The Michael William Mitchell Memorial Fund
Cornell University

"And an appreciation of the pattern of his life by one who knew him well"

Michael William Mitchell, Cornell-educated geologist, died in a mining accident at the age of twenty-five. In recognition of his achievements as a scholar at the University and to aid deserving Cornell students, a scholarship named for him has been established by friends and family.

Purpose of the Fund

The Michael William Mitchell Memorial Fund provides for an annual cash award to an outstanding junior or senior at Cornell University. The award will be made to "a geology student who proves himself adept at other liberal arts fields as well as geology—a student of the world." Considered, too, in naming award winners will be characteristics and interested typified by the late Michael W. Mitchell, whose life and accomplishments are described on these pages.

Michael William Mitchell
July 29, 1934—August 22, 1959
By D. B. Hardeman,
former assistant to the late Speaker Sam Rayburn,
U. S. House of Representatives

On August 22, 1959, at Smith Lake in the New Mexico desert, Michael William Mitchell, B.A., Cornell, 1956, age 25, was killed in a mining accident.

In 1960, William O. Douglas, Associate Justice of the United States Supreme Court, wrote many of Mike's friends, inviting them to contribute to a memorial scholarship fund. From the fund's income, an annual award was to be made to a Cornell University student—

"An award to a geology student who proves himself adept in other liberal arts fields as well as geology—a student of the world."

In his letter, Justice Douglas said:

"Mike represented to me the very best in our American heritage. He was versatile in outdoor activities; he was vitally interested in ideas; he had the urge for high adventure; he had deep spiritual reserves; he was a joyous companion; his horizons were as wide as the world."

Who was Mike Mitchell? What kind of young man was he? What qualities did he possess that impressed noted figures and simple, poverty-stricken Native Americans in New Mexico alike? What were his ideals and goals?

Herein we seek the answers to those questions.

* This criterion was written by Mike's brother, John A. Mitchell, Cornell, 1958.
Who was Mike Mitchell?

Lean, muscular, broad-shouldered, six feet, one inch tall, weighing 180 pounds, his blond hair was always crew-cut. His face was dominated by large, bright blue eyes of exceptional warmth and expressiveness. “Fine-looking” rather than “handsome,” his friends might have said.

Born in Chicago, Illinois, July 29, 1934, Mike was the son of Stephen A. and Evelyn Mitchell. His father was of Irish ancestry; his mother of Luxembourg-German descent. His father was one of Chicago’s ablest attorneys, who first attracted national attention as chairman of the Democratic National Committee from 1952 to 1954, the personal selection of Governor Adlai E. Stevenson.

His first good fortune was to grow up in an exceptionally warm and happy home life with two highly intelligent, understanding parents, and two able, amiable brothers. All three Mitchell boys graduated from Cornell University. Steve, Jr., 1954, the eldest, became a physician, and Tony, 1958, the youngest, became a lawyer.

After attending parochial schools in Chicago, Mike transferred to the Abbey School in Canon City, Colorado, for the last two years of high school because his Chicago high school “did not offer enough of a challenge.”

Here is the first appearance of a dominating characteristic of his life—Mike had to face “a challenge” constantly to be happy. To him, a life of ease represented boredom. To be challenged and to make a successful response—this was the essence of contentment for Mike.

In 1952, he entered Cornell, studying nuclear physics for two years before turning to geology, in which he received a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1956. He won many campus honors, including the presidency of Psi Upsilon fraternity in his senior year.

In July, 1956, he entered the United States Marine Corps. He was commissioned a second lieutenant, and served two years in the United States, Japan, and the Philippines, before being released as a first lieutenant. Upon the completion of his tour of duty in Japan, he took a leisurely trip back to the United States through Asia and Europe, thus completing a round-the-world trip.

In Japan, he met Georgette Henroid, a beautiful Swiss airline hostess, courted her there, in India, and in Paris, and when he returned to the United States, they were engaged.

Married in December, 1958, they moved into a house trailer at a uranium mining site in the New Mexico desert where Mike had been employed as chief of exploration for the mining company.

Under his direction, the exploration crew discovered a vein of uranium worth several million dollars in the spring of 1959.

That summer Mike began to feel that he had learned most of what there was to be learned about exploration. It ceased to offer the “challenge” which he always had to have. He set out to learn the mining business itself; in the process, he was suddenly killed in an underground accident.

He had just passed his twenty-fifth birthday.

What kind of young man was Mike?

His temperament was sunny, genial, serene. He saw life as a great adventure, a continual challenge. Possessing a ceaseless curiosity about life and people, he followed the advice of Josiah Royce—“Let nothing human be wholly alien to you.”

Quiet, even-tempered, Mike was at home with all types and all ages of people. He had “an easy way about him.” The only people for whom he felt a dislike were the pompous, the pretentious, the lazy. He could not understand people who did not try to make the most of life.
He kept physically fit all his life. Possessing exceptional muscular coordination, he probably could have been a capable college athlete had he tried. In high school in Colorado, he was a member of the state parochial school championship basketball team, and was named on the all-state team. In Cornell he restricted himself to intramural sports. After college he kept fit with skiing, skin-diving, swimming, mountain climbing, fly-fishing, squash, and an occasional tennis game.

This exceptional good health gave him boundless energy. Time to him was a precious commodity, something never to be wasted. He found it difficult to understand people who were at a loss as to what to do with themselves.

From Japan, he wrote: "It's amazing how much of a different world we live in here on the base—good Western food, liquor, soft beds, radiators, good clothes—everything is as Americanized as possible, when just outside the gate is Japan. The great pity is that at least half the people don't care at all what is outside the gate..."

There were so many things he wanted to do—places to see, people to know, books to read, knowledge to acquire, letters to write, skills to learn, music to play, languages to master—life was for him endlessly interesting.

When his unit was stationed on Corregidor Island in the Philippines, many Marines were bored by isolation and inactivity—but not Mike. He explored the fortifications ruined by the Japanese in 1941-2, he spent long hours skin-diving and spear-fishing in the brilliant ocean, he got books on astronomy and became an amateur expert on the stars and constellations in the tropic skies, he wrote to Cornell for information on the geology of Corregidor.

Under the guidance of his Marine buddy, Nick Kotz, he undertook an intensive reading of the great Russian novelists. He carried on an exhaustive correspondence with family and friends, writing long, detailed letters on what he was seeing and doing. In his spare time, he took a correspondence course in economic geology from Pennsylvania State University.

Someone told his commanding officer that Mike was an expert guitar player and a good ballad singer. The commander gave him money to buy a guitar in Manila. Thereafter many nights on "The Rock" found the Marines sitting around Mike, drinking beer, listening to his songs in English and Spanish—bullfight songs—a hilarious ballad of the sex adventure of two Mexican laborers, Pedro and Juan—a sad song of a worker's plight on strike before the days of union power—songs of the Mexican mariachi—takeoffs on Elvis Presley. Often in the United States and overseas he would shut the door to his room and play his guitar for hours.

Mike was efficient and systematic. As a child he collected military insignia, stamps, stones, and gems. He kept these collections carefully all his life.

Whatever he did, he tried to do well. By nature he cared little for clothes or neatness, but in the Marines—where good grooming was important—he took pride in "spit-polishing" his shoes and in dressing immaculately. When his Marine duty was completed, he returned to his own preference of a comfortable, well-worn old sport coat and sometimes unpressed slacks.

During his tour of duty at Quantico, Virginia, Mike and three other Marines rented an old house off base to have some semblance of civilian life. As an economy measure, the Marines decided to buy a barber kit and cut each other's hair. They found it more difficult than they had anticipated—the great art was in "tapering" which required great skill and practice. All but Mike were ready to abandon the venture. At every opportunity he gave the other boys haircuts. When he had mastered "tapering," he, along with the others, returned to the professional barbers.

Mike had a mind of his own. There was no rashness, no impulsiveness, in his nature. He made decisions calmly, reflectively, and when they were made, he stuck to them. His parents always encouraged, even insisted upon, their sons making their own decisions. This training—added to Mike's sturdy sense of self-reliance—made him independent.

The first time I met his bride-to-be, I told her: "You are marrying a stubborn man."
“Ah, yes,” Georgette replied. “I know— but stubbornness is a mark of character.”

People around him quickly felt this quality of great strength. He was his own man. He made decisions, stuck by them, and did not complain when they turned out badly. It was one of the qualities that made him a natural leader of men.

Coupled with this rock-like quality was a spirit of great gentleness, a deep compassion. His reticence about translating into words these feelings, worried him. Once he said: “Maybe I just don’t feel as deeply as other people, or maybe I don’t know how to express what I do feel.” It bothers me.”

Yet his letters from around the world refer again and again to his dismay at the poverty, disease, and illiteracy which he saw— his worry that well-off Americans were not doing enough to help others.

On Corregidor, Nick Kotz got the news that his stepfather was probably dying. He asked Mike to pack his gear and ship it back to Japan. Mike put his arm around Nick’s shoulder and said: “Nick, I will pray for your father.”

“That was the saddest moment of my life,” Nick wrote later. “Michael’s words penetrated the core of my being. I felt a man speaking completely above sentiment and above the natural human desire to say the right thing. I heard the simple, profound statement of a man who believed completely in life and in his God. I simply rested in the strength of his firm, absolutely certain belief.”

On his way to Japan, Mike and his mother drove to the Grand Canyon. Mrs. Mitchell was to return east by train, and Mike was to drive to San Francisco. Leaving his mother at the railway station in Flagstaff where she had a wait of several hours, Mike started west.

In an hour or so, she looked up to see Mike coming into the station.

“I thought I was in a hurry to get on the road, but I’ll be gone a long time. Time is not that important. I’m going to stay with you until your train comes.”

Tolerance was one of Mike’s first qualities.

He insisted on his right to choose his own friends, make his own decisions, enjoy his own tastes; but he accorded the same right to everyone else. When his advice was asked, he gave it freely and with complete frankness. But he did not volunteer it, and if his advice was not followed, that was all right too.

The Roman Catholic faith was a great emotional experience for Mike; he was a willing, devout son of the Church. But he never tried to force his faith on another and he never questioned their own beliefs. Perhaps it was no accident that of the three most intimate friends he had in his entire lifetime, one held the Protestant faith, one the Jewish, and one the Catholic.

What were the qualities which impressed people from the humble to the mighty?

First, perhaps, was his intelligence. A few minutes of conversation was enough to convince one that here was an alert young man who thought with clear logic, and who was unusually well-informed.

The official records support this conclusion. At the Abbey School in Colorado, he had the highest scholastic standing in the senior class. He won the Bausch and Lomb Award for exceptional progress in science studies.

At Cornell he was elected to Phi Beta Kappa, national honorary scholastic society, and to Phi Kappa Phi and Sigma Gamma Epsilon, honorary scholastic societies. He won the Buchanan award, given to the most outstanding and prominent senior in the Department of Geology. The Boldt Scholarship, based upon scholarship, ability, character, and personality, was awarded to him.
In a graduating class of 550 at Cornell, Mike's class standing was sixteenth. When he entered the Marine Corps he scored 157 on the General Classification Test—a score made by only one serviceman out of ten thousand.

At the conclusion of his training course at Tyndall Air Force Base, Florida, his final class standing was third in a class of seventy-three.

Coupled with his ability to learn rapidly and his remarkably retentive memory was a rare capacity for concentration. A Cornell fraternity brother recalled:

"Mike used to make me furious. The night before a final exam, Mike would sit in a room where the radio was on, the boys were talking loud or perhaps playing cards; yet he would sit there concentrating on what he was reading, not hearing any of the noise, and the next day go to class and make an A."

When he was studying a subject, whether barbering or watching stars in the tropic skies, he focused his mind on that to the exclusion of everything else.

Sloppy intellectual habits on the part of others sometimes irritated him. In Japan he enrolled with others in a course to learn the native language. He always studied the assigned lessons before class; many did not, slowing down classwork. This disgusted Mike, and only his transfer to the Philippines prevented him from hiring a private tutor so that he could progress faster.

In Japan he was an aircraft controller. He was not happy with the old system which, it seemed to him, allowed too many pilots to miss their targets. Using his knowledge of higher mathematics—a field of knowledge in which he always excelled—he devised his own system for controlling aircraft. It worked so well that the pilots were jubilant, and it was adopted by the other controllers. The efficiency rating of the squadron on aircraft intercepts soared.

Leadership is that indefinable human quality which makes other men willingly follow. I doubt that Mike ever thought of himself as a leader, but other men considered him one. When the Marines lived in their house off the base at Quantico, Mike automatically became the leader. Almost instinctively the other occupants sought his judgment about things large and small having to do with the running of the household.

Why? He was self-reliant, ready and willing to make decisions. They trusted his common sense. They respected his knowledge. He was willing to take the lead, but he never sought it; he never tried to "boss" others.

During his basic training at Quantico, Mike was selected as platoon leader for a night attack exercise—the most difficult of military maneuvers. Success of the attack depended on keeping 45 men quiet and together as they filtered through half a mile of unfamiliar woods in order to surprise the defenders. With two-score aggressive young men bumping their knees, barking their shins, stepping in holes in the dark, this was no easy task.

The officer Mike most admired was the toughest of the tough—Major "Bull" Fisher, who wore a chestful of ribbons earned in gory combat, a man who evoked fear, pride, discipline, and admiration in student officers.

Leading his mean through the pitch-dark tangle of woods, Mike used cajolery, gentle humor, the right degree of toughness.

When the "defenders" became aware of the attack, Mike's platoon had overrun the objective. At the critique following the exercise, fearsome Major Fisher looked at Mitchell and said simply, "Well done." It was Fisher's first—and last—word of praise for an individual member of the class during the course.

Mike made light of his success, but Marine classmate Wes Marx said later, "Actually I think the words of the combat veteran meant as much to him as some of his scholastic honors."

I was with Mike often during that period; he never mentioned this incident. That was not unusual. He was reticent about mentioning his accomplishments.
He told neither parents nor friends about his election to Phi Beta Kappa nor to Beth l’Amed, a men’s social honorary fraternity at Cornell. They learned the news from others.

Modesty, too, can be an ingredient of leadership.

Perhaps another quality which made men willing to follow him was his complete lack of pretense. At all times Mike was just Mike. He was no braggart; and he disliked being around braggarts. He was intensely proud of the record his father made as Democratic National Chairman, but I never heard him tell anyone of his father’s position.

When someone asked him a question to which he did not know the answer, he flatly said that he did not know. He had little mechanical aptitude; was quick to say so. We talked of a driving a car overland from Asia to Europe. “I don’t think that’s a good idea,” he concluded. “Neither you nor I have much mechanical aptitude. We couldn’t fix it if it broke down.”

Nick Kotz knew and understood Mike as well as any human being. After Mike’s death, Nick reflected on the effect which Mike had on his contemporaries.

“I look at the effect we young men have on each other. We enjoy each other’s fellowship, but we judge each other also. We say: this fellow is ambitious, that fellow is a do-gooder, this man is a hard worker, that one is an opportunist, and so forth.

“But once in a while, I know, we look at each other and ask: Where amongst us are our natural superiors? Where are the men with high character and beliefs, dedicated to improving the world?

“Many of us aspire to be such men. But we do not follow men very far simply because they want to lead. Almost unconsciously, we follow men who possess the stuff of deep beliefs, goodness, and dedication to high purpose.

“Mike never asked anyone to follow him, but we followed him naturally.

“Mike never asked anyone to learn from him, but we listened to him and enjoyed wider vistas of knowledge.

“Mike never looked for laughter from his jokes. His humor was sharp. It made us laugh and struck home at some of our sillier pretensions.

“Mike never soft-soaped anyone to be his friend. He gave and accepted friendship naturally as it came his way.

“Many of us young men are better human beings because we just happened to bump into Mike Mitchell someplace…. He made us want to be good, and not just for our own sake. He made us want to apply our knowledge and energy for the benefit of others.”

He was a quiet non-conformist. He was gregarious, but formal social affairs had little appeal for him. Through his parents he had entrée to exclusive society, but by and large such affairs with their “small-talk” seemed to him a waste of time. He could not understand young men—or young women—who appeared never to have a serious thought about their environment or their world and its future. One of the things that attracted him to Georgette, he wrote, was that, in addition to her charms, “she also thinks.”

He never wore clothes just because they were the latest fashion. His boyhood friends could never convince him that there was any good reason for smoking cigarettes. He took a drink whenever he pleased, but if everyone around him was drinking and he did not want a drink, he firmly refused to join in.

When he liked a person, he was steadfast in his loyalty although his closest friends and even his family disapproved.

Sometimes this non-conformity produced hilarious results.

The day he and Georgette moved into the house trailer fifty miles from nowhere in the New Mexico desert, life seemed full of problems. They were weary with unpacking and trying to get everything into cramped quarters. The plumbing wouldn’t work. The desert seemed awesomely bleak.
Gay spirits, Mike and Georgette decided to have a party—just the two of them. In mid-
afternoon, they opened a bottle of champagne left over from the wedding, and Georgette, on her 
last trip as a Pan-American hostess, had brought back some genuine Caspian Sea caviar from Iran. 
With much hilarity, they were drinking champagne and eating caviar in a trailer in the middle of the 
desert when there was a knock on the door—it was Mike’s new boss, a rugged Western miner to 
whose life both champagne and caviar were strangers.

When he left, they roared with laughter. “I guess he thought these upstarts were really showing 
off,” Mike said.

What were his ideals and goals?

Mike’s most distinctive qualities were his appetite for knowledge and his instinctive 
understanding of the brotherhood of man.

No man I have ever known possessed the hunger for information that Mike had. He pushed his 
intellectual horizons ever outward. There was nothing in the field of human knowledge that he did 
not wish to know.

In his earlier years his main interest was in the field of science and mathematics. He had little 
formal training in the humanities. As he matured, he began to realize that there were gaps— 
important gaps—in his knowledge. He set out with a vengeance to fill those gaps.

Perhaps this inquisitiveness could have been foretold in his youth. In addition to collecting 
military insignia, stones and gems, and stamps, he had an avid interest in nature which he never lost. 
As a child he won a nature magazine award for identifying rare animals. Hunting, fishing, horseback 
riding, and hiking delighted him as a child and ever after.

And there was always reading.

After he left college, free from the challenge of the next exam, his reading habits broadened 
remarkably. He wanted to make up for lost time in his acquaintance with the humanities— 
government, economics, history, art, and literature.

“One of the great gaps in my knowledge is poetry,” he wrote. “On our trip around the world 
you’ll have to give me a course in good poetry.”

He knew little about art, but he was always ready to go to a good art museum—he wanted to 
gain an appreciation of painting and sculpture.

Although he had a fine musical ear, his background of musical history was limited. But he 
always was ready to go to a concert—to learn.

Although his father had been active in the political world for a long time, Mike knew little about 
politics until he left college. He was determined to learn. He read political news with avidity, 
particularly in the field of foreign relations.

He talked for hours with those familiar with the political realm, asking probing questions, asking 
why things had to be thus-and-so, seeking personal details of this political figure and that. Before he 
died he possessed a far better understanding of the political world than the average citizen.

When he was nineteen, we met in New York for a weekend. Being older by years, I decided 
where we would go and what we would see. Second hand bookshops, art museums, libraries, 
antique shops, exotic produce markets, quaint cafés with unfamiliar foods, the strident noisiness of 
Greenwich Village, the stuffiness of plush hotels, the gaudy excitement of Times Square—in each of 
these Mike showed the same eager interest. From each he was learning something about the world.

His quest for knowledge knew no bounds; the range of his interests, no limit.

In his college years, ideas were all-important; afterward, people and their problems came to be 
his main concern.
His insatiable curiosity was most intense when it concerned human beings. He wanted to know “what made them tick.” He liked the spend long hours with close friends talking about life, its meanings, what brings satisfaction in life, what is worthwhile and what is trivial in life, what constitutes genuine success rather than popular success.

In Japan he had a lot of time to think. “One great thing I’m learning… that it isn’t really much fun doing things for ourselves all the time—that doing things for others is far more satisfying. I say I’m learning because I’m still a pretty selfish bastard after all… let’s just say I’m working on it.”

These “off-the-record sessions,” as he called heart-to-heart talks with intimate friends, had a special appeal to him. They pointed up the fundamental seriousness of his view of life. He was never grave; he was usually serious.

His interest in people outside his normal world probably began in the summers he spent as a child in northern New Mexico where he first came to know the Native and Spanish-Americans.

This was reinforced the summer he was 18 which he spent in a Mexican home in Guanajuato, Mexico, where no English was spoken—part of the program of the Experiment in International Living. Here he learned to speak and sing Spanish fluently; he learned to love the warm, sensitive Latins, and to appreciate that mankind works out its problems in sundry ways. All the rest of his life he had an unconcealed love for the Mexicans and the Spanish-Americans—an affection they instinctively reciprocated.

In the summer of 1955 he spent all the money he had to tour Europe with friends—starting in Copenhagen, spending his 21st birthday in Udevala, Sweden; into central Norway, across most of Germany, throughout northern and central Italy; lying on the beaches in Majorca, reveling in the gypsy singing; and drinking wine from goat-skin bags in Spain; seeing the offensive slums of Tangier, back to the throbbing life of Paris. He was interested in the panorama of tourist sights, but he was more interested in the new peoples he met. Instinctively, I think, he came to see them all as brothers in the human race.

In the Marines he actively sought assignment to Japan rather than a comfortable booth in the States—it would give him a chance to see new peoples and a new land. Arriving there he used every spare minute to see as much of the country as possible, to learn their customs, to learn their language, to eat strange dishes like fried snake in native cafés, to learn something of their religions. For companions he sought out young natives who could teach him.

He obtained permission to be discharged in Japan so that he could return to the United States through Asia and Europe. He thought about trying to go across Africa, too, if his money lasted. His short supply of money would determine how far he could go.

Okinawa, Hong Kong, Cambodia, Thailand, South Vietnam, India—these he saw. Alone, he rented a houseboat in the Vale of Kashmir; he caught trout and climbed mountains. Accidentally meeting Lowell Thomas, they explored the ancient ruins of Angkor Vat together. Afghanistan, Iran, Egypt, Lebanon—Istanbul, yes, Istanbul, the greatest city of them all, he thought—Vienna, Rome, Germany revisited, Paris, London—and finally home, full of plans for marriage and a career.

“I want to take this trip,” he wrote, “because I want to see the world and its peoples and I want time to think.”

From Japan he wrote: “It is really hard to believe how ignorant of international affairs the average American citizen is (especially of Asian affairs). Isn’t there some way to remedy this?”

After his return to the United States, he wrote: “I like foreigners, like to associate with them, talk with them, learn about them, etc… What is the most important thing today in the world, if not the relations between nations, the solving of world problems, and our (the U.S.) role in it all?”

In summation: “People are the things that count.”

In Teheran, Iran, he stayed with a chance acquaintance, John Bolling of the State Department.
"I took him with me to a meeting of old Iranian chiefs," Bolling said. "I marveled at his conduct. With these old, wizened chiefs, he was completely at home. He was not aloof because they were unfamiliar foreigners; he did not try to patronize them nor be overly nice to them. He was just himself; a genial human being, genuinely interested in them, wanting to learn, meeting them as equals. I thought to myself— if all Americans could be like Mike!"

Mike could not understand how Americans could live in a foreign country and not want to learn their language in order to communicate more fully with them. He spoke Spanish fluently, he learned some Japanese, and he attempted French with some success.

He was grateful that he had been born an American with all the advantages which that birth gave him— but he did not believe that America was the know-all and the be-all of the world. Americans did not always do things right, and they did not always give people of other lands their due.

This experience with other peoples of the world had so enlarged his horizons that it troubled him as to how he should order his life. He had a real feel for and a love of geology, but simply to be a highly successful geologist, that along would not be enough. He wanted a broader horizon.

Nick Kotz recalled that in their long hours of talk in the Philippines, Mike often revealed “his great interest in wanting to help the poor Asian and African nations to discover their own natural resources. It seemed to me Mike was most interested in the pure knowledge of geology and in the practical application of geology which would best aid man.”

To help people to understand one another, to narrow the gap between those who have perhaps too much and those who have far too little, to try to lead men of different races, colors, and customs to work and live together in amity— this seemed to Mike the supreme challenge in the twenty-fourth year of his life.

In the last months of his life Mike was thinking hard and long about the best road to meet this challenge. How he would have resolved his dilemma, we may always wonder.

One night after his return to the United States, Mike and a friend had one of his treasured “off-the-record sessions” which lasted for hours. Finally he summed up the challenge that he felt: “I know God gave me a good mind. I want to use it for something other than to make money.”

Mike had become a student of the world.