

# A Kool Story

by Lynne Belluscio

I was half watching Mysteries at the Museum last night and was listening to the story about the invention of Pop Rocks. (We sell Pop Rocks in the museum shop but I didn't know the connection to General Foods and Jell-O.)

What caught my attention was the story about Bill Mitchell who invented the exploding candy. It seems that he was a food chemist who worked for General Foods, and in addition to Pop Rocks, he also invented Tang, Quick Set Jell-O, and Kool Whip.

During his career, Dr. William "Bill" Mitchell received over 70 patents. One source that I read, said that he briefly worked for Eastman Kodak and helped develop a process to produce the photographic color green. Born in Minnesota in 1911, he joined General Foods in 1941. One of his first challenges was to develop a tapioca substitute. Tapioca is made from cassava, and during World War II, it was not available. Mitchell invented a substitute that quickly became known as "Mitchell mud" within the United States army.

Mitchell is credited with creating "quick set" Jell-O. So far, I haven't been able to find much about this, other than in the 1950s he made it possible for Jell-O to set faster. During this time, in 1957, he also developed a powdered mix that added vitamins to water. It was called Tang and General Foods marketed it in 1959, but it wasn't very popular. The erroneous story that Tang was developed for the space program began when NASA introduced Tang to the manned space program as a way to cover up the metallic taste of the processed water on board the Gemini flights. It was then that Tang became known as the "breakfast of astronauts."

Mitchell was also interested in creating a powdered drink that would fizz when put into water. General Foods was interested in a carbonated variety of Kool Aid. Mitchell began experimenting with a variety of combinations in the 1950s. (Fizzie tablets, which were like Bromo Selter, were introduced in 1957 by a drug company).

Mitchell did not like the taste of the concoction he created, and by chance just put some of the granules into his mouth, and was delighted with the crackling on his tongue. He patented his recipe in 1961, but General Foods was not interested in a candy product. He tried marketing the popping candy on his own under the name of

"Cosmic Dust", with little success.

Finally in 1976, General Foods introduced Pop Rocks. But a story about a young television star, "Mikey" of "Let Mikey Eat It" fame, surfaced. It was said that he had died of drinking Coke and eating Pop Rocks and his stomach exploded. The story was fabricated but General Foods had to set up a hot line to dispel rumors and in 1983 they pulled Pop Rocks from the market. Today, Pop Rocks are owned by Zeta Especial S.A. and they are distributed in the United States by Pop Rocks Inc. of Atlanta, Georgia.

In 1966, the Birdseye division of General Foods introduced Mitchell's patented Kool Whip. It is basically hydrogenated oils, corn syrups, sugar and artificial flavors and because it contained no dairy products and didn't need to be refrigerated, it was popular for picnics. Recently, to make Kool Whip taste more like whipped cream, a slight bit of real cream was added to the formula. As most



of you know, Kool Whip is manufactured in nearby Avon, although when Heinz took control of Kraft Foods, the factory in Avon was jeopardized. Senator Schumer and Gov. Cuomo interceded and struck a deal that will keep Kool Whip in

Avon for a few more years.

William Mitchell continued to work on a wide variety of food products and retired in 1976. After his wife died, he moved from New Jersey to Stockton, California, where he died in 2004, at the age of 92.



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