

J. LOWE  
DAVIS  
Commentary

**No, thanks,  
I don't think  
I can make it**

I got the bad news in the mail this week. The dreaded notice that makes you self-concious drop below sea level:  
"High School Class Reunion.  
"Dinner-Dance on Oct. 10."  
My first thought was "The same as any normal person's would be:

Can I lose 30 pounds in two weeks?  
I graduated in 1959. Yes, I realize this year is not an even-numbered milestone. We're marking our 38th-year reunion because too many of us didn't want a 30th or a 35th. We also don't want a 38th, but certain members of our class, namely the party crowd, apparently still don't have their upstairs lights turned on.

**IN TRUTH,** I don't want to go to a reunion because there's someone who won't be there. His absence will be, for me, as painful as his presence was during our school days.  
James was in my class beginning in first grade. He came to school in overalls, the same pair for two years or there at a stretch. In the hot months, he did not wear a shirt and he flapped around in sandals made of rubber strips cut off a bald tire. In the cold months, he wore a BVD shirt under the overalls and cracked-leather, old-man-style shoes without socks.

He lived in "mill town," the place where textile workers rented homes from the company. He often had lint in his hair and bruises on his arms, neck and face. I had no idea, then, what that said about his life. My friends and I merely knew what he was: an outcast.  
He usually had a sniffy cold, and he never had a Kleenex. One after another, grade after grade, the teachers moved him to the back row and never called on him, never asked him to go to the blackboard, never gave him a classroom duty. I cannot recall the sound of his voice because I don't believe I ever heard him speak.  
I did see him smile, though, on Valentine's Day when we were in fifth grade.

**AS ALWAYS,** the classroom had a big decorated box into which everyone stuffed cards for friends and heartthrobs. The last hour of the school day in Feb. 14 was devoted to distribution of the Valentines, a process by which popularity could be calibrated precisely.  
Every year, Julia, the most beautiful girl in our school and he known universe, had a mound of Valentines on her desk.

Every year, James had none. The night before Valentine's hat year, I was sitting cross-legged on my bed surrounded by packets full of Woodworth's cards I'd bought that afternoon. I was busy trying to hink up cryptic-romantic messages to put on them in lieu of my signature when my mother came in and sat on the edge of the bed. She picked up a few cards, glanced at them and didn't seem to notice when I moved certain ones under my pillow, away from her reach. Then she asked if I had any extras.

Well sure, I guess so. Then she asked if there was anyone I had overlooked, someone who might "need" a card. I was puzzled.  
She picked up a simple one that said something friendly but not feverish. "You know, something like this," she said, then she went back out to the technician.

# LIFE



**Amsterdam, the city of canals**  
The romantic charm of the capital of the Netherlands makes you want to linger.  
Travel, 6E

## Our own national treasure prepares for retirement

# BOWDEN

"The Editor" may be retiring, but knowing Earle Bowden as I have known him for several decades, he will continue to be a treasure, as he discovers and defines for us the yet undiscovered treasures that lie in our future. To him we say Godspeed and good luck, keep the ink flowing, and help us to keep knowing what our treasures really are."  
— Vince Whibbs Sr., former mayor of Pensacola

By Jackie Brooks  
News Journal correspondent

**J** Earle Bowden has never been afraid to lead the Pensacola community — even if it meant waiting for the rest of us to catch up.

Developers eyeing 21 miles of undeveloped seashore? Set it aside for the public.

Want to tear down a semi-alm near downtown? Create the Seville Historic District and lure new homeowners.

"Some still bear a grudge about the (Seashore) giveaway, but being called the 'father of the Seashore' is one of the better things I've been called in my life," said the 69-year-old community activist and editorial writer who retires this year after 44 years with the Pensacola News Journal.

A public reception honoring the man and his career is planned for today at the J. Earle Bowden Building, 120 Church St.

The crowd should be large. Through Bowden's career in Pensacola, he's written sports, politics and crime stories. Covered movie premieres, wars and minor league baseball.

But it's his 31 years as an editor and editorial writer that have helped shape Pensacola's personality as we know it today.

Millions of people have visited the Seashore since it was created in 1971. It's the foundation for the area's tourism industry. And those dilapidated Seville shotgun houses are selling for six figures.

Former Mayor Vince Whibbs Sr. calls the Seashore and Seville Square projects "lasting treasures that demonstrate (Bowden's) knowledge and appreciation."

"Earle Bowden made them happen."

Indeed, it wasn't until Bowden wrote a May 5, 1965, News Journal editorial calling for the preservation of miles of Santa Rosa Island beaches and historic forts that the idea was taken seriously.

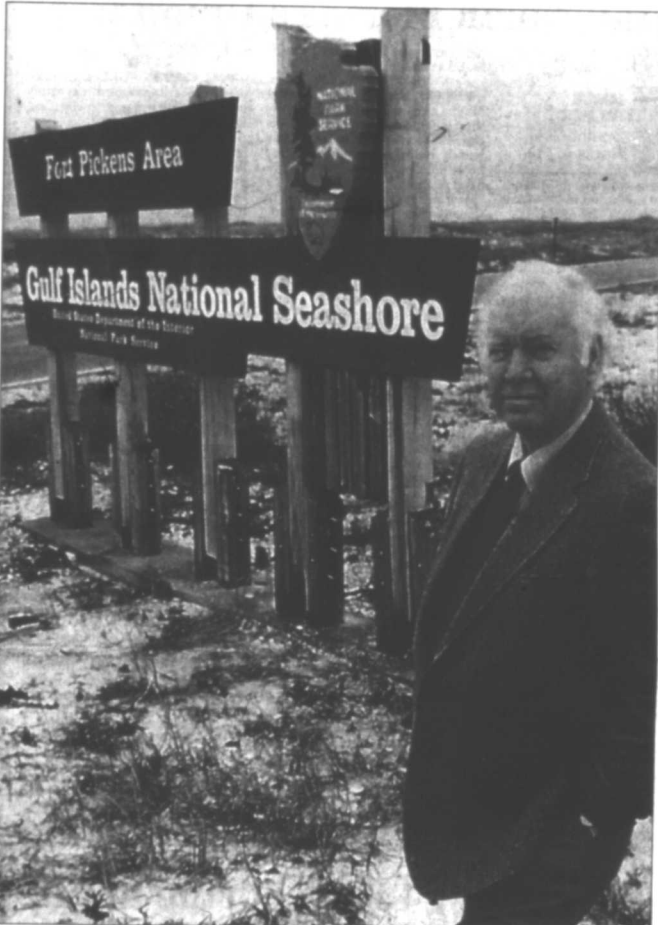
"The next day (former U.S. Congressman) Bob Sikes called me and said he liked the idea and would put in a bill in Congress to create a national park," Bowden said.

But the position made Bowden squarely a target for those who'd rather see the land available for development and, possibly, taxation. Opposition came from such formidable foes as the Escambia County Commission, the Chamber of Commerce and the Board of Realtors.

"I really thought we had lost it two or three times," Bowden said. "But the general public liked the idea."

"I didn't want to give up even when a lot of my friends and influential people in the community opposed it. It was the right thing to do, and I'm proud of the victory. Most of the people who opposed the Seashore have since admitted to me that we were right."

He jokes today that he can't



J. Earle Bowden wrote a Pensacola News Journal editorial in May 1965 that began the campaign to create Gulf Islands National Seashore. Millions have since visited the Seashore, the primary draw for tourists to the area.

**WANT TO GO?**

- **WHAT:** Public retirement reception for J. Earle Bowden.
- **WHEN:** 2 to 5 p.m. today.
- **WHERE:** J. Earle Bowden Building, 120 Church St.

find anyone who was opposed to the idea.

Courageous leadership roles are what he says the newspaper and community activists must be willing to take on if Pensacola is to progress.

"We need to have a bold vision for the 21st century," he said. "We've got a good foundation for it. Strong citizen involvement is important. It begins at the neighborhood level, at the community level."

"A newspaper has a responsibility to provide leadership, to look at issues and take stands

See **BOWDEN 7E**



Bowden explains drawing principles to a group of children during a cartooning workshop at the Pensacola Museum of Art in 1992.

**JESSE EARLE BOWDEN**

1951: Graduated from Florida State University with bachelor's degree in journalism. Joined U.S. Air Force. OCS, discharged 1953.

1953: Discharged from Air Force. Began working as sports writer and cartoonist at Pensacola News-Journal.

1954: Named News-Journal sports editor.

1957: Named news editor.

Early 1960s: Became involved in the historic preservation movement. Cartoons are exhibited as a collection at the Pensacola Art Center.

1964: Named editorial page editor.

May 1965: Wrote first editorial calling for the establishment of Gulf Islands National Seashore.

1966: Named editor in chief of the News-Journal.

1967: University of West Florida enrolls its first students. News Journal editorials had championed the university's creation.

1968: Gannett Co. Inc. purchases News-Journal. Bowden named editor and vice president. Redesign newspaper to current four-section design.

1970: Received Public Service Medallion. Gannett Co. Inc. for editorial campaign to protect environment of Escambia and Pensacola bays and establish Gulf Islands National Seashore.

Jan. 7, 1971: Congress authorizes the establishment of the Gulf Islands National Seashore.

1979: Published "Always the Rivers Flow, Deliberately a Memor," the first of his eight books.

1981: Named honorary National Park ranger by U.S. Secretary of the Interior.

1983: Began teaching journalism classes at UWF.

1984: Award of Merit. American Association of State and Local History, for helping preserve Pensacola and West Florida history.

1985: Named Preservationist of the Year by Florida Trust for Historic Preservation.

Honorary doctorate of Humane Letters, University of West Florida.

1992: Helped found Pensacola Bay Area Literacy Coalition. President until 1996.

Awarded Bob Graham Architectural Awareness Award, Florida Association of the American Institute of Architects.

1994: Named a Fellow by James Madison Institute for Public Policy Studies, Tallahassee.

1997: Announces retirement from the News Journal.



Bowden's collection of editorial cartoons is first exhibited as a collection at the Pensacola Art Center in the early 1960s.



Bowden is awarded an honorary doctorate of Humane Letters from the University of West Florida in 1985.