Herman B. Wells

The Man Who Shaped Our World

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.

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.”

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

by James Capshew

as told to Jeremy Shere

Photography courtesy
of IU Archives

Author James Capshew with a painting of Herman B. Wells. Photo by Steve Raymer
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 relationship with his mother, Anna Bernice. In his book Indiana: A Working Man’s State, he says that his upbringing wasn’t deficient, his family was close with his mother, Anna Bernice.

But Wells’ early life was far from perfect. In fact, he dealt with some significant challenges. In his father was a respected local banker, but at home he was moody 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 G.N. Wells’ 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, G.N. Wells’ 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 G.N. Wells 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.

In his autobiography, Being Lucky, Wells talks about hanging out with his buddies and participating in late-night ball 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 YM CA 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 had. They became his elective family. He enjoyed the communal living that fraternity life offered, and Wells’ remarkable talent for friendship began to shine. Perhaps as a consequence of his earlier physiological trauma, Wells might have felt barred from the typical dating routines of his college peers, so he found compensation in the companionship of his fraternity brothers and in cultivating a wide circle of friends.

Sigma Nu also put Wells in contact with Ward Biddle, who became his trusted mentor. Biddle was head of the university bookstore and the house adviser for Sigma Nu. He helped Wells plan and execute a fund-raising strategy for the chapter when Wells was fraternity president, which provided valuable experience in sales and marketing. It was when Biddle became president of the university, Biddle served as university treasurer.

After graduation in 1924, Wells spent a couple of years working at his father’s bank in Lebanon before returning to IU and obtaining a master’s degree in economics. After a year of pursuing his doctorate at the University of Wisconsin, Wells was lured back to Indiana to work for the Indiana Bankers Association as field secretary, and he never finished his dissertation. In 1930, he was hired as an instructor at IU.

Wells was a specialist in institutional economics, with significant work experience in the Indiana banking industry. In 1931, in the midst of the Great Depression, he was appointed the secretary and research director of the Study Commission for Indiana Financial Institutions. The commission was charged with investigating banking failures and devising remedies. Its report, authored by Wells, was the basis for reform legislation in the Indiana General Assembly in the new administration of Governor Paul V. McNutt (1890–1954), at the time the dean of the IU Law School, who had swept into office with the New Deal landslide. Wells accepted M.O. Olin’s offer to oversee the implementation of the new banking regulations, and took leave from his university duties to serve in the Department of Financial Institutions as supervisor of the corporation of the Bank and Trust Companies and supervisor of the Divisions of Research and Statistics. In addition, he took the position of secretary of the Commission of Financial Institutions. Filling this triple role in state administration, he demonstrated a remarkable managerial talent. After two years, in 1935, IU President Herman B Wells appointed Wells as the dean of the School of Business Administration, where he got his first taste of academic stewardship.
Wells's administrative style was such that he, with the help of his small staff, operated almost like a benevolent dictator. There wasn't too much bureaucracy in those days, so we didn't have to use as much money as we saw fit. For example, when another university tried to hire away Stih T hompson, who was a leading folklorist at UI, Wells offered him more money to stay, even though it wasn't apparent where the money would come from. When Dean WHallin asked and needed 50 grand to fix 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 these deals 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 UI'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 people who genuinely didn't like Wells or had negative things to say about him as president.

"A Talent for Cultural Entrepreneurship" — the Benton Murals

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"A Talent for Cultural Entrepreneurship" — the Benton Murals

Wells was able to do this, I think, because he was a true scholar, a true administrator, and a true leader. He 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 valued the Benton murals, Wells acted to preserve and make available to all citizens this cultural treasure. For example, when the Benton murals were under threat, Wells intervened and saved them from destruction. He did this because he believed in the value of the murals and the importance of preserving them for future generations. Wells's actions as president were guided by his belief in the importance of cultural heritage, and he used his power to ensure that the Benton murals were preserved and made available to the public. Wells's leadership was instrumental in preserving the Benton murals, and his actions as president were guided by his belief in the importance of cultural heritage. He used his power to ensure that the Benton murals were preserved and made available to the public, and his actions as president were guided by his belief in the importance of cultural heritage.

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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 "attitudes, inclinations, and habits" of students. He had, he believed, an almost preternatural appreciation for the power of place, and how it could contribute pedagogically. Wells noted that he "fell in love" with Indiana University as an undergraduate. He enjoyed the beauty of the rural landscape as well as the succession of summer cabins in Brown County, because he was "very fond of the ever-changing seasons of campus life.

Right to the end, Wells never failed to take delight in the presence of his mother on campus. He was an only son, and she still liked to dote on him—she was very devoted to him—he was an only son—and she still liked to dote on him. At the beginning of his career, Wells began to rent a residence. Wells’ mother was always very devoted to him—he was an only son—and she still liked to dote on him—he was an only son—and she still liked to dote on him.

The presence of his mother on campus was an asset to his presidency. Since Wells never married, she took over the role of "first lady," a comforting function. 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. The rest of the time, 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 fun, maybe ten hours a week. The rest of the time I studied and enjoyed being a student.

IU 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, documented 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. "Bobby" Coffee to simply jump in the campus pool. There was no adverse reaction, and the pool remained desegregated from that time on.

"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, as a butler and housekeeper, and generally to serve him around the house. The compensation was room and board and a nominal salary. I served as a houseboy in the last years of his tenure. My daily duties included having dinner with him if he didn’t have a party or some other out. And I drove the townhouse and my own kitchen floor. On week-ends, 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 fun, 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 E 3rd Street from the main library, and having daily contact with Wells. He was always happy to talk about opera and other performances, so we went out a lot. And I drove the townhouse and my own kitchen floor. On week-ends, 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 fun, maybe ten hours a week. The rest of the time I studied and enjoyed being a student.

"Not Always So Amiable When Dealing With Bigots"

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