars and then spread through or to a number of cars.

One such very influential car was the 1938 Cadillac 60-Special, the first complete car designed under Mitchell's supervision. This smaller Cadillac became the first "personal-luxury" car.

Mitchell recalls, "the 60-Special had a lot of new ideas in it. It was one of the first cars to have the hardtop convertible look—the 2-piece doors with the light uppers; the thin chrome frames running around the glass. That gave the openness of a convertible, and a lot of other cars soon copied it—the 1939-40 Mercury coupe, certain Briggs Dodge coupes, the 1940 Lincoln Continental.

"The 60-Special was one of the first cars without running boards and belt moldings. Belt moldings were always put on cars to break up the height of the flat-sided doors. But the 60-S was so low that it didn't need them.

"Another unique feature of the 60-S was the tapered deck. Again, everyone else soon copied it and followed our design innovations."

John R. Bond, former editor and publisher of Road and Track, commented on the engineering of the 1938 60-S, "This was the stiffest frame put under a car to that time. I was with Olds back then, and our liaison engineer at A.O. Smith, who made the frames for Olds, Buick, Pontiac, and Cadillac, was a guy named Sherman, a good friend. He told me that the 1938 Cadillac 60-Special was absolutely the best road car in the world he'd ever driven anywhere, anytime, because of the very, very stiff frame. It really was a foundation."

Its trend-setting design themes, of distinct upper and lower body forms, convertible-type door glass frames and absence of a running board—a first in large quantity produced cars—gave the 60-Special a distinction that exists even today. Its design lines were softened into the "torpedo body" forms used by General Motors for nearly a decade. excerpts from "Retrospect," Motor Trend Magazine, June 1977.



1975 Pontiac Firebird Formula and Trans Am.

Training the Young Designers

It is the young people entering the field of automotive design today who will maintain that lead tomorrow. Bill Mitchell has always shown a strong interest in the career development of design students; this encouragement has been appreciated and well received at Art Center College, and other centers of design training.

Don Kubly, President at Art Center, remarked, "Bill Mitchell has been a good friend of ours at Art Center College of Design for many years and last fall was awarded the highest honor the college

can give, an honorary Doctor of Science degree. We have valued his friendship and support and the personal inspiration he has brought to generations of students preparing for careers in transportation design. During his own long career, he has been instrumental in raising the importance accorded the whole design profession. His leadership and taste have had enormous impact on the consistent marketability of General Motors products through their strong emphasis on design innovation."

1963 Buick Riviera





Design Directions

"I don't believe in surveys and asking people what they want. I never have," stated Bill Mitchell emphatically. "Good taste comes from experience. Good design sells. You lead when you believe in yourself."

All the 1977 model GM cars have what Mitchell calls "the sheer look" - tailored and trim. He predicts that this style will prevail into the 1980's. It represents GM's successful effort to increase fuel economy by reducing weight and size. The new cars are shorter, higher, and narrower, as opposed to the "puffy look" still seen in competitive models.

Bill Mitchell realizes that individualized car design is difficult to achieve and many cars are bound to look alike, simply because the body size and basic shape are so similar with economic and manufacturing limitations being such controlling

factors. Every designer consciously or sub-consciously is in a way improving or improvising some design element on other 'designed cars' that have gone before. Hints of the Rolls Royce can be seen in the roof and deck details of the original Buick Riviera introduced in 1963. That car, along with the 1938 Cadillac 60-Special, 1963 Corvette Sting Ray, and the Eldorado, is on Mitchell's list of "favorite things." That Riviera is a bold statement. It was the first of the personal luxury cars and really the forerunner of today's "sheer look" which can be seen in the elegant Seville.

Some of Mitchell's present favorites include the Trans Am and Camaro "image cars." "The proportions are right," Mitchell believes. "It's a classic design which will look good forever." These automobiles were built to capture the spirit and the thrill of driving which is what automobile design is all about.

On Government Controls

The automobile's historical development and future growth have been a vital part of William Mitchell's private and working life. It is not surprising, therefore, that he was quick to attack those who would impose excessive government regulation on the automobile industry. "It wasn't long before we found ourselves the target of anti-capitalist critics. 'If big business is bad,' they reasoned, 'then the biggest must be the worst.' They began to suggest that the automobile was a villain." This touched off a flurry of legislative activity in the form of environmental, safety, and damageability rules.

"As a designer, this really antagonized me! Because we designers and engineers have consistently developed safer cars year after year. Such worthwhile items as seat belts, collapsible steering columns, energy-absorbing instrument panels, side marker lights, and impact bars were installed."

"But the demands for more and more gimmicks grew. Every time we developed new designs to meet current government requirements, we were confronted with a fresh set of government requirements! Some of us began to feel that it wasn't the problem of safety these people were attacking, but the existence of the car itself."

Like most of the motor men in Detroit, Mitchell has little use for the crusading views of Ralph Nader. He thinks that Nader is doing his best to reduce the automobile from a sporting carriage to the excitement and performance level of a farm cart. The Experimental Safety Vehicle (ESV) is a prime example. The interior, which resembles a padded cell, promotes a feeling of claustrophobia; while the exterior appearance is ponderous. Excessive control hinders design development.

"There are those in government who have tried to kill the 75 year old love affair between American people and their cars, but the critics cannons have misfired. We're still in business, designing pleasant, attractive cars and today we're working harder than ever on new products for tomorrow."

1970 Chevrolet Camaro Rally Sport





Bill Mitchell takes a moment to speak with Zsa Zsa Gabor at the 1977 New York Auto Show. Mitchell, Zsa Zsa, and Mayor Beam officially opened the show. Twelve special cars featured at the show from Design

Staff were: Y-Job, LeSabre, Silver Arrow I and II, Banshee Berlinetta Monza SS and GT, Mako Shark, Manta Ray, Aerovette, and Sting Ray. These show cars were a popular attraction.



Jack Nicklaus, golf champion, chats with Bill Mitchell at the Pontiac Masters Acapulco Convention held in Acapulco in 1972. Mitchell was the guest speaker and gave a classic design presentation to the assembled convention. He had the opportunity to meet Nicklaus again the following year in Puerto Rico.



Lorne Greene is one of the many famous celebrities who has been a house guest of William Mitchell. He is an accomplished movie, stage, and television actor. Greene was the star of the famous Bonanza western television series for many years. A classic car buff, he enjoyed sharing his hobby with the experts. Here, he discusses the many intricate aspects of automotive design with his host during a special Design Staff tour.

Left to right: Chairman of the Board Thomas Murphy, President E.M. (Pete) Estes, Vice-President Bill Mitchell, and King Gustav of Sweden. The King was officially received at Design Staff on his Technical Center tour. He visited the Color Studio, Cadillac Studio, and the Garage where he was shown the experimental cars. He showed an appreciation for these advanced concepts in automotive design.



BMW designer Hans Muth illustrates his point as he surveys the BMW 1000 motorcycle with Bill Mitchell.



Dr. Dick Thompson, racing champion and a close friend who tested the Corvette Sting Ray in track competition.



On Creativity

William Mitchell shared a few of his thoughts on creativity in a commencement address given at Art Center College last year.

"The creative profession is filled with excitement, demanding challenges, and endless opportunities. Each day brings new excitement. After 40 years of designing automobiles, I still can't wait to get to work every morning. There is always something new and exciting to discover. Working with fresh, new ideas every day keeps you young and keeps your life style youthful. I'm convinced that the greatest joy in this world is to create something new that is enjoyed and appreciated by others."

to learn how to use sweeps and blend forms into beautiful, flowing shapes. But today, many of the European cars look like they were designed with a T-square and triangle, with little regard for beauty. This greatly concerns me. At the Geneva Auto Show last year I was appalled at the lack of grace and elegance always associated with fine European automobiles. It seems as though some of the designers were preoccupied with functions and forgot about beauty." These cars will not be remembered. They will not endure. However, "good design is timeless, and fluid, like beautiful music." It has that certain flair -- a touch of class. Create a thing of beauty and it will last forever.



Bill Mitchell explained, "Creativity must also include a sense of social responsibility. What you create, will affect the attitudes and life styles of many, perhaps millions of people. Your efforts will stimulate people." You will be the Style Leaders of tomorrow creating moods and beauty.

It is the creative people, after all, who make our world exciting and beautiful. "It's only natural for people to prefer pleasant surroundings and fine things. Who wants to put a crow in a gilded cage? We are all attracted to beauty and refinement."

"It takes great skill and training for a professional automobile body designer

Corvettes

The peak of heading experimental styling is being able to build the sort of cars you like best. Bill Mitchell is standing between the Mako Shark II and the Manta Ray. These two models from the Corvette line provide perfect examples of Mitchell's ideas being translated into experimental sports cars. The Mako Shark II has a low, sloping hood, with high peaked front fenders. Its fastback rear ends in an aerodynamic lip containing two stabilizing flaps. It was introduced as a Fiberglass display model at the 1964 New York international Auto Show. The Mako Shark II underwent major revisions and was renamed the "Manta Ray" in 1968.

Some of Bill Mitchell's friends wish him well.

"No other man in the history of the automobile has had as much influence on its style and design as Bill Mitchell. He has not limited the scope of his design activities to automobiles alone. His influence on the design of other transportation vehicles such as trucks, buses, RV vehicles and trains is world-renowned.

Bill Mitchell likes style and he likes class and every venture with which he has been associated reflects this. When they built Bill Mitchell, they threw away the mold."

Charles Pilliod, Jr.

Goodyear Tire & Rubber

"Bill Mitchell and I are known around the auto business as 'friendly rivals.' I don't think I'll be giving away any trade secrets when I say that Bill's innovative and creative leadership has often helped set the design tone for the entire industry."

E. Bordinat, Vice-President-Design
Ford Motor Co.

"The retirement of Bill Mitchell from General Motors marks the end of an era in automotive design. Few design executives have had such a significant effect on what people all over the world consider as being the really up-to-date American motor car."

Lord Montagu of Beaulieu
National Motor Museum

"All of Bill's friends at Rolls Royce join me in wishing him much fun and the very best of health during his retirement." His influence on automotive design has been very impressive in the past and will continue to be seen in future models for many years to come.

David Plastow, Managing Director

"Bill Mitchell told me that he believes the best designs are the ones that wear well and are not vogueish. Simplicity with character is what gives our cars their image. Good designers are ageless. I have known Bill for many years and have always been refreshed by his tremendous enthusiasm for all aspects of life. I only hope that his retirement will give all of us in the racing profession more opportunities to benefit from his friendship."

Stirling Moss, Race Car Driver

"Bill Mitchell has had an uncanny ability to give the public what they wanted... while subtly and constantly leading them into newer and better designed automotive products. Secondly, he has never been afraid of competition either inside or outside of General Motors. He has developed a staff that is outstanding and situated them all around the world. There should be no doubt that his greatest contribution to General Motors is the personnel that he is leaving to continue the responsibilities of GM design."

Keith E. Crain, Automotive News



Original racing illustration by Walter Gotschke

This is one of Bill Mitchell's favorite racing illustrations and part of his extensive collection of racing memorabilia which occupies one room in his home; it includes helmets, gloves and other mementos presented to him by the likes of Stirling Moss, Jackie Stewart, and Phil Hill. Stirling gave him the goggles he was wearing when he crashed at Goodwood in 1962, and these are enclosed in a glass case with a plaque. Also carefully preserved are the linen helmet and racing goggles worn by Rudi Caracciola in the 1939 Grand Prix, his last major victory.

Since taking over as GM's top designer upon Earl's retirement in 1958, Mitchell has followed auto racing at many of the world's famous courses including Le Mans and The Grand Prix of Monte Carlo, Elkhart Lake, Daytona, MIS and the Indy 500 in the United States. He became involved as a racing car owner in 1959 when he purchased a lightweight Corvette chassis and designed a striking new body around it. "I wanted to make something that looked like it would knife right through the air," he recalls.



The result was the famous Corvette Sting Ray, which was campaigned by Dr. Dick Thompson during the 1959-60 seasons, became a styling prototype for the production 1963 Sting Ray, and is still a striking show car today. Long time racing fans will remember some epic battles between Thompson in Mitchell's Sting Ray and Augie Pabst in the Scarab.



Mitchell's Favorite Racing Car

The legendary Mercedes-Benz SSKL was spawned by the Formula Libre Grand Prix contests of the late 1920's. It provided a thundering climax to an era of heroic machines and equally heroic drivers.

The "Super Sports Kurz Leicht" had its first and greatest triumph in 1931. When driven single-handedly by Rudi Caracciola it won the grueling Mille Miglia, surpassing the far lighter and more maneuverable Alfas. Following this auspicious debut, the SSKL won three more major events in 1931, one in 1932, and another in 1933. It was extremely successful in hill climb contests, winning no less than fifteen, usually driven by Caracciola or the "Bergmeister," Hans Stuck. The SSKL, superseded by the more contemporary pure racing Mercedes of the 1930's, wrote a final chapter to an exciting era.



Cycle re-styling a la Mitchell:

Lower The Bike, beef up the suspension, and power to match its weight. Improve the aerodynamics wherever possible. Add a special paint job, and you have it - the custom cafe racer designed, like all of Mitchell's Bikes, for a winner who wants to race with the wind.

August Pabst recalls racing moments: shared with Bill Mitchell:

"Bill and I have been competitors - when he was sponsoring the Sting Ray and I was driving the Scarab in National Championship road races in the late 50's and early 60's, and was he competitive! His enthusiasm and appetite for competition shows in everything he has done. I will never forget Road America, about 1970, when Bill took me for a lap in his SSKL Mercedes.



The clutch was on the left, accelerator in the middle, and brake on the right. Imagine coming into a rather sharp corner at close to 100 mph, and instead of hitting the brake, Bill would hit the accelerator by mistake. I thought I was going to die at least seven times in that one lap, but Bill managed to slide and drift us around in one piece - with the biggest grin since sin. Bill is the best thing to happen to GM since the electric starter - and a wonderful and exciting person whom I feel fortunate to call a friend."