

Readers' Forum

News Journal

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21A

Many tries, many triumphs: Bowden worked for his community

"Make no small plans. There is no magic in them." - The slogan for Action '76, a community goals program kicked off in 1976.

I feel as if I have known Earle Bowden for 100 years. We have fought a lot of battles together, won some and lost some. I'm glad Earle is still in harness and still fighting after 30 years as editor of the News Journal.

I can't think of an important project here which Earle hasn't been involved in. Earle is a pre-eminent historian. He knows our history backwards and forwards and writes about it often, including books. He joins such local scholars as John Appleyard, Woody Skinner, Bill Coker and Jim McGovern.

Earle was a driving force 40 years ago along with Pat Dodson and Mary Turner Bule in launching our noteworthy historical district. Over the years, with Earle's leadership, Pensacola has resurrected its history and put it back on the map.

We recognize Earle as the father of our Gulf Islands National Seashore. He and former U.S. Rep. Bob Sikes pushed the



WARREN BRIGGS

measure through Congress in spite of opposition by the chamber of commerce and others. God knows what that stretch of beach would look like without the national park. Another Miami Beach?

For years a battle raged in Escambia County over the building of a governmental center. Finally a group of young tigers, including Earle, took over the project and rammed it home.

Win some, lose some, Earle has been a strong editorial advocate of charter government through a series of local civil wars. We hope come close, but close is not close enough. So we continue an antiquated horse-and-buggy county govern-

ment, depending on local bills passed way over in Tallahassee rather than local option and responsibility. Some of us had hoped to live long enough to see the day.

Alas! Earle may make it; he's still young. In 1972, Pensacola Mayor Reinhardt Holm and Pat Dodson dreamed up a biennial citizens' goals program for the community with Earle's personal and editorial backing. A bunch of young turks, including Earle, banded together and formed a rammed committee known as SABB (Self-Annotated Bunch of B.....).

As Earle said then, "A community without goals doesn't know where it's going!" With the newspaper's firm support, hundreds of citizens turned out to set goals in a program dubbed Action '76.

People young and old volunteered; they wanted a voice.

The agenda was ambitious. Some goals came to pass; others were passed to succeeding goals programs over some 15 years, always with Earle's help and encouragement. Without continued charter support the program withered and perished, and the new generation of young turks has not stepped forward to

pick up the pieces. At least this city, county and chamber have adopted their own goals.

When someone suggested we become the crape myrtle capital of the world, Earle jumped on it with his pen. The Telephone Pioneers, Gulf Power city, Navy, Clean and Green and others promoted and planted crape myrtles which are now sprouting all over Escambia County. We still lag behind Foley, Ala., but not because Earle hasn't pushed us.

When the battle over the USS Lexington erupted, Earle and the News Journal sided with those desperately trying to keep the aircraft carrier here. With opposition from the Navy, the National Museum of Naval Aviation, the Pensacola City Council and other leadership, we lost again.

They said we would always have an active carrier here, so we shipped the Lex off to Corpus Christi, Texas. Now we have nothing. Earle is still suffering.

Those are just a few of Earle's battles. There were many more: downtown redevelopment, Bayfront Parkway, Clean and Green, waterfront permitting and on and on. Time doesn't permit listing them

all, but there were many triumphs.

Earle is a gentleman, a scholar, a teacher, a writer, a speaker, a family person. He has an eloquent command of the English language and teaches writing at the University of West Florida. He donated the proceeds from his books to the university.

In recognizing his literary and editorial talents, the James Madison Institute in Tallahassee selected Earle to receive its Malcolm B. Johnson Award. Johnson was the longtime, noted editor of the Tallahassee Democrat, a then-conservative newspaper. Earle was Malcolm's protégé, so the award was most fitting.

The greatest thing about Earle is that he was born and raised in the piney woods village of Altha.

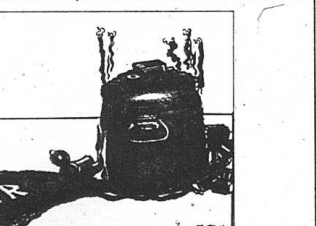
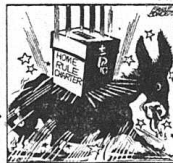
He knows what a sawmill looks like, sounds like and smells like. He is an honest-to-God Northwest Florida cracker and proud of it. Here's to another 30 years of continued success. Bravo!

Warren Briggs is a former state legislator and mayor of Pensacola. He served as chairman of Action '76.

30 years in pen and ink:



J. Earle Bowden was named editor of the News Journal on March 15, 1966. In honor of that event the News Journal is running this sampling from 30 years of his editorial cartoons.



A country boy from Altha did indeed make Pensacola his new home

I was 13 years old when Earle Bowden was named editor of the News Journal in 1966, so perhaps I can be forgiven if, in those years, it seemed he always was editor.

The wider world isn't always clear when you're that young. Which might explain why, since we got both the morning Journal and the afternoon News, I thought a single subscription included both a morning and an afternoon edition. Getting both newspapers, of course, made Earle's name even more of a presence.



CARL WERNICKE

He isn't really a hometown boy, hailing from Altha as he does. But Altha is a Panhandle town and so is Pensacola. Neither of the two are like they were then, but in all this time I believe Earle has - where it counts - changed less than either.

No, I'm not saying he hasn't adapted to modern times. He led the News Journal from the Linotype to the computer and created its modern four-section look. And today he does his writing on the terminal on his desk or his PC at home, and when he needs a national news update he grabs the remote control and tunes to CNN.

But in my 17 years on the News Journal Earle has never changed his ideas about what a newspaper should do - and that is cover its community, tell people what's happening so they can go the city council meeting or the ballot box armed with information.

"He let me do it, so I did." And the results are all over town - Gulf Islands National Seashore, the governmental center, downtown redevelopment, vibrant historic districts. Earle was leading or supporting each (see former Mayor Warren Briggs' column above for more). Even now, the city of Pensacola is finally catching up with his years-long coaxing to develop the bayfront as the focus of downtown.

Earle believes editors should be activists, not just encouraging community action but getting in the middle of it, be it Action '76, the community goals program, or years of service on the city's Architectural Review Board - today he's chairman - the guardian of authenticity in the renovation of historic downtown buildings.

He absorbed from his father this idea of community service, remembering still his father's declaration one day in Altha that "This town needs a funeral home," and

watching him trudge off to the meetings that made it happen.

"I grew up in that mold," Bowden said. "That's my perception of what an editor should be, someone who serves his community."

In addition to his determination to do what's right for his community, Earle's effectiveness as a community builder lies in his strict professionalism and obvious passion for what he believes in. It's why in the 1970s he could lead a crusade for Gulf Islands National Seashore, pitting him against many of the community's top readers, and emerge after the battle with both the seashore and the respect of his opponents, many

who later conceded that he had been right all along.

On the editorial pages, he demanded that the Journal speak with a strong voice in favor of the seashore. On the news pages, he required that the story be covered evenhandedly.

When critics had something to say, he made sure they had a place to say it. It was a perfect example of his belief that this newspaper should be a positive force for community progress - but only by bringing the community along with it.

Pensacola was a smaller community when Earle came on the scene, and ripe for his kind of leadership. The top circle was small, and if you

could win them over you could move. Earle had winning ways, and through his community involvement he knew almost everybody who mattered.

I've never met anyone so skilled at figuring out where you come from - literally. With amazing detail he can explain how someone's geographic region, family background, political or religious philosophy, personal ambitions and community alliances led to a particular vote or the birth or death of a project. His ability to retain these insights, instantly retrievable from memory, gives him a virtual blueprint of community lines of power stretching back over decades.

When all that comes together at the helm of a newspaper, as it did in 1966, the result is a multifaceted legacy that will impact this community far into the future.

Carl Wernicke is assistant opinion editor of the News Journal.



Early Bowden



Later Bowden

30 years and millions of words later ...

I had been editorial page editor a year when News Journal Publisher Braden Ball called me to his office and, with a quick roll of his unlit El Trelles cigar, bluntly asked: "Could you run that entire news department?"

Stunned, words choking my throat, I snapped, "Yes sir, I could try."

"You're the editor," Ball said. "Go back to the newsroom, call the staff into the conference room and tell them you're editor-in-chief."

"Right now?"

"Right Now!"

"Yes sir."

It was a long walk, remembering 12 years earlier I had walked into the News Journal for the first time; seeing the editor who hired me, Marion T. Gaines; a 37-year-old replacement editorialist remembering salad days as a writer of ball (sports editor), and then — at last — a dayside job as news editor of the evening Pensacola News.

It has now been a long walk, the first steps taken in the publisher's office May 18, 1966.

Thirty years.

Yet only yesterday, writing editorials in the 1960s and 1970s about redeveloping a worn and mostly abandoned downtown; championing historical preservation, the cultural arts, need for a civic center; the verbal fisticuffs enlivening both City Hall



**J. EARLE
BOWDEN**

and courthouse; my first crusade: consolidated government; millions of columns and editorial words about the neglected historic fabric of the Pensacola Bay area.

Today Pensacola's downtown is a model for Florida. The city has four preservation districts, and the City Council has an angelic, harmonious quality and the Escambia commissioners have discovered the 20th century as opposed to the dirt-road 1930s, vogue of the 1960s.

It was only yesterday, lamenting in 1960s columns, editorials and blunt editorial cartoons about shameful neglect of Pensacola harbor fortifications crumbling and rusting in the sands and the unplanned overdevelopment of barrier island beaches.

Now they are in good hands: Gulf Islands National Seashore, the fruits of a long editorial crusade, celebrates its 25th anniversary this year as the nation's

largest, and often the most visited, and certainly the most visited national park in Florida.

Only yesterday, dreams of reclaiming Pensacola's bayfront in the 1960s and 1970s — now a goal of the 1990s; working on grassroots goals-setting Action '76 for the bicentennial, including a Civic Center, four-year University of West Florida and saving the Saenger as a performing arts theater.

Only yesterday, fighting county commissioners for the governmental center. Now the cramped Judicial Center will be expanded; commissioners hope to join the rest of the city by restoring the Old Custom House, scene of a continuously changing cast of politicians such as O.E. "Tex" Edwards, King of the County Grady Albritton and Dr. No himself, Kenny Kelson.

Thirty years.

I once wrote granddaughter Jessica: Let the laughter of your successes rise above the whimpers of your disappointments.

I'm joyed to have been at the Romana/Jefferson nerve center as activist-advocate-critic from the 1960s to the 1990s — a journalist walking into the morrow for new challenges and the music of presses running at midnight.

J. Earle Bowden is editor and vice president of the Pensacola News Journal.

Olympic visitors should seek out Foxfire