

# William G. Milliken Biography

On March 16, 1922, William Grawn Milliken was born in Traverse City, the second child in a family already attuned to the intricacies of public service. His father James had served as a state Senator, and mother Hildegard had been elected to the Traverse City school board; the first woman elected to public office in that city.

During his high school years, Milliken began corresponding with former Governor Chase S. Osborn, igniting Milliken's ambition to someday become the state's chief executive.

Great aspirations often require great patience; he took no shortcuts.



In 1942, Milliken interrupted his studies at Yale University to enlist in the Army Reserve Corps and, in early 1943, volunteered for the Army Air Corps. That summer, while in training, Milliken met and dated his future wife, Helen Wallbank. Before leaving for combat in June 1944, the couple agreed that they would marry after the war.

Milliken received his discharge on Sept. 29, 1945 after narrowly escaping death on several occasions. Less than one month later, on Oct. 20, 1945, he and Helen married. Milliken returned to Yale to complete his senior year, graduating in the spring of 1946. The couple moved to Traverse City, where they welcomed their first child, William Jr. in 1946 and Elaine in 1948. Milliken became president of J.W. Milliken, Inc., a department store founded by his grandfather—who had also been a state senator—and run by his father.

In 1947, Governor Kim Sigler appointed Milliken to the Michigan Waterways Commission, putting him in touch with downstate politicians. In 1960, he was elected to state Senate, where he emerged as a leader among moderate Republicans, inching him closer to the governorship. He became the Senate majority floor leader, making a bid for the Republican nomination for lieutenant governor in 1964—a position he won alongside running mate Governor George Romney in 1966. Milliken became governor on Jan. 22, 1969 upon Romney's resignation to accept a Cabinet post in the Nixon Administration. He held his gubernatorial ground, with victories in 1970, 1974 and 1978, making him the state's longest serving governor—a record not likely to be surpassed under current term limits.

As governor, Milliken established a legacy of conservation and environmental protection. Michigan voters passed the bottle deposit bill in 1976, diverting from landfills an estimated 600,000 tons of container refuse annually. In 1977, Milliken won limits on phosphates used in laundry detergents, an action that contributed significantly to Lake Erie's recovery. In 1979 the state adopted the Wetlands Protection Act, an important step in protecting areas that strain pollutants from water, control runoff sediments, store floodwaters and provide habitat for fish, amphibians and waterfowl.

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