

Bowden: Cartoons tell all about town

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India ink lines flow in Internet digital sparkle, my stained left hand working toward deadlines from Louise's kitchen table for many thousand drawings satirizing politicians and political absurdities in the cartoonist's art. Soon, the University of West Florida Library Internet website will offer a caricatured journey through Pensacola and Escambia County political and civic minefields littered with wit, parody, satire and metaphorical absurdities, serious issues transforming the Pensacola Bay Area since the 1960s.

So far, librarian Bob Dugan, archivist Dean Debolt and a high-tech crew have posted more than 1,200 drawings of 3,000-4,000 in the Bowden Collection.

I see great faces, battles, won, lost: Rod Kendig's jolly face as city and county manager. Kenny Kelson jousting with Mayor Vince Whibbs; the aborted UWF-PJC unification; Bill Maloy wanting an appointed school superintendent; intricacies and heartburn of state-forced growth management, fluoridation fights, agonies to establish Gulf Islands National Seashore, Escambia's independent dirt-road board finally hiring a county administrator, sudden need to address urbanization creeping north toward Molino.

Escambia school board members Vanette Webb and Hal Mason, bombshell metaphors marking comedic political uncertainty for public education change; Commissioner Mike Whitehead in a sandbox, digging up property tax for beach dwellers; King of the County Grady Albritton in his chariot and the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, symbolic of an old county order now memory; Banty rooster Wyon Dale Childers, building a legendary Florida Senate deanship and then his buzzsaw exit from the Escambia courthouse in prison stripes; campaign to prevent Scenic Highway walled with highrises, blocking the bay; early mayors shaping the city Renaissance since the 1970s; Environmentalists vs. Developers, an unending conflict; Ol' Stench, symbolizing the wastewater plant, stinking up Main Street, Palafox Pier developer Ray Russenberger unnerving City Hall, calling for a strong elected mayor. Warren Briggs and Clark Thompson trying to moor the USS Lexington on Pensacola's bayfront in fatal political crosswinds as the retired Blue Ghost sails for Corpus Christi. Adm. Jack Fetterman's Florida Maritime Museum becoming a ball park.

Now county government is more professionally executed than dirt-roadism; the city's elegant restored heritage streetscape lay hidden when I drew my first cartoons in the 1950s, advocating neighborhood reclamation. Many natural green parks dot the Bay area; city and county protect heritage trees; the Pitcher Plant Prairie preserves a sensitive west Escambia watershed. Low-ranked Tourism's risen as a vital if still controversial enterprise.

New, youthful attitudes awaken Palafox, nationally heralded as one of America's Great Streets. The University of West Florida trots out a rah-rah football promise while striving to expand a vital cultural/economic partnership.

Cartoonists broadaxe hypocrisy and pomposity; expose politicians too big for their britches. Strolling these old political minefields of fault, failure and success, I see the growing pains of a city and region grasping for new visionaries of less rancor and fewer political absurdities.