

The Woodlands founder George Mitchell regarded as brilliant man with a brilliant mind

Staff Report



Photo: Nick De La Torre, MBI

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George Mitchell, Chairman and CEO of The Mitchell Family Corporation, is seen in a Nov. 11, 2009 photo, in his downtown Houston office. Mitchell, Texas oil man, real estate developer, and one of Houston's ... more

While George Mitchell's long and colorful career made him a billionaire, friends and colleagues said he always stayed grounded.

"His story was quintessentially American," his family said in a statement after

he died at age 94 on July 26, 2013. He left behind 10 children, 23 grandchildren and five great-grandchildren.

Mitchell is best known for his contributions to the oil and gas industry and in Montgomery County he founded The Woodlands where his legacy and imprint are still greatly visible today.

Early life

Mitchell was born on May 21, 1919 in Galveston.

His parents came to Galveston from Greece, where his father had herded goats. Mitchell's Greek legacy included the middle name his parents gave him - Phydias.

In the New World, his father opened small cleaning and shoeshine businesses but also was a lifelong gambler.

Always resourceful, he spent his boyhood fishing along the Galveston ship channel jetties and working odd jobs for the operators of a fishing pier, according to Mitchell's obituary in the Houston Chronicle. His fishing prowess provided food for the family table. To support the family, young Mitchell also earned money selling his catch and handmade bamboo fishing poles to tourists.

His mother, who encouraged him to focus on education as the best way to improve his conditions, died when Mitchell was 13.

According to his obituary, as a child, he dreamed of becoming an astronomer, and applied himself to the study of math, physics and chemistry. His mother wished for him to become a physician, but then his brother Johnny arranged a summer job in the oil patch where Dad became enthralled with the hunt for petroleum.

During his time at Texas A&M University, where he studied petroleum engineering and geology, he honed his entrepreneurial skills by selling gold embossed stationery to lovesick freshmen.

Stationery profits kept him enrolled through graduation, but looking ahead he was inspired by Professor Vance who told him, "If you want to drive a Chevrolet, work for a big oil company, but if you want to drive a Cadillac be an independent," according to his obituary.

He graduated from the Class of 1940 at Texas A&M University.

Education, the military and meeting his life-long partner

During a train ride back to Houston from College Station, Mitchell introduced himself to identical twin sisters. One of them - Cynthia Lorretta Woods - would become his life-long partner. They were married on Oct. 31, 1943 in a double wedding with her twin sister and brother-in-law.

According to his obituary, Mitchell's officer training at Texas A&M prepared him for the rank of captain in the US Army. He was assigned to the Corps of Engineers and was stationed in Galveston, although he yearned to be deployed overseas like his brothers and comrades from Texas A&M.

The oil and gas business

After the war, Mitchell worked for a major oil company in the Louisiana swamps.

He later returned to Houston to establish an independent consulting business with his brother, Johnny.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Mitchell and his brother built the company that became Mitchell Energy and Development Corporation.

According to a 2016 Houston Chronicle article, in the early 1980s, Texas oil giant George Mitchell read an academic article arguing that economically extracting natural gas from shale rock just might be possible.

But the revolution didn't arrive quickly.

"It took a decade and a half of conviction, investment and dogged determination," energy historian Daniel Yergin wrote in 2013. "But before Mitchell was done, he launched what has proved to be the most important innovation in energy so far this century."

Mitchell is often called the "father of fracking," but fracking had actually been common for decades before Mitchell's innovation paid off in 1997. Energy industry veteran Stephen A. Holditch says it's more accurate to say that Mitchell succeeded in "combining long horizontal wells with hydraulic fracturing," which made shale gas economically viable and laid the groundwork for later growth in the domestic natural gas industry. The same techniques would also be used for oil.

"He's the father of the shale revolution," said Holditch, a retired Texas A&M petroleum engineering professor who consulted for Mitchell's company and knew him personally.

In 2002, he sold his oil and gas company for \$3.5 billion.

The Woodlands

The idea for The Woodlands came after Mitchell saw the destruction of Los Angeles' Watts neighborhood following race-fueled riots in 1965, said his granddaughter, Katherine Lorenz.

"He knew he could do better. So he went to work creating a sustainable community," Lorenz told the Chronicle in 2014.

The township had its grand opening less than a decade after the riots, in 1974.

The settlement was part of a federally funded urban-planning initiative that supported about a dozen "new towns" around the country. The concept arose in England in the 1940s and hopped the pond in the 1960s. The Woodlands was built on land that was formerly a part of the Grogan-Cochran Lumber Mill.

The idea was a bit of a stretch, said Kyle Shelton, a program manager at Rice University's Kinder Institute for Urban Research. "It was an attempt to create a different kind of city, and one that is tied to a longer history of utopian ideals: If only we could design the right type of community ... then everything would work perfectly."

The community opened on Oct. 19, 1974.

By 1976, The Woodlands was the only such community not entering or approaching bankruptcy, East Carolina University historian Roger Briles wrote in 1998 in the academic journal *Planning Perspectives*. "Only The Woodlands had established economic viability."

"The biggest difference" among the towns, Shelton said, "is that The Woodlands had George Mitchell."

The township's main backer contributed land, capital and vision.

The commitment to integrate nature - the master plan left a third of the acreage as green space - was "revolutionary" at the time, Shelton said.

Mitchell brought in landscape architect Ian McHarg, who emphasized the need to preserve the natural watershed. That meant nearly half of the township's land would be protected from development.

In 1997, The Woodlands Corporation was purchased by new owners, but Mitchell's legacy is still an important part of the community.

The Cynthia Woods Mitchell Pavilion, which hosts entertainment acts from around the world, is named for Mitchell's wife. The venue was opened in April 1990.

In March, the new George Mitchell Nature Preserve trail broke ground in the Village of Creekside Park in The Woodlands.

Philanthropy

After selling his oil and gas company, he became more focused on philanthropic efforts.

He became the largest donor to his alma mater, Texas A&M, according to state Sen. Tommy Williams. He gave more than \$30 million to help build the Magellan telescope in Chile.

Mitchell's gifts to support the study of space grew out of his long-term interest; he had wanted to become an astrophysicist, but he didn't think he could make a living in the field after graduating first in Texas A&M's class of 1940.

Mitchell's funding and vision also boosted his hometown of Galveston. Starting in the 1970s, he rehabilitated historic buildings on the Strand. He would buy dilapidated properties, restore them and resell them with covenants ensuring their preservation.

"The Strand had other investors, but Mr. Mitchell was the most significant one, and he certainly brought the most vision," said Dwayne Jones, executive director of the Galveston Historical Foundation. "His presence, his efforts, his investment and his vision really began to transform the island into a higher-

quality, greater-visibility tourist entity."

He also gave 135 acres on Pelican Island to establish Texas A&M University at Galveston.

Mitchell's commitment to Galveston's revitalization helped the city recover from Hurricane Ike. After the 2008 storm, he spent \$24 million to renovate three of his hotels on the island.

Just a year or two before Mitchell died, Jones said, he bought buildings on Hendley Row at the end of the Strand.

"He took a declining, slow area of the Strand and he has made it into a really top-notch property," Jones said. "And it's a really beautiful building."

Cynthia Woods Mitchell passed away on Dec. 27, 2009 at 87.

George Mitchell passed away on July 26, 2013 at home in his beloved Galveston.

On the day of his death, The Woodlands Township Board of Directors stood for a moment of silence during their meeting.

Then board chairman Bruce Tough, who had known Mitchell for nearly 40 years, bowed his head, closed his eyes and was taken back to a beach house in Galveston in the late 1970s.

Tough's father, Coulson, worked with Mitchell during the early years of developing The Woodlands. The two families often spent time together on Pirate's Beach, a Mitchell development.

"That's what I saw when I closed my eyes. He was asking me about school and how I was doing," said Tough. "It's hard to think that he's gone."

Portions of this article are from Mitchell's obituary in the Houston Chronicle in 2013, from a Houston Chronicle story by Andrew Kragie in June 2016 and from a Courier article published on July 27, 2013.