

Bowden's legacy celebrated

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As long as the Gulf of Mexico caresses the shores of Pensacola Beach, as long as turtles and sea oats and sand dunes have a white sand beach to grow upon, J. Earle Bowden's legacy will be secure.

The Northwest Florida visionary, one of the area's most prominent and respected figures, has worked for decades to preserve Northwest Florida's history and environment. He is known as the "Father of Gulf Islands National Seashore" for his work to save miles of Gulf beaches from development, spearheading the authorization of a federal park that came to fruition in 1971. Bowden helped establish the Pensacola Historic District, has been honored as the state's Historic Preservationist of the Year and campaigned to protect Pensacola.

And he used a unique bully pulpit to push for Pensacola at every turn: the pages of the Pensacola News Journal, where the writer and cartoonist used well-crafted prose and morale-building cartoons to push for a better tomorrow.

It was 60 years ago this fall when Bowden first came to the Pensacola paper to work in the sports department. But his passion for writing and Pensacola would propel him to the paper's top position -- editor. And even today, 15 years after he retired, he still is the Pensacola News Journal editor emeritus. And he still occasionally sends in an editorial cartoon and a well-spun column for publication.

"They pay me with a little gasoline to get to the PNJ and back," said Bowden, 85, from his home in Cordova Park. "I sure don't do it for the money. I just feel like it's a way to keep in touch with the paper. Because it has been my life."

These days, the world of journalism is different from the day when Bowden stepped into the PNJ, when hot metal presses ruled and the Internet wasn't yet a dream. It was decades before Twitter, Facebook and social media sites delivered journalism right to your phone in paragraph-long information nuggets. Bowden always has been known for delicate prose, poetry even, layering his stories with colorful adverbs and adjectives and wonderfully wandering sentences that evoke emotion as much as they relay information. Bowden working in the age of Twitter and 140-character pronouncements? No, that wouldn't work.

"I don't care about writing 140 characters," he huffed from his study, the walls blanketed by numerous awards, honorary degrees, pictures and cartoons that detail his 60 years in journalism. "That would be hard for me to do."

Early years

Bowden is from the Panhandle community of Altha, a town of about 400 to 500 people near Blountstown between the Apalachicola and Chipola rivers, which was the basis for his 1979 memoir "Always the River Flow." He was a budding artist even then, inspired by the illustrations of Norman Rockwell and others. He even wanted to attend art school in Chicago, but got cold feet and attended Florida State University instead.

He has wanted to study art, but became disillusioned because most of the art studies revolved around the "fine arts."

"That was fine," Bowden said. "But I wanted to illustrate books and magazines like Rockwell."

He drifted toward journalism, finally earning a bachelor's degree in 1951.

He then joined the U.S. Air Force, and served as a military journalist at Mountain Home Air Force Base in Idaho, writing for the base paper called The Planesmen. But as the Korean War ended, Bowden, then an officer, was given a choice. Stay in indefinitely or get out of the military.

Bowden, married with a small child, made a decision.

"I wanted to go home and do journalism," he said.

He lined up a job with the Panama City News Herald, but that job fell through when he was delayed in New Jersey for two weeks. But management in Panama City referred Bowden to their "sister paper" in Pensacola, the Pensacola News Journal, which then had a morning and evening paper, and Bowden's career was set. He was hired as a sports reporter for \$65 a week with an extra \$10 a week for his cartoons.

"The newsroom wasn't that big," he said. "There were metal desks all gathered together. The first person I saw was Pat Lloyd (longtime News Journal writer) putting on rouge. There were a lot of characters there in those days."

Preservation interest

Bowden worked his way through the ranks, becoming editorial page editor in 1965. It was there that Bowden found his pulpit for change.

He wrote about history and Pensacola's need to preserve it. He wrote about the environment and how we should cherish and protect it.

"I always thought that was what an editor was supposed to do," Bowden said. "Get out and lead the town."

Bowden did, pushing for progressive measures that would protect what already was best about the area for generations to come.

He had written about the need for preservation of Civil War sites in Northwest Florida when the idea came to him that long-term preservation was needed at Pensacola Beach.

"So I wrote an editorial about how we had the best beaches in the world and these historic sites and how we needed to protect them," Bowden said of the initial 1965 editorial calling for beach preservation.

Soon, he received a call from U.S. Rep. Bob Sikes, who offered to put a bill together to preserve the seashore from development.

The debate raged for about five years, Bowden said. Still, he led the charge, constantly hammering the community with pro-seashore editorials.

"There was a lot of resistance," Bowden said. "A lot of people thought it was a federal land grab. The Santa Rosa Island Authority resisted it. The Chamber of Commerce resisted it. There were a bunch of young lawyers here that wanted to develop the land. Now, some of those same people tell me that the Gulf Islands National Seashore is one of the best things we have."

Seashore legacy

Even today, Bowden's legacy at the Gulf Islands National Seashore is prominent. Earle Bowden Way is a 7-mile road that runs through Gulf Islands National Seashore.

"He is certainly known within the park and the community as the Father of Gulf Islands National Seashore," said Dan Brown, park superintendent. "Certainly, many people worked for the creation of the seashore, but as with any of those types of movements, someone at the forefront is required. Earle did that. He took the lead and pointed the way and became a spokesperson for the seashore."

Brown said that, normally, a national park takes about 20 years of processing to become a park.

"But he helped build popular support in five or six years," Brown said. "His leadership was crucial."

Bowden was named an honorary park ranger shortly after the seashore was established in 1971. Not that he's out on the beach he helped to preserve that often.

"I don't really go to the beach," he said. "I burn."

Bowden continued to push for preservation of Pensacola's treasures:

He served eight years as chairman of the Saenger Theatre management board, working on various restorations of the Palafox theater.

He helped establish the Pensacola Historic District in 1969 and served eight years as president of the Pensacola Historical Society.

In 1981, he served as general chairman for Pensacola's American Bicentennial Galvez Celebration.

In 1984, he was named Florida Preservationist of the Year by the Florida Trust for Historic Preservation.

He was a founding member of the Pensacola Historical Restoration and Preservation Commission, part of West Florida Historic Preservation Inc. The building housing the organization's headquarters is named for Bowden.

"We love Mr. Bowden," said Robert Overton Jr., CEO of West Florida Historic Preservation Inc. "Our organization wouldn't be here without his guidance and support. If not for Earle Bowden, who knows how many historic and environmental treasures in our community would be lost? He definitely made Northwest Florida a better place to live."

Newspaper man to the core

And Bowden still works to make Northwest Florida a better place to live, serving on numerous boards and continuing to be a sought-after speaker on matters of history and preservation. Not bad for a newspaper fella.

And through it all, Bowden remains a newspaper type of guy, even though he's disappointed in the Internet revolution edging past printed newspapers.

"I'm saddened by what's happened, but I understand the economics," Bowden said. "I'm not critical of the new changes, but I am saddened that the press I knew no longer exists."

Still, Bowden always was willing to accept, and sometimes embrace, change.

When the morning and afternoon papers were consolidated in 1985, Bowden was part of the task force to redesign the new combined Pensacola News Journal. A young News Journal reporter, Mike Suchcicki, also was on the task force.

"He was in his 50s," Suchcicki, 57, said of Bowden. "My age now. Being one of the younger guys, I thought of him as the old guard who would want to do it the old way. But Mr. Bowden had the most progressive ideas of anyone. I thought he would be against change, but he was all for change. He wasn't like I thought he would be at all. He was forward-thinking."

Bowden often thinks about the changes he has seen.

"My oldest son, Steve, said to me, 'Dad, do you realize you lived through all these changes?' I remember the hot metal days, the manual typewriters, all the characters in the newsroom. It really was my life."

J. Earle Bowden, pictured in his study, first came to work for the Pensacola paper 60 years ago. And 15 years after he retired, he still is the Pensacola News Journal editor emeritus. BELOW: Editorial cartoons by Bowden.

Photos by Ben Twingley/

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Jesse Earle Bowden

Age: 85.

Occupation: Pensacola News Journal editor emeritus. Bowden, now retired, started at the Pensacola News Journal in 1953 as a sports reporter. He worked his way through the ranks, serving as sports editor, editorial page editor and editor at the paper.

Highlights: Wrote series of editorials calling for the creation of Gulf Islands National Seashore on Pensacola Beach - and which includes parts of Mississippi -- to preserve the beach area for future generations. Also helped establish the Pensacola Historic District and worked on numerous preservation projects.

Hometown: Altha, Fla.

Family: Mary Louise Bowden, wife. Two children, Steven Bowden and Randall Clark Bowden.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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