

# Author and Former Detroit Carl Mitchell Dies at 86

BY TIM RETZLOFF

Carl Mitchell, a former Detroit and author of three memoirs that touched on different aspects of his gay life in the 1940s, '50s and '60s, died May 14 at age 86. According to Robert Stanley, his partner of 47 years, Mitchell had been battling cancer for the past six years. Mitchell passed away at their home in St. Petersburg, Florida, where they had lived since 2002.

Born in Hazel Park on April 12, 1932 during the Great Depression, Mitchell went to live on a farm with an aunt and uncle after his parents separated. His father was killed in an automobile accident when he was seven and Mitchell spent his teen years at the Protestant Children's Home on East Jefferson Avenue in Detroit. He shared his memories from the orphanage in "The Home," a book published in 2006.

Mitchell joined the U.S. Army at age 17 in 1949 and served as a combat medic during the Korean War, receiving the Bronze Star for his service. While in the military, he had his first romances with men. He wrote about these experiences in the 2002 memoir "Marching to an Angry Drum."

In reviewing the book, *Between The Lines*

columnist Charles Alexander called it "two-fisted, funny and, at times, very touching."

While on leave back home, he discovered the thriving gay bar scene around Farmer and Bates streets in downtown Detroit. In a 2005 oral history interview, he described the attention he received from customers at the Ten Eleven when he wore his uniform into the bar. On leaving, some police officers on the street asked him what he was doing in there. Playing dumb, Mitchell told them he'd just happened to stop in and that the other customers had been quite friendly. "Don't you know?" one patrolman replied in a panicked tone of voice, "It's a bunch of queers in there!"

Mitchell knew to dress in civilian garb on his next visit.

Following his time in the military, Mitchell returned to Detroit where he enjoyed a long career as a nurse in area hospitals. He pursued several business ventures, as well.

In the late 1960s, he operated several stores, including a canteen, an antique business, a head shop and a curiotique on Plum Street. At the time, Plum Street was Detroit's mini version of Haight-Ashbury where the local hippie crowd hung out. The block had a notable gay presence as well.

"Plum Street," published in 2013, recounts

Mitchell's time in the area.

Carl Mitchell and Robert Stanley met in 1970 and began their life together at a time when many in the gay community frowned on interracial pairings. The two men had no patience for such attitudes and avoided those who were "racist and stupid."

Decades before same-sex marriage became legal, Mitchell expressed his love and commitment to Stanley at the Woodward Lounge one night with a Fabergé egg that contained a sterling silver ring inside. "That was our little ceremony we did among ourselves," Stanley said.

"He and Bobby were just a beautiful couple," said longtime activist John Kavanaugh, who knew Mitchell for nearly half a century. "They are the only people to come to see me and thank me for the work I did in the movement."

Carl and Robert played their own role in the movement, too. They were involved in the early formation of the Metropolitan Community Church of Detroit and were later active in the Association of Suburban People. For short time, after moving to Ferndale, they also attended FANS, Friends and Neighbors of Ferndale, but found the group less friendly to them than its name portended.

Following their retirement in St. Petersburg,

Florida, Mitchell became a life member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, AmVets and the American Legion.

Minutes after Mitchell died, Stanley raised a brand new American flag on the pole outside their home, then lowered it to half-staff.

A funeral with military honors is being planned for June in Florida.



Carl Mitchell in the 1950