

**MOTOR  
TREND**

# T-TOPS—THE NEW CONVERTIBLES

THE COMPLETE AUTOMOTIVE MAGAZINE. JULY 1977 \$1.25

# MOTOR TREND

VOLVO'S FIRST  
50 YEARS



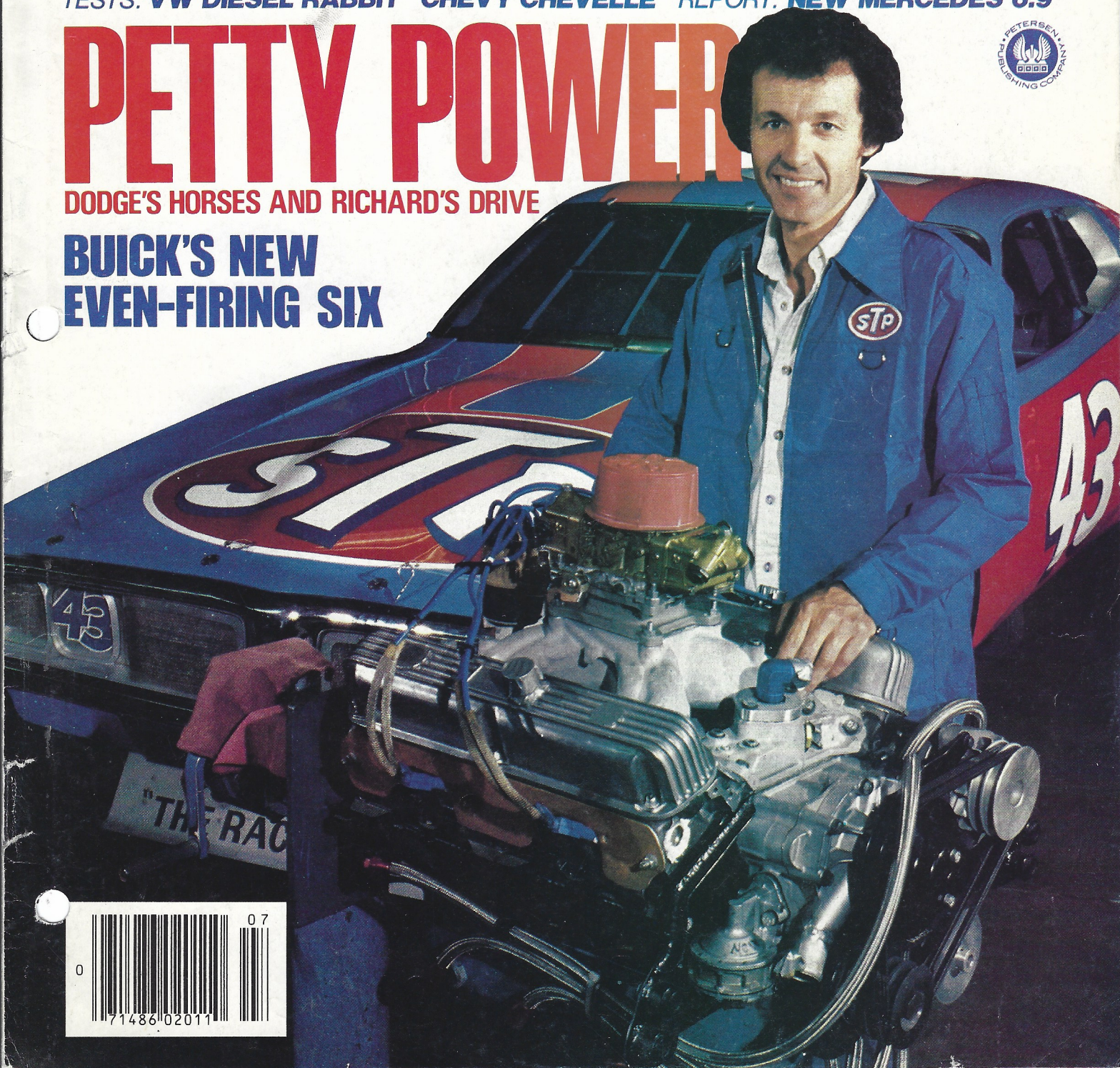
€ COMBINED WITH CAR LIFE, SPORTS CAR GRAPHIC AND WHEELS AFIELD

TESTS: VW DIESEL RABBIT CHEVY CHEVELLE REPORT: NEW MERCEDES 6.9

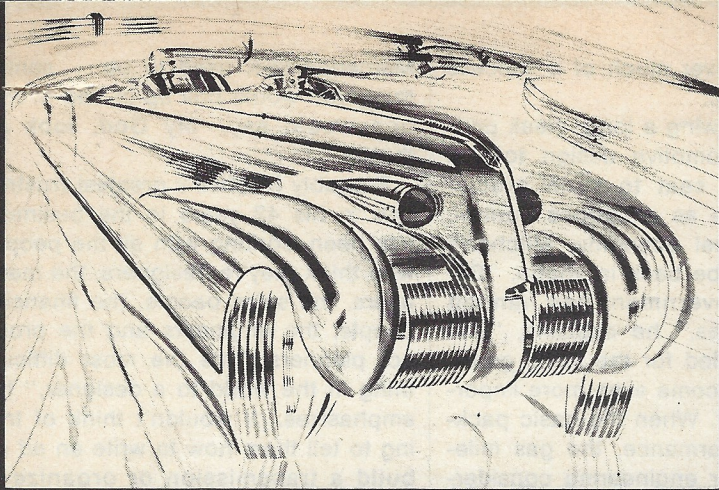
# PETTY POWER

DODGE'S HORSES AND RICHARD'S DRIVE

**BUICK'S NEW  
EVEN-FIRING SIX**







# A Designer's Designer

General Motors' flamboyant, talented, often controversial chief designer is about to retire . . . but we haven't heard the last of William L. Mitchell yet

by GARY WITZENBURG





Successful automobiles, whether long-nosed "personal" cars or chopped-off minis, have character and personality befitting their respective buyers. Little ones are "cute" and "spunky," big ones are "elegant," sports cars are "jaunty," muscle cars are "hairy." Even mundane "family" cars possess an appropriate "family look" that blends nicely into suburban America.

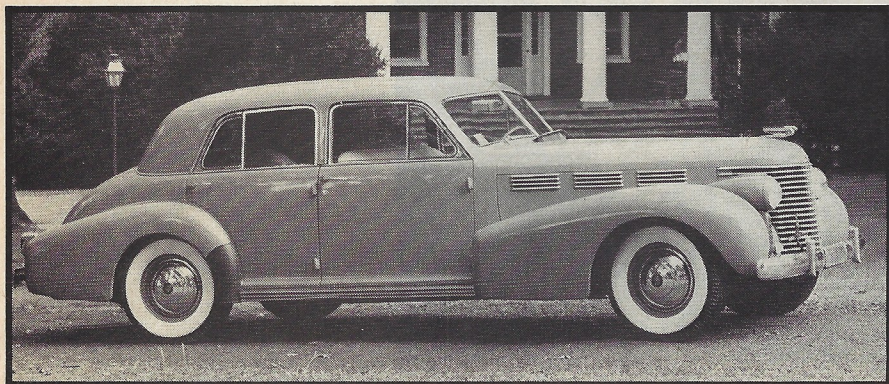
What determines a car's character? A grille, a set of headlights, a fender line, a window shape, the cut of a bumper, the taillamps, a rear deck, seats, an instrument panel, various pieces of trim and ornamentation. And who determines the shape, size,

wandering through New York's 57th Street and Park Avenue showrooms, studying and admiring the most beautiful automobile attractions of the period—Isotta-Fraschini, Rolls-Royce, Hispano-Suiza. Mercedes-

After studying with the New York Art Students League and at the Carnegie Institute of Technology, he went to New York for the Barron Collier advertising agency in New York as an illustrator and layout specialist. There he formed a close association with the Collier brothers (Miles, Sam and Barron Jr.), who founded the Automobile Racing Club of America (ARCA), predecessor of today's Sports Car Club of America (SCCA), and the ARCA clubhouse soon be-

decidedly horizontal theme, in marked contrast to the vertical motifs found on most cars ever since the beginnings of the industry; and the rear was equally distinctive, with long, narrow taillamps set at the ends of extended rear fenders.

There was also another innovation, which came about purely by accident. "We were rolling the finished '41 model out to the viewing area for review by the corporate and divisional executives," Mitchell relates, "when someone remembered that there was no provision for a gas filler cap on it. So we got the idea to make up a quick sketch showing the fuel filler hidden under the left taillamp housing. They bought it, and a



color and configuration of these interacting elements? A designer does.

If it all works as planned, the car sells. If not, it bombs.

And right at the forefront of this mysterious art of automotive design, where every decision has a profound influence upon the financial welfare of a major corporation and its employees, has been the prolific, the most successful and the most widely imitated automotive designer of all time—William L. Mitchell. When he reaches retirement age this month, he will have presided over the interior and exterior appearance of nearly 100 million cars, trucks, appliances and other General Motors products; and few will dispute that this strong-willed and creative man, along with his talented, hand-picked staff, has been largely responsible for keeping his corporation well on top of the automobile heap.

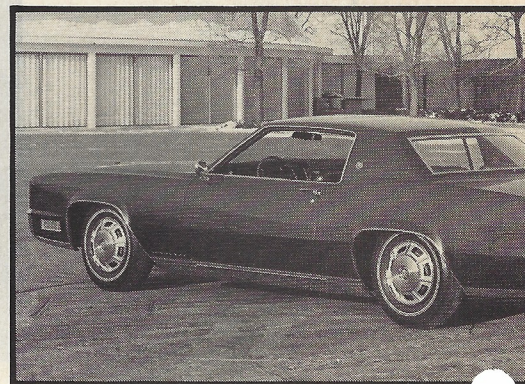
He was born 65 years ago in Cleveland, Ohio, and grew up in both Greenville, Pennsylvania, and New York City. His father was an auto dealer, so it's not surprising that the young Mitchell quickly matured into a certified, card-carrying car nut. During his college years in the early 1930s, he spent many an evening

came decorated with Mitchell's race car sketches and drawings.

One day a Detroit industrialist, Walter Carey, saw these works and suggested that Mitchell send a portfolio to Harley Earl, who then was head of GM's eight-year-old "Art and Color" section. Earl liked what he saw, and the young designer was hired in 1935 to work on the '37 Cadillac and LaSalles.

Less than a year later, at the age of 24, Mitchell was promoted to chief designer over the Cadillac studio, and the first complete car done under his supervision was the trend-setting 1938 "60-Special." This was the first production car without running boards, the first with "2-piece" doors and a roof designed to resemble a convertible top, the first sedan with a coupe-type rear deck, and it was Cadillac's first "personal luxury" car.

Three years passed, and then Mitchell knocked 'em out again with the 1941 Cadillac. Among other things, this car was a leader in both front and rear "identity," that quality that makes an automobile instantly recognizable on the road. Its bold, "egg-crate" grille (a recurring Cadillac trademark ever since) and widely spaced headlamps gave the front a



Cadillac trademark was born."

Another story involves the '48 Cadillac, the one that sprung tailfins on an unsuspecting automotive world. Harley Earl had emulated the shape of the graceful P-38 fighter plane by making the rear fender resemble its fuselage, and there was a gentle "bump" at the tip representing the plane's tail. But conservative Cadillac owners didn't appreciate the little fin. So Jack Gordon, who was the division's general manager at the time, had Mitchell working on the '51 clay model with instructions to shave down the fins.

"But Ed Cole, who was then chief engineer, and I didn't share Jack's conservatism, and we played a little trick on him," the designer recalls. "Each day we would raise up the fender opposite the one we were supposed to be working on, so it would look like we were lowering the other one. The result was that the '51 had even higher and more prominent fins than the '48-'50. Later on I confided to Gordon what we had done, and he got a chuckle out of it, because by that time the fins had really caught the public's eye. But he'd have raised hell if he'd caught on at the time."

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF GM DESIGN



As we know, things got a bit out of control during the 1950s, with each manufacturer trying to out-fin the others. One of the first things Mitchell did when he took over upon Earl's retirement in 1958 was to chop the fins off GM's '61 models. He also had the good taste to strip much of the excess chrome from the '60 cars at the last minute before their designs were finalized.

"I've always liked lean cars with less chrome," he explained, "and I've always been influenced by the fine cars of Europe, particularly the classic examples from the late '20s and early '30s, which had chrome that was put on like silverwork—not with a trowel like some of the God-awful things our industry had in the '50s. But getting rid of it was a tough battle, because the sales people were convinced that the more chrome you had, the more expensive a car looked. Of course, that idea was ridiculous... the fine European cars never looked like they were put together by a boilermaker."

Mitchell's specialty has always been the "personal" car, and his design philosophies are best expressed in such modern-day classics as the '63 Riviera, the '66 Toronado and '67 Eldorado, the '69 Grand Prix and '70 Monte Carlo, the '70 Camaro and Firebird, the '63 and '68 Corvettes and the '65 Corvair Monza. Of these, the least successful, he feels, was the '66 Toronado—a good design, but one that would have worked better on a smaller car (as originally intended). Excess bulk, he says, was also the major problem with the controversial '71 "boattail" Riviera,

which was never much of a success with the public.

Today, following a long, bleak period when automotive design took a distant back seat to such crucial considerations as emissions control, safety and fuel economy, Mitchell's art seems to be back in vogue. "Because the government has handed down the rules," he explains, "and we're all headed for the same goals, styling has become even more important than ever. When the basic package, the performance, the gas mileage and other engineering considerations are all identical within a class of car, then the only difference will be appearance.

"And we're doing some things right now that'll knock you out when they hit the market. You'll be seeing the new A-bodies (intermediates) this fall, followed by the X-bodies (compacts) and the all-new Eldorado, Riviera and Toronado in '79. In '80 we'll have face-lifted B-bodies (standards), plus the new Camaro and Firebird and the next-generation Corvette, which looks a lot like our Aerovette show car. Each of these will set a new style. But wait'll you see the next Seville!"

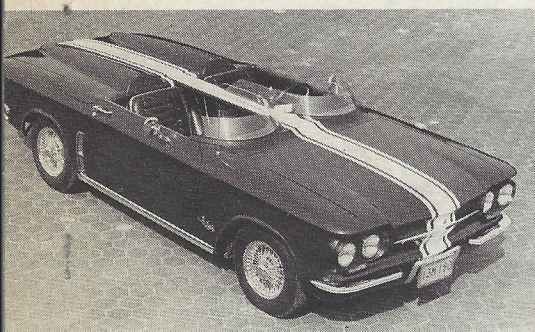
He also hints at what will be his show car, an outrageous throwback to the classic style of his favorite era, the late '20s and early '30s. "We haven't had a really shocking car for some time," he grins, unable to conceal his excitement, "and with all the government regulation, all the 'no-no's,' I think we owe that to the public. I think there's a great need for a genuine, Gatsby-esque, exotic car... something as exciting as the

Mercedes SSK used to be... something you would pull up in and everyone would say, 'My God, look at that!'"

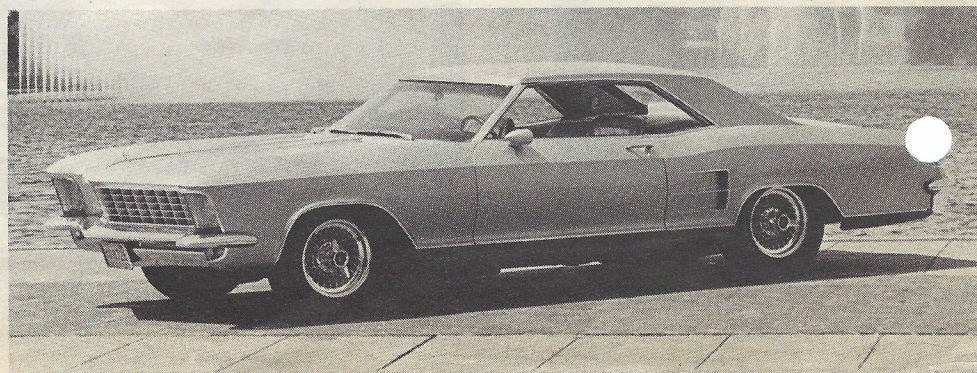
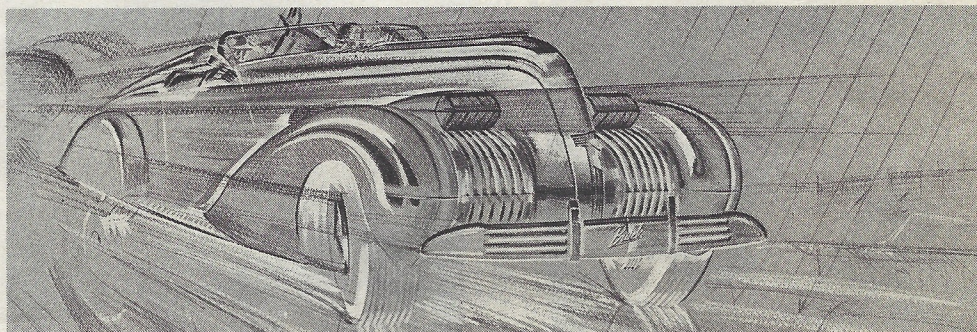
Probably Mitchell's greatest frustration in his 42 years in the business has been working with all the people who think they're designers: the managers, the sales people, the financial people, the engineers and the product planners. "It's the most difficult thing in the world to a designer," he emphasizes. "I wouldn't think of trying to tell them how to write an ad or build a transmission or organize a production line, because I'm not trained or experienced in those fields. For the same reason, I think they should keep their noses out of my business.

"Designing a car by committee is

*The library of Bill Mitchell's home is a treasure-trove of racing memorabilia.*



**Roadster version of Corvair Spyder (above) was one of the tamer versions of small rear-engine Chevys created during Mitchell's reign. Design sketch of a '38 Buick proposal (above right) was drawn early in his career. The '63 Riviera was one of Mitchell's favorites, and modified version at right, the Silver Arrow, was shown shortly after introduction of the production Riviera.**





like 10 guys doing a painting. One guy says, 'Move the moon away from the tree,' and another guy says, 'No, let's move the tree over here and raise the clouds a little bit . . . ' I can show you every good-looking car that was done without the committee, usually so damn fast they didn't have time to get their fingers in it, and I can show you cars that were hurt by committees. I'm not going to name them, but every time you see one that looks like five different people did it, just figure it out."

He also has little use for those who would research design. "Do you know what car had one of the biggest and most expensive research campaigns ever done?" he asks. "The Edsel. That car was consumer researched from here to the moon, and look what happened to it. Hattie Carnegie never asked any woman what kind of hat she'd like. Frank Lloyd Wright never went around ringing doorbells to ask what sort of buildings people preferred. You can find out where you've been that way, but not where you should go."

When a top executive retires from GM, he is forbidden by contract to work in competitive fields. But Mitchell intends to keep his hand in the design business as a high-powered consultant, even though he won't be able to get involved with cars or trucks. "I think my reputation here demonstrates that I can be of value

to any company that's making a product where design is important to sales. If they have four models, I believe I can come in and tell them which one will sell. I've seen a lot of designs over the years, automotive and otherwise," he adds. "Sometimes the walls are covered with them. But knowing which one to pick up is the key to the whole thing, and I think that sort of judgment has been my *forté* through the years."

Looking into the future of automobile design, Mitchell predicts that aerodynamics will play an increasingly important role as carmakers strive for that last fraction of a mile per gallon. "I think you're going to see more curved surfaces replacing the angular, slightly boxy lines we're getting into today. There'll be a lot more soft, flowing lines," he predicts.

As this is written, he can't (or won't) name his successor, saying that decision rests with GM management. But whoever gets the nod is going to find a large pair of shoes to fill behind Bill Mitchell's mammoth, curved, wooden desk in the spacious GM Design Staff vice president's office. His tastes and preferences are likely to be a bit different, as Mitchell's were different from those of Harley Earl before him, but he'll probably tread a little lightly at first. Responsibility for the design, and therefore the sales, of some 5 million GM cars and trucks every year, not to

mention Frigidaire appliances and other products, is bound to be a sobering proposition.

Certainly the heavy Mitchell influence will linger long after the man has taken his leave, both within General Motors and throughout the industry as a whole. And when he finally clears his desk and turns in his keys this month after nearly 20 years as the giant corporation's top designer, we're betting his parting words will resemble the theme of his speeches and presentations in recent years:

"True, we'll produce cars that are more space- and fuel-efficient," he'll exclaim, fist upraised defiantly, but that doesn't mean they'll be dull! They will not, I repeat, will not be mere boxes on wheels! They will be exciting vehicles with personality, character and identity . . . vehicles their owners can love and drive with pride. And I hope our critics are listening when I say this . . . our love affair with the automobile is still going strong!"

We hope his successor, whoever he may be, will have the strength and courage to carry on with the business of designing beautiful and exciting cars in the face of mounting concern for energy and increasing bureaucratic pressures.

And we wish this amazing, hard-living, car-loving man named Mitchell all the best in his future endeavors. 