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OLD CITY HALL, HOME OF BOCA RATON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Jeanne Nixon Baur, Artist

A report to the membership of
Boca Raton Historical Society, Inc.

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Floy Cooke Mitchell. The photograph was taken in 1919, four years before the Mitchells moved to Boca Raton.

MRS MITCHELL'S MEMORIES OF EARLY BOCA RATON

Floy Cooke Mitchell arrived in Boca Raton in 1923. This means that she not only witnessed almost the entire history of the city, but with her husband, J. C. Mitchell, was actively involved in its growth and development. This issue of The Spanish River Papers might be called a Memoir of fifty-five years in the life of Boca Raton.

Donald W. Curl, Editor

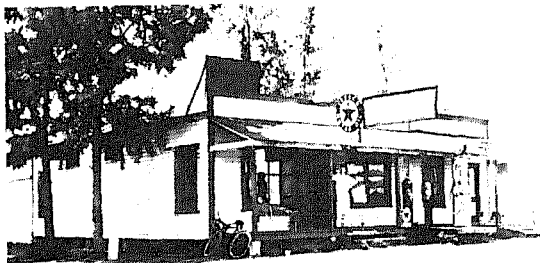
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EARLY BOCA RATON by Floy Cooke Mitchell

Boca Raton, Florida, has its own colorful story, and I am very happy that my family has been a part of its history and growth.

My father and mother, LaFayette and Elizabeth Cooke, of Cooke Springs, Alabama, used to come to Miami for several months each winter. Dad, an astute business man, could see great possibilities in South Florida real estate. In the winter of 1922, he met H. D. Gates, who had his real estate office in Miami at that time. Mr. Gates brought him up to Boca Raton and sold him five hundred acres in the southern part of town, where the Royal Palm Yacht and Country Club subdivision is now located.

When my parents returned to Alabama in the spring of 1923, Dad asked my husband, J. C. (Joe) Mitchell, if he would come down and develop the land. This he consented to do. We arrived in Boca Raton, October 1, 1923, and drove up to the combination grocery store and post office owned by Tony Brenk. Before we



Tony Brenk's Store. One of the first in Boca Raton, it was located at Palmetto Park Road and Northwest First Avenue.



Palmetto Park Road in the early days of Boca Raton looking west from the bridge.

could get out of the car, Tony came out with the mail, the key to the house we had rented from Mr. Gates, and said, "You must be Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell. Here is your mail, the key to your house, and welcome to Boca Raton." That was our first introduction to the warmth and friendliness that characterized Boca Raton in those early days.

Our rented house belonged to Maurice and Helen Stokes, great uncle and aunt of George and John Lamont who still live here. The furniture was rather sparse--just the bare necessities. A two-burner oil stove, small ice box, hand pump in the sink, and an oil lamp furnished the kitchen. A "chick sale" was in the back yard, with a cute half-moon cut out in the door. We would have to take a bath in a zinc tub with water heated on the stove. Joe looked at me, and, knowing we had left a home with indoor plumbing and all the modern conveniences of that time, said, "Are you sure you want to stay?" I replied, "Wild horses couldn't get me away from here!" I had hoped and prayed that we could live in Florida some day, and here we were. That was my first really big answer to prayer.

We got busy and cleaned the house, unpacked and settled in, ready to spend the rest of our lives here. I really felt that way from the start.

Next morning our next-door neighbor, George Martin, a bachelor from Vermont, came over with a bowl of green mango sauce. George took me under his wing, so to speak, and taught me how to do the

laundry out in the yard with a tub and rub board--and how to boil in another tub with a fire under it to keep the water boiling. He thought that I was very dumb because I didn't know how to do these things. He was always available in an emergency, and added much to our lives with his homespun humor.

The day after we moved in, Mrs. Margaret Young, who lived across the street on East Palmetto Park Road (where the 7-11 Shopping Center is now located) came to call, bringing homemade Scotch shortbread and a pot of hot tea. Our house stood at the present location of the Fishing Tackle Shop.

A few days later Mrs. George Long, mother of Vinton Long, came with a large basket of fruit from their trees. She was a lovely, understanding person and a very dear friend for the twenty-three years we were privileged to know her.

While we were still "new" to Boca Raton, Bert and Annie Raulerson, uncle and aunt of Eula Raulerson and Viola Poston, came with fresh vegetables from their farm. The way these folks took us into their hearts and homes was heartwarming!

Our first Christmas Day in Boca Raton dawned warm, bright and beautiful. At the breakfast table I made the comment that Mama and my two sisters would be busy in the kitchen preparing a large Christmas dinner and everybody would be there but us! Before I could say anything more, Joe suggested that we spend the day at the beach--an intriguing idea, which caught my attention at once. I got busy and prepared our lunch. We dressed in bathing suits, gathered a blanket, books and magazines, and were on the beach by ten o'clock. We had it all to ourselves all day. It was like being on an island away from civilization--warm sun, soft breeze, and the waves quietly lapping on the shore. The spiritual significance of the day made a deep impression on us. It wasn't just any day; it was Christ's Birthday. We recalled that there were palm trees and sand in the Holy Land, and here we had the same.

We swam, read, talked, ate and swam again, and had a marvelous time. We were sorry to break the beauty of the day by leaving the beach, but the wind began to get cool, and we were invited to Bill and Peg Young's home for five o'clock dinner, and for which I had volunteered to bring the dessert.

A large box had arrived from our Alabama home the week before, which contained our Christmas gifts, plus homemade candy, mints, cookies and fruitcake, made by my two sisters, who were very talented in the culinary department. They knew that we were not going to be with them, so they tried to share some of the traditional Christmas goodies with us.

The Chesebros and the Longs had each brought baskets of fruit to us for the holidays. The basket from the Longs contained, besides fruit, one of Mrs. Long's "Heaven Knows What" cakes. Her daughter-in-law, Winnie, had once asked her for the recipe, and

she was told there was no recipe. Mrs. Long used whatever she had at hand. One time it could contain chocolate, coffee, jelly and nuts--another time it could be honey, peanut butter, and orange juice. So, Winnie named it "Heaven Knows What." Anyway, whatever she put in it, the end result was delightful. With all the help from home and neighbors, dessert wasn't a bit of trouble. I made ambrosia with oranges, bananas, pineapple, and fresh grated coconut. I didn't have any cherries to put in it, so I used Surinam cherries that were growing in our yard and a few sprigs of mint around the rim of the cut-glass bowl to carry out the Christmas colors. That dessert tray with the addition of cake, nuts and mints made an adequate ending to Peg's chicken dinner.

We sat and talked with them until late in the evening. When we returned home, we agreed it had been the most blessed, tranquil, uncluttered Christmas Day we had ever spent. There had never been a day like it before, nor has there been one since.

These early blessings continued to come into our lives as other neighbors became lifelong friends. Later we met Pop and Mom Purdom, two dear people whom I loved very much, as well as Audrey and the rest of their family which included Eula and Charlie Raulerson, and their daughter, Pauline.

Many interesting families made Boca Raton their home in the early years. I recall the Brown family, John and Clementine, parents of Betty Moore and John Brown. John's brother, Charlie, who hauled the garbage, wore a beautiful diamond ring. We told him he was probably the only garbage man in the world who wore diamonds! Their sister, Kate Caniff (what a cutie she was), took a machete to Wilson Mizner when he tried to vote in a City Election. He was not a registered voter here. We loved her for that.

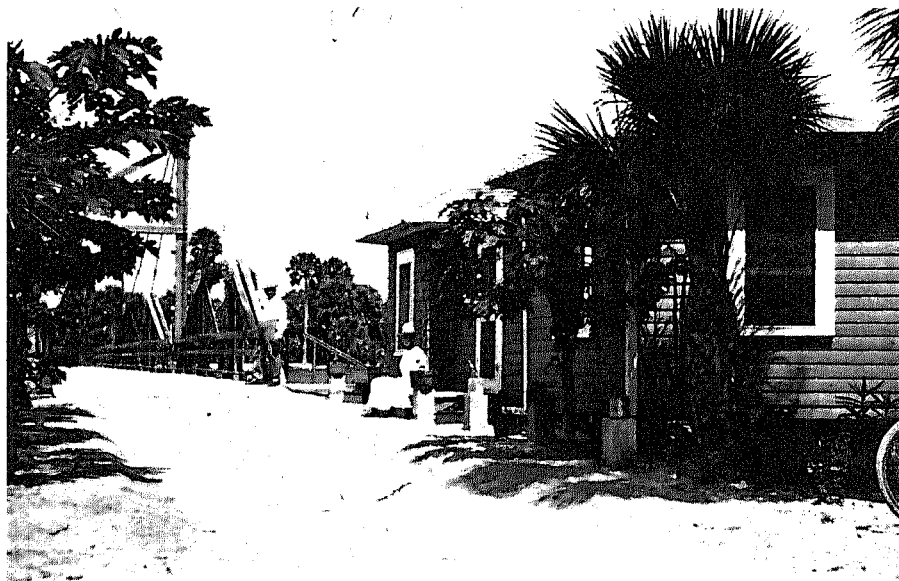
Another family was the Sellers, parents of Dixie Hillegass.

George and Nellie Race and their daughter, Lillian Williams, were a very musical family and added much to the culture of the town. Lillian's house has recently been donated to the Historical Society. She furnished the music at the Methodist Church for years, and later she was organist at the Church of the Open Door.

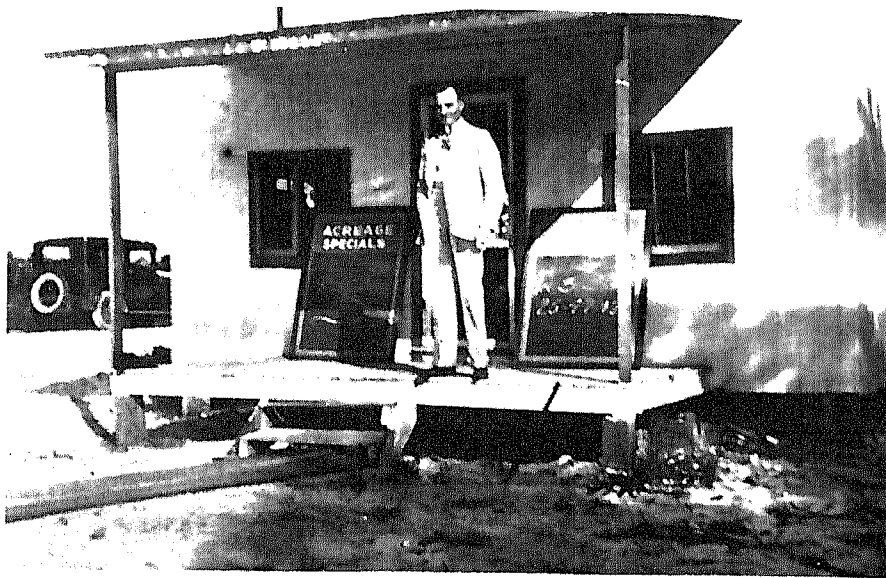
The Chesebro family, who helped to make our first Christmas and who became close friends, had been among the early pioneers of Boca Raton.

We met the George Howards, parents of Helen Howard, when they came down for the winter and felt that we had known them all of our lives. They were two of our favorite people.

We spent many evenings talking to the bridgetender of the Palmetto Park Bridge, Lucas Douglas, father of Carl Douglas, one of the oldest native-born residents still living here.



The Palmetto Park Bridge and bridgetender's house.



Mr. Mitchell on the porch of the first J. C. Mitchell Real Estate office on the Dixie Highway.

The George Aikens, parents of Jeannette Troxell, were well-known to us, too. George was later elected our first town clerk.

When the property was surveyed and laid out in lots, my father, Mr. Cooke, insisted that three lots be set aside for churches. The Methodists were the only ones to accept a lot, which was on Royal Palm Road (the First Bank and Trust Company has it for a parking lot now). The population of the town was too small to start and support more than one church. It was called the Community Church, and that is just what it was. Practically every one in town contributed to the building of it, and most of the people attended and helped support it.

When the lot was ready for dedication and ground breaking, Clementine Brown and I had charge of the refreshments. She was older than I, and had more experience in housekeeping and cooking, so I followed her lead. We made the lemonade in a new zinc tub borrowed from Tony Brenk's store. Several people became ill, so we learned to never make lemonade in a zinc tub!

When Dad's health began to fail he decided to sell the property to W. A. Gelhouse, who later sold it to Mizner.

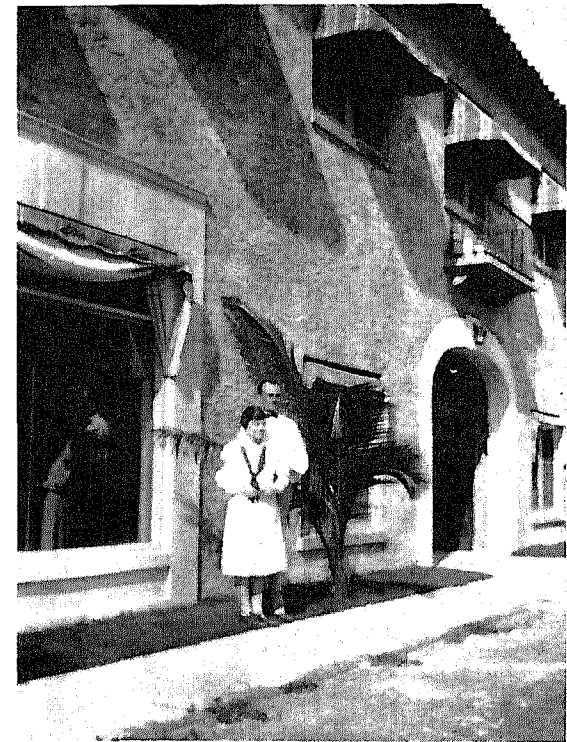
Then Joe went into the real estate business on his own. His first office was just north of the Harry Chesebro home on the Dixie Highway, a one room building which served the purpose admirably.

The Boom of the late 1920s came. People got rich over night and lost it just as quickly. Those were exciting days!

About that time we built the Mitchell Arcade Building on the Dixie Highway--apartments upstairs, stores and offices on the first floor (where Calico Corners and Lily Pulitzer are now tenants). We rented offices for the Boca Raton Town Hall. Later when the town needed more space it moved its offices across the railroad tracks to a larger building where the present Aldrich Shopping Center is located.

In 1933 my husband, Joe, and our older son, John (six years old), with younger son, Billy (one and one-half years old), riding in the wheelbarrow, brought a banyan tree up from Harry Chesebro's place and planted it in front of the Arcade Building. It is still there, almost in the middle of the Dixie Highway, and has been a tourist attraction for years.

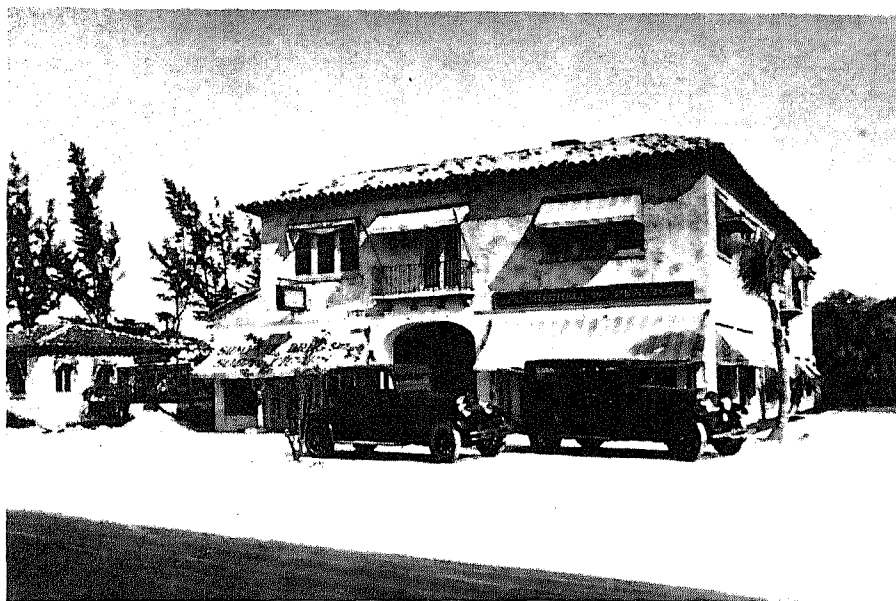
We survived the 1926 Hurricane, our first one, and I hoped it would be our last. I have never been so frightened in my life! We didn't know that all windows should be covered in a hurricane. I watched freight cars blown off the tracks in that



Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell standing before the southern facade of the Mitchell Arcade building shortly after its completion in the 1920s.

one hundred fifty mile an hour wind, and telegraph poles snap like toothpicks. The building was a wreck--most of the windows broken; much of the roof was blown off; and the water damage was terrific.

After the storm had passed, I wrote hasty notes to our relatives in Alabama, to let them know we were safe. Then, we went out to meet the first train that came up from Miami to get the report from there and mail our letters. We learned the hurricane had caused much damage and loss of life there. My parents had moved to Miami permanently in July. I said that we must go there immediately and see about them. The conductor on the train, who had given us the news said that there were road blocks up and nobody was to be allowed in. We loaded the car with jugs of fresh water (which we luckily still had), and some other supplies that I bought at Tony Brenk's store, placed a sign on the front of the car saying "Supplies from the Boca Raton Chamber of Commerce" and went. The fact that there was no chamber of commerce in Boca Raton did not bother us. We felt we had to get to my parents as soon as possible. The sign got us through with no trouble. We found my folks' house had much damage but they were both uninjured. We helped clean out the broken glass and fallen plaster, and immediately started back home to our own broken glass and fallen plaster. On the way, we decided to go by Hollywood Beach, where we saw people shoveling sand out of the second story of the Hollywood Beach Hotel. The waves had come through the broken windows and left sand half way to the ceiling. We continued on home counting our blessings--at least we didn't have to shovel sand out of the second story windows.



The western (Dixie Highway) facade of the Mitchell Arcade building with the newly planted Banyan tree in the 1930s.

When the 1928 Hurricane came, we were all boarded up and the damage was not so bad. We learned in those early years to have a great respect for these storms--that by taking all precautions beforehand, the damage would be minimal. We realized that in a hurricane, everybody needs a clear head in order to be able to take care of any emergency that might arise--and this is no time for a party!

Our friends Tom and Mary Brown from Delray Beach were in Miami when the message came from the Weather Bureau that the 1928 Hurricane was to come into land between Fort Lauderdale and West Palm Beach. They started home immediately. As they neared Boca Raton, the wind got worse, the air was full of flying debris, large signs, tree limbs, etc., so they drove into our driveway on the south side of the Arcade Building. We kept our car parked inside the Arcade.

The tiles from our roof and limbs from the Longs' mango trees next door kept hitting their car, so they decided to sit in our car inside the Arcade. The next morning, when the storm had passed, they went out and discovered that a piece of tile from our roof had gone through the car roof, through the seat where Mary Brown had been sitting, and was buried in the driveway under their car! If they had stayed in their car, she would surely have been killed. We were all thankful for her escape from certain death.

This storm caused much damage in the Glades, especially Okeechobee and the other small towns. The dike broke and waves from Lake Okeechobee, ten or more feet high, covered that area with water. Over 2,200 people died and many were buried in mass graves--some bodies that were found several days later had to be burned. People were on roofs of their houses and some climbed the tall pines. They found snakes in the trees and on the roofs. The people didn't bother the snakes and the snakes left the people alone as they were all intent on survival. It was a terrifying experience.

The Depression--those were the days of no business and less work! We lived well on five dollars a week. I made dresses out of material that cost ten cents a yard. A few deft touches with unusual trims or buttons and the dresses were very pretty. I was proud to be wearing dresses that cost less than fifty cents to make. The leftover material was used to make articles for the annual church bazaar. We accepted the challenges of the Depression but became irked at times watching the WPA crews leaning on their shovels too often and too long!

After the Depression came the Second World War. Joe had been a Boca Raton Councilman for three years and Mayor of the city for eleven years. He decided to contact the different branches of the Armed Forces and see if he could get a military installation here to help with the war effort and also help the economy of the area. It took a lot of time and work, but eventually the Boca Raton Air Field came into being, built by that human dynamo, Colonel Arnold MacSpadden. Those were Boca Raton's interesting and busy days.



W. C. (Bill) Young on the Boca Raton beach. Mr. Young, who was bald, made his own wig from sea weed.

When the war ended, there was all the Air Force property lying idle, so Joe decided it was time to get it back on the Tax Roll. Back to Washington he went and eventually got it released. Joe L. Moore of Gadsden, Alabama, bought the property from the government and put the lots and buildings back on the market and on the Tax Roll. He subdivided that part of the Air Force Base which is Boca Raton Hills today.

We had felt the need for a fundamental Christian ministry here for a long time, and on June 4, 1950, after much prayer and work, the Boca Raton Bible Conference Grounds was dedicated--a real beacon light pointing the way to Christ and Heaven.

Joe had an application for a bank charter on file in Tallahassee for several years. Finally, the "powers that be" decided that Boca Raton was large enough for a bank. By this time, Joe was very ill and could not work actively in founding the bank. Tom Fleming, who was like our third son, took over and the First Bank and Trust Company of Boca Raton, N.A., opened for business on March 8, 1956.



Margeret (Peg) Young on a picnic at the Hillsboro Light.

These are just a few of the highlights that helped Boca Raton to grow into the prestige city that it now is.

I have enjoyed every moment of my almost fifty-five years here. It has been a most interesting and fulfilling life, and a challenge that I would not have wanted to miss. It brings to mind something I heard Joe, my dad, Mr. Howard, and others say when we would be sitting around a bonfire at the beach chatting:

The day will come when it will be
a solid city from Palm Beach to
Miami.

I would say that day has come!

Several families added much to that early history of Boca Raton. One whom I feel (and many concur) deserves special mention and biographical review is the Young Family. W. C. (Bill) and Margaret (Peg) Young were a very interesting couple. Bill came

over from Dundee, Scotland, to get a job and make money to send for Peg to come and join him. He was a sculptor and master craftsman with stone and concrete. After several months he sent Peg the money for her passage. Arrangements were made and her boat was to dock at eight o'clock on a Sunday morning in New York Harbor and Bill was to be there to meet her. The boat docked around eight, but Bill was not in sight! Peg sat there all day with all her worldly possessions and wondered what she should do, as she knew no one in New York or elsewhere in the U. S. A. She had decided to take the first boat back home when at five o'clock in the afternoon Bill sauntered in. He was a very calm, deliberate person and nothing bothered him. He had quite a time getting that Scots lass calmed down so he could tell her why he was so late. Then it took him quite a while longer to persuade her not to take the first boat back home after she heard his reason. His friends had given him a stag party the night before, and he didn't wake up until late afternoon! She took a dim view of that.

They were married in New York and went to Cincinnati, where he worked a while; then they moved to Houston, Texas. They came by boat to Key West in 1915, and by train over the Flagler Overseas Railroad to Miami. Bill had been commissioned to set up the marble statuary on Viscaya, the fabulous Deering Estate. They were living with friends from Cincinnati at that time.

The Youngs heard that George Fryhofer was holding a lot auction in Boca Raton, so Mrs. Young and her friend, Mrs. Muhle, came up to Boca Raton by train to attend the auction. Peg surprised herself by buying four lots on East Palmetto Park Road, where the 7-11 Shopping Center is located. After Bill had finished his work on the Deering Estate, they moved to Boca Raton. They took over the small commissary at the corner of Dixie and Palmetto. Mrs. Young became Postmistress, Fourth Class, relieving Mr. Long of that chore. They lived upstairs over the commissary. In 1917, they decided to build a home on two of the lots Peg had bought. One day Bill saw an ad in a magazine about prefab houses. They selected one they liked, a northern bungalow type. The top half was clapboards painted white, with the bottom half brown stained shingles. Bill sent a check and in due course of time, a freight car arrived in Boca Raton with all the materials for the house, pre-cut and numbered. Bill got some help and before long their six-room home was ready to move into. It had a bathroom with indoor plumbing and running water and was most attractive and comfortable. When we arrived in Boca Raton, Bill was working in Kelsy City, now Lake Park, and came home on weekends. He designed and made the models for most of the ornamental stone plaques that decorated many of the Palm Beach homes of that era. He also designed birdbaths and fountains, many of which were on the grounds of these palatial mansions.

In 1936, Margaret Young took over the Post Office again and served as Postmistress for ten years, making a total of fifteen years in government service. She retired in 1946, and died in 1952; Bill Young died in 1943. They were long remembered for their very active participation in civic affairs.

Peg and Bill adopted us, more or less. One Sunday afternoon, Peg came to ask us over for tea. When we arrived, Bill put his arm

around my shoulders and said that they felt we were taking the place of the family that they never had. So, they had rearranged the furniture in their house to make a three-room apartment for us and wanted us to move in, which we did the very next day. Our apartment had a small living room, bedroom and kitchen. We shared the bathroom with them. I really enjoyed the luxury of a warm bath in a real bath tub once again. That was the one thing I had missed since we arrived in Boca Raton.

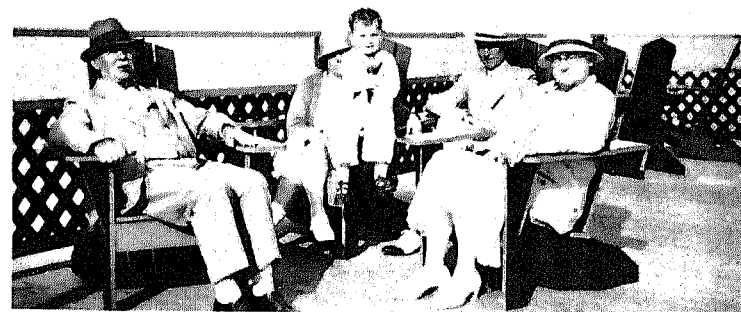
We lived with the Youngs until we built the Mitchell Arcade Building in 1926. In the Arcade Building we had three apartments upstairs. Ours took up the east half of the building and had three bedrooms and two baths, living room, kitchen and dining area, and an electric stove (no more smoky oil stoves) and electric refrigerator. We had a solar water system on the roof which furnished adequate scalding hot water. The solar heater withstood the 1926 Hurricane, but the one in 1928 wrecked it. We then got an electric hot water heater.

It was fun furnishing our apartment, and when it was completed with rugs, draperies, etc., the Flaglers, the Stotesburys, nor any of the other people who lived in palatial mansions in Palm Beach were a bit happier with their homes than we were in our apartment. We lived there until Joe died in 1955, while we were in the process of building a new home. When the house was completed, I moved in. If I had to start a new life alone, I was fortunate that I could do it in a new home and at a new location. I have been very happy and content ever since....

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In this article I have tried to mention all of the people who were living in Boca Raton year around when we came in 1923 and the George Howards who spent six months in Boca Raton and six months in Bouckville, New York.

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Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell and son John with Mr. and Mrs. Howard (far left and far right) at the Boca Raton beach in the 1920s.



LaFayette and Elizabeth Cook, Mrs. Mitchell's parents.

From the Boca Raton Pelican of the late 1940s or early 1950s, "Builders of Boca Raton---LaFayette Cooke."

...Mrs. J. C. Mitchell, daughter of one of our early developers, LaFayette Cooke, and Mr. J. C. Mitchell, ex-Mayor of Boca Raton, who with their two sons are active in real estate in Boca Raton at present, came to Boca Raton as a direct result of this land promotion. LaFayette Cooke was President of the Bank and Trust Company of Pell City, Alabama and land sales promoter there. He came to Florida in 1921 out of interest spurred by the good advertising the state had, even at this early date. He found it

all more than true, and after returning to Alabama, came back in 1922 to get some more sand in his shoes. He selected as the best and most promising, the lower East Coast strip between Palm Beach and Miami, and purchased, through the South Florida Sales Company, in Miami, the five hundred or more acres which was then platted as Boca Raton Townsite. After selling more than one hundred lots he sold the remaining large parcel to W. A. Gehlhaus of the Gehlhaus Steamship Company of New Jersey who in turn sold it to the Mizner Development Company. A previous article in the "Pelican" tells of the Mizner interlude. Both Mr. and Mrs. Cooke lived to an advanced age and passed away in their adopted city, Miami.

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"J. C. Mitchell Eulogy, made by Thomas F. Fleming, Jr., President of First Bank of Boca Raton, at the Dedication Ceremonies of the J. C. Mitchell School."

I have the happy privilege of presenting two portraits to the J. C. Mitchell School today--one in oil of Mr. Mitchell, a gift to the school from the Directors of the First Bank of Boca Raton. I will ask Mr. Hopkins to unveil the portrait now. The other is a word picture of J. C. Mitchell. In the last few years this wonderful community of Boca Raton has grown from a village of about 700 people to its present-day population of nearly 7,000 people. I have been asked many times "Who was J. C. Mitchell and why should this school be named for him?" I will try to tell you who Joe Mitchell was.

An important part of the great American heritage is the ever present man who loves his community and who elects to dedicate his creative thinking unselfishly to the progress of his town. Every American town and city can credit its advancements to a progression of men who have led and envisioned the future of it, and have had the courage of their convictions to carry them on.

What are the characteristics of such a community leader as Joe Mitchell? I would say Joe Mitchell had three outstanding characteristics. First of all, he had the ability and capacity for thinking--thinking is the newest and most difficult of the arts. Nobody can engage in it very long at a time because it is too painful. Mostly we rely on ready-made opinions, and we think more with our emotions than with our heads. Sometimes we think we are thinking when we are only rearranging our prejudices. But Joe Mitchell had this ability for straight thinking.

Secondly, Joe Mitchell was a man of great courage. He had the courage to speak up--take responsibility and do something about solving the many problems that faced him and the community.

Thirdly, he had great imagination and vision. He exercised his innate capacity for imagination. Imagination is the master quality of the human mind. It is that God-given spark that enables a few to see ahead and envision things as they will be some day. His type of imagination was not that of a dreamer, for he had the practical ability to stretch out the horizons of the future,

and to see things that should be done, and could be done. He was a wonderful visionary, but a very practical man.

Such were the characteristics of Joe Mitchell, a resident of Boca Raton from 1923 until his passing in 1955. He was mayor of this town for eleven years, a great churchman and trustee of the Community Church of Boca Raton; he was trustee of the School Board District of Boca Raton; Trustee of the Boca Raton Boy Scouts; director and benefactor of the Boca Raton Bible Conference; an organizer and director of the First Bank of Boca Raton; and a charter member of several organizations including the American Legion, the Lions' Club and the Palm Beach County Research and Development Board.

At the approach of World War II, Joe Mitchell demonstrated his patriotism by acting as a spokesman for the town and offering the site of what was to become the Boca Raton Army Base, which contributed so greatly to the war effort. This same site is now being turned over to the State of Florida for the establishment of a great new university....Even this recent-day accomplishment had its beginning in Joe Mitchell's successful effort to get the Air Base located here.

Now you must admit that this is an impressive list of community gains. The greatness of Joe Mitchell, however, cannot be measured by a listing of concrete and material accomplishments. His greatness lies more in his ideals--his dreams--and the visions he had for his community. This city is in the splendid condition it is today with its great prestige name of Boca Raton because of the solid foundations on which he and his successors were able to build. This is the only community which has no bonded indebtedness on its real property in South Florida. This happened because of the efforts of Joe Mitchell.

Above all else, he had great love and loyalty for four things. He was a great family man. He loved and believed in his wonderful wife and two fine sons. He believed in the family as an institution. He knew that the home and family is the pillar of civilization and the foundation of the nation. The nation can be no better nor stronger than the homes of which it is composed. The Town of Boca Raton had a great and glorious future and he untiringly worked toward that end. He loved and was truly loyal to his country, serving in its armed forces in World War I and making the Boca Raton Army Air Base possible in World War II, and finally he loved and served his church and his God. I know of a no more fitting thing to say of any man than he loved his God, his family, his community and his country. True greatness of a man can be measured only by such lasting yard sticks as these.

Probably the greatest tribute to Joe Mitchell can be singled out "That he truly loved his Town." His name over this beautiful new school is very fitting for he also loved children and he knew the value of education to preserve the American way of life. For truly, our children are our future.



J. C. (Joe) Mitchell. The photograph was taken in 1920. Mrs. Mitchell says it was his "courting" photograph.

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