

IN DEPTH



Carleton Mitchell in his element.

TRENDS, ANALYSIS, PEOPLE

APPRECIATION

A meticulous man to the last detail

Winner of three Bermuda Races, Carleton Mitchell planned his own memorial, right down to the 1910 brandy

By Douglas A. Campbell

SENIOR WRITER

Carleton Mitchell, who won a record three consecutive Bermuda Races aboard his 38-foot yawl *Finisterre* and who died at age 96 in Florida in July, paid attention to details in both life and death.

Preparing for a trans-Atlantic race early in his sailing career, Mitchell — who also excelled as a writer and photographer — told his secretary about one detail that amazed her. Without medical necessity, Mitchell was going to have his appendix removed “to be sure that it didn’t happen crossing the Atlantic,” recalls Margaret M. Nayden.

On a beautiful Saturday in late July, Nayden; Mitchell’s wife, Ruth; and 18 others scattered Mitchell’s remains just as he had dictated in a precisely worded, written directive. They boarded his 76-foot houseboat at Mitchell’s home and motored an hour and a half onto Florida’s Biscayne Bay, anchoring near Stiltsville. There, they carried out these instructions:

“I request my ashes be strewn to leeward, and mind the backdraft, on Biscayne Bay during the early stages of ebb tide ... in the unobstructed area behind Stiltsville so part of me will flow out into the Gulf Stream to merge into the vanished wakes of beloved little ships during past races to Nassau and Bermuda or cruises to nowhere.”

Following the ceremony, Mitchell’s friends and his widow mingled on the houseboat and obeyed his final order: to share a bottle of 1910 Armagnac brandy — the same vintage as Mitchell, a wine connoisseur — that he had bought for the purpose 16 years earlier.

“If you were to add up the 10 most important people in [sailing] over the

last 100 years, he’d be in it,” says Mitchell’s friend, yachting historian John Rousmaniere. “And not just because he won three Bermuda races. He was really a three-sport star: All-star sailor, writer and photographer. He was the great yachting writer of his time.”

Through both his writing — for *National Geographic* and other magazines and in seven books — and his racing success, Mitchell led a wave of average 20th-century Americans into the sport of sailing and, particularly, cruising. His success rested on his ability to focus on the task at hand, a quality he demonstrated before the age of 10.

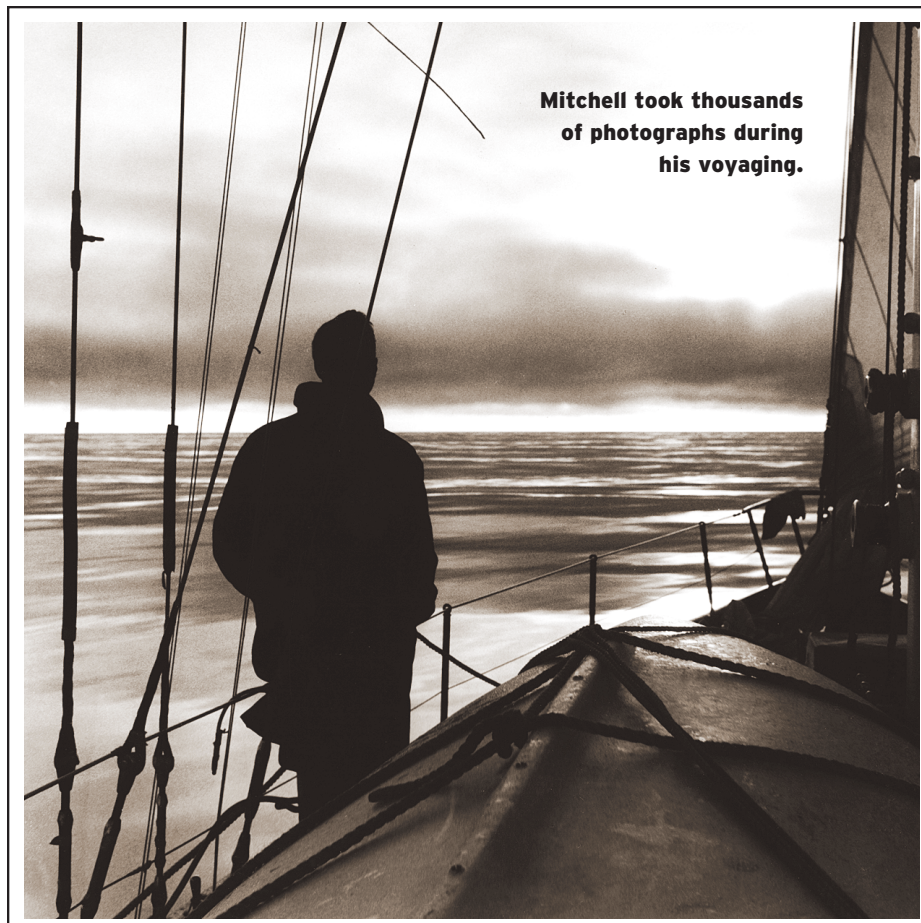
Born in New Orleans, the son of a physician who had little interest in boats, Mitchell began sailing as a crewmember on the boat of an uncle, whose boating magazines he pillaged for photos that he saved in scrapbooks. He declared to his parents: “I want to sail and I want to write about it,” Rousmaniere says.

Mitchell fulfilled his ambition without following a traditional academic course. He dropped out of college in Ohio in the late 1920s, at the beginning of the Great Depression, Rousmaniere says. There followed a series of jobs, including work in a Minnesota lumber camp. He traveled from job to job by motorcycle and eventually found himself in Manhattan, selling women’s underwear at Macy’s. This drifting ended when Mitchell joined a friend on a voyage from Norfolk, Va., to the Bahamas.

“The boat almost sank on the way,” says Rousmaniere. “It was a dreadful trip. He had the wits scared out of him, but he loved it.”

Mitchell then spent time in Nassau. When he returned to Manhattan he wrote several travel stories based on his experiences, but he couldn’t sell them. “Someone said send photos with them,” Rousmaniere says. “He went to a photo shop and bought a camera and dark room equipment and set it up in his tiny apartment.” (Today, Mystic Seaport in Mystic Conn., houses 20,250 of his images in the Carleton Mitchell Collection.)

For a while, he wrote and photographed for a Bahamian newspaper. During World War II, he taught photography for the Department of the Navy in Washington. Following the war, Mitchell and his first wife, Elizabeth, moved to Annapolis, Md., and bought one of John Alden’s old Malabars, which he renamed *Carib*. The



Mitchell took thousands of photographs during his voyaging.

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