

Man, myth, mystery

Herman B Wells' chosen biographer faces a larger-than-life challenge.

BY BILL SHAW
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BLOOMINGTON, Ind. — The cavernous, book-lined chancellor's office here in Owen Hall on the Indiana University campus remains undisturbed since the great Herman B Wells left for the last time on March 18, went home, ate supper and died in bed.

A framed photograph of a smiling Wells is propped in his office chair. He died 12 weeks before his 98th birthday, ending an epic life that nearly spanned the 20th century.

His books and personal belongings remain as he left them. Nothing moved. Nothing rearranged. The office he'd occupied since the summer of 1962 is now a shrine to the Hoosier icon whose name is synonymous with Indiana University.

"He's still here, and I still work for the chancellor," said Linda Bucklin, Wells' longtime secretary, who speaks of him in the present tense.

Such was the immense power of Herman B Wells, surely one of the most honorable men ever to grace the Hoosier landscape. Even in death, he lives as an enduring Hoosier legend whose life and legacy have reached mythical proportions to legions of admirers.

Admirers like James H. Capshew, who has taken on the task of writing the great man's biography.

"This is where I sat in April 1977 when Dr. Wells interviewed me to become one of his houseboys," said Capshew, resting a hand on a chair beside Wells' desk. Capshew was a 22-year-old undergraduate at the time and needed a job and a place to live to finance his education.

Wells hired him. For two years, Capshew lived in Wells' home at 1321 E. 10th St.,

across from the Main Library. He served Wells dinner every night and ate with him, a requirement of the job. The gregarious, outgoing Wells did not like to eat alone. Or be alone. He needed constant companionship, conversation and intellectual stimulation. There were telephones in every room of the house, including the bathrooms.

"There was nothing solitary about him," said Capshew.

Wells, a liberal New Deal Democrat, talked of world events, politics, university matters, but nothing personal.

On weekends, when the cook was off, Capshew fried Wells' bacon and eggs.

"Dr. Wells couldn't boil water," Capshew recalled. "He was helpless in the kitchen."

Capshew is 46 now, and a tenured professor in the Department of History and Philosophy of Science.

On Halloween night five years ago, at the frighteningly young age of 41, Capshew suffered a stroke after trick-or-treating with his children.

When he awoke in the hospital, hunched in a wheelchair beside his bed was Wells.

Capshew removes his glasses and cries when telling this story of the old man in the wheelchair, holding his hand and offering heartfelt assistance.

"Dr. Wells said, if you need anything, just let me know," recalls Capshew, who was in the hospital two weeks. Wells visited every day, played with Capshew's three little kids and consoled his wife.

"He was the greatest man I ever knew. I miss him so much," says Capshew, composing himself and drying his eyes.

Unrestricted access

Three years ago, Wells designated Capshew as his biographer, giving him unrestricted access

to his professional papers and personal letters. They number in the millions of pages, fill two entire rooms and will take two years to catalog and read.

"When I told him I wanted to write his life story, he said 'Fine, but don't you have anything better to do?' " said Capshew, who has a publishing contract with Indiana University Press.

This is a daunting challenge. Capshew regards Wells as a saint, the most significant influence in his life. Yet Capshew also is a historian, a seeker of truth and facts, which can sometimes conflict with myth and legend.

Complicating matters was Wells' self-deprecating sense of humor and mischievous habit of embellishing a good story to make it better, mostly because he thought it was funny.

Once a colorful, harmless anecdote took hold, no matter how inaccurate, Wells often embraced and enhanced it. For example, says Capshew, one whopper was the story about how stunned Wells was to be selected university president. He didn't even know he was under consideration. It dropped from the sky with no warning. And, aw, shucks, how could he resist such a surprising opportunity to serve his university.

"The truth is, he was well aware there was an enormous effort by his friends to have him named president," said Capshew.

What if unpleasant or disturbing facts surface that might alter the perception of the legendary Herman B Wells? What then?

"When the facts conform to the myth that's fine," he said. "If they don't, I'll write that, too. I want to complicate him and explain how he became a legend. It's not a simple process. I want to get beyond the myths and determine how they were established."

The most delicate, complicating issue is Wells' personal life. Did he have one? And what was it, or were his personal and public lives so intertwined as to become one?



Separated only by death

Herman Wells was the only child of Granville and Anna Bernice Wells. Granville was a Boone County banker, schoolteacher and farmer. Anna Bernice also taught school. When Granville died in 1948, Anna moved to Bloomington and lived with Herman until her death in 1973.

They were constant companions during the 25 years they lived together. She was his confidante, worldwide traveling companion and the university's unofficial first lady.

When she died, the grief-stricken Wells left her room untouched for the rest of his life.

During the two years Capshew lived with him, the first thing Wells did every morning before coming downstairs to breakfast was visit his late mother's room.

"He just went in there for a few moments and contemplated," says Capshew. "I never asked what he thought about."

Wells never married, never dated, and as far as anyone knows, never had an intimate relationship with another man or woman. "The university is my sole mistress," he often told friends who broached the touchy subject.

All of which led over the years to considerable speculation over a perplexing question Capshew vows to address.

Was Herman Wells a homosexual?

"That has been talked about on this campus forever, and at this point I can't say one way or the other," says Capshew, reflecting on this puzzling matter back in his tiny office in Room 130 of Goodbody Hall, surrounded by dozens of pictures of Wells at various stages in his long life.

"If I had to guess at this point, I would say Herman Wells was asexual and probably died a virgin," he adds. "We may never know if Herman was a homosexual, but I hope to find the answer, one way or the other, and put this to rest."

A couple of years ago, Capshew says, he summoned the courage to ask Wells if he'd ever dated a woman. He laughed and brushed aside the question, saying only that he'd known some beautiful women when he was a young man, but now couldn't remember their names, where he met them or even what they looked like. This from the man who could recount in vivid detail a meal he ate in Paris along the Champs Elysees 60 years ago — even whether the salmon was poached or sauteed.

Kinsey contention doubted

In his 1997 biography of Indiana University

sex researcher Alfred C. Kinsey, author James H. Jones hinted that Wells was a homosexual. Jones implied that Wells' vigorous, unyielding defense of Kinsey's highly controversial studies of human sexuality might have been rooted in a personal rather than professional relationship.

Although it's still early in his research, Capshew discounts that theory, noting that Wells routinely declined invitations to visit Kinsey's home, was photographed with him only once and maintained a professional, arms-length relationship with the temperamental sex researcher.

"Herman and Alfred Kinsey were two very different people," says Capshew. "They were colleagues, not personal friends in any way."

Concern about Wells' apparent lack of romantic interest in women was noted in a Jan. 8, 1938, letter that Trustee John S. Hastings wrote to fellow Trustee Ora L. Wildermuth of Gary. Wells was acting IU president at the time.

Hastings wrote that Wells had talked with Ward Biddle, secretary to the board of trustees, about the "marriage question" after expressing admiration for the beautiful women in the South.

"Whereupon, Ward told him he ought to spend all of his vacation time in the South and marry one of them," Hastings wrote. "Maybe we could put a marriage stipulation in his contract to the effect that he marry within a specified period of time or forfeit a certain percentage of his salary each month he remained single after the time limit had expired."

Two months later, Wells was named university president. No such "marriage penalty" was inserted in his contract.

Shadows over the family

But even Herman's devoted, demanding mother urged him to marry. In late 1947, he gave his mother a ring.

"I will gladly turn it back to you to be reset at any time should you choose to get married and I hope it will be soon, as I do think you need a wife to look after you," she wrote her 45-year-old son on Oct. 9, 1947.

In his 1980 autobiography, *Being Lucky*, Wells wrote of an idyllic childhood in which he was guided and nurtured by loving, patient parents he adored.

However, dark clouds hung over the extraordinarily close relationship between the doting parents and their beloved child.

In the relentlessly upbeat *Being Lucky*, Wells skipped the details of his father's death, saying

only he became ill and "declined very rapidly." In fact, Granville Wells committed suicide by drinking poison while Herman was in Germany on university business in 1948.

For at least eight years before his suicide, Granville Wells seemed a tortured soul, haunted by nervous exhaustion over apparently unfounded fears of financial failure. Granville's mother, Jane Emmert Wells, had committed suicide when Herman was a child.

As an adult, Herman was involved in every microscopic detail of his parents' financial and personal lives. They exchanged voluminous letters during his presidency. His mother sometimes wrote him three times a day, often signing the letters "Bushels of Love, Mother," after giving him the latest gloomy news about his father.

"I am so concerned about Dad as things never seem to ease up for him," she wrote eight years before her husband's death.

"I believe that the way to handle the situation is to agree with him as much as possible and change the subject rather than argue," Herman wrote his mother at one point, counseling her on dealing with his father's wild mood swings.

One year, it took her four hand-written pages to tell Herman what she wanted for Christmas, which boiled down to "a pretty colorful pottery or something that would be pretty on the table when it was unset. I could continue to use my glass basket with a few flowers for a center piece and my horn of plenty candle holders when my table was set."

She once sent him samples of cloth swatches, asking his advice on a reupholstering project.

Very rarely did Mrs. Wells inquire about her son's demanding job as president of the state's largest university. She often wrote pages upon pages about her own activities, asking him to perform mundane but time-consuming tasks and gently scolding him for not writing prompt thank-you notes to relatives.

"I had your note about Carrie, and I have written Uncle Earl," he assured her in one letter. "I also appreciated the cherries and the jelly, for which I forgot to thank you."

"Parent" to his father

Although Granville Wells was the president of a Lebanon bank, he constantly looked to Herman for personal financial advice.

"Dear Dad," Herman wrote in August 1939. "It has occurred to me that we should get the spinning wheel from the Smiths. Couldn't you have some commercial truck that operates



between Lebanon and Jamestown pick it up and put it in the attic at Lebanon? There will be a \$2 or \$3 charge, which I would like to defray. Mother and I had a delightful time this week. I wish you could have been with us."

In the early 1940s Wells answered the torrent of letters in his own handwriting. Later, many of the letters were dictated and typed by his secretary, Bernita Gwaltney.

"Could Bernita write and tell me, as soon as possible, whether you are going to bring the turkey or not," his mother wrote, outlining in exhausting detail her plans for Thanksgiving dinner. "If you are not we will have a baked ham but if you still have the turkey we will have Lorene roast it and send on the liquid and I will make a pan of hot dressing."

In one barrage of letters, his mother swamped him with news of a new pickle recipe she had created. As always, he responded courteously and at a length that would seem to test human endurance.

Occasionally, Wells seemed to seek his parents' approval by proudly noting some personal achievement, like the day in 1939 when he took a swimming lesson.

"For the first time in my life I was able to swim about halfway across the pool," wrote Herman, whose weight hovered most of his life around 300 pounds.

Capshew is intrigued by this unusual family relationship.

"While Herman's sexuality is an issue, I'm interested in all aspects of his family life, which as you can see, is quite complicated," says Capshew, chuckling at his own understatement.

"I'm beginning to think there might be a difficult childhood here, and his lifelong commitment to public service was a way to get adults to listen to him and appreciate him."

Dealt with the details

During Wells' presidency, he handled every detail, attended to every problem. He personally signed every diploma. Kinsey and other faculty members regularly wrote him to complain about parking, office space, cafeteria food. Anything and everything. And, as with his parents, he patiently and graciously solved their problems.

After he bought the home on 10th Street, he promptly deeded the house and all its contents to the university. He never owned it. When he became chancellor in 1962, he insisted on a legal contract that stipulated that he would be paid nothing. He personally paid his staff of houseboys, drivers, cooks, housekeepers and round-the-clock nurses in later years.

"He never wanted it to appear in any way that he personally profited from Indiana University," says Capshew.

Throughout his years as president and chancellor, he loved shopping for antiques. When he found something he liked, he'd buy it and put it somewhere in the university. The Indiana Memorial Union houses dozens of antiques Wells bought and placed around the building.

Students often wrote him, seeking advice or saying they were running out of money and would have to quit school. "He'd find them the money," says Capshew.

Only half-jokingly, Capshew suggests that Wells may never have had an intimate

relationship with a man or woman for one simple reason:

"He had no time," says Capshew. "He was too busy taking care of everyone."

Just one last request

One week before his death, Wells invited IU President Myles Brand to his house on 10th Street. In his final years, Wells often had joked with friends about his death, frequently contending that it was long overdue.

This time there were no jokes. The old man in the wheelchair simply wanted to say goodbye, but he had one final, pressing question:

"Is there anything more I can do for the university?" he asked the startled Brand.

Time was short. Could he help someone? Solve a problem? Write a letter? Fix something? Buy somebody something? Give something away? Bring a turkey? Make some pickle relish?

Brand told him there was nothing more to do. He'd done enough.

Ten days later, the great Herman B Wells was buried in the Independent Order of Odd Fellows Cemetery in rural Boone County, not far from where he was born and just down the road from the Granville Wells Elementary School.

He's buried next to his mother and father, beneath a small marker that says only:

Herman B Wells.

Now it's James Capshew's challenge to complicate and add dimension to the myth. "It's a search for the truth, as close as I can get.

"That I loved him makes it more complicated."

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