

## Wernicke shares memories of J. Earle Bowden

Carl Wernicke, Special to the News Journal 6:09 p.m. CST February 15, 2015



(Photo: PNJ archives)

I think "great" is an overused word today, but Earle Bowden deserved to be called a great journalist. Better than anyone I ever worked with, Earle understood how to use a newspaper to accomplish things he believed were good for his community. And if you knew Earle, you knew that his "agenda" was always to make his community better. You might not agree with his view, or his approach to it, but if you knew Earle you could not doubt that he was about doing what he believed to be the right thing.

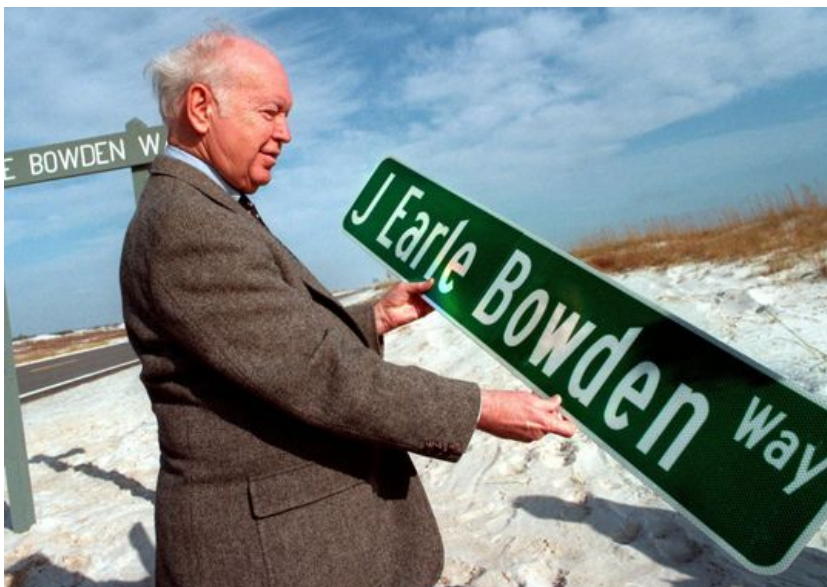


PENSACOLA NEWS JOURNAL

PNJ Editor Emeritus J. Earle Bowden has died

<http://www.pnj.com/story/news/2015/02/15/j-earle-bowden-passes-away/23456675/?from=global&sessionKey=&autologin=>

Whether it was getting Congressman Bob Sikes to establish Gulf Islands National Seashore, breathing life into Pensacola's nascent historic preservation efforts, pushing for better schools or recognizing the need in the 1960s for environmental awakening in a community that had trashed its greatest natural asset, Pensacola Bay, Earle was not just ready to bring the power of the press to bear, he knew how to do it effectively.



J. Earle Bowden admires a street sign which will soon be placed on County Road 399 which runs through the Gulf Islands National Seashore. The dedication ceremony took place on Wednesday Jan. 21, 1998. Bowden played a major role in preserving the seashore so it can be enjoyed by everyone. (Photo: scott fisher, Copyright 1998 Pensacola News Jo)

First and foremost, that meant educating the public through the pages of the News Journal. And as an editor with influence, he sometimes accomplished more behind the scenes than he did on the front page. Earle believed the editor of the newspaper should be an active member of the community's leadership group, and he was. You could measure it if by no other standard than watching the parade of community leaders trooping through the News Journal lobby on their way to Earle's office.

And for many years Earle served on local appointive boards where he developed great expertise on architectural design standards and historical preservation. Early on he joined with those calling for saving Pensacola's heritage trees at a time when development was threatening to leave the landscape bare and asphalted. When racial tensions overflowed in our schools, Earle called together the community's top leaders and pushed them to take the responsibility to address the problems.

But it wasn't just *his* voice that he considered important. One of the many things that impressed me about Earle was his commitment to letting other people speak through the pages of the News Journal. If he agreed with their vision, he'd throw the News Journal's editorial voice behind them; if he disagreed, he'd oppose them with that voice. But whether he agreed or disagreed, he believed that all sides of an argument should be heard.

In the news pages, he wasn't afraid to let the facts speak for themselves; he always insisted that those pushing ideas that the News Journal opposed editorially should be given fair treatment in news stories and the op-ed page. And he always felt there was room at the top for new leaders who brought good ideas, whether they were politicians or housewives on a crusade to save old buildings.

One of the more fascinating things about Earle was his incredible memory. He was an insightful interviewer, although I think that often people having lunch with Earle or chatting in his office didn't realize they were being interviewed. But he wanted to know what made people who they were. I can't count the number of times I asked Earle about someone and then sat spellbound as he talked about where they came from, both geographically and in terms of family, what church they went to, their politics, their personality, and he seemed to be able to tie it all together to explain who they were. His eye and memory for detail were astounding. He could go on in amazing depth about someone he hadn't seen in years.

Earle definitely had an ego. We used to joke that he thought he was the second coming of William Faulkner or Thomas Wolfe in his writing, with his fondness for long, convoluted sentences and multiple descriptive phrases in his newspaper columns. He loved to make up words that seemed appropriate, a la Faulkner, and would surrender their use good-naturedly when challenged.

But at his best he was a fine writer; his treatment of his great-grandfather's experience at Gettysburg is one of the best pieces of writing on the Civil War that I have read. He was a respected amateur historian who insisted on getting things right; more than once he complained to me about historical writings that got crucial details wrong because the writer didn't take the time to do enough research, or because the wrong story might seem more interesting than the correct one.

He was also a memoirist, a writer of short stories and a novelist, favoring gothic tales of rural people struggling with the eternal basics: life, death, sex and the struggle to earn a living, sometimes in a way the law might not be happy with. And while his editorial cartoons seemed simplistic to many (he modeled them after minimalist cartoonists like Herbert Block, know as Herblock) he was a fine artist and caricaturist. I have hanging on my wall at home a collection of his prints, including an old-fashioned sugar cane mill, his family homestead in Altha and a spot-on likeness of my younger self.

In working with Earle for many years I also got to see how respected he was by politicians of all stripes. They might not like the editorials he wrote or had written for the News Journal, but they recognized that he was someone they had to deal with. He got deserved respect from politicians on the local scene, in Tallahassee and even in Washington.

Today, I don't know if he could become what he was, given the changing economics and focus of journalism, especially newspapers. But Northwest Florida is fortunate that he came along when he did. He will definitely be missed.

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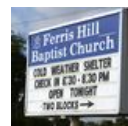


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Feb. 17, 2015, 1:59 p.m.



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