



Transcript for

**AUTOMOTIVE DESIGN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**INTERVIEW WITH WILLIAM L. MITCHELL, 1984**

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## **NOTE TO READERS**

This PDF-format version of the William L. Mitchell interview transcript was created from a Word document, created in turn from the transcript available on the *Automobile in American Life and Society* Web site (<http://www.autolife.umd.umich.edu>).

The Automotive Design Oral History Project, Accession 91.1.1673, consists of over 120 interviews with designers and engineers conducted by David Crippen of The Henry Ford during the 1980s. For more information, please contact staff at the Benson Ford Research Center ([research.center@thehenryford.org](mailto:research.center@thehenryford.org)).

Staff of the Benson Ford Research Center  
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AUTOMOTIVE DESIGN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of William L. Mitchell

Reminiscence from the 1985 Interview with William L. Mitchell. Automotive Design Oral History, Accession 1673. Benson Ford Research Center. The Henry Ford.

This oral reminiscence is the result of interviews with William L. Mitchell by David R. Crippen during the month of August, 1984, at The Edison Institute, Dearborn, Michigan. These interviews were held under the auspices of the Edsel B. Ford Design History Center, Archives & Library Collections, The Edison Institute.

The questioning was primarily in the form of topics suggested to Mr. Mitchell concerning his career. No editorial insertions have been made other than the brief synopsis of the interviewee's career activities.

The language of the narrative is entirely that of the interviewee. He has reviewed and corrected the manuscript and by his signature below indicated that it is a correct copy of his reminiscences.

This transcript and the recorded tapes are deposited in the Archives at The Edison Institute with the understanding that they may be used by qualified researchers for scholarly purposes. The undersigned does hereby release to The Edison Institute all literary rights to this interview.

[William L. Mitchell signature on original is here]

(William L. Mitchell)

4-8-87

(Date)

This is Dave Crippen, and this is August 8, 1984, and we're in Bloomfield Hills [Michigan] on another one of our Design History Oral Interviews, under the sponsorship of The Edison Institute, and today we're speaking with William L. (Bill) Mitchell, well-known industrial designer and former head of G. M.'s Styling and Design [department], Mr. Mitchell has agreed to tell his story in his own way and at his own pace.

A: Well, before you talk about me, I'd like to talk about the man that probably created automobile styling, and that's Harley Earl. Now, he came from Hollywood, which is a very glamorous place compared to Detroit, and his father had been with a custom body business—coaches—and then went on to cars, and it seems that [at] the custom body show in the Commodore Hotel in New York, Mr. [Alfred P.] Sloan and the Fishers noticed that the best Cadillacs in that show had Earl bodies, so Fred Fisher, the oldest of the Fisher brothers, went out to the Coast and contacted Earl. Then, [Larry] Fisher went out, who was then head of Cadillac. They were called vice presidents of the divisions at that time. He made a deal with Earl, who was a young man in his late 'twenties, maybe early 'thirties, to come to Cadillac as a consultant. Earl

came out, and coming from Hollywood he was quite a shock to Detroit. Now, this is before I ever came there. He came alone, and he picked up a few people out of Cadillac, Ralph Pew was one, and he created the LaSalle. He went to the Paris [auto] Show with Mr. Knudsen—Bill Knudsen—and was impressed by the Hispano-Suiza and that prompted him to do the design of the LaSalle. That's when it was practically a cousin of the Cadillac—same size and everything. Not quite as much money, but it had elegance—wind splits in the fenders, and he was impressed by all

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that. Well, it seems that Sloan was sold on how it worked, and he said to his board, "My God, if a man can do Cadillac why doesn't he do all General Motors. And, at that time, Fisher Body built the bodies for Chevrolet, Pontiac, Olds, Buick or Cadillac, and the responsibility of the division was the chassis, and Fisher put the body on it. Now, the general manager of the division had a lot to say of Olds, or the general manager of Buick, at that time they were vice presidents. [No.] They were called presidents at that time, president of Pontiac or Olds, and to think that this man [Earl] took all of this away from the divisions and from Fisher Body, one by one. Now, the Fisher brothers were small, and I can remember when I came, they wore homburgs, and what a contrast to this 6'4" man who had a bronze complexion. He'd wear bronze suits, suede shoes—flamboyant was the word and outspoken, a tough man, and he'd cuss those Fisher brothers out. We called them the seven dwarfs. He'd say, "God damn, you don't know what you're talking about." He didn't have any respect because he was hired by Sloan. Anyway, I hadn't heard about him, didn't even know him, but a friend of his saw me at the Colliers' [advertising agency], and I worked for Barren Collier, and he had three sons, Sam, Barren Jr., and Miles. Miles was my age, Sam was older—no, Sam was my age, Miles was younger, and Barren Jr. was older, and they brought over the road racing from Europe. They had an estate outside of Tarrytown [N.Y.] between the Stillmans and Rockefellers called "Overlook"—beautiful, and they first raced little sports cars like MG's, and then they got bigger cars, and I was in the art department, and I always drew cars. My dad was a Buick dealer, and he sent me to Carnegie Tech to draw something else, and as I got into art, one of my instructors said, "If you want to really be an artist, you ought to go

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to Art Students League in New York." Well, my father and mother were divorced, and Mother lived in New York, so I went there in the summers, and she knew [the] Colliers, and I got a job as an office boy and finally in the art department. The Collier boys would see me drawing cars along with anything you do in a studio with twenty commercial artists, and I was learning my trade and going to school at night, and they'd take me up to Tarrytown—a little Ford I'd drive up—and I'd race the cars with them and draw sketches. Well, a good friend of Mr. Earl's, [Walter Carey] who was in the insurance business in Detroit, he insured the plants, and he saw my drawings and he said, "Bill, did you ever think of designing a car?" I said, "No." He said, "Well, I know a big fellow that's in charge of all design at General Motors, why don't you send your drawings out to me, and I'll get them over to him." That was in the summer of '35, and I took the summer off, from water colors and everything, just to work at my free time—to work on these designs. So, I sent them out, and in December I went to work with General Motors in 1935, and

within a year, I had the Cadillac studio. But you gotta realize there were less than a hundred in the whole place on the third floor of the General Motors Building. There was no air-conditioning, and I remember the cars were all modeled in a row in a room where, if the temperature dropped, the clay would crack, and the front end would fall off, and the designers were in another room. Now, you could go out and look at the car, but you weren't right with the car. It was sort of confusing. And, then there were no studios then. But, I remember I came there before Christmas—I came December 15, 1935—and Paul Meyer, who was one of the cracker jack designers then and there were just a few emerging—He said, "Well, I'll see you." This was Christmas

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Eve, and he said, "I'll see you tomorrow." I said, "What." He said, "Oh yeah, we'll work tomorrow." And, we did! Earl worked 'em! Anyway, at that time there were no chief designers. I worked on the Buick and Cadillac and the Oldsmobile. I worked around with different designers. Paul Meyer had been given the Buick for awhile, and then Exner finished it. He was a...

Q: Virgil Exner was there in those days?

A: Yeah. He was there ahead of me. He came from Indianapolis. He came with the same background of a commercial art studio. George Snyder was the top man then. He came out of Rolls Royce/Brewster of New York, and Frank Hershey was another senior [designer], and he came out of the West Coast bodies [companies], and they were really older, and pros. I had no experience, except I just loved to draw cars.

Q: Can I take you back just briefly to the thing that Earl had done which was so unusual in the industry that he had created an overall design complex which transcended, as you said earlier, the several divisions of General Motors. How did he do that? You indicated that by the strength of his personality....

A: Well, he called us the Art and Colour Department, and there was a DuPont man that handled the interior.

Q: [Which] about that time owned part of General Motors.

A: Yes, and they had two/three members on the Board, and I'm trying to think of his name, and he got pneumonia and died, and that's when Steve McDaniel was put in to run it. Steve was good designer out of Atlanta, but he was more of a detailer than the overall flow of the car. But, in [the] summer of '36, Earl decided to make studios, and Snyder had had

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a wonderful year. He did the Oldsmobile, the eight, which was different from the six. Six had scoop grille, and the eight was egg crate—fine, and he did the Chevrolet. Then he stepped to Cadillac, and he was a high-powered guy then. So, I worked for him on the Cadillac and on the LaSalle, and then there was pieces—louvers, running boards, details, you know. Then that next summer, '36, they divided the studios. Raymond Loewy took Exner with him, and Exner had had Cadillac and Olds.

Q: Loewy was just beginning to...

A: No, he [Exner] hadn't had Cadillac in there, he didn't have it. Harry Shaw was over—let's say this: before I got there, Andrade was the chief designer under Earl, an older man, and he went to Briggs, and Harry Shaw took over, an older man. Exner did a good a job on the Buick and had done the Pontiac, he did the '38 Pontiac in '36, but he went with Loewy, and he took (I was talking with Strother MacMinn about him [recently]), he took a good guy who was patterned after him with him, and he ended up doing Sears & Roebuck for Loewy. So, he was destined to get the Cadillac, and I got it! Paul Meyer got LaSalle. Hershey got Pontiac and was responsible for the Silver Streak. I wanted Buick, but a guy named Lawson—I competed with Hershey on the Buick of catwalk cooling it. That summer they set me up in a studio at the back where Fisher Body was, before we moved into the upper floors of Research Building B, in '38. Catwalk cooling was a grille in between the fender and the hood, that was a vogue that was on. Frank had sort of a boxy version, and I did a flowing type—more like the Cord is, the Cord was that went this way, and I got to know Curtice well, and...

Q: Harlow Curtice?

A: Being a Buick man, I was telling them how great it was to sit down and talk to Curtice, and he was then head of Buick. Well, that was the

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first time there were individual studios. Then the next move we went to the seventh, eighth—no, the seventh, eighth, ninth, tenth, and eleventh floors in the Research B. Fisher was underneath, and we could work back and forth. I had the Cadillac studio up until I went in the Navy.

Q: Was this the General Motors Building?

A: No, Research B.

Q: Research, where is that?

A: That's right back of the G.M. where research was—where Kettering's people were, and we got the building beside it. They called it Research B, and they put Research A, was all engineering staff, and B was Fisher and art. Then, of course, at the close of the war we went to the Tech Center. But, the things that impress me was the power Earl had. Now, each division, and one thing different from General Motors than Ford, there was individuality which is fading fast. It's going to be gone. Conglomerate and it'll become homogenized, as I say. There's gonna be no great Cadillac royalty. You see, before you could see the moves, like as Gordon moved in Cadillac, Cole came back, and Harry Barr came back, and that went on in Buicks, and Olds, and today, they come from anywhere. A guy can come from Argentina and run Pontiac. There isn't that pride of ancestry, heraldry. I say that, sentimentally, we've always had that over Ford, because at Ford there's an engineer over transmissions, there's one over engines, that's for everything. Mercury's sort of a mistake, you know, you don't know what it is. But one thing, Ford did have what you like to get a hold of, some ancestry, a history. You go up to Pontiac or go up to Oldsmobile, you can't see the history of the Oldsmobile.

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Q: They've obliterated [it],

A: Yeah, it's gone. As a new manager comes in, he sweeps clean. There's no history, no—he doesn't care what the other guy did, he's going to make a mark of his own. Now, with Earl, he let me know five years ahead that I was going to get his job. You couldn't do that today. I'll make a statement that will shock people when they hear it, but, when he retired about the same time that [John] Gordon became president and [Frederic] Donner became chairman, and I had [Tom] Christiansen, who was sort of my—ran the business end of the place. I was right next to Earl's office, and Earl says, "Gordon's in there, and he wants to talk to you." He'd just become president. And, I knew Jack well, because Jack ran Cadillac when—he was chief engineer at Cadillac, and then ran Cadillac when I was designing for them. But, he was a Navy man and a tough guy, and hard, stubborn as hell. He'd not change his mind. Earl said, "He wants to talk you." He was one of these heavy smokers, and he set there in Earl's office, and he said, "Harley just told me that you're going to take his job, and I don't like it one God damn bit." There was no voting. Earl had just told Sloan and Curtice that this is the guy I want. And, he said, "Bill, you're going to have to prove to me that you can do that." Well, that's the best thing he could have said, 'cause I took on like hell, and he was very conservative, and I wasn't. One time when I was pushing the fast-back coupe, and [Clifford] Goad is my immediate boss, and he said...

Q: Who's that?

A: Cliff Goad. He was over all of the Tech Center, and Gordon said, "You're going to have that over my dead body." And, I said, "I hate to

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do that." I fought him all along, but he was a solid guy. But, Earl would come in a room—he ran the show, there was no doubt about it, and he'd go off with Sloan on a cruise, and we'd make up a beautiful book for him on the future things we wanted to do. But, he had that in with Sloan. He had no great respect for any general manager. He and Gordon never got along—just the hell with it, and he only played up to the top men in New York. He had a button in his office that I inherited where he'd punch Sloan. If he'd had meeting with [Harry] Klingler or somebody at Pontiac, who was stubborn, he'd get Sloan and he'd say, "Alfred," you know his voice would change, "how are you Alfred." "Well, fine." "You know the son-of-bitch Klingler, I want you to fix him." Shit, you'd go in a meeting, and they'd all be like that. He always had a piece of paper like, "Hello fellas," and he had it fixed. He wouldn't take any of that. Another great thing I remember, the first car that I got credit for, and I didn't do it, because I did it under his direction, was the Cadillac '60 Special. Now, that started out as a LaSalle, and we had a fender we called the suitcase fender. It was very arty with glass, a V-glass, in front of the headlight. The first car with a headlamp in the fender O. E. Hunt was chief engineer and very conservative, and I'll never forget 'cause I was new then, and in my studio was the first job I did in the new studios in Research B. I looked around, and I thought, look at the money in this room. There was Sloan, there was Knudsen, the Fisher brothers, and O. E. Hunt, the chief engineer, and I thought, "my God, wow!" Anyway, O. E. was negative on that light in the fender because he said, if you bump the fender, you'd throw the headlight out of kilter. Earl stood up, his belt buckle in

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O. E. Hunt's mouth, he's that tall. He looked down—he'd always look down at him, and he said, "O. E., why don't you call me a son of bitch, I could understand that." And, he walked out of the studio quietly, and broke up the meeting. And, the next year's Zephyr had it.

Q: That's right.

A: Oh, he was powerful. God, I admired [him]. He just knocked the tar out of anybody. He'd get it fixed. If he couldn't, he'd call New York and say, "Fix these...[.]" Then, I inherited some of that. I believe this, and I still do: I think what's wrong with the G.M. [products], the new ones I see coming out, it's hard to tailor a dwarf, so you're going to have these cars that aren't exotic. But, there should be style leaders. There should be prestige cars, like the Eldorados, Toronados,



Rivieras—there's not gonna be—the new ones are vanilla. I didn't go to the proving ground [last] Monday because I didn't want to blow my top, and I'd seen them, and I said, "I'm busy. I can't go." It's not my way of life. Now, a good friend of Earl's and Sloan's, I don't know whether you know him or not, he's Fred Cody. I was at a party a couple of weeks ago over here, and Murphy was there, and all the G.M. people, and he turned to a group we were talking to and said, "Now, Harley Earl turned this all over to you, didn't he?" I said, "Yeah." "Who did you turn it over to? Who is he?" Irv [Rybicki] has been in seven years, and nobody knows him. He won't speak up, and they're just taking it away from him. You've got to fight for what you want. I had a general manager once that wanted to put, I won't name him, but he wanted to put a grille in the Toronado, and I wanted it like

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a Cord, you know. I said, "Look, I don't tell you how to make your car, or run your plant, [but] keep your damn nose out of design. I'm helping you. You don't go to your tailor and tell him how to make your suit." I said, "You have no business in design." I said, "That suit you've got on, my wife's got better linoleum on our kitchen floor than that God damn suit you're wearing." Right in front of his whole people. So, I've been a great man for that, and, to me, like I have to give talks around to different places. I gave one up in Minneapolis this winter, and I said, "You gotta know me before I talk. First of all, I don't like modern design, art," and I said, "Picasso to me is a queer," and I said, "If God made beautiful things, if you can just imitate 'em, you're doing pretty good. I don't like crazy music, and I don't like crazy designs in automobiles." I said, "It took me years to learn how to use sweeps. Now you can design a car with a T square and a triangle." I threw a bunch of pictures on the screen, and I said, "I've been in the business forty years, and I'll be God damned if I can tell you what they are." You could take the emblems and move them around. It isn't just in the United States, but now the Mercedes are trying to look more like us, and the Pontiac looks like a BMW, I mean, God, there's no heredity. It sickens me, and, having been a disciple of Earl, I didn't get a disciple. So, it's the romance, I said, "My cars, any car I had, the paint, everything on it, had to be different." When somebody said, "Whose car is that." Jesus, when it goes by—Earl had a great saying, "If you go by a schoolyard, and the kids don't whistle, back to the drawing board." And, you've got to have designs that, somebody—I made a statement the other day, "Somebody—Ford, General Motors, Chrysler—are going to make an exotic car, and that'll wake us up again." We've got to get another

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Clark Gable, another...now there's nothing, nothing.

Q: If we can take you back to the early '50's when you were, Mr. Earl's assistant...

A: Oh, that was after I got out of the Navy. That was it. I was a director, yeah.

Q: And, his career is obviously coming to end about then. He's thinking of retirement, probably, in a couple of years. How did you work out the post-war product mix in terms of design? Were you stuck with that that face lifting dilemma that everyone else had?

A: Yeah, we added—you see, there was always a budget, and, for instance, some interesting cars, how they came about, in our Motorama cars, he did that, not only to show the public, but to get the Corporation off its ass. You know, to make something—and if you made an exotic car, somebody would say build it, like the Corvette. Any of these. One time, one of the last Motoramas, and the money we spent! [Harlow] Curtice loved shows, and that all stopped. The government got in. The profits weren't as great, but the shows were glamorous. God, spectacular! We'd have 20 special cars—work our brains off and enjoyed it. There was a great esprit de corps in the whole place. Now, it's a bore over there, God! Anyway, we had six special, four passenger, not two passenger, Corvette was the two passenger, and the Thunderbird at that time was a two passenger. We made about four specials—Olds, Buicks, Pontiacs—and we noticed, somebody did, that Ford engineers came in there after the show and were taking dimensions, which is all right, but, by God, out comes the Thunderbird. Oh, [they] caught us, and, we didn't have a four passenger, and that thing took off like that. Well, Earl had retired then, and the dealers got after him, and letters came in,

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so Gordon told me see what we could do. I worked down in a room with Ned Nickles, who was a good senior designer. His weakness—he'd wanted to do it all himself, but he was a good guy to have for that. We did the Riviera, but I did it as a LaSalle. That's why those two grilles are on it. Gordon was the only one that didn't know about it. He came down, and he'd look at it, and he liked it. Where things were wide, he liked the tightness of it. And, by the way, I just restored my mother's - - '63 [Riviera]—21 years old. It's beautiful, and Buick gave me a new engine, no catalytic converter, it could go like hell. Anyway, we got it all done, and showed it in the auditorium one night to Donner and Gordon, just the three of us, and Donner said, "Well, I think we should build it, but who's going to build it." Cadillac didn't want it, they didn't need it. And, Chevrolet was knocking the pants off of Buick, Olds, and Pontiac with the Impala. So, Donner—ever the financial man said, "Jack, where we going to get the money to build this car?" He [Gordon] said, "Take it as an advertisement." Now, that was pretty good. In other words, two people talk about General Motors having a stylish car. They liked it. So, they let Pontiac, Olds and Buick bid for it. DeLorean was at Pontiac then, and he had some crazy ideas that he was pumping into them, and I wouldn't let him touch it. It was down in that room finished! [At] Olds, Jack Wolfram, wanted to put a blower on it and do something. I said, "No way," and Roller! [Edward D., Buick General Manager, 1960's] who owned this house one time, he said, "I'll take it the way it is." They did a smart thing. They went over in the Gotham Hotel on Fifth Avenue away from their agency and had their own writers and the illustrator that did the Rolls Royces—Melbourne Brindle. I've got a painting he did of mine for me.

I'll show it to you down there. He did the illustrations, and they gave it a whole, separate image, and that really was interesting how that was born, and that's the way a car should be done. I didn't have any engineers looking down my neck. See, within the studio if you went over there today, there might be a Buick meeting. There would be fifteen engineers in there picking at it. Then going back and saying, "I didn't like this, I didn't like that." Terrible!

Q The Riviera was one of your great passions, I've read.

A: Yup.

Q: Would you consider that one of your best creations?

A: It was the happiest Christmas Eve because I say, "Sold." The corporation bought that idea, and the Stingray. Those were my two pets, and they both—God, I could have got drunk for a week.

Q: Tell us about the Stingray. How did it come about?

A: Now there's a real story. Chevrolet was racing, and Gordon was on the National Safety Council, and General Motors, to be into racing, didn't look good, and their last race down in Sebring [Florida], he said, "No, stop it," I knew they had three or four chassis that Duntov [G.M. design engineer] had built. So, I went to Cole, and said, "Get me one of those." He said, "Well, I'll sell it to you for \$500." It was worth \$500,000—tubular frame, the Dion suspension, inward brakes, everything!

Q: Where was Cole at that time?

A: He was head of Chevrolet. So, Harry Barr was chief engineer, and nobody in the corporation knew about it. I went down in the hammer room and designed this Corvette Stingray image, in clay—built it, in

fiberglass, and I raced it once in Marlborough. I was on the Engineering Policy Committee. I was on that for twenty years. It later became the Product Planning [Committee], because overseas got in it. So, in that meeting Gordon said, "I thought everybody knew we were out of racing." So, after the meeting I said, "Jack, were you talking about me?" He said, "You're damn right I was." I said, "Do I have to quit?" He said, "You've got to quit right now!" And, it just made me feel terrible. I got some word makers, and we wrote a letter to him, I did, saying that I got my job from racing, because that's what I did. I was in it—it was like a doctor to go to conventions or something. And, he used to come out to studio in those big limousines in those days. So, I took him down to the car, in [an area] they still use at the Tech Center, and I said, "Jack, did you get my letter?" He said, "I sure as hell did, and you're a good salesman. You can go ahead." Now, that was a tough guy. Just to show you how honest he was the other way. "Keep it off the property and spend your own money." Well, today I couldn't have afforded it, but there was Goodyear giving you tires, it was Firestone, I had to buy them. But, I put a thing in with the government income tax, and I only had to pay 25% in two years. But, it came time to face-lift the Corvette, so I took the lines right off that car, and the sales on the Corvette went like that. And, I had to judge down at Williamsburg three weeks ago, and they sent me a new Corvette to Washington, and I drove down.

Q: What did you think?

A: Down there, those Corvettes are beautiful, and the Stingrays were...

Q: Perfect.

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A: And, I gave them a story. I have a nice way to make a pitch now. I show slides, and then when they come on, I can talk. Like Earl and the Firebirds and what made him and how we did things. Then, the Stingray, you can see the race car and then the other one, you know? Just how I did them. But, that's what I was trying to say, a car—well, Bill Lyons that owned Jaguar for years and did his own designing, was a wonderful guy. He said the only thing the committee ever designed was a camel.

Q: You're right.

A: You see, you can't have committee design. You've got to go in and say, "This is what I want to do."

Q: The giants like Fred Donner and Jack Gordon and Harlow Curtice are no longer with us—and Harley Earl.

A: No, it's another—I don't whether you know [Strother] MacMinn of Art Centre. [Pasadena design school]

Q: I'd like to.

A: He's a wonderful guy. He was here as one of the judges [Meadowbrook] with me, and he sat here...

Q: Strother MacMinn?

A: Yeah, Strother MacMinn. Well, I've known—he was with G.M., and then he went out and helped form [Art Centre], You see, Earl, the way Art Centre got going, Earl's from Hollywood, and he drove by this school which was in a mansion somebody gave 'em on Wilshire, and he wanted to see a design school. It was really founded by a guy that thought he had TB and from Chicago [Tink Adams], He went out there, he was an

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advertising man. So, the basis of the school was advertising and illustration. Well, Earl looked at it, and he said, "Why don't you do automobile design?" So, they sent MacMinn, Jurgensen, and another guy, a product man, and a modeler out there, and they started the product end, which is a big thing there although Art Centre is now across from the Rose Bowl up in Pasadena. It's a fabulous school. They come from all over the world. I've given talks out there, and it's so great because it isn't just design, it's fine arts, photography, and being in Hollywood, photography is big thing—movie making and all that. But, it's so contagious, it isn't just products, it's everything.

Q: Sounds perfect.

A: But, MacMinn and I sat here [last] Monday. He called me up and said, "Can I come over?" But, these Californians, they have three hours difference you know, and I was wondering why I was getting sort of tired, wasn't drinking or anything, and hell, it was eight o'clock. See, it was five o'clock his time. But we reminisced about - - he said, "Bill, the days aren't—something's happening—there's not the same people. There's no Jack Dempseys, no Babe Ruths over there." I don't dare say. Now, Earl, when he retired, never criticized me once, and he was still being paid. He'd come back once or twice a year. He'd have to. Now, Gordon and Donner, especially Gordon, didn't like that but, Sloan set that all up. His wife gets money 'till she dies, he did, 'cause

he made it.' And, I'll show you a painting of Sloan that hung in the hall as you go up to the Tech Center. He's got an inscription that

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I've got on my desk around here, and he said, in 1926, "With all cars about alike," and they weren't, because some of them and things, but styling meant a great deal to General Motors. He really put—he's a financial man, and he was a clothes horse. He dressed, and he admired Earl, you see. So, they put it up.

Q: Alfred Sloan?

A: Sure, he admired that. See, there's nobody there to—now, one thing I learned from Earl, boy, if things didn't go right, I'd just pick up. I'd get right to the guy that left. I would talk to Donner direct, I could talk to Curtice direct. [Ed] Cole was my baby. I could go to him. I got in a fight with old [Roger] Keyes. I didn't like him one bit. Earl didn't like him, and I didn't like him, and he was criticizing me for something, and I was down in the wood shop, and they said, "Cole's on the phone." I got on the phone and he said, "Bill, I'm on the squawk box, and Roger's sitting here. What is this, Roger that you're saying about Bill?" And, he said something. He said, "Well, wait a minute, Roger, he doesn't work for you, he works for me." And, you heard Roger blow up, and Roger said, "It's either me or Mitchell," and he [Cole] said, "Make up your mind, Roger." So, I had him. From then on I just—I made that Manta Ray. And, he [Kyes] looked at it, and I said, "You know why I made that? So you couldn't get your ass in it! You couldn't get in that son of a bitch."

Q: He was tall and angular, wasn't he?

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A: But, I think what fixed him [was] he was [C.E.] Wilson's hatchet man in Washington. In those pictures that Look magazine made up, I often said to my wife, "He must look at himself when he shaves and...[.]" I know there's one incident where [Pete] Estes told me that we had a guy named [Harold] Warner, who had run the truck division, and they moved him into Cadillac. I mean, I came back from Europe and had a bad back, and Knudsen called me at the hospital and said, "If you feel bad, how would you like to hear Warner running Cadillac?" God! Well, anyway he couldn't cut the mustard, but he was a nice guy. So, Estes was telling me that Keyes came in Tuesday and was going to fire him. I wouldn't fire him. I wouldn't think of it. He said, "Don't worry, I'll do it." He was a hatchet man.

Q: He later got involved with Ferguson in the mid-Forties.

A: Before that. Before he came to G.M. Then Wilson brought him.

Q: That's right, Wilson brought him in the Fifties, late Fifties, or late Forties. In the immediate post-war era, there was an exodus of G.M. [design] people to Ford largely because of Breech.

A: Yeah.

Q: And, as you well remember...

A: And, I liked Ernie too.

Q: Did you?

A: Oh yeah, he's a good friend of mine. I'd go hunting with him, I knew his son. My wife—and I was out playing golf with his son's ex-wife.

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Q: As you well remember, Breech seemed to bring several G.M. junior stylists along with—well, not along with him, but about a year or 30 later. How did that work? How did that come about? Do you remember the details?

A: Well, Snyder...

Q: That's George Snyder?

A: Yeah. There's a guy named Lauve, and he's still around. Henry Lauve. [Howard] O'Leary was the director then, and he was great on—but a wonderful personality. There's a great, terrible story about if anybody drank, it just ruined him, but he sponsored Lauve over some of these other guys. And, Lauve was good artist, one of the best. I hired him in New York.

Q: O'Leary was who?

A: He was [administrative] director of styling. But he was not a stylist. He came from Fisher Body, and L. P. Fisher liked him and got him in, and was friend of Earl's and said, "He'll run it."

Earl had a terrible temper. God, he'd fire and hire. Something about our chemistry, he never whipped me. I remember he'd demoralize some guys so that one night I came into his office after hours, 6 o'clock, and he was quiet, and I said, "Mr. Earl, can I talk to you for a minute?" This was before he retired. He said, "Sure." And, I said, "You know, you're a big man, and you're volatile, and you've got a couple fellas that I can't work with. You just scared them to death. They're

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going to psychiatrists." He said, "Is that right?" I said, "Yeah." "God," he said, "I'm glad you told me that." I went home and I thought, boy, I've made a major victory. Next Monday he called me in, "God damn son of a bitch, they don't like the work, throw their ass out of here." You know, he didn't like to be told.

Q: So, you had almost—it seemed to be sort of a mass exodus of several junior...

A: Yeah, 'cause they didn't like who he was moving in. [Frank] Hershey, he fired Hershey, and he fired Anderson. Anderson went to American Motors, and Hershey went to...

Q: Frank was pretty good, wasn't he? Frank Hershey?

A: From the old school, yeah, but he was good, yeah. But, he was running his own business, and Earl didn't like that. You couldn't run your business and work there.

Q: What about Tom Hibbard at that period?

A: Tom, well, he was an older man. He just came in and out. He had been a great body designer in the days when Earl, you know, when they—in fact when I came there, [Virgil] Exner and I were the only guys that could draw perspective. Everything was done on the side, and, you know, that could really get in and do it. But, Hibbard was a good guy in those days, but he couldn't fit into these new styles. Earl really brought in guys with no—like me—no background in designing, just guys that loved cars.

Q: I guess [Eugene] Bordinat left General Motors right after the war too, didn't he?

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A: He was with Fisher.

Q: Oh, he was at Fisher.

A: Well, coordinated with it—sometimes Fisher's would do interiors, and Gene has been a friend of mine for years. In fact, he gave me a job. He called me up a couple of years ago, and Fiat, Ciat, that's the Spanish version of Fiat, had a law suit they were to defend against Fiat, and they wanted to pay him to come over and show the...they had taken the car and changed it, but Fiat didn't think they changed it enough to sell it under another name. He had been dismissed by [Donald] Petersen, who is a good friend of mine, who's president [of Ford], and they made a deal with him when they let him out where he's got good money for years, but he couldn't do anything. So, he said, "I can't do this, and I gave them your name." So, I took it on. I got paid well. I got a good history of—like our Chevette that is made in Argentina, Brazil, Germany, England—same car but just different pieces and how you could do this.

Q: So, you and Mr. Earl were gearing up for the post-war onslaught and streamlining the department, and weeding out a few...?

A: Well, there was Lauve and [Art] Ross who he let go before I took over, and he didn't want anybody that was across from my thinking. It was pretty good.

Q: That really set it up for you?

A: Yeah. Whenever he'd come back, he'd have to come back a couple times a year to look the cars over, they gave him a courtesy car. Really, it was embarrassing 'cause Gordon and Donner didn't even ask him anything. But, he'd come to me and say—a few days ahead come up from Florida, and he'd say "Now, what are you selling? Where are the ones?" And, then he'd back me up. He was wonderful. So, I don't

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feel I should take Irv [Rybicki] and Chuck [Jordan] and tell them what to do. They're running it their way, and that's the way it's going to be. Now, [Strother] MacMinn called me yesterday. He wanted me to have a little séance with some of the new men, I said, "No, no, I can't do that. I'm not there," I mean. "They don't have the esprit de corps," is what he's saying. I said, "That's another day. Coolidge wasn't like the guy that he followed,"

Q: So, in '48 Mr. Earl retired for all intents and purposes, and gave...

A: That's not '48, it's '58.

Q: Oh, it's not until '58, I beg your pardon.

A: See, I was in-between he, Ed, and myself, was over forty years. I was twenty years vice president—nineteen years—from '58 to '77.

Q: Well, let's take you back to 1948 then, you got a couple of face-lifts out of the way, and now you've got to gear up for...

A: '58 you mean.

Q: Well, I really want to go back to '48. You've got a couple of— it's a seller's market, and you've had a couple of facelifts in '46 and '47, now you've got to gear up for a really new post-war car. What did you come up with?

A: Well, really, what happened, when I came out of the Navy and came back, there was a movement on to cover the front wheels—to cover the car up, and I've got sketches all around. Some will be in the Museum that I was doing during the war, and I had the guys shooting guns out of it and all this, but Earl had a great faculty. He'd fight when others would give up and yet he would drop something when he saw it was wrong. He had enough guts to say, "That's no good. Stop it." He went from

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this car that was like the Nash that came out and some of them. I said it looked like a horseshoe crab on a roller skate. Everything was covered over. Well, if you do that, you've got a balloon. You don't have any anatomy showing, and all of a sudden he did the other. He dropped the belt, put the belt down below the window, and the car looked longer. See, the more lines you get—in other words, you got a sausage, and we just cleaned the hell out of it. Everybody was going this way, and he went that way. He was a master at the cross up.

Q: Can you detail some of those models that were successful in those days?

A: The cross up, yes. Well, the Zephyr sort of got us into this fine grille and catwalk cooling, and one of my designers, Art Ross, came up with this more powerful front on the '41, and what I'd do at night in the studio, I'd put a light by the one I'm selling, 'cause he didn't like to come in

and you were there. He'd come in Sundays, and come around, and he grabbed that thing and ran, just like take a fix, and we made overnight—Lincoln and everybody went our way with a strong front—'41 Cadillac. One other interesting story was the taillight under the gas cap, or the gas cap under the taillight, and we had a car ready to go up in the elevator to show Knudsen, who was president [of G.M.], and one of the fellas figured you didn't have to show a gas cap. We used to take a gas cap and just stick it in the clay model. Then, he realized that the taillight we had at the time, if it was an inch wider, you could lift the top and put the gas in the taillight. Old Knudsen thought that was great, and it was a great conversation piece. You'd pull in the gas station, and kids would go around, "Where do you put the gas in this damn thing? And, we went clear up to where it

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went in under the fin. Another great story there, Gordon was chief engineer, and once again he was like this, and Dreysfcadt [Nicholas, General Manager, Cadillac, late 1940's), former submarine commander in Germany, was the general manager at Cadillac, and he liked the idea of the taillight under the gas cap under the taillight. And, Gordon didn't because he saw the danger of the wiring in the lighting. But, I'll never forget [what] Dreystadt said—Gordon had been running the tank plant during the war—he said, "Jack, you make a tank, you make a taillight, yeah?" Wonderful!

Q: As I recall, it lifted up, right?

A: Yeah.

Q: That was great.

A: And then later on when...

Q: This still the Cadillac?

A: Yeah, the fins, that we put the fins on, and we got the inspiration by going to Selfridge Field and seeing the P-38's. You know, the engine came back to the fins. Frank Hershey, while I was in the Navy, he started this thing over in—then he was in the Navy for a while too, no, he was in the Army, but, anyway, at Forty-one Milwaukee was a separate building where they had a [design] school, and he started that. They were little nubbins, but they went on to become these tails. Well, Gordon never liked them, and he'd sit in the wastebasket in the studio, and he was head of Cadillac, and Cole was chief engineer. Cole and I wanted to raise him, and we pulled a trick on him. We took the drawing, and instead of saying we'd raise the other drawing every day,

and it looked like we were lowering it. And, Gordon heard of that later. He said, "You bastards you." And, we got it over—

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well, anyway, Sloan at the proving ground turned to Earl at the back, and he looked at the Cadillac, and he said, "Harley, now you got a Cadillac in the back as well as the front." It was the first car with rear identity. They're all rounded, and round taillights, but all of a sudden, it was the beginning of knowing a car from the back, and, now they're losing it. I say if you take the fins off the Cadillac, it's like the taking the antlers off a deer, you got a big rabbit!

Q: But, you're back with Mr. Earl, and you've got a decade ahead of you before you take over from '48 to '58. Those must have been very exciting, tumultuous years for you—the immediate post-war new cars.

A: Well, I'll tell you, the fins things—two years it was the worst in General Motors—'58 and '59, back to back. In '58 we were putting the chrome on with a trowel. In '59, Chrysler scared the hell out of us—Exner. He tried to out-fin them. We had fins. So, when I took over my job was to get them down, and I did. I cleaned them down. But, I've got to say this, they had some identity. They were doing that then. Exner was a flamboyant stylist. Now, it's just like fights. If you go to see a fight, one guys a puncher, and the other guy isn't—it's not a fight, it's just a—but, if they're both punching, and he was exotic. Right now there isn't any of that going on. Nobody's challenging anybody. This new Ford, I said [to] [Jack] Telnack, [Ford design head] I know him, and I said, I don't what to say, but I tried to think what it reminds me of, and then I saw it the other day—a seal, little eyes and big fat ass!

Q: Which one? You mean the Sierra?

A: Thunderbird.

Q: Oh, the Thunderbird.

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A: The little grille, the little thing down the road and the big round back.

Q: What did he say?

A: Oh, he laughed.

Q: They're having some problems with it.

A: Well, at least I say this. Now, this is interesting. The president, [Donald] Petersen, he told me once, he said, "You know," we were giving a talk down at some college here. He's a good friend of mine anyway. He said, "I asked [Jack] Telnack was he happy, and he said 'No. I don't like committees telling me how to do things.'" He said, "Well, you do what you want to do now." So, he did this. Now, if it's a success, he's won a lot of points for designers. If it isn't, back to the committees. Now, I've worked in my own business. I worked with Yamaha for five years, and I had an idea beforehand that they were more like Ed Cole but, they're not. They're great committee people. Oh my God, yeah. I had to work with Yamaha because Honda had a car. See, any business I got on the side had to be approved by the Bonus and Salary Committee. They let me have Yamaha, but not Honda. I was going to get Massey-Ferguson, and they didn't buy that because of diesel engines. John Mitchell was head—he's passed away now. I couldn't get North American Rockwell because—and I knew Bob Anderson well. He just had me out to see the B-1 again. God damn, that's something! But, anyway, the Japs surprised me. Now, they did ask me two years ago to come to Japan, and Hiroshima was the president then, and Sam Shimomoda, chief engineer, and he said, "Would you give us a talk on what made the automobile number one industry? Number two, what made

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General Motors the number one automobile industry?" So, this is just like asking someone to kick them in the pants. So, I took two or three months and taped this all with slides, had the artist—they paid for it, you know they did, I pumped them a lot. But, my big pitch was diversification. I said, "I got motorcycles. Hell, I had seven or eight, now I've got four. I ride them. But, you're at a disadvantage. A motorcycle isn't accepted in society," and I said, "You got to admit it, on the highway, you got to drive, you've got to watch out, because you're at a disadvantage, and any day the government could take you off the road. You're not safe. You get in a wreck, the guy gets a dinged fender, and you get a dinged head. If I was to go out—you know, you gotta get geared up for 'em, you can't pick your nose and ride a motorcycle." But, they had—I gave it in English, and then they had another projector, and the guy talked in Japanese. By the way, they had the most fabulous place down there outside of Toyko, about forty miles near their plant. Like a country club. Polo fields, ten swimming pools, auditoriums, golf courses, and the inn I stayed at was better than any I ever saw in California. And, motorcycle track—I rode on the track, Jesus, beautiful! But, anyway, the club room, which was like a country club, we set in a V, and I spoke here, and the two groups of directors, the head man was up at the—big glasses. When I made a presentation, I had an idea of a good three-wheeler. They could make it. You could do a lot of things with that. I had all kinds of farm equipment—motorcycle snowmobile. So, the snowmobile. And, anyway, I got done, and some fine men, nice looking men. They could be on any board, and they said, "Well, the committee, they'd have to study

it." I said, "You don't get anywhere with a committee. Henry Ford made what he wanted." And, I said, "I don't give a God damn about committees." And, the old man didn't get what I said, and they had to tell him, and he set there and he went, "Haw, haw!" I'll never forget that.

Q: Oswald and Snyder came over to Ford.

A: Yeah. Well, Oswald brought Snyder.

Q: Oh, is that how it was?

A: Oswald was an Olds engineer, and his brother still stayed at Olds, and George and he were buddies, and George got mad at [Henry] Lauve. He didn't like Lauve, so he went.

Q: They didn't last too long.

A: Well, George—and then they sent George to Europe. And, he was for years a personal friend of mine, and I was with him when he died, and for a big man, he just withered away, but he got heart trouble, and he would drink and not eat—terrific temper, and he killed himself, but he was a great designer.

Q: Was he?

A: He was one of the top men when I was a young man.

Q: You've seemed to have good relationships with key people, not only Donner and Gordon, but also with key people like Ed Cole.

A: Oh yeah, I made it my business. Pete Estes, who followed him. Knudsen was a good friend of mine. He still is. I'm with him a lot of times. In fact, he was thinking of doing something about that Avanti. He had me flown down, and we drove one back, and I drew it up

in the studio what I'd do with it, and I said, "I wouldn't do much. I'd just take that big back light, that bubble back light, and make it sharp." But, it is, on its own, it wears well. No, I found out

from Earl that you've got to have the top guys on your side, and I always went in to a meeting backed up. Like that one meeting I had on Olds, and the guy says, "Well, if I won't agree, you'll probably go right to the phone and call Ed, won't ya?" I said, "You're right."

Q: Could you give us a rather lengthy description of you and Ed [Cole] and the Corvair? Give us sort of a....

A: Well, that was his—I'll tell you one thing about Cole, he was probably his own worst enemy. In a sense, Earl was that way. You couldn't criticize Earl, he'd scare the hell out of you, so you get so you wouldn't tell him if he was wrong. Now, Cole was like that. He'd design the car, the carburetor, the suspension. Instead of bringing in Fisher to do something, Chevrolet, he did it, and all I did was the styling, and he got Porsches out there and Volkswagens. What you call it was always a great help—the guy that was head of engineering staff [Frank J. Winchell] who's now retired—I'm getting old when those names go by me. He was head of engineering, he just surfaced a little bit on this air bag thing. But, anyway, he did most of the stuff with Cole, but Cole just liked the rotary engine, he got General Motors to spend millions of dollars, and he'd go to those board meetings and sell. And, that big thing he had after he retired, you know, I got smuggled drawings out for him and did that stuff. One of my men that worked with me later, Bill Armstrong, who was set to fly with him that day that he crashed. But Ed, when he died, at his funeral, his wife had this guy that sings at

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ballgames, sing "I'll Do It My Way," and Henry Ford, all of us, the tears just came down, because that's the way he was. He shouldn't have been flying a twin-engine plane alone, but that's the way he ran things. My God, and while I loved him and worked with him, if I wanted to sell this and didn't come with him on something, he wouldn't back me on this one. You had to play ball.

Q: Why did he think the Corvair would go?

A: If it was here today, it'd be better than ever. It was economical, but what killed it, those were the days of dragster cars where you'd take, not just Corvettes, but you'd put big engines in the A bodies—all those Pontiacs and Olds that would rip the stones out of the street. Corvair couldn't do that. I built one for my daughter, and she was afraid to drive it, because you go to shoot across the street, and it wouldn't go, and even the blowers they put on acted like a slip and clutch. I built a couple cuties—the Monza, took 'em to Florida, six carburetors on it, a lot of fun; but the car wasn't timed right. Today, they're good looking. I got one for George Russell [former G.M. vice chairman], he's got it down in Palm Beach. He just told me the other night he's got it all restored. Good styling—is classic, it lasts forever.

Q: Did Ed come to you and say, "Bill, I've got an idea I want you to..."? How did that work out?

A: Earl was still there. We went into a separate room—nobody knew anything about it. We worked just with Cole, and Ned Nickles was the designer, and we worked with him. Nobody in General Motors knew it. Earl liked Cole, and he liked Knudsen, Then, the funny thing, he liked DeLorean.

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Q: Really?

A: Well, DeLorean was a good guy.

Q: In those days he was fabulous from what I hear.

A: No, Cole, he was a great dreamer. This last thing he had that would carry freight—this big—God, he'd get on to something like that, and he'd just go! And, the thing is, he'd be 95 years old before it ever was born. But, he was a great pusher.

Q: The rear engine was quite a sensation in those days.

A: Yeah.

Q: How did that come about?

A: Well, he saw the advantages of a Porsche and the Volkswagen, see, and actually the one thing that defeated it was the [Corvaire] wagon. See, you had to have high floors in it for space under even the front-wheel drive. You know an interesting thing, under my direction, which Earl didn't have much to do [with] before, but after Europe it got to be a big thing, they came to me and said, "Can you put a good designer in Opel?" And, they named one, and I said, "Well, he isn't good, you've got to take the best man we got. Opel is second to Chevrolet." So, I brought in [Irvin] Rybicki and let the overseas people talk to him, and I brought in [Chuck] Jordan, and I brought in [Clare] MacKichan, and they didn't know what their interview [was], they just thought they were talking to them—the designers did, but they selected Rybicki because (A) he was in between. Jordan was too young, and they thought Mac was too old, he had kids in college, he didn't want to go



over there. Well, Rybicki didn't want it. He turned it down, and so they chose Mac, and he wanted it, he liked it, and he was over there five years and did a hell of a job!

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Q: What was his full name again?

A: Clare MacKichan. He's retired in Florida now. How did we get into that—Opel?

Q: The Corvair and the Opel.

A: No. The rear engine—oh, I was studying with Vauxhall and Opel—future cars—and we knew we were going to make a small car here, so we made all layouts—conventional, front-wheel drive, rear engine. Front-wheel drive proved the best because a little engine could be turned crossways, which they're doing now, and you had all that floor down here. In fact, the Toronado—Charlie Chayne and Earl—Earl wanted to build a front-wheel drive, and Earl saw it as a sports car, but Chayne was chief engineer, and he saw it as a wagon. The first that was ever built was an Olds wagon. Nobody ever saw it. I mean drawn around. Then, the Riviera was already out, so they took the Riviera chassis, and I remember going to the proving ground, and you could always see a Toronado 'cause the hood was that much longer. Wow, that looked spooky! But, we studied every way, and the front-wheel drive was the best. You knew it was coming. The rear engine is just not the way for people and passengers, luggage. You see, the big thing, you can't put the luggage up front, because wheels turn, and your package space isn't good. Funny, [at] Indianapolis they got rid of front-wheel drive after a few years. They said it wasn't the best. On sports cars—I've got a model downstairs of the—I'll have to show you my studio—of the Corvette the way it was going before I left. It was mid-engine, and they just couldn't spend the money, but that's the way to do a sports car because it handles. Indianapolis, anything, Formula 1, they're all mid-engine.

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Q: Out of the Corvair came something which people—some commentators describe as one of your finest creations—the Monza.

A: Yeah, that's beautiful.

Q: Could you tell us a bit about that?

A: Well, I wanted to get something that would go up against the Mustang, and I wanted it to be more exotic. So, I built the one where the hatch came up, and show car, and it's still a beautiful car, but it was heavy, so then I built the open job. They just couldn't see putting that out, that's all, but it went around to shows everywhere.

Q: Does it still exist?

A: Yeah. One nice thing they've done for me at the [G.M.] Tech Center, I've got like a museum over there in the warehouse. My Manta Rays, and all that. Up at Flint are the two Rivas I did. I put that much on the hood, lowered the roof four inches.

Q: [Alfred] Sloan Museum?

A: Yeah, the Silver Arrow I and II.

Q: I was going to ask you about the Silver Arrow. But, before we get to the Silver Arrow, tell me a bit more about how the Monza was created.

A: Well, they just couldn't get born. Cole was for it, everybody was for it—a sports car. But it's funny, the corporation—now they're seeing more of this, but there was a time when Roche wanted to wash out the Corvette. Financially it wasn't—you know, they—now, I said to my wife, she said, "Don't talk like that." But, I said, "Kroger's makes more money than Tiffany's." That's why G.M.'s into all these funny-looking things. They're not out for prestige, they don't give a God damn about that—money, money!!! And, they would go from a—look

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at these conglomerates, that one that's called Beatrice or something, and they make snow shovels and gems, breakfast food, dog collars.

Q: And peanut butter.

A: Oh God, that makes me sick. That just turns my stomach, and that's what [Roger] Smith's doing.

Q: But you couldn't get the Monza off the drawing board or off the prototype?

A: No, we just made two prototypes.

Q: That was marvelous.

A: I loved it too.

Q: It's gorgeous. I saw it the other day, and I was really impressed.

A: They're at the Tech Center.

Q: Good. What about the S. S.—the one that you had out at Elkhart Lake?

A: Well, I made a lot of those. Well, first I made—the cheapest you way you could make one is chop the production job. So, I chopped it, put headrests on it, brought the pipes outside, and I was always making those. God, I had them coming out of my ears. Now, they haven't made a show car since I left.

Q: Haven't they really?

A: That makes me just—nauseates me. They made aerodynamic studies, but aerodynamics and I don't get along. Hell, they were running at Daytona down there 200 miles an hour without that kind of aerodynamics.

Q: Right. Was the Super Spyder, was that...?

A: That was one.

Q: That's gorgeous—is that still available?

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A: That's out there. Yeah.

Q: That's marvelous.

A: I didn't have anybody to report to. I'd just go make them. One time [James] Roche did say, "Before you do a show car, write what it ought to be." I said, "I couldn't do that," because I could never finish—like writing a story, you change it all the time, and I said-why, I did one, I did a two-passenger Toronado. Oh, that was something. Put that in the show, but I learned from Earl to

do these. You see, you have no committees. That's how I sold a lot of stuff. As you came in to get on the elevator to go in my office—I only drove those kind of cars—so they'd look at it and say, "Jeez," and I'd have them bidding on it. "Let us make them," see.

Q: The Fifties were good years for General Motors. You made a lot of money, you outsold Ford, except for maybe one year, and Chevrolet was riding high, did you still have that crew together that I read about? Clare MacKichan?

A: Rybicki was Olds, and MacKichan was Chevrolet.

Q: And Dave Holls?

A: Dave Holls was Cadillac.

Q: That's a pretty good team, wasn't it?

A: Yeah. Then well, Mac retired, but Dave Holls is now got sort of—there's Rybicki and then Jordan, and then I'd say Holls.

Then, on the West Coast they've started a studio, you know, a design thing, run by [Henry] Haga, and Haga had run Opel for years. My plan was to have them go—I'd put them in Australia, then I'd put them in England, and Germany. The only thing is is one designer that I loved, Wayne Cherry—

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big, tall, handsome guy—he loved England, and he did not want to move. I was getting ready before I retired to get him to Australia, because when they came back, they were stronger.

Q: Ford copied that technique.

A: Yeah. So, anyway, God damn it, he married a nice English girl. My wife and I had dinner with them, and just when we were having dinner we got word that he was transferred to Opel, and as much as he loved England...Well, Opel's the big fish. Vauxhall has just gone down like that. But, our chief designer at Opel was up by the Lorelei, you know that tower on the Rhine where they used to pay a toll to go by, and he was out on a cliff to take some pictures, and he dropped part of his camera, and he went over the safety line to get it and fell, got killed. So, they took Wayne and moved him to Opel.

Q: Now, who's that died again?

A: His name was...no, no, this guy was head of Opel [design] [Gordon M. Brown].

Q: Is [Clare] MacKichan still...?

A: No, no, he's in Florida, yeah, he's retired.

Q: He's in Florida. And Rybicki?

A: Rybicki is—has my job [Vice President of Design].

Q: He's there now?

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A: Yeah. That's why you don't hear about him, see.

Q: Right, you were the one—he's kept the low profile since you left.

A: Dave Holls is right behind...no, Chuck Jordan is the head stylist under Rybicki.

Q: And Dave Holls?

A: Dave Holls is under him.

Q: Good. So, you've had a good decade [1948-1958] and the immediate post-war decade has been good for G. M., they're selling well, and the cars are very well accepted, and now it's '58, and Mr. Earl decides to retire. Was there any reason for it?

A: Oh, 65, that's a G. M. law.

Q: Oh. That was it.

A: He died when he was 75. My wife and I just had dinner with him, too, the next day had a stroke, yeah—Palm Beach—great guy, like a father to me. I was 23 when I started with him, and I was 46 when he turned it over to me. That was half of my life.

Q: He never changed, he was always the same.

A: Yup. Wonderful personality, powerful. He wouldn't yes anybody.

Q: The era of Alfred Sloan had passed just about this time, had it not?

A: Well, yeah. You see, Sloan was such a dictator, and he ran it, always did.

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Q: Didn't delegate much, except Earl.

A: Well, it was delegated around, but he built this structure for the whole thing. A car for each and every person, purpose—Chevrolet, Pontiac, Olds. Then along came [William] Knudsen, and he was a fixit guy. He didn't have it, [C.E.] Wilson, I can't remember what he looked like. He didn't have any personality. [Harlow] Curtice was flamboyant, but he was his own worst enemy 'cause he never wanted to come to Detroit. He had a Lockheed Vega that they'd fly back and forth to Flint, and he was so pro-Buick that he tried to make a million Buicks before Chevrolet did, and probably made the worst '55 Buick, the worst Buicks ever made. They made so many of them. He was president then, too. But, he reminded me of my father. His Scotch, you know, reddish complexion, and I loved it. I personally thought the world of him, and, of course, when he shot Anderson (that accident at the club), he died right after. That took everything out of him.

Q: It shattered him, didn't it?

A: Oh yeah.

Q: Yes, right. So, who has succeeded Curtice then at this time?

A: Oh, I've got a book—what I did, I went to another room down-stairs in one of the studios and put an engineer on this, took about a year and a half, and I'll show you I've got everybody from Sloan, to directors, to the president, the chief engineers, the general manager, from when I took over to when I retired. And, I've got every car 'cause

I knew I couldn't, If I ever wrote a book, I couldn't go back and ask somebody to dig it out, so I got it. You forget, you know, what year....[.]

Q: Oh heavens, yes. You've taken over for Mr. Earl, and you've been working for him by then about ten/twelve years?

A: No, 23 years. I came when I was 23, and was 46 when...

Q: That's right. What sort of a situation did you find at General Motors in terms of...?

A: Well, I had my plan of what I was going to do. One thing I did, instead of a having a studio of ten people in one studio, I'd have five studios with two people. I mean, get more ideas, and I didn't believe in a lot of people in a room because the imposters could get away with murder. You never knew who did what, and if there's just a couple guys—I these special cars I did, just cut one or two designers. Sometimes only one, because you can't have a melting pot and do a car. You pick pieces and put them together, but you can't paint a watercolor in Grand Central Station, you know. You can't have all that. I think there's a lot of that today.

Q: Did you find that it was different? Was the committee approach taking over about this time?

A: Oh, when Earl left, they thought they had me, 'cause they couldn't run him, so the first couple of years, I had to watch it. They were moving in on me, and I fought like hell, and I made it. I used to think

I'll never make it, but I did, and I had his picture back of me in my office. I thought I'll never let you down, whether it was Murphy or who it was. I got the guys that loved cars like Knudsen and Cole to back me up. Even in John's book, he tried to make the—John DeLorean. In his book, one of them, he said that he tried to get the Camaro and Firebird out of the A body, and I got Cole, and Pete knocked him down—Estes, and he said, "Mitchell fixed it." I never got on [with him]. I didn't like him. I didn't like his aloof egotism. He'd sit in a meeting and open his briefcase and brush his hair, and he'd dress floozy, you know, and he called us the establishment. He was a queer guy. But, you know, where he changed—I'll never forget this—in my dining room he'd come up, they'd all come up and eat at different times. I inherited that from Earl—beautiful dining room, push-button lazy Susan, control the music and everything. And, he'd been gone a week or two, and he'd go away being a vice president, and nobody knew where the hell he was!

Nobody else would dare do that. But, he'd just like to flaunt this, and he was sitting to my left, and I was looking into the sun, and I couldn't see him too well, but he was talking, and he always ate fast and left. I got up, I called Knudsen on the phone, and I said, "Bunkie, have you seen John?" I said, "He doesn't look the same. It's like—I don't know, he's like a guy that's changed." The Dorian Gray story, you know. I said, "What the hell is it." So, went the other way—he had

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had his teeth pulled out and all screwed in, had his face lifted, and then he said that he'd been in a wreck. Well, hell, he didn't—and when his face changed, he changed. He had an outfit in California who were making their commercial movies for Pontiac, and that's when he met Kelley Harmon, and the guys I knew out there that got him into wearing shoes with no socks, turtleneck sweaters, he just changed. He just went the other way.

Q: The people like Ed Cole, Pete Estes, and Bunkie Knudsen, you've made friends with and made them your professional...

A: Yeah, real car guys.

Q: Right, really car guys, and that got you over maybe the rough spots of Earl leaving and the...

A: Yeah, and they backed me up against Kyes and some of those other guys.

Q: What about Keyes' boss, we mentioned briefly earlier that...

A: Wilson? [C.E.]

Q: Yeah, who went to work in Eisenhower's administration.

A: He was nothing. I can't remember him.

Q: Really, where had he come from? Did he come up through the ranks?

A: He came from—was ahead of my time, so I don't remember.

Q: He must have come up from engineering, apparently.



A: He was—oh, Deloo, I think. He was one of those guys, and I never knew a general manager that came from one of these outlying divisions that was worth a damn.

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Q: Really.

A: That's what scared me to death. No heritage of moving up.

Q: Curtice was flamboyant, but he was a good car man.

A: Well, he loved it. He knew sales, and he came to Earl, and he said, when he was head of Buick, and he was really a bookkeeper, you know, financial man, and he said, "I don't know a damn thing about styling." And, Earl made him. I remember I put the—the Cadillac studio was right across the hall from Buick in the Research B, and you could open up the doors and move cars in and out. We had that through fender on the Cadillac, and Cadillac didn't want it. Earl gave it to Buick. And, after the war, the convertibles were hot. Buick and convertible became synonymous—a through fender and everything. And, the gun sight he took. Quite a few things we had that he took—the instrument panel, engine turning, and things like that.

Q: And, then the Riviera, and after he'd made...

A: Well, that wasn't Curtice though, that was...

Q: No, but I mean, you...

A: Yeah.

Q: Gordon and Donner were pretty much bean counters, weren't they?

A: Well, Gordon, let's say, [was] conservative. The rumor is that— you see, when Cole was president, before that when Curtice was president, and Curtice was president and the chairman was (he came after Sloan from New York), he lived, he stayed in New York. You see, Sloan never would come out. He was in New York, and Bradley...

Q: Oh, Albert Bradley, yes.

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A: But Cole ran everything, and they didn't want this to happen again, so when they got Donner, they picked Gordon, and he could run Gordon. I remember the phone would ring, and Gordon would say, "Oh, God damn, he called me again." He'd just run it from New York, but Gordon couldn't get away with anything. So, then when Cole came on as President, for chief engineer under Gordon, he had a time, but when he became president, [Chairman Richard C.] Gerstenberg couldn't run him, but they liked each other. When they retired, they both said, it's a shame. They were only together a couple years, but Cole was running it. The plan is never again to have—now the minute [Chairman Thomas A.] Murphy got in, he never got any publicity out of Pete Estes. But now with [Chairman Roger] Smith, he's running the show, and [President F. James] McDonald, you don't where he is. He's a fixit guy, but it's going back to the Sloan control.

Q: The one man control?

A: I remember one time I said to Donner (we were flying on a plane), and I said, "The difference between Ford and General Motors is Ford is decentralized, or General Motors is decentralized, and Ford's centralized." And he said, "Decentralized with centralized control." Then, everytime I'd exalt the fact that what made Earl run it was a big man move, Donner wasn't a big man, he'd always talk about Ernie Breech, but Ernie was small. I got along good with Donner, oh yeah.

Q: Fred Donner?

A: I'd go over Gordon if he wouldn't do something.

Q: I think Donner was probably a very fair person.

A: Oh yeah. And I went to Europe a lot with him.

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Q: Did you?

A: We'd swap ties and have some drinks, you know, dinners. Just wine, but he liked that. God, they tell me all that's gone now—all those nice things overseas.

Q: They cut them all out.

A: One guy I wanted that Ford got was Lutz.

Q: Bob Lutz?

A: Bob Lutz was head of Fiat in Paris, and then he went with Opel as sales manager, and then he couldn't get going like he wanted to 'cause he was under Earl's dominance. Some of those old guys—he went with BMW, and then he'd get me motorcycles from BMW. They got a new one out now I've got to get a hold of. I gave a talk, with the chairman of—I had lunch with him and telling him about my philosophy, and he was writing it down on the tablecloth. I said, "I'll send you a film—sound film," and I sent one of the men over, and he invited all the Germans in, sent him to London, they did it. I did a film on the government trying to take over the industry.

Q: Did you find in 1958 when you took over, you'd mentioned that the committee mentality began to impinge on your area. Were you able to hold them off?

A: Oh, it took a little while, but I did.

Q: How did you do that?

A: I surrounded myself with people that wanted to go—Cole and [Semon "Bunkie"] Knudsen—the new breed. Oh, they were ready...'cause I had a seating committee that were all big, tall guys—tall uppers—and, you know, they were hell to package, and they went through in '61. God,

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we had to raise the coupes. They were awful. The next year we kicked them out, but there was a time there where I had a hell of a battle. Cause Earl, while he's 6' 4", he was all legs. He could sit in a car and say, "Look, what are designing?" There's some stories of if he had an accident, you know, and some guy would jump out of a car to come over, by the time he got out of the car, the guy ran, jumped back into his car, and he'd get out—he had a car, a low car, you know, and then he'd get up like that—Jesus Christ.

Q: That is intimidating, isn't it?

A: Yeah.

Q: Ernie Breech's defection, if you can call it that, bringing a lot of G.M. people with him, did that cause any dislocation?

A: Ernie was always liked by everybody, and he did a lot for TWA, you know, and that other stuff. He was a great man, and he got sort of sidetracked by G.M.

Q: He was at Bendix, and he didn't think he was going anywhere. So, he brought over Earle MacPherson as I recall.

A: Yeah, yeah.

Q: And Del Harder.

A: Yeah, yeah.

Q: And, of course, the design...

A: He brought all the books—he brought the books right out of Fisher Body.

Q: Really?

A: He was with Fisher, what was his name? He was one of the top men he brought—he took the books and everything—how to run it, yeah. [Lewis D. Crusoe]

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Q: It became sort of a miniature G.M. in a way.

A: And, then, well, we had a reverse when Knudsen went with Ford, and then Iacocca belonged to the club over here, and he didn't want to be—I remember, I was down in Hawaii, and my daughters came over to see me, and I was staying in a place, a hotel on the ocean there—he was next door—Iacocca, and he swore this was my girlfriend, and I said, "It's my daughter." I'll never forget, he'd go out in the ocean, and he grabbed a cigar, and he wouldn't realize it till he got out there that he couldn't swim. But, he kicked Knudsen out. No doubt about that.

Q: Knudsen had a pretty good track record at Chevrolet and Pontiac as I recall, and with your help...

A: There he was, I remember one day [James] Roche, who was president said, "Well, what made Knudsen leave? I said, "Jim, don't you know. He and Cole just couldn't be both, and when Cole got it, he lived in the story that his father was president once, he's going to be president." Cole didn't like him, and I said to the guy that's over me [Clifford Goad]—it's not [C. L.] McCuen. Anyway, I said, "Who's going to get the job." He said, "Well, Bunkie's lazy, and that's it." Bunkie was slow talking—he lived in the past a lot, "Now my dad did this." He was born with a silver spoon, you see, and Cole wasn't. Cole came up the hard way.

Q: He was a good mechanic.

A: So, Bunkie left, and I remember when it happened. I knew something was going on 'cause at the engineering policy meeting, he was half loaded, and he threw a book over to me, "Read the book," and interrupted the thing, and acted funny, and he had left then. He'd seen Ford. But, I was in the middle when he was there because Cole and he

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were my buddies, and I'd always have to watch. He'd talk about Cole, and Cole would talk about him.

Q: I think the board made a wise choice. I think Cole was far superior. Couldn't Knudsen have stayed around?

A: He could have stayed. He could have had it [GM presidency].

Q: He could have had it eventually, yeah, but he was impatient. He was ticked off because he was passed over.

A: Yeah.

Q: Did either Cole or Knudsen have any impact on design?

A: Oh, both of them. Knudsen loved cars. Now, I've often said this, with all the executives, and I always felt guilty come Friday, I'd have four or five special cars to take home. In fact,

[Clifford] Goad—he was the guy I was thinking of. One time Goad called me in his office, and he said....

Q: Now, who was he again?

A: He was over the Tech Center. He was the guy they thought should have been brought in after Curtice. He said, "You know something, I got some people telling me that you take five and six special cars around your house on the weekend." I said, "You're damn right. You don't see me playing golf. God damn, I bet I know more about cars than you or anybody else." He shut up. He never said another word. But, getting back to that, I could have all these special cars, and I'd be ashamed. I'd say to people walking out, I'd say to Cole, "You want to use this weekend?" "No, I'm going fishing." Now, Curtice, you could fix a car up for. We had the Italian [designer Pnin] Farina build a couple for him. We'd design them, and they'd build them. But, Knudsen would. He had special pickups, special colors, everything. He loved cars, but

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there weren't many executives that liked the car, as a car. You'd have trouble fixing one up for them.

Q: Ford had the Ghia connection, and you had the [Pnin] Farina.

A: Yeah, but before Ford, Chrysler had Ghia, and Ford had—LaMans, those formula cars, racers. Ford finally bought him out, and he went and he bought Motagusi and some other motorcycle companies. What the hell was his name? He got his money from a wealthy American. He was in Argentina, and he worked for Ford and then went to LaMans.

Q: But you had the Pnin Farina connection there for a time.

A: Oh yes. Well, he'd build low. I loved that.

Q: Some of these models I think I've seen.

A: Well, he didn't design them. We'd design them, and he'd build them, and what's upset me since, is that, through Murphy, he's building a new two-seater Cadillac [Allante]. \*

Q: Oh is he? I've heard about that.

A: And, to me, I purposely had Smith—he met me out at the Tech Center. We had a meeting. It was before I went to Florida last year. Irv told me, he'd been to Europe, and I said, "Why did you come back so soon?" He said he went over to look at this car. It's all done, and he said he made one too, but his was only in clay. The other one was finished. It was Smith that did it. He wanted that imported champagne stuff. I've heard it isn't any knockout, but I told MacDonald, I said, "You know, my budget was \$58,000,000 when I worked there, and the esprit de corps that's going to go out of that place when you got a little out-fit in Italy makes something." Wayne Kady, who's the head of Cadillac studio, it just broke his heart.

\* Editor's Note: The Allante was introduced in the summer of 1986 just before the GM belt tightening. It faces an uncertain future.

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Q: Are they going to bring it out?

A: Yeah.

Q: Yeah, they've said it. It's set, huh?

A: That's why I didn't go to the proving ground. I'm bitter about all—I didn't want to say anything, hell. It's another day and age. Harley Earl wouldn't have stood for it, and I wouldn't. I knew Farina, and I liked him, because he's built couple rotors that MacKichan designed, but he did that Rolls Royce which was a hell of a looking thing.

Q: Chevy was, of course, the big success story. What was behind that?

A: What do you mean? Chevrolet car?

Q: The car and the design and the acceptance.

A: Well, the big story of—you mean the history of the Chevrolet?

Q: Well, no, the post-war continuance.

A: Oh, the Impala.

Q: Right.

A: Those cars. But, you know, the big story I think on Chevrolet is [that] old man Knudsen worked for Ford, and he didn't get along, and he left and came to Chevrolet. Before he got to be president, he was head of Chevrolet. And, he said he knew he couldn't make a car as cheap as Ford, but he'd make a better one, and that's what made Chevrolet. It was a better car, better looking, and I think there was one year in between the whole thing there that caught them. Chevrolet just...but the story was make a better car, not a cheaper one.

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Q: Of course, at that time, Sloan and Knudsen were thinking about annual style changes, and more colors, more pizzazz, and....

A: I'll tell you an interesting thing—you're bound to get that some way or another—Earl's chief engineer, [Vincent] Kaptur, showed him, before I came to G.M., and his son was my chief engineer. He came to Earl and showed him where Pontiac, Buick and Olds were within decimals of the same body, and that's how the BOP body was born. Then, later on, Cole was head of Chevrolet; Pontiac, Bunkie Knudsen was head of; and the A Body, which Chevrolet and Pontiac had, they didn't have the B Body. Buick, Olds and Cadillac, and they'd come out different years. Well, the year that they didn't come out, they'd be Old, see. So, they got me in the corner and they made up—I did a design where you'd have a new roof and new pieces, but it would look new. It was more money than the budget would allow. And, Kaptur, he's the son of the guy that did the BOP thing, he said, "You know, I think we can put Chevrolet in the B Body, and I'll show you a drawing." And, I'll never forget, I looked at it, and I was not in charge then, Earl was down in Haiti, and I didn't know what to do, so I called him on the phone, and he's usually rough as hell, and he says, "Hello Bill, how are you?" He was half clobbered. He said, "I've got a little card in my pocket, and I pull it out every now and then to see who the hell I am." I'll never forget that, and that was a Sunday afternoon, and I called, he said, "Call Bud Goodman and Charlie Booth, the controller at Fisher, and tell them what you think about it." It was a rainy Sunday, and Booth said, "My God, you've saved hundreds of million dollars." I said, "Well, I'm modeling it."

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Didn't tell Cole or Knudsen—had them come over and look at it. They said, "That's it." So, we went to the proving ground. It was raining, and Cole and Knudsen had the cars that were at a decision, it was a proving ground board meeting—engineering policy meeting. The story was that they wanted approval to build this. So, we're sitting in the car, and I'm sitting back with Charlie Chayne, and Bud Goodman is sitting up with Curtice, and he'd seen it. He said, "Bill, tell the boss what you got." Curtice looked back, "What you got, Bill?" I said, "Well, I can show you how Chevrolet and Pontiac can go right into B Body." "Where is it?" "My studio." "Let's go," he told the driver. And, hell, Knudsen and Cole were standing out in the rain, and we left. They



could have killed me. Oh, Jesus, they were mad at me, but he took one look at it, and that's how Earl got on. And, right away Chrysler and Ford did it. Now, at first they looked like under-tooled, like a crab on a roller skate because the wheels [are] inboard, but then next year they widened them. With Bunk, the way we got the wide track....

Q: The Pontiac?

A: That we engineered as a wagon with the idea of putting the wheel on it, so the window could drop inside the wheel. Wasn't for wide-track stability, and they bought the wide track story.

Q: At Ford, as you well know, in the 'Fifties, they were still under the thumb of body engineers, and I guess Gene Bordinat and maybe George Walker brought them gradually back to a concept of a design center. Did you have that same problem at G.M.?

A: Oh, Earl had that all set. Oh, that was all set, I had no trouble there. Earl just took it all away. You'd still have negatives. Fisher

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would come over to look at something that we were going to build, and I say to the chief engineer, "How do you like it?" Well, you know, they didn't come over here to say, "I like it." They'd never entered it, sour [grapes] and "not invented here." Carlos Dean, who was retired, and he and I have given talks together, and the head of Rolls Royce and Farina were out to have lunch with me one day, and Knudsen was there, and they'd just shown their \$100,000 Rolls out at Palm Springs or somewhere. We're having lunch, and the head of Rolls, who used to be with Vauxhall, and now he's with Rolls, and he said, "Estes, how do you let Mitchell get away with what he does? He just does as he damn pleases." And, Estes says, "You know, Christ if I don't, he'll blow his top!" And, Carlos Dean said, "You know that sign out here over Fisher Body on Van Dyke?" he says, "Well, he's going to change that sign to God Damn Fisher Body!" But, my dad taught me one thing—you got to know how to call a guy a son of bitch and smile, and I never had any hate in it. I'd have an argument, and it was dinner that night, and the hell with it.

Q: So, you were able to continue the Earl tradition of centralized design, a position that you continued to hold.

A: When I left, they just moved in on the boards like they tried to move in on me when Earl left. Earl was the golden days, and I got the last of the golden days. Now, these poor bastards are terrible.

Q: Have you talked to Rybicki at all?

A: I did, but I can't blame him for something. He hasn't got it in him to do it.

Q: The Corvette, of course, is a fabulous success story. Can you give us a little...?

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A: Well, Earl—General LeMay was a good friend of his, and after the war all the Air Force bases had a hobby of racing and sports car things to keep them busy, and big companies would give them money to have tool shops and things like that. We fixed a jeep for Lamay with a Cadillac engine, and he'd drive it on the highway and had fun. So, he came to Earl one day and he said, "Why don't you make the American sports car? You haven't any." They were driving Ferraris and Maseratis and Porsches. So, that's what Earl came about when he, at the proving ground, he showed Bradley and Sloan some of this car. And, they said, God, he said, "Well, it's fiberglass model. How can we make it?" They couldn't see how they could spend the tool money. He said, "We could make it out of fiberglass." That was the first fiberglass car ever made. It was shown in the Waldorf—everybody liked it—it went.

Q: You've had, of course, you had done fiberglass prototypes for years, hadn't you?

A: No, that has just started.

Q: Just beginning, okay.

A: Before then our models were wood models, and then there were plaster models.

Q: Plaster models, that's right. So, really Earl pioneered the fiberglass model. There were some misgivings at first, were there not?

A: Yeah, anybody had one, and then no dealer wanted to monkey with it—they're not used to that. So, you'd have to go to a specialty shop, and even today the Corvette is looked upon as a, you know, it isn't one—now it's very high-tech engine and everything.

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Q: Aside from the Stingray, which you pioneered, who's original design was the Corvette? Was that Barley's?

A: No. Well, the original design was his.

Q: Right.

A: Then it evolved, and then like we got dual headlights, and that wasn't fitting for a sports car. Then I'd change the back and change the front. Then, finally we did the whole car.

Q: Do you think that's one of the best things to come out of General Motors?

A: Well, I think from a designer's viewpoint, it's what I like where you do the car, and then they buy it. You don't committee a car. Now, a good example, the first Camaro and Firebird, I can't remember what the hell they look like, because [Cliff] Goad, [James E. "Bud"] Goodman and [Jack] Gordon, I said, killed it. Each one said, "Shorten this, do this." A three G engine. It's a committee car. Where the new Firebird, the ones that ran up until this one's come out, they ran for ten years, because I got the right dash to axle, the right cowl height, and it's like good clothes. A woman with a good build is ageless, and this baby, it still looks good. I won my points. That's where a designer has to have an engineer that's sympathetic, because you can't tailor something if you can't get them to get the cowl down and get the dash to axle, and get things where you want them. That's why at the Tech Center, in the styling is where it's all settled—right there in the wind tunnels, it's styling, not an engineer, because everything dictates what you're—you can't have a guy like they have give talks at Greenbrier on it. Years ago the chassis rolled in, and you'd decorate it. That's what it was. You know, that's the frame, what can you do

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with it? This way you can get in and say, "I want that down. I want that." That was Earl's way. He knew how to—and at the Engineering Policy Committee is where we'd settle it.

Q: So, you really had to battle the engineers?

A: Oh, all the time. In the later years, we got such respect from the engineers because if they had good engineering, they wanted to look good. The worst we had were sales—the sales people, because if something is selling, "Oh, don't change it." Oh, God damn, sales people were the worst! Jesus.

Q: The problem at Ford today seems to be the product planners. Did you have problems with product planners?

A: Yeah. I had a great story, and you know [Donald] Petersen was a product planner, and I gave a talk once, he had to follow me, and he was a friend of mine, and I said, "Well, Mitchell introduced me all right." I said, "You know, in life, if you're not a good engineer, you're not a good designer, you're not good at sales, not good at research, don't feel bad, you can always be a product planner!" And, in our place we had guys that couldn't—it's like Nader, you can always criticize, but, if you could product plan, and win, anybody could open a hot dog stand and be a millionaire, but you've got to have guts and go out and do it.

Q: The ideal product planner can seize a project and bring it to the design center.

A: Well, it's good that—I say this, the only thing you can do, you can't have a crystal ball, you can't look ahead. Nobody has that kind of imagination. Dream, you've got to dream at it. The only thing you can

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do is find out what not to do. You find out what's good, what's not, but don't make the same mistake again. But, you can't look ahead. Hell, if you made a car the way the committee wanted, and then you went over here and made one on your own, they'd say, "Oh, that's what I really meant." My whole makeup, it just destroys me to see these committees—oh, and I'd rip them apart. "What the hell are you talking about, you dumb son of a bitch, you don't know anything." You know, like Nader, he couldn't—he couldn't even have a license.

Q: He didn't drive. Well, something you said reminds me that I wanted to ask you about those marvelous dream cars that you and Harley Earl dreamed of in the 'Fifties and 'Sixties. Tell us something about those.

A: Oh, we had them coming out of our ears.

Q: Did you have a special studio for that?

A: No, every studio did their own. We didn't have special studios. In fact, one thing Earl didn't have before I left, he didn't have advanced design.

Q: He didn't? That's interesting.

A: His advanced design were the Firebirds, and you couldn't use them. I mean, they were real exotic, way out; so I started getting an advanced design [studio] which they have today—there's an advanced room for Buick, Cadillac, Olds, Chevrolet and Pontiac, and the divisions aren't allowed in there. 'Cause you want to dream without somebody looking over your back. Then, when they got ready, you'd move them up into a room, and that's how the Firebirds are born, that's how the Camaro, that's how the Eldorado/Toronado/Riviera--all of them done that.

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Q: So you pushed that on a division basis rather than a...

A: Because there's two weaknesses: one, you hang on to something too long, like I said in '58, you didn't know what to do but decorate it with chrome. Then, '59, we got panicked by Chrysler and made crazy things, and wings, and everything—ashamed to look at. So, you need advanced studios, because you may look at something, and then come in on a weekend, and say, "Ah, I don't like that." You've got to have time. I remember a Cadillac. This was not a show car that we were doing. That Sunday, it was being finished—the model—it was all approved, except for a final approval, and I was out driving with my family, and I saw a Cadillac coming at me. I thought, God, that new one we got hasn't got that road value, and I drove on home, came right out to the Tech Center, went down in the shop, praying I was wrong. I wasn't. I called Cadillac the next day, "We're going to rip her apart." They thanked me. You've got to look back.

Q: The tradition seems to have disappeared, hasn't it? I mean, the....

A: Well, [Strother] MacMinn wanted me to talk to a bunch of new students. I said, "No, no. I don't want to do that. They're down there working. That's their job, and it'll be out in a year and a half." Chuck now is different, he's got a Ferrari—Chuck Jordan. And the boy that's out with the [G.M. Advance Design] school on the Coast [Hank] Haga. There's Haga and Holls and Jordan. It's sort of a three-way run at Rybicki.

Q: Oh, I see.

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A: Chuck should have it for seniority. But, there's another bad thing there in that organization—I'm giving you a lot of spilled milk here—but, [Howard] Kehrl is over all that, and he followed the guy that was head of Olds [Johnny Beltz], he died of cancer, young. I did the Toronado with him, and he gave it to me at dinner one night, he said, "That Mitchell, I've got to give it to him." He said, "We couldn't cool it. We wanted to open that front up, and he didn't

want—he sent some spies in the wind tunnel, and found out we could. We wouldn't have had it today if it hadn't been for that." But Kehrl followed him when he died, and he's a school teacher, and he's now over the Tech Center— terrible. Unimaginative—God damn!

Q: Tell us about the impact that—am I interrupting you?

A: No.

Q: Tell us about the impact that the [G.M.] Tech Center had on design.

A: It was wonderful. You know, we moved out there, it was like moving from Titusville to Park Avenue. Everything changed. I mean, guys dressed better. The shop would put a tie on to go lunch. You know, and then that campus atmosphere. You've been out there. And, I'd look out of my office, there'd be a college campus—the young girls and guys walking around, the ducks in the water. All your work got better. The whole place went up like that.

Q: And, of course, design was there too as an integral part of that?

A: Oh, that's—you see, that came—Earl went to Sloan. It was really his idea, and said, "We ought to get the hell...." You see, down at the General Motors Building, they could come in from anywhere. They

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could walk over. They could say, "I'm going to be over," and they'd be there. Jesus, they'd be on your back. They'd show the cars up on the roof.

Q: Oh, really?

A: Yeah. So, Earl wanted that, so then Sloan said, "Well, I think you and Kettering ought to get together." So, it became the two of their's responsibility, and then as it went in, Fisher Body was across the railroad track, of course. I always wanted to bring the General Motors Building out there before it went to New York, and Gordon did. Of course, Donner was a New Yorker, and these other boys, but there's nobody in New York. Now, Overseas [Division] is in Detroit. They brought them not only back from Europe—the main offices—but they're in Detroit. The only time there's a meeting, once a month is the meetings in New York, and you go down there, and otherwise those secretaries are sitting there looking at the wall. Terrible! And, we designed it and built it up, in styling, we did it.

Q: They still have the general headquarters in New York, even though local activity is in Detroit?

A: Yeah.

Q: What about the foreign...

A: Smith's here though, he isn't—Smith is here.

Q: Yeah, he's here. He's the first one that we have. What about the foreign affiliation, did more design come out of your shop?

A: Oh yeah.

Q: Holden, Vauxhall and Opel?

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A: I said, first they came to me once and said, "We need somebody to run Opel," and Rybicki didn't want it, and [Clare] MacKichan got it. So, then they said, "We need somebody..." Davy Jones ran England, and we got him a top guy—he was English—"to follow him when he retired." That was Wayne Cherry, and then [Hank] Haga—no, Dave Holls followed MacKichan, and then they wanted somebody in South America, and I put Lou Stier down in Brazil, and I put Joe Schemansky in Australia, and there was a new guy following him, and then we'd rotate them, see, it was good.

Q: That worked out very well.

A: Yeah, it did.

Q: Vauxhall is coming up strong at the moment.

A: Yeah, they need to, but they've had a lot of tough—and the big trouble is the English business, labor. I was there once—twenty-three suppliers are striking, you know—strike, strike, strike!! In England, you read that, it's sad, it's sick. I remember when Margaret Thatcher spoke, I'd go every year to there, it was like a SAE dinner—black tie, and big—250 people there, and they'd talk about their business. It was a big dinner, and Margaret Thatcher spoke once, and my wife said, "Now, be sure and get up there at the cocktail party, at the speaker's table, get the mater." And, there was no G.M. guy outranking me, so Henry Ford introduced me to her. And, I

said, "You know, my wife is anxious to know what you're going say as much as I am, and we're very proud of you." Well, she got up and lambasted me. She said, "How can your labor want more money when your company's going broke? You got to get [your] back up." She said what a man couldn't say. So, afterwards I wrote her a letter, and I said, "You were terrific, and I want to thank you." I

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said, "Would you send me a copy?" She sent me the tape, and I had Murphy and all of them go down there and hear it. England's sick.

Q: Opel's a different kettle of fish, isn't it?

A: Yeah, the Germans are funny. With two nations that were our enemies—Japan and Germany are global. The Germans are having a little trouble now too.

Q: Are they?

A: Yeah. But, you could see it. A German is a German, and the Japs are like that.

Q: What cars did you have for Bob Lutz?

A: Well, I was going to tell you. I always liked Lutz a lot, so when he was [at] BMW, and he was wanting to get out of it, he was hard to work with the Germans—really, language thing—although he can speak Swiss, he can speak any of them. So, I got a hold of Estes, and one thing about—I like Pete, he's a personal friend of mine, but he's a gonna be a guy, like a party, leaving, he'll stand at the door and talk all night, you know. He's not a pusher, and I said, "Get Lutz. God damn it, he's in New York now." I had Lutz on the phone, and he [Estes] was going to talk to him, and Lutz says, "I can't talk right now, somebody's coming in." In his hotel. That turned out to be Petersen. Petersen flew him right here to meet in Henry Ford's office, and that was it.

Q: That was it. Apparently Henry likes him. He's one of his champions. [1984]

A: Well, Petersen liked him. They would always talk, but then he said, from what I read, I haven't talked to Petersen about it since, but it seems that he riled them over there. He's a tough guy—he's an Ed



Cole type. "Get off your ass, or get out," and that's what he said, and some of them got out. So, here he is building a house out here in Dearborn, and he has to go back and forth, and he has to stay over there, and he's at a social disadvantage. His wife's German, or Swiss, and she's not an extrovert. She's not like—she isn't like Petersen's wife or Red Poling's wife. I think, my wife does too, she's his second wife, she's not taken to him—helping him.

Q: That's a big part of it.

A: My second wife, she'd go to Europe, go anywhere with me. It's part of—it's a battle.

Q: In the time we have left, Mr. Mitchell, can you give us a somewhat detailed discourse on the design philosophy of Earl and Mitchell?

A: Yeah, I think design—I'd put it this way, in a business cog, it's as equally important as sales, advertising, engineering, finance or anything. Should be as strong a message as to what sells a car. A car is a silent salesman. You look at a Cadillac, you don't know who the hell runs Cadillac or anything else. It's an image, and the designer should be given more authority, more—don't have somebody get reports of what sold last year, what people like. No way—a designer's an artist. I've got some plaques down here. In the Roman Empire, nobody remembers their financial peak. The Romans and the Greeks, it was the artists, and you leave something to history, and all of a sudden, just like architecture, houses are all—the only building that looks [like] any history in New York is the Chrysler Building. They are boxes. You go to New York, you go to Europe, bridges are getting that way. So, the artist can leave something. I looked at that classic car show out

there. I said to some of the designers, "God, I hope this rubs off on them." Earl would talk about an emblem that Cartier would make, you know, and the paint, the trim, and the—I looked at this new Corvette that I drove down to the show.

Q: What did you think?

A: Now, I've got special cars here with carmine leather, and beautiful paint. That square box is pretty near plastic. God, I reached to open the door, it's like a box. The instrument panel—black plastic—Dracula's dressing room! My wife said, "I don't want to sit in here any longer and look at it!" I saw some boys down in Palm Beach, where they painted my Corvettes up, that had

money, that had them re-do them—wood paneling, nice soft—but the car, it rides like a truck, God damn.

Q: European suspension?

A: Well, it's all right to go at Indianapolis, but you can't take a lady for a ride. And, those big taillights, they're for A. J. Foyt. I told them, I said, "Women drive these cars, and it ought to be—I've a Jaguar down in Florida, a convertible, beautiful, smooth, nice, fast as hell, but it ought to be nice. No, this is too, too crude.

Q: Where did they go wrong and how?

A: It's engineered. They asked me, and [Zora Arkus] Duntov and some other lady that did a survey on Jaguars, some agency on the outside. Chevrolet wanted an outside input on how to sell it. I said, "Don't talk about styling, just eliminate it, don't talk about it, it isn't a style car, it's a machine car." There's where the engineers are running

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it. Earl would never let that—I would never let that [happen], and I condemn the guys for it. I said to Chuck, or Irv, and to [Jerry] Palmer (the Chevrolet Corvette designer), "Do like I did, don't argue with them, go make one of your own." They said, "Jesus." Make it for your-self.

Q: It's all compromise now.

A: Yeah.

Q: Is there anything in the modern trend that you approve of? Now, I don't mean to say that sarcastically, but you did say that aerodynamics wasn't your bag.

A: Well, I like aerodynamics if it looks good. You can take it, but where the hell are you going to run at 155 miles an hour?

Q: Germany [is] about the only place.

A: Well, they talk safety all the time. No, I think cars should be beautiful, and you ought to make a car—somebody—Ford, Chrysler, G.M.—somebody's going to bring out one, and they'll

say, "Wow, look at that," and that'll get them all out. Until that happens, they're a bore. There's more cars than there's ever been, but whether it's Japanese, German, Italian, I've got the books, I've looked at them, and threw them out. I can't see anything going in them. That's why these older boattail, beautiful things that are out there—yeah, that's the stuff—Duesenbergs.

Q: You must have enjoyed yourself on the weekend—this weekend [at Meadowbrook's Concours D'Elegance].

A: Oh yeah.

Q: Did you run into any of your old acquaintances?

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A: Oh yeah, that's what I said, "I hope some of this rubs off on them."

Q: Gordon Buehrig said he saw you out there.

A: Oh yeah, I know—we've been—we were at a thing up at St. Ignace—custom body show.

Q: Oh yeah, you had a great time up there.

A: Come on down, and I'll show you my place down there [Florida].

Q: I'd like to. One more question—General Motors seems to have succumbed to the pressures from Europe as Ford has. This could have been a good thing if they had handled it right, don't you think in terms of taking the best of aerodynamic styling?

A: Oh yeah. But, this potato, I think the Ford [Thunderbird styling] looks like a cake of soap, you know, there's nothing like anything good, like music, it's got to be accent, like an airplane, you've got to have that windsplit soft, not rubbery. I come back—I'll say this, for years you can tell a Thunderbird a mile away. Now, I see it [with] my wife driving back from Florida, "What the hell is—you know that thing, that rounded-off thing?" That's a Thunderbird.

Q: Well, I think their argument is that they want to get away from angles.

A: Well, it isn't the case of angles. You can't—that's philosophy. That's bullshit. Make a painting. You don't describe a painting. Either you walk in and like it—you can't say, "Well, I put the house over there because the light would hit it." Hell, it's got it or it hasn't. Those cars out there at Meadowbrook, they're all statements.

Q: But, basically, they said they wanted to get away from the boxy look—they'd had it.

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A: Another thing they did, they said the door opens into the roof. Well, I had that on the Corvette—one car—but that's back to the one-piece door. You get in there, the pillars are that thick. We went for years to get—that's how the hardtop was born—to have little, thin upper. Now that—you get inside and stick your head around, all these portholes, it's going back—heavy, rounded.

Q: If you were asked, as I'm sure you are, to talk to students of design or design students, what would you tell them?

A: Well, we need imagination—see the future—new ideas. That's why they hire—what gets me, here General Motors has got that school over in California, they're thinking of getting one in Europe, what the hell good is it if you don't get it out at the top? There's a vice president of sales at General Motors [who] once said, "You can have all the creative people in industry, but if the man at the top doesn't unlock the door, you can't get out."

A: Right, and that's really the key.

Q: Yes sir.

Q: Well, thank you Mr. Mitchell. It's been a marvelous interview.

A: Well, it's easy to talk about what you like, what's going on. I'm really heartsick that—and I don't want to say anything, my days are over, but I know Earl would roll over in his grave.

Editor's Note: In late 1986, Chuck Jordan succeeded Irv Rybicki as Vice President for Design, who retired, and Dave Holls succeeded Jordan. Ken Pickering became administrative head of the Tech Center succeeding Howard Kehrl, and Jerry Palmer was moved into Advanced Design.

END

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