

YORK REGION

## WHEELS

Legend has it, one glorious day while on a deep-sea fishing holiday in the early 1960s under a sweltering Bimini sun, William Mitchell hooked a classic. A shark, actually. But a whole new concept, in reality.

It seems General Motors, and Mitchell, its Renoir stylist, needed a new theme for the debut of the Corvette at the 1962 New York auto show. Mitchell's surprising catch would do. The aggressive look and graded coloration of the shark's head would become the Corvette Shark, causing more of a stir in the automotive waters than a Hammerhead off the coast of Cape Cod.

Mitchell had his fish, GM had its design and the classic car world had a keeper.

William 'Bill' Mitchell was just that kind of guy: Here today, designing for tomorrow.

As the head of GM styling for nearly 20 years, Mitchell was the anti-rectangle. He was well-rounded when things were still square. He was out of the box when things were still boxy — "the sheer look," the late GM design boss once described the cars of his day.

And he was hardly conservative.

Once, upon hearing that Mercedes-Benz had accused him of copying its designs with the first-generation Cadillac Seville, Mitchell replied, "Hell, I didn't copy Mercedes. I copied Rolls-Royce. My father always told me, 'If you're going to be a thief, rob a bank, not a grocery store.'"

Rolls-Royce would include that in their annual report.

And Mitchell would roll on, copying no one.

From his first summer days with his mother at Barron Collier's New York ad agency in the 1920s, sketching Bugattis and MGs in his spare time as they drove past his Manhattan window, Mitchell was always on the cutting edge. By day he would daydream about drawing. By night he would envelope himself in design, taking courses at the Art Students League in New York, and brushing up on his technique with other illustrators who also believed that fine art was an expression of drama.

When the opportunity came to submit idea sketches for cars as a candidate designer to Harley Earl at General Motors in 1933, Mitchell's sense of sweeping form landed him a spot in the company's Art and Color Section.

Less than two years later, Mitchell was the Chief Designer at Cadillac. By 1958 he was the chief of styling, a title he held for nearly 20 years.

And style would never be the same.

From the first Buick Rivieras of the mid-'60s to the Corvettes he would call 'his baby,' Mitchell incorporated bits of his personality in each vehicle he created. Mitchell loved machinery and taking chances. He drove Porsches, laughed hard and lived with gusto. One year he wrapped one of his Harley motorcycles in silver fibreglass and rode it back-and-forth to work wearing matching silver leathers.

To Mitchell, the unconventional was the ordinary, the ordinary was unusual.

He loved drawing and designing

fast cars more than he loathed the corporate committee culture of his employer. And he felt plenty for both.

He fought against the idea of a four-seat Corvette, and won. He defended the split rear-window in the '63 Vette, and won — for a while. At his 1998 induction into the Corvette Hall of Fame, he was described as someone who fought divisional general managers, salespeople, engineers, bean counters and "almost anyone who attempted to tamper with (the Corvette)."

He railed against committees, market research and the idea that a design-

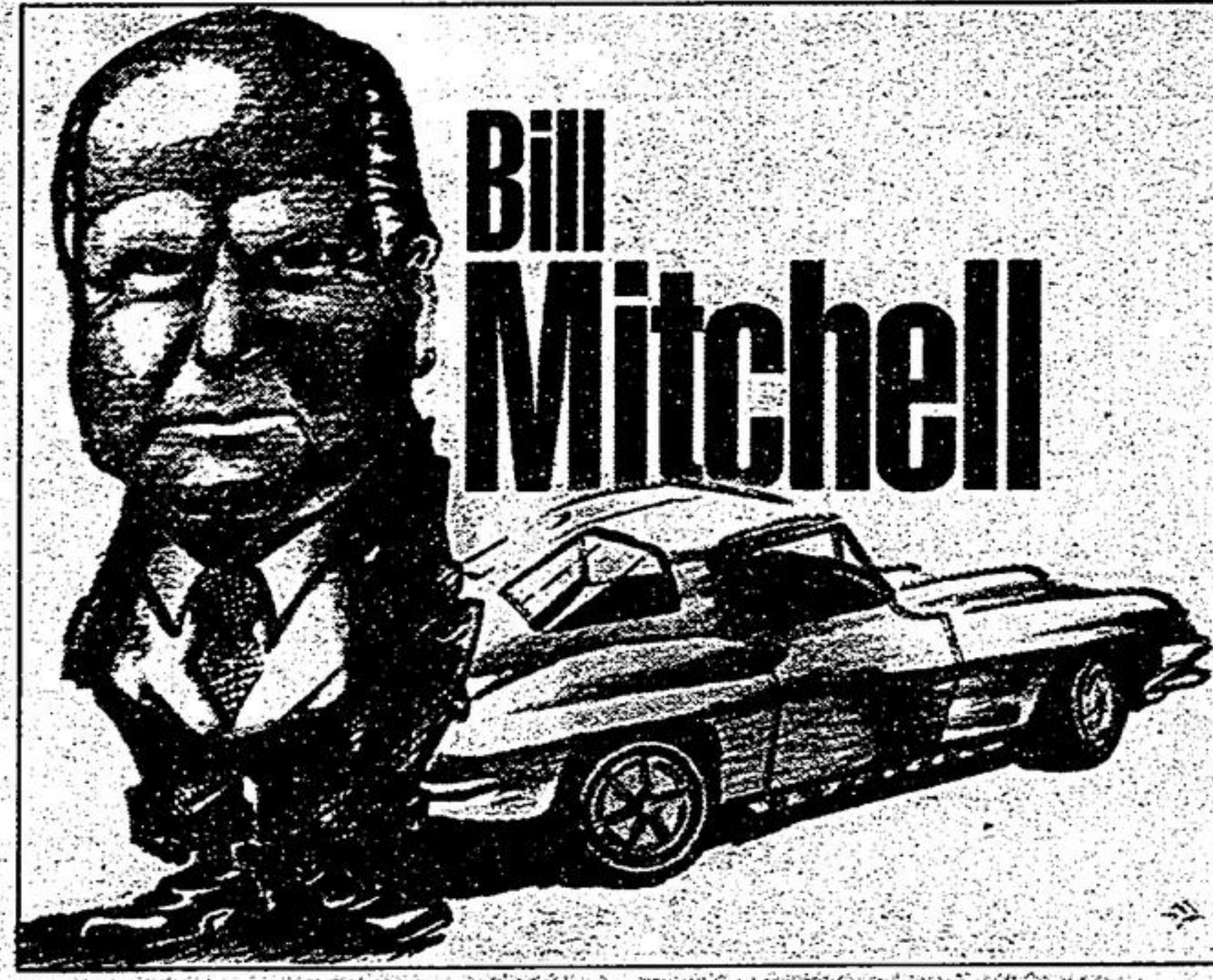
er shouldn't be left alone.

"Frank Lloyd Wright did not go around ringing doorbells asking people what kind of houses they wanted," Mitchell once said. "There is not one good-looking car. I designed that market research had anything to do with."

But there were plenty of good-looking cars.

By the time he was named GM's lead styling guru, he did away with the jukebox look favored by the flamboyant Earl, who loved tailfins and lots of chrome. Mitchell favoured clean, crisp styling.

The results showed.



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