

Personality: He Tapped 'Gas' in His Blood

Mitchell, Early an Auto Buff, Heads Styling at G. M.

By DAMON STETSON

Special to The New York Times.

WARREN, Mich., Feb. 6—One day last Spring a turquoise 1960 Ford stopped in front of the home of William L. Mitchell in Bloomfield Village, Mich. A photographer hopped out of another car and set up his camera for some shots of the new model (still not introduced to the public) with Mr. Mitchell's house and turquoise balcony as background.

Mr. Mitchell, who is the vice president of General Motors in charge of the styling staff, was not at home at the time. But he arrived while the picture-taking was still going on.

"They got out quick when they found who I was," Mr. Mitchell said with a grin. "But at least I got an advance look at their 1960 styling."

In an industry that agrees pretty generally that it is styling that sells a car, it was close to the ultimate in ironic coincidence that a photographer should inadvertently pose a Ford in front of the home of the new (at that time) styling chief of Ford's greatest competitor.

But Mr. Mitchell, a bald, round-faced man, with a ruddy complexion and an easy sense of humor, gained both a laugh and a preview of the new Ford from the incident.

Relaxed Sketcher

A relaxed individual who likes to sketch with a pencil while talking, Mr. Mitchell sat on a beige-colored, sectional divan in a corner of his spacious office at the General Motors Technical Center the other day and discussed styling and automobiles.

The office, which has walls of fluted cherrywood with aluminum edging, was formerly occupied by Mr. Mitchell's predecessor, Harley J. Earl, dean of auto stylists. Some of the auto industry's most important styling decisions of recent years have been made there.

Only a few days ago, in fact, Frederick G. Donner, chairman of General Motors, and John F. Gordon, president, sat around the circular, glass-topped table in the same corner with Mr. Mitchell and passed judgment on some of the styling proposals for G. M.'s 1962 and 1963 models.

"Yes," Mr. Mitchell said in answer to a visitor's query, "our sixty-ones are all done and we're well into our sixty-tvos and sixty-threes."

Mr. Mitchell is somewhat reluctant about using the crystal ball but he thinks the trend is toward greater specialization in



William L. Mitchell, vice president in charge of General Motors' styling staff, with a model of the corporation's latest experimental turbine automobile, the Firebird III.

cars. People would rather take a big car on a trip, he says, but a housewife usually prefers a small one for shopping.

"I think the new little cars nicely complement the big ones," he said. "And I think you're going to see more three-car families and more different types of cars. Americans are mighty independent, you know."

"Then, too, there are feminine and masculine cars. You see some you know darned well are not men's cars. I think you'll see more of that. Also people like to have variety. For instance, I like to wear a brown suit today and perhaps a gray one tomorrow."

What this means, according to Mr. Mitchell, is that auto stylists must anticipate the varying moods, attitudes and needs of a changeable public and attempt to provide them with all kinds of specialized vehicles in the years ahead.

Lists Main Influences

The major influences on such designs, he says, will be the way present models sell, public reactions to the experimental "dream cars," new engineering developments, the changing living and working habits of the American populace and finally, and by no means least important, women.

"It wasn't too many years ago," Mr. Mitchell explained, "that the feminine influence upon cars was largely a stern voice from the back seat suggesting that Dad turn to the right or to the left—or slow down! Today, the women has moved to the front seat of the car, drives it half the time and

in many cases has her own car."

Mr. Mitchell believes the public's taste in automobiles has become more refined in recent years as people have shown a preference for quieter colors and less chrome.

"But the stylist still has to put interest and character into cars," he said, "because styling is what really sells them. If a person doesn't like a car's styling, he won't walk through an open door to look at an auto even though it has the best of engineering."

Directs Staff of 1,275

Mr. Mitchell directs a staff of 1,275 people at the modern, glass-walled studios and offices of General Motors styling. These designers, engineers, clay modelers, draftsmen and model makers are among the most important architects of General Motors' automotive destinies.

In designing an auto, stylists first create theme sketches, followed by full-size drawings. Then clay models and trim bucks are built. (Trim bucks are models of interiors corresponding to clay model exteriors).

Once approval of these has been given, a plastic model is built and painted. It has chrome parts, a glass windshield, rear windows and side windows.

Throughout this process, fifteen to eighteen months before the new car's announcement date, additional changes may be made. Small items such as door handles and trim moldings, however, can be approved as late as six to nine months before production.

Mr. Mitchell, now 47 years

Expert Foresees a Trend to Greater Variety in Cars

old, is a native of Cleveland. His father was a Buick dealer who was delighted with his son's artistic ability but impatient with his obsession for drawing automobiles.

In the hope that he would learn to draw something else, the father sent his son to the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh and later to New York City for art training at the Art Students League.

During summers Mr. Mitchell worked as a commercial artist, all the while continuing his interest in automobiles and particularly racing cars. A Detroit business man saw some of his illustrations of racers one day and suggested he send them to Mr. Earl, top stylist at General Motors.

Mr. Earl liked the sketches and invited Mr. Mitchell to submit a portfolio of auto design ideas. The portfolio took him most of the summer of 1935 to complete, but it won him a job. A year later, at 24, having quickly won his spurs, he was named chief Cadillac designer.

Sparkling Manuals

During World War II he served in the Navy and brought new sparkle and clarity to flight manuals explaining complicated procedures of instrument flying. After his discharge he returned to Cadillac styling where the now famous Cadillac "tail fin" was introduced in 1949.

That same year Mr. Mitchell left General Motors to head Harley Earl, Inc. (now Harley Earl Associates), an independent company that designed products not competitive with those of G. M. While there he styled such diverse items as cameras, carpet sweepers, tires, pens, power shovels and television sets.

But in 1953, he returned to General Motors as assistant director of the styling staff. A year later he was named director of styling and in 1958 became vice president in charge of the styling staff.

Automobiles are still his chief enthusiasm, both on and off the job. He loves sports cars and enjoys attending races whenever possible.

"I don't race myself," he explains, "but I have fun going to races and I like the people I meet there. I guess I've just got gasoline in my blood."

He has a studio at his home, enjoys water-color painting, and also attends a couple of life classes. He turns to hunting and guns for his outdoor recreation. He and his wife have two daughters, Nancy Lynn and Wendy Lee.