

# Former colleagues, friends share memories of J. Earle Bowden

10:43 a.m. CST February 16, 2015

## Former colleagues, friends share memories of PNJ Editor Emeritus J. Earle Bowden



Former friends and colleagues share their memories of Pensacola News Journal Editor Emeritus J. Earle Bowden.

Bowden, 86, died Sunday.

**'J. Earle Bowden wasn't just a Florida journalist. He was Florida's journalist.'**

(Photo: Ben Twingley/btwingley@pnj.com)

Once a week or so, Earle Bowden would stop by my office, ask if I was busy, and then spend about 20 or so minutes reminding me of my obligation.




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Not in those precise words, of course. But with a smile as long as the Three-Mile Bridge, stretching across that full-moon Cracker face of his, and eyes that looked like they were holding nervous secrets, the guy we all called "J. Earle" would remind me of that obligation with stories and sermons of how special Pensacola and Northwest Florida are, that the woods and the rivers and the beaches, especially the beaches, needed to be treasured, to be cared for and hugged. And he expected me, he expected all of us at the PNJ, to treasure and to love and to, perhaps most of all, defend these places as much as he did.

I heard about his passing Sunday and it was easy to recall all of the wonderful things he had done for Northwest Florida, from the beaches along J. Earle Bowden Way, to the celebration of the city's amazing and wonderful history, to his political cartoons that line the walls of Irish Politicians Club, to his years of service, including as editor, at his beloved PNJ, to his works of fiction and his tales about growing up in Northwest Florida. J. Earle was a storyteller, and a darn good one at that.



**Bill Vilona**  
@billvilonaPNJ

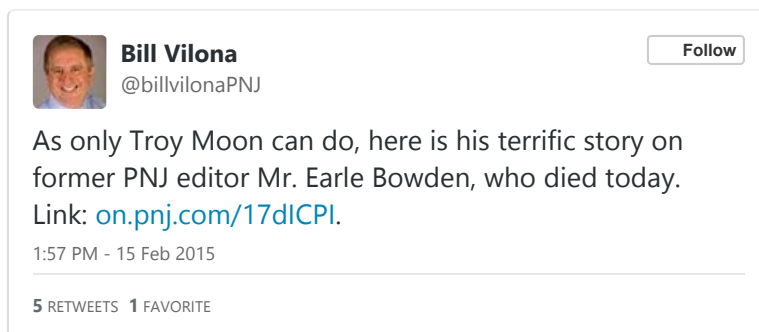
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I first met Mr. Earle Bowden decades ago when joining PNJ. So sad to learn today of his passing. A great man, impeccable legacy. #pnjsports

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But in his stories, in his cartoons, in his talks, I came to realize that what J. Earle was doing was warning us all, warning us that all the good that he had done to save what makes Pensacola so very special, the work that so many had done, could all disappear in a heartbeat. Florida does not have the best of records in defending its coastlines, or many other parts of its soul. For sure, J. Earle had managed to take a large piece of sand from the developers and make sure it was the public's to love, and not the owners' to pocket. He knew where the danger was coming from. He knew what had happened in other parts of the state; that the unchecked growth, the selling of our coastal soul, could happen in Escambia and Santa Rosa as well. It still might.

So he continued to write deep into his life. He continued to draw, deep into his life, and he could continue to express his hope, but also his displeasure at those who would take away Florida's beautiful spirit. He was both creator and defender.

J. Earle Bowden wasn't just a Florida journalist.

He was Florida's journalist.

— Richard A. Schneider, a journalist in Florida for more than 22 years, was the executive editor of the Pensacola News-Journal from 2006-2013. He is retired and teaches journalism at Belmont University in Nashville.

### **Champion of Pensacola**

For well over half a century, Earle championed Pensacola's past along with its present and future, its people and its natural resources. From this day forward his own name will be indelibly etched into the city's history.

Of course, his great legacy is the creation of the Gulf Islands National Seashore. But I think he also will be remembered as a newsman and a historian whose likes we won't see again. He cared deeply for Pensacola, he understood the fabric of this community, and his gift to all of us was to record that knowledge for posterity. But perhaps above everything I'll remember him as the very good, the very thoughtful and the very compassionate man whose ink-stained fingers kept going and going and going.

— Ginny Graybiel, former Pensacola News Journal managing editor

### **'RIP, my friend'**

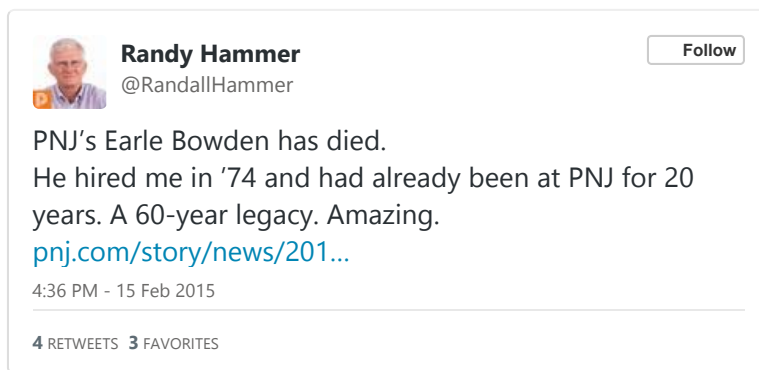
As managing editor of the PNJ from 1983-1988 and as a 40-year newspaperman, I can honestly say that I never worked with a more honest and more principled editor than Earle Bowden.

As we shaped editorial opinions for the PNJ in some spirited meetings, it was always Earle who stood tallest for the long-term needs of the community and it was Earle who always insisted that the newspaper be a force of progress.

He always managed to give us a Gulf Coast history lesson, reminding us that what we said and did today could have major ramifications for tomorrow.

Sometimes I think he loved Pensacola more than anything in the world. Probably no one in the last 100 years had a more significant impact on what Pensacola and the Gulf Coast of Florida have become than Earle Bowden. RIP, my friend.

— Ken Fortenberry, former Pensacola News Journal managing editor



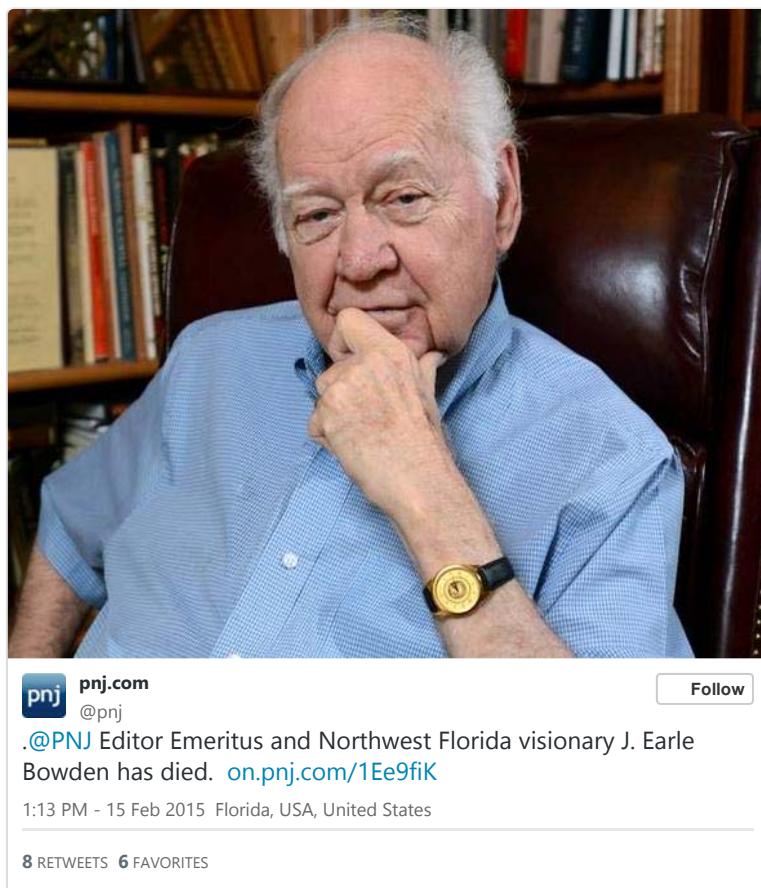
### 'Epitome of a great newsman'

Earle Bowden was the epitome of a great newsman. His powerful pen brought us all an appreciation for West Florida's rich history.

His relentless quest in the 1960s to have what were then sparsely populated beach areas set aside as Gulf Islands National Seashore spared large swatches of beach for the development onslaught yet to come.

His life's achievements will be felt for generations to come. You knew when he was in the room, you were in the presence of greatness.

— Karen Harrell Paulus, former Pensacola News Journal reporter



### Meeting led to career path

My first face-to-face meeting with Mr. Bowden came in 1974 in my senior year at J.M. Tate High School when I won a Pensacola News Journal writing contest. My award included a personal invitation to visit with him.

The door that opened that day led to me becoming a reporter on the News Journal's courthouse beat, writing about murder trials and big lawsuits in Escambia and Santa Rosa Counties.

And that paved the way for my present role as the spokesman and communications director for Florida's Supreme Court in Tallahassee. Mr. Bowden always told me that two crucial things lie at the root of our American government: a free press and independent courts.

After Mr. Bowden's early mentorship, I built my entire career around those two institutions.

— Craig Waters, Communications Counsel Director, Public Information Office, Florida Supreme Court



### Bowden encouraged journalistic dreams

Earle hired me back in 1974, brought me in as assistant news editor when I was just 22 years old. A few years later he called me into his office and said I could be editor of the newspaper someday if I really put my heart into it.

It was that kind of encouragement he gave to me and other young journalists.

— Randy Hammer, president and CEO of Studer Institute and former Pensacola News Journal executive editor



### 'Rest in peace, Mr. Bowden'

My heart is breaking. I thought the world of him. His door was always open, and we had some great conversations. I am so fortunate to have a framed copy of his sketch, 'Pecan Winter in Rural West Florida.' I cherish it. He signed it: 'For a great friend, Alice Crann, with best wishes... Jesse Earle Bowden.'

I was so fortunate to know him for so many reasons. Rest in peace, Mr. Bowden.

— Alice Crann-Good, former Pensacola News Journal reporter

'Taught me about newspapers' In the course of my work life and career, I've worked with many great bosses. There are three standouts over the years. With Earle's death, two have now passed. Some 30 odd years ago, Earle Bowden hired me at the News Journal. He taught me about newspapers, Pensacola politics and history. Of the latter, Earle insisted that you must tell history accurately and in general, get it right. He had a zero tolerance in this area long before the phrase was coined. Invariably, if you found him greatly aggravated it was usually because he found local examples of it not being correct. If I was nearby, I usually heard his rant until he got it out. Not long but certainly a rant. Earle taught me the power of the press not only as a catalyst of social change but community enrichment as well. To this end, he has long been revered as the father of historic preservation in our area as well as the savior of Gulf Island National Seashore. Those legacies alone made him a treasure. For all the accolades accorded him, I never heard much of this from him. I was family and life on which he commented. I never doubted his love of wife and family. I knew he was proud of Louise and her career accomplishments. He was proud of his sons, Randy and Steve. And I remember for some crazy reason his excitement on a long-ago weekend. Louise had gotten the movie, *Gone With The Wind*, on video tape. He, Louise and his young granddaughter were planning to do a marathon viewing of the movie. It touched me how he looked forward to spending the time together with them.

Earle was a great storyteller. He had hundreds of them. He hired me a few short months after my dad died, himself a great storyteller. I think missing my dad made me more appreciative and patient with Earle's stories. I listened close and I learned. For me, Earle served as my first boss at the Journal but more, he was a teacher, mentor, encourager and long-time friend. Earle, I'll miss you greatly.

— Sheila Kirkland Reed, former Pensacola News Journal community services director

#### 'Great respect for the man'

I personally got to know Mr. Bowden first as a student at the University of West Florida where he taught Feature Writing. I had a great respect for the man who had the ability to write with such flair. I was huge admirer of his loyalty to Pensacola and to the Pensacola News Journal. I worked at the PNJ as a reporter from 1985 to 1991, and during those years, my respect for the man deepened. I looked up to Mr. Bowden as a father-figure, considered him to be Northwest Florida's greatest storytellers and fine editorial cartoonist, and I greatly appreciated his campaigns for historical preservation. This man knew his history. I always appreciated his remarks, anecdotes, and historical information that he posted on Facebook, and I will miss those comments. Pensacola has lost a great man. Rest in peace Mr. Bowden.

— Allison Smith Moran, former Pensacola News Journal reporter

#### 'A pillar of principle'

Earle Bowden was a pillar of principle who never compromised honesty or integrity. Truth and right were absolutes ... there were no degrees of either -- in journalism, in life or in friendship. He was a friend, a mentor and a guide for me through many a troubled water. And he was one of only a handful in my many years in the industry who never wavered from doing the right thing at the right time, despite the risks, the threats and the repercussions -- personal and professional. Godspeed, Earle.

Joedy Isert, former Pensacola News Journal city editor

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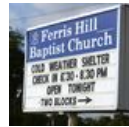


**Meetings: Wednesday, Feb. 18, 2015**

[\(/story/news/2015/02/17/government-meetings-wednesday-feb18/23561557/\)](/story/news/2015/02/17/government-meetings-wednesday-feb18/23561557/)

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



**Milton cold weather shelter open through Thursday night**

[\(/story/news/local/santa-rosa/2015/02/02/cold-weather-shelters-opening/22739449/\)](/story/news/local/santa-rosa/2015/02/02/cold-weather-shelters-opening/22739449/)

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**Century Business Challenge workshop, orientation dates set**

[\(/story/news/local/santa-rosa/2015/02/17/century-business-challenge-workshop-orientation-dates-set/23555377/\)](/story/news/local/santa-rosa/2015/02/17/century-business-challenge-workshop-orientation-dates-set/23555377/)

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