Our own national treasure prepares for retirement

By Jackie Brooks

Earle Bowden has never been afraid to lose the Pensacola community - even if it meant waiting for the rest of us to catch up. Developers eying 21 miles of undeveloped seashore "set aside" the public. Want to tear down a semi-slum near downtown? Create the Seville Historic District and lure new homeowners. Put in 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 68-year-old community activist and editorial writer who retired 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., Pensacola.

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

But it's his 31 years as an 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 3, 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 Bikes 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 the land be 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 community 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 slowly admitted to me that we were right."

He jokes today that he can find anyone who was opposed to the idea.

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

"We need to have a bold vision for 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 causes and take stands."

Photo courtesy of J. Earle Bowden

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

WANT TO GO?

WHAT: Public retirement reception for J. Earle Bowden

WHERE: J. Earle Bowden Building, 120 Church St.

When: 2 to 5 p.m. today

Bowden was awarded an honorary doctorate of humane letters from the University of West Florida in 1985.