

A Brief Biographical Essay of J. Earle Bowden  
Bob Dugan, Dean of Libraries, University of West Florida, September 2014

Jesse Earle Bowden is respected as a civic leader and activist who has given to the community as a friend of the arts, an educator, an historian and preservationist, and an environmentalist. An accomplished journalist, he may be the only senior news executive in American newspapers who drew his own editorial page cartoons. His influence on the geographic area as the editor of the *Pensacola News Journal* is everywhere. A visionary, Mr. Bowden's legacy, centered by his focus on Pensacola and the Florida Panhandle, is realized in the creation of the Gulf Islands National Seashore.

Mr. Bowden was born September 12, 1928 in the Panhandle community of Altha, FL (Calhoun County) West Florida between the Apalachicola and Chipola rivers. His early journalism career included founder and editor of the Altha High School student newspaper -- *The Al-Hi Gab* -- and the art editor of high school's first student yearbook, *The Althea*, in 1946. He was also editor of *The Altha Times* (later *Calhoun County Times*) (1946), and soon after a writer and columnist for the *Calhoun County Times* and *The County Record* in Blountstown (1947-1948).

Mr. Bowden wanted to become a writer-illustrator. His art training was limited and cartooning was a self-taught evolution as a result of focusing on journalism over illustrating, earning a B.S. in 1951 from Florida State University in journalism and minoring in political science. While at FSU he was sports editor and cartoonist (1949) and associate editor and editor (1950-51) of *The Florida Flambeau*, the student newspaper; he was also sports cartoonist and a correspondent (1948-1950), and city reporter and columnist (1950) for the *Panama City News-Herald*.

Mr. Bowden entered the U.S. Air Force in 1951 during the Korean Conflict. As an Air Force journalist at Mountain Home AFB in Idaho (1951-52), he helped launch the base newspaper, *The Planesman*; as editor he drew portraiture cartoons of base personalities as a regular feature. He attended Officer Candidate School at Lackland AFB Base at San Antonio.

As the conflict in Korea ended in 1953, Second Lieutenant Bowden was given the choice of remaining or leaving the Air Force. His decision to return to the Panhandle to continue his journalism career would forever change his life as well as Pensacola. A hoped-for return to the *Panama City News Herald* fell through, but the newspaper management referred him to the *Pensacola News Journal*, a sister newspaper.

Mr. Bowden began his career at the *Pensacola News Journal* on September 30, 1953 as a 25-year-old sports writer; he was paid extra to provide the newspaper's sports cartoons. During his career at the *News Journal* he served as Sports Editor and Cartoonist, 1953-58; News Editor, 1958-64; Editorial Page Editor and Editorial Cartoonist, 1964-66; Editor-in-chief, 1966-69; and, Editor and Vice President, Chairman of the Editorial Board and Editorial Cartoonist, 1969-97. As both editor and editorialist cartoonist, Mr. Bowden captured through text and image the progressive ideas and opinions that his editorial board wanted to convey publically. Although producing artwork was from the outset secondary to editing and writing responsibilities, he sometimes drew the cartoon before writing the editorial. Although retired since January 1, 1998, J. Earle Bowden remains Editor Emeritus and oftentimes contributes a column accompanied by a drawing.

His many contributions to the community mirror his personal and journalist/editorial interests. As a historian, he fostered historic preservation in Pensacola including the need to preserve Civil War sites in Northwest Florida; Seville Square; Historic Pensacola Village; the T.T. Wentworth Jr. Florida State Museum; the establishment of the Pensacola Historic District in 1969; and, the placement of neighborhoods and buildings on the National Register of Historic Places. He contributed to the historic preservation efforts through leadership positions in the West Florida Historic Preservation Inc. (renamed

UWF Historic Trust in 2013); West Florida Preservation, Inc., (continuing the program of the Historic Pensacola Preservation Board of Trustees; Historic Pensacola Preservation Board of Trustees); and, the Pensacola Historical Society, among others as identified on his vita. His contributions to preserving the area's history were recognized with the dedication in 1990 of the J. Earle Bowden Building located at 120 Church Street in Pensacola and currently housing the administrative offices of the UWF Historic Trust.

Other community leadership positions include the University of West Florida Foundation and the Saenger Theatre Management Board. Mr. Bowden has received numerous national, state, and regional journalism and community awards which are detailed in his extensive vita.

In addition to his journalist and editorial responsibilities, and his contributions to the community, Mr. Bowden is also an author of several books including local histories; a journalism guidebook, *The Write Way, An Editor's Guidebook for Students of Writing*; his memoirs, *Always the Rivers Flow*; an anthology of his editorial essays, *When You Reach September: An Editor's Essays and Other Episodic Echoes*; and *Drawing from an Editor's Life* published in 1996 which includes more than 40 years of editorial cartoons, caricatures and illustrations from the *Pensacola News Journal*. Mr. Bowden has edited, and contributed text and illustrations, for dozens of other books, stories, and magazine articles.

Mr. Bowden's influences on the Panhandle are reflective of his background. His father taught him that if you are going to live in a town, you should become a good and active citizen. As an editor and cartoonist, Mr. Bowden focused more of his attention on local government, state politics, regional issues, and controversies than national and international issues believing that the closer to home, the greater the editorial's and cartoon's effectiveness and impact in causing action towards more efficient government and an improved quality of life.

Mr. Bowden's legacy -- the establishment of Gulf Islands National Seashore -- was first suggested in columns and cartoons in the early 1960s. The idea was to save miles of Gulf of Mexico beaches from development. U.S. Representative Bob Sikes offered to put a bill together to preserve the seashore which escalated the debate for years between pro-beach development advocates allied with those who viewed the bill as a federal land grab, and those in the local environmental movement. Mr. Bowden drew more than 50 cartoons advocating the national park; the nature preservationists prevailed, and President Richard Nixon signed the congressional act in January 1971 establishing the seacoast recreational and historical park stretching from Santa Rosa Island and Pensacola harbor west to the Mississippi barrier islands; the park opened the following year. The Santa Rosa Island county highway through the Gulf Islands National Seashore from Pensacola Beach east to Navarre Beach was named J. Earle Bowden Way by Escambia County Commission and dedicated on January 21, 1998. Mr. Bowden's contribution to this effort, now widely held as one of the most important actions that contribute positively to the area's year-round quality of life, earned him the moniker of "Father of Gulf Islands National Seashore."

#### Selected Information Sources Consulted

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