

Herman

B In 2010, IU Press will publish the first comprehensive biography of Herman B Wells. The author is James Capshew, an associate professor in the Department of History and Philosophy of Science at IU, who once worked as a houseboy for Wells. Capshew has been writing and researching the book for more than eight years. Herein is a first look at this major work-in-progress.

Wells



The Man Who Shaped Our World



Author James Capshew with a painting of Herman B Wells. Photo by Steve Raymer

by James Capshew
as told to Jeremy Shere

Photography courtesy
of IU Archives



Wells enjoyed mingling with students on his daily walks across campus.

Nearly a decade after his death in 2000, the presence of former Indiana University President Herman B Wells continues to loom large on campus and in Bloomington as a whole. Wells' singular role in transforming what was once a middling small-town university into a world-class institution has firmly cemented his nearly mythic status as IU's greatest leader.

But who was the man behind the myth? What was Wells like in his private moments? What fueled and drove his devotion to IU? James Capshew answers all of these questions in his nearly completed biography, under the working title *How Herman B Wells Built Indiana University and Shaped Higher Education in America and Around the World*.

"When I first talked to Wells about wanting to write his biography, his first response was, 'That's crazy, there's no need for that,'" says Capshew, who as an IU undergraduate in the 1970s worked as a houseboy for Wells. "Every time I brought it up he would playfully needle, 'Isn't there something better you can do with your time?'"

Wells was aware, though, that his life would inevitably be the subject of study. Without naming Capshew as his "official" biographer, Wells gave his former houseboy-turned-professor an implicit green light to go ahead with the project. Capshew has spent most of the past decade studying Wells' life, from his Indiana small-town childhood through his rise to prominence as IU's president and later role as chancellor. When he began the project, Capshew says, he had a very high opinion of his subject. Today, he has an even greater appreciation for Wells. "Most people have a peak in their careers that might last five years, ten at the most. Wells had a peak that lasted forty-five years."

“His Imprint Is All Over the Campus and Town”

Herman B Wells had a deep and lasting influence on Bloomington. Newcomers will notice that the main library at Indiana University is named after Wells, and a life-size bronze statue of him is located close to Owen Hall in the Old Crescent campus area. These are two obvious references to him. But if you look closer, his imprint is all over the campus and town, and also on the people of this community. Were it not for his entrepreneurial efforts, the educational environmental and cultural landscape in Bloomington would not be nearly as rich. The School of Music, the IU Auditorium, Bradford Woods, the biology department, the Lilly Library, WFIU and WTIU, the Kinsey Institute, the IU Art Museum, the Hillel Center, the Department of Central Eurasian Studies, Hilltop Garden, the Benton murals, the IU Outdoor Pool, the IU Cyclotron facility, the Musical Arts Center, Meadowood Retirement Community, WFHB community radio, and Showalter Fountain all bear the imprimatur of Wells. Yet still they represent only a fraction of his many contributions to our society.

“Early Life Was Far From Perfect”

Wells was born in 1902 in Jamestown, Indiana, a village of 600 people in Boone County, a little northwest of Indianapolis. When he was a sophomore in high school the Wells family moved to Lebanon, the county seat. In his autobiography, *Being Lucky*, Wells writes that he had a happy, normal childhood. He had a very strong appreciation for his father, Granville, and was especially close with his mother, Anna Bernice.

But Wells' early life was far from perfect. In fact, he dealt with some significant challenges. His father was a respected local banker, but at home he was morose and depressed. Indiana had big problems in banking throughout the '20s, even before the Great Depression, and Wells' father constantly worried about work. Wells and his mother essentially had to take care of his father, but Granville's depression got so bad that at age 40 he checked into a sanitarium to relax and “take the waters.”

But on the day he left, Granville's mother [Wells' grandmother], who also suffered from depression, committed suicide by hanging herself with a horse harness in an outbuilding. It was all over the papers and Granville had to return to deal with the situation. Wells was 12 at the time, and I think it affected him deeply. Twelve is a pretty tender age, and it must have been frightening to confront the idea that his grandmother had depression, his father had it, and so maybe it ran in the family—a family taint—and maybe he'd have it, too.

There were other hardships. Just before his sophomore year of high school in Lebanon, Wells came down with the mumps and missed two months of school.



“An Average Student”

Wells spent his freshman year of college at the University of Illinois and then transferred to IU Bloomington for his sophomore year, in 1921. Academically he was an average student, earning mainly B's and C's. But he flourished socially. In *Being Lucky*, Wells talks about hanging out with his buddies and participating in late-night bull sessions and runs to Jasper and Evansville to get “white lightning” or “hooch,” as they called it, because this was during Prohibition. He was involved with the YMCA and was treasurer of his fraternity and then president his senior year, and served on the Union Board as treasurer. Wells loved the physical and cultural landscape of the university and the different students and interesting professors. He really bloomed in Bloomington.

Wells' fraternity, Sigma Nu, was at the center of his college experience. His upbringing wasn't deficient, but I think there was something missing—something he found in the fraternity. Wells was an only child, so his fraternity brothers became the siblings he never

Wells (center, baritone) in the IU Marching Hundred. He got the B in his name from his mother and her siblings, whose names began with B.

Adolescent boys sometimes have a complication called orchitis, in which their testes are swollen and inflamed. It is painful and uncomfortable, and, at the time, people believed that it would result in sterility. Later health records reveal that Wells suffered from a bout of orchitis, and he had continuing pain in the groin through his adulthood. So, at age 15, entering a new high school, Wells was dealing with his grandmother's suicide, his father's depression, chronic pain in his testicles, and perhaps the belief that he'd never be able to have children. On top of that, right around this time, Wells started to put on weight, which led to some teasing in high school. There were some really nasty caricatures of him in the school yearbook as a giant, obese guy, and a joking classified ad: “Wanted: someone to love a fat man.”

But I don't want to give the impression that Wells was an unhappy, tortured kid. He dealt with hardships by immersing himself in work and activities. Around the time of his grandmother's suicide, the *Indianapolis Times* emerged as a competitor to the *Indianapolis News*. Wells bought a *Times* paper route and went into business, convincing people to drop the *News* and pick up the *Times*. The work kept him out of the house and gave him some independence. During high school he worked at his father's bank and was involved in the school paper and yearbook and was the treasurer of just about every club. He got good grades and was in the top 10 percent of his class. So despite the teasing about his weight, Wells was actually very well regarded, and known for his nice smile. In 1920, his senior year, he was voted “Best Boy” and “Funniest Boy” by his classmates.

Little Rascal? No, it's 6-year-old Herman B in 1908, on his first day of school. He would stay involved in education for the rest of his life.



“Wells Didn’t Aspire to Become President”

President Bryan decided to retire in 1937, after 35 years in office. Wells wasn’t on the short list to be a permanent successor, so he seemed like a safe choice for temporary president—someone with lots of administrative experience who could hold the fort down for the interim. So Wells became acting president in 1937, at the age of 35.

Wells didn’t aspire to become president; he wasn’t personally ambitious in that way. He didn’t campaign for the job, but he did have a powerful group of supporters and friends. Wells had great ambitions for the university, so he didn’t act like a mere caretaker. One of his first initiatives was to ease out a lot of the older faculty and administrators who were well beyond what we consider to be retirement age. At the same time, he traveled around the country to recruit new, research-oriented faculty. In those days the president of the university was



Wells is engulfed with congratulatory flowers after being appointed the 11th president of IU in 1938.

the unofficial chief recruiter. Wells traveled something like 33,000 miles throughout the U.S. by train, plane, and car in his first year.

Wells also inaugurated a self-study of the entire university as acting president, with faculty and staff committees investigating every aspect of the curriculum, research effort, and operations. The self-study report was used as a blueprint for academic and organizational improvements, both immediately and in the long term. After nine months as acting president, the Board of Trustees removed the modifier from his title, appointing him as the 11th president of Indiana University, in March, 1938.

“Almost Like a Benevolent Dictator”

There were several facets of Wells’ presidential style. On the one hand, as he wrote in *Being Lucky*, he believed that less administration is better and that the university should hire the best possible faculty and leave them to do their jobs. He didn’t have much in terms of money or resources to offer the new faculty he’d recruited, but Wells excelled in selling the idea that they’d work together for the renaissance of the university. So in one sense Wells’ approach as president was putting the right people in place and enabling them to excel.

But on the other hand, he wielded tremendous power within the university. Thanks to his extraordinary social and diplomatic skills, he won over the faculty to such an extent that he, with the help of his small staff, operated almost like a benevolent dictator. There wasn’t so much bureaucracy in those days, so Wells had more leeway to use money as he saw fit. For example, when another university tried to hire away Stith Thompson, who was a leading folklorist at IU, Wells simply offered him more money to stay, even though it wasn’t apparent where the money would come from. When Dean Wilfred Bain said he needed 50 grand pianos for the School of Music, Wells dipped into money left over from several science grants to buy the instruments. It took a bit of fancy bookkeeping, but Wells had the power to make those things happen without having to jump through a lot of bureaucratic hoops. He was able to do that because he had virtually the complete backing of the faculty. It’s not like today when some people support IU’s president, some oppose him, and many don’t really care. When Wells was president, the faculty not only supported him; they loved him. My research has revealed very few persons who genuinely didn’t like Wells or had negative things to say about him as president.

“A Talent for Cultural Entrepreneurship” —the Benton Murals

Wells oversaw the expansion of the student body and was instrumental in growing the campus from around 130 acres in the late 1930s to more than 1,800 acres by the time he retired in 1962. His talent for cultural entrepreneurship also displayed itself early, in the acquisition of the Benton murals and the construction of the IU Auditorium.

Midwestern artist Thomas Hart Benton had been commissioned to paint a large, 12-foot-high and 250-foot-long mural for the Indiana exhibit at the 1933 World’s Fair in Chicago. The mural depicted the social and industrial history of Indiana. After the Fair the murals were stashed away in a building at the Indiana State Fairgrounds in Indianapolis and forgotten for the most part.



(left to right) Field Marshall P. Pibulsonggram (prime minister of Thailand), Governor Harold E. Stassen (U.S. director of Foreign Operations), and IU President Herman B Wells worked together in 1955 to strengthen public administration in Thailand. Wells later was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for his work in promoting international understanding.

Wells had been to the World’s Fair and remembered the striking murals, and he wanted them for the university. But there was not a place on campus that could accommodate them. An opportunity presented itself with a new state appropriation to build an auditorium, and Wells knew he had solved the space problem.

The IU Auditorium plans were drawn to include a hall of murals to serve as an entryway. The murals were transferred to the university, and Benton himself oversaw their installation. This is a good example of how Wells was always looking ahead, 50 or more years into the future. As I mentioned earlier, Wells wasn’t personally ambitious, but he saw himself as an agent of the state, a steward of its educational resources. So when few people saw value in the Benton murals, Wells acted to preserve and make available to all citizens this cultural treasure.

“Nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize”

Three years after the start of his presidency, the country became involved in World War II, and Wells oversaw the mobilization of the campus. Academic routines changed as IU offered specialized training to the various U.S. armed forces, and the faculty bolstered their teaching and research on defense projects ranging from nuclear physics to foreign-language instruction, including Russian.

For several months, Wells commuted to Washington, D.C., to work for the U.S. State Department as an economist. He also became involved in national educational affairs in D.C. at the headquarters of the American Council on Education and of the National Education Association. At the end of the war he traveled to San Francisco to participate in the conference that led to the formation of the United Nations. After the war he studied liberated areas in Europe and Africa and how to revive their economies.

In 1947, President Truman appointed Wells to be the cultural affairs liaison for the U.S. Military Government in Germany. Berlin and much of the rest of the country had been demolished during the war, so Wells was the point man for enacting the Marshall Plan in terms of resurrecting the German educational system, newspapers

and media, and culture in general. The former University of Berlin, which today is Humboldt University, was in the Eastern Sector and was taken over by the Soviets. Many German students in the Western Sector wanted their own university, and Wells played a major role in smoothing the way through the military bureaucracy for the creation of Free University of Berlin.

Through his war work, Wells was sensitized to the global dimensions of education, and IU became an early leader in international programs, particularly the study of foreign languages and cultures. He encouraged the enrollment of students from other countries, and thus contributed to the cultural diversity of both town and gown. In the 1950s and ’60s, IU faculty and administrators reached out to the developing world, providing educational and technical assistance to universities in Thailand, Pakistan, and other countries. As a measure of Wells’ stature as an educator, in 1970 he was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for his work in promoting international understanding.

“His Greatest Controversy”—Alfred C. Kinsey

Wells faced his greatest controversy as president when he was called on to protect the academic freedom of IU biologist Alfred C. Kinsey, the author of path-breaking studies in human sexuality in the 1940s and ’50s. Well aware that Kinsey was researching an explosive topic, Wells supported the right of Kinsey to perform his scientific studies from day one. In 1948, prior to the publication of Kinsey’s first book, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, Wells exhorted his administration and the Board of Trustees, saying in essence, “We have to support this, and we must present a united front.” He reasoned that, if the university would bend to outside pressure, then it would lose its vital autonomy, with the consequent erosion of its stature as an institution of higher learning.

As head of the state’s university, Wells knew everyone in power in Indiana. He was friends with all the major politicians, including the governor. But he wasn’t shy about exercising his power as president. One time, during the height of the controversy when Kinsey was becoming famous for his sex research, Governor Ralph Gates called Wells to complain that church groups were giving him flak and demanded to know what was going on in Bloomington. Gates became quite upset, and Wells calmly told the governor to get a hold of himself and call back when he was able to talk reasonably. And then Wells hung up the phone.

Wells was able to do this, I think, because he was totally secure in his belief in academic freedom. And he was uncommonly skilled at reasoning with people who took a hard line and was often able to convert them to his point of view. He used the same strategy during the 1950s to diffuse the American Legion’s protests that the

university library was importing “Communist” periodicals. In the 1960s he refused to bow to the demands of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) when it wanted to kick ROTC off campus in protest of the Vietnam War. He held the basic position that any group can protest and make their beliefs known, but the university will not cater to any political ideology or partisan stance. He made his arguments in such a way as to disarm his opponents, even when they weren’t charmed about Kinsey or some other controversial topic.

“To Cut a Tree Unnecessarily...an Act of Treason”

Wells believed the idea, popularized by Frederick Law Olmsted, the originator of landscape architecture in America in the 19th century, that the physical campus helps to shape the “tastes, inclinations, and habits” of students. He had, I believe, an almost preternatural appreciation for the power of place, and how it could contribute pedagogically. Wells reported that he “fell in love” with Indiana University as an undergraduate. Later on, as a professor and administrator, he rented a succession of summer cabins in Brown County because he enjoyed the beauty of the rural landscape as well as the fellowship of the art colony there.

Over the 25-year span of the Wells’ presidency, the campus acreage grew to almost its present size. Like his forerunners, Wells was intent on preserving the woodland character of the campus, and he was fiercely protective of trees and green space. He said: “To cut a tree unnecessarily has long been an act of treason against our heritage and the loyalty, love, and effort of our predecessors who have preserved it for us.”

To use an agricultural metaphor, Wells was a cultural landscaper, dedicated to cultivating a rich educational environment, centered on the Bloomington campus, for students to grow and learn. That environment was composed of the natural setting, buildings and facilities, academic programs, public art and performances, university rituals and ceremonies, and, of course, the diverse individuals who make up the academic community. Right to the end, Wells never failed to take delight in the ever-changing seasons of campus life.

“She Took on the Role of ‘First Lady’”

In 1948, as Wells was serving as the cultural advisor to the U.S. Military Government in Berlin, his father committed suicide at the age of 73. Devastated, Wells flew back immediately for Granville’s funeral, during which one of the trustees held his hand. We can only guess at the impact his father’s death had on the 45-year-old Wells, since he left no direct record of his reactions.

But one consequence of his father’s suicide is that,



Wells (right) as an undergraduate student at IU, watches T.C. Steele paint in Dunn Meadow in 1923.

shortly afterwards, Wells’ mother Bernice came to live with him in Bloomington. She lived with him for the next 25 years, until she died at the age of 91. What’s interesting about this is that when Wells was a young man he sort of distanced himself from his parents. He appreciated his parents and in *Being Lucky* credits them for his success, but early on he was quite autonomous and made his own way in the world. When he was president, before his father died, his parents often invited him over for Sunday dinner but he was always making excuses and seldom went. He was busy and overcommitted, of course, and Lebanon was 90 miles away. But it is hard to avoid the impression that he was content to see his parents only occasionally.

That changed, obviously, when his mother took up residence. Wells’ mother was always very devoted to him—he was an only son—and she still liked to dote on him. There’s a story about Bermuda onions being served for dinner. Bernice told Wells not to eat the raw onions because he was going out later that night. But Wells wanted to eat the onions, so he blandly replied, “These are all right, Mother. They’re sliced thin.” The response was vintage Wells—getting his way without offending anyone or causing a scene.

The presence of his mother on campus was an asset to his presidency. Since Wells never married, she took



(left to right) Wells’ father Granville, mother Bernice, and Herman B in 1925. Granville committed suicide in 1948. Granville’s mother had committed suicide in 1914, when Herman was 12.

on the role of “first lady,” a comforting convention. Mother Wells, as she became known, took to her role like a duck to water and became very popular with the students. She traveled with Wells when he went abroad on business and even met the Queen of England. Wells’ mother was proud of him and supported him, but she did not concern herself with his day-to-day work.

“Not Always So Amiable When Dealing With Bigots”

A regular churchgoer as a child, Wells imbibed the egalitarian philosophy and social meliorism of early 20th-century Methodism. He was taught that all people are brothers and sisters. When Wells was in college at

IU he observed a Ku Klux Klan rally in downtown Bloomington. The KKK was powerful in Indiana at the time, and Wells observed firsthand how their members, clad in white hoods and robes, tried to intimidate and frighten people.

As IU president, Wells became aware of the racial barriers that prevented African-American students from full participation in college life. In the midst of the Second World War, black students at IU began to document examples of racism in food services, dormitories, and athletics. Blacks weren’t allowed to live in the dorms or eat in campus cafeterias or in most restaurants in Bloomington. They were barred from swimming in the campus pool. Wells listened to the students’ complaints, determined their extent and validity, and then took action, often quietly and always ingeniously. For example, Wells instructed a popular black football player named J.C. “Rooster” Coffee to simply jump in the campus pool. There was no adverse reaction, and the pool remained desegregated from that time onward. Initially Wells confined these efforts to the campus because he didn’t want to overstep the bounds of his authority.

That changed in the late 1940s. Wells had open office hours once a week when students could drop in, and one day the IU football star George Taliaferro showed up. He recounted his problem: He was coming from classes in the Education School at East 3rd Street and Jordan Avenue and had to run back to his boarding house to eat lunch, because even though he had money in his pocket, none of the restaurants in town would serve him. So Wells picked up the phone and called the Gables restaurant, right across the street from the president’s office, and told the manager that George Taliaferro was in his office and would like to get something to eat. The manager protested that he wasn’t prejudiced but some of his customers were, so he couldn’t serve “colored people” lest that drive away the white customers. In his non-threatening way, Wells convinced the manager to allow Taliaferro to eat at the Gables for a trial period of a week. The week passed without incident, and a further week’s trial, with Taliaferro and a friend and their two dates, also passed uneventfully. That was the beginning of Wells’ effort to effect change at off-campus facilities that catered to students.

Wells was not always so amiable when dealing with bigots, though. After the Gables began to allow African Americans, some other restaurants did, too. But there was a hard core of business owners who wouldn’t budge. After his attempts at diplomacy failed, Wells met with them and gave them an ultimatum: Either they open their businesses to all students or Wells would have to ban off-campus dining and make students eat all their meals in student cafeterias. The threat of economic blackmail finally worked to desegregate the remaining restaurants.



“A Lot of Fun Living at the Chancellor’s Residence”

In 1937, Wells initiated a tradition of having a student employee at his residence, to serve at dinner parties, assist the cook and housekeeper, and generally help around the house. The compensation was room and board and a nominal salary. I served as a houseboy in the late 1970s, when Wells was university chancellor. My daily duties included having dinner with him if he didn’t have a party or some other outing. And I’d drive the cook home and mop the kitchen floor. On weekends, I would drive Wells around, or go out to dinner with him. One of his favorite places was Le Petit Café, newly opened with just four tables. It wasn’t a lot of work—maybe ten hours a week. The rest of the time I studied and enjoyed being a student.

It was a lot of fun living at the chancellor’s residence, which was located directly across East 10th Street from the main library, and having daily contact with Wells. He always had tickets to basketball games and the opera and other performances, so we went out a lot. And he hosted formal dinner parties about once every two weeks, and big cocktail parties once every semester in which 200 people would be invited. Wells truly liked to be around people and to have a good time. But for the most part he lived for work. When I would see him at breakfast in the sunroom, he’d be at the table, eating and talking on the phone. There were phones in every room of the house, even his private bathroom. So he was

Wells and author Capshew in the ‘70’s eat at the chancellor’s residence (now Wells’ House) at 1321 E. 10th St. Photo by Gregg DesElms



Wells, with a copy of his autobiography *Being Lucky* in September 1980.

always on the job, but I wouldn't describe him as driven or a workaholic. It was just natural, just who he was. He was always happy to be interrupted and I never once saw him get angry or lose his temper.

"A Genuinely Nice Guy Whom People Liked"

Possessing an immense social network, Wells had a charming personality and was unusually adept at interpersonal relationships. His social radar was highly developed, and he had a natural ability to put people at ease, from university janitors to heads of state. One example of this occurred during 1937 when Wells

was serving as business school dean. Alfred Manes, the famous German scholar of international insurance, was slated to give the inaugural Patten Foundation Lecture, and Wells was to introduce him. The aristocratic Manes, clad formally in white tie and tails and with medals on his chest, met Wells shortly before the lecture. Wells, immediately sensing that this uniform might make Manes appear too different and exotic and thus alienate his audience, briefly explained American customs to the foreign scholar. Manes understood, and went back to his room to change into a conservative business suit, and the lecture went off without a hitch.

Part of Wells' genius for this sort of social maneuvering was his non-threatening appearance—he was about 5'7" and had a potbelly and a large round face. But mainly, Wells was a genuinely nice guy whom people liked to be around. He had an innate sense of how to connect with people. For example, early on, Wells trained himself to remember personal names and details about their lives. As president he was famous for, among other things, remembering the names of students he'd met only once. When my father was an undergraduate at IU in the 1950s he met Wells one time and they exchanged names and greetings. When they happened to meet again several months later, Wells easily remembered his name, even though my dad was just some random student. You've probably heard stories about Wells timing his daily walks around campus to coincide with students moving between classes so he could mingle and get to know the student body. He kept open office hours and made a point of personally signing every diploma by hand—over 60,000 of them in 25 years. It wasn't an act, just simply part of the Wells persona. When you were in his presence you felt affirmed, and I think people understood that, even if only unconsciously.

"A Sphinx-like Silence About His Sexual Orientation"

Over the years, there's been a lot of speculation about whether Wells was gay. After all, he was a bachelor, he lived with his mother, he had gay friends, he hired gay faculty, he supported Kinsey's studies (which included homosexuality), he employed houseboys, he liked to stay in private men's clubs, and so on. But Wells maintained a Sphinx-like silence about his sexual orientation or preferences. I haven't found any evidence that Wells ever dated or had romantic or erotic relationships with women or men. As a biographer, I have to leave it as an open question (and temper my irritation at those who continue to speculate without substantiation).

There is a plausible theory about Wells' lack of romantic attachments. As mentioned above, Wells suffered chronic pain during adolescence. Such concerns, perhaps combined with apprehension about his family's mental health, might have led to reluctance to express sexual feelings in high school. In college, he found ways to compensate for romantic attachments through an intense cultivation of brotherly love, through his fraternity and more generally. Not being partnered with any particular individual meant that he was free to be friends with everyone.

"Being Part of and Contributing to a Larger Cause"

Wells personified a deep humanitarian impulse. At his core, he lived for and cared about other persons and about institutions that served the common good, whether at the local level of Indiana University and Bloomington or in the state, national, and international arenas. He believed that education is one of life's most important goals and a force for good in the world. Wells believed very strongly in being part of and contributing to a larger cause. That's essentially the story of Herman B Wells, I think, and that's why we're still talking about him. His is a living legacy because he was an agent for change—a true public servant—and in many ways embodied the best of what the university had to offer. He had grand ambitions for IU and was adept at realizing those aspirations because he understood the importance of the prosaic, day-to-day work that makes great things happen. He infused the mundane with a higher purpose and spread that attitude to everyone around him. He could have gone anywhere, working in the private sector or the public, in New York or Washington or Bangkok. But he chose to stay in Bloomington. Why? Because he found a home here, at the heart of the university, a bountiful mother, his alma mater. And through his university home, he was able to reach out and find the world. ✱