

MEMORIAL RESOLUTION

JOHN PEARCE MITCHELL (1880 – 1973)

John Pearce Mitchell's close association with Stanford University spanned almost seventy-five years, beginning with his matriculation as a freshman in the Autumn of 1899, well before the midpoint of David Starr Jordan's tenure as President. Before his death on December 27, 1973, he was among the surviving Senior Members of the Academic Council, the only one whose active membership in this Council dated from the time of the Jordan presidency.

Born in Providence, Rhode Island, he early developed a consuming aspiration to a career in medicine, his father's profession. This ambition was soon thwarted by a bout with scarlet fever which left him with a hearing loss, a misfortune which proved to have far-reaching significance in his life, being mainly responsible for his family's moving westward, and thus ultimately for his interest in Stanford. With characteristic objectivity, the young Mitchell accepted the fact that a career in medicine would for him be impractical, and he turned to the related field of chemistry. Nevertheless, his romance with medicine endured throughout his life and prompted him to participate as a layman in a variety of medically-oriented civic and academic enterprises: The Student Guild, which was a genuinely pioneering effort in prepaid medical care; the Palo Alto Hospital, and its forerunner, the Peninsula Hospital; the Isolation Hospital on the campus; the School of Health; the Stanford Convalescent Home; the Rest Homes operated by the Stanford Mothers' Club; and the American Red Cross.

Generations of Stanford freshmen knew him as a rigorous, stimulating and sympathetic teacher of inorganic chemistry. His first teaching assignment came in 1905 as an Acting Instructor assisting the professor then in charge, Robert Eckles Swain. That was after Mitchell had completed his bachelor's and master's degrees at Stanford and after a year's graduate study at the University of Leipzig, but before finishing his doctorate at Stanford. In all, he taught freshman chemistry for thirty-five consecutive years, attaining the full professorial rank in 1920. In his research he did pioneer work in air and water pollution control.

Early in his career, Dr. Mitchell demonstrated unusual capacities for statesmanlike service to the community, both on and beyond the campus. He was a charter member of the Board of Athletic Control, which was established in 1917 as a body semi-independent from the University but responsible for the University's intercollegiate athletic program. He served as Treasurer of the Board for the full twenty-six years of its existence, and as its secretary for most of this time. Dr. Mitchell made it his mission to see that the athletic program was consonant with the higher mission of the University. As one of the by-products of this effort, the BAC was able to contribute an amazing amount to the development of the physical plant of the University, including the Stadium, Basketball Pavilion, the Men's and Women's Gymnasias, the Golf Course and its Clubhouse, and even a dormitory, Branner Hall.

In 1917 also Dr. Mitchell's talents were enlisted to rescue the Associated Students and its related organizations from bankruptcy. He designed and developed a central accounting system which soon became the Students' Organizations Fund, of which he served as Financial Director until 1945. The structure which he established has survived essentially unchanged for more than five decades, and it has served the University and the student body eminently well.

In 1920 the faculty adopted the so-called Cathcart Report, a significant pioneering effort in liberal education. It fell to Dr. Mitchell to chair the newly-established Committee on the Lower Division and to chart the course for the new program. He continued in this capacity for twenty-five years, until he became emeritus. The fact that the Lower Division Program, as such, survived for more than thirty-five years, with only minor substantive changes, is a tribute not only to its original conception but to the effectiveness of the program which was created under Dr. Mitchell's leadership.

When Stanford's first Registrar, Orrin L. Elliott, retired in 1925, Ray Lyman Wilbur had been President for ten years. The office of Registrar then embraced functions which, by present terminology, would be connoted by the title, Vice President for Academic and Student Affairs. In view of what President Wilbur referred to as Mitchell's "tested abilities," he was the logical choice as Elliott's successor. On the campus today Pearce Mitchell is most vividly remembered as the Registrar from 1925 to 1945.

During the final eighteen years of the Wilbur presidency, Mitchell was not only a close friend and confidant of the President, but administratively responsible for undergraduate studies, admissions, student financial aids, academic advising, career counseling and placement services, as well as registration. For this entire period he chaired the Committees on the Lower Division, Registration, and Admissions and Advanced Standing, and served also on the Executive Committee of the Academic Council and on the Committees on Athletics, Scholarship, Vocational Guidance, Graduation, and Schedule and Examinations. In addition he was the University's Faculty Athletic Representative, and the Financial Director of the Students' Organizations Fund. During World War II he served also as Director of the Basic Unit of the Army Specialized Training Program at Stanford.

In Palo Alto Dr. Mitchell is remembered for his long-time chairmanship of the Palo Alto Chapter of the American Red Cross and his membership on the Boards of the Castilleja School and the Stanford Convalescent Home. He served thirty-one years on the City Council, including two terms as Mayor. When he retired from the Council in 1961, he was referred to as to "Mr. Palo Alto."

In Menlo Park he is remembered for his service as a Trustee and President of the Board of Menlo School and College. Farther afield, he is remembered for his service on the Board of The Katharine Branson School in Marin County and for his distinguished service as a member of the Board of Standards of the California Association of Independent Schools. He took an active part in the affairs of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, serving as its President during the academic year 1930-31; and for two decades of his most active career, he was recognized as one of the most distinguished University Registrars in the country.

But to those who were privileged to know Pearce Mitchell personally, the characteristics which made him special were not the offices he held nor the influence he exerted officially in University and civic affairs. They were rather the qualities of mind and heart which were reflected in his daily endeavors: his economy of language; his capacity to strike at the heart of a complex matter, particularly one involving complex human relationships, and to capture its essence in colorful, although simple, every day language; his respect for and capacity for innovation; his sense of wonderment at the mystery of human nature -- the nature of the human individual; his quickness, as a scientist, to call upon newer contemporary instruments of psychological measurement for whatever assistance they could give, but his awareness of their limitations and his refusal to accept them as a substitute for human judgment; his respect for rules as a necessary condition for social order, but his insistence that in order to provide an optimum environment for learning on the part of young people, rules should be applied with discretion; his insistence that students had the right to make their own individual mistakes and the obligation to stand accountable for them; his deep concern for the welfare of human beings around him, be they students, employees, faculty colleagues or other friends; his spirit of unshakable optimism and faith in the future; his sense of the joy of living; his love of a good story and his inimitable chuckle in response to a good story; and his sense of loyalty and love for the institution of Stanford. In his ninety-fourth year he took keen-eyed pride in the fact that his two sons and his two daughters had attended Stanford, as well as their respective spouses and ten of his fourteen grandchildren, and that the eldest of his great grandchildren, a great grandson, was in the process of applying.

On the day following his death, a Palo Alto Times editorial heralded J. Pearce Mitchell as a great academician and a great citizen. To this we may add, as well, that he was a great and good man -- one of the greatest of his long time at Stanford.

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