

The Big Red owner protects his privacy with an inscrutable jealousy.

Bill Bidwill: Now you see him...

By Kim Plummer

IN THE MOMENTS just before the press conference to announce the fate of the Big Red in St. Louis, the mayor's office buzzed with talk of new stadiums, seating capacities and, of course, football.

But football Cardinal owner Bill Bidwill also had something else on his mind. Bow ties.

As usual, Bidwill was wearing his trademark bow tie for this meeting to end speculation that the city might lose its professional football team. In Bidwill's honor, Mayor Vincent C. Schoemehl Jr. also had donned a bow tie. And since St. Louis County Executive Gene McNary didn't want to be sidelined, he remarked that he, too, should have worn a bow tie.

The setting was perfect for the kind of game the Big Red chief seems to enjoy perhaps second only to football. "If I had known Schoemehl was going to show up in a bow tie, I would have brought one for McNary, too," Bidwill said, recalling the news conference.

He leaned back in his chair and grinned. "And then, at the last minute, I would have whipped out a long tie for myself."

"Painfully shy."

Bill Bidwill didn't play that prank this spring when he broke the news that the Big Red would remain in St. Louis for at least another season, but football fans might be surprised that he would even consider it.

Over the years the Cardinals owner has been called many things. A comedian isn't one of them.

Depending on the headlines at the time, Bidwill's image generally has been that of

a scrooge, a sourpuss or, at best, an enigma. Newspaper photos seldom show him smiling. At his rare press conferences, he tends to answer questions as briefly as possible, looking so uncomfortable that one suspects he can't wait to turn the microphone over to someone else.

While baseball fans hail Red Birds owner August A. Busch Jr. as the venerable "Gussie," few football buffs have cheered "Billy." Should they spot Bidwill at the stadium, they are more apt to do — and have done — the opposite.

Bill Bidwill has lived in St. Louis for 25 years, ever since he moved with the Cardinals from Chicago. But in that time he has been something of a stranger, maintaining an unusually low profile in a high profile business, shunning publicity in a society big on public relations.

He has been called "painfully shy" and "socially inept." His friends and business associates say he is "misunderstood."

"He is almost the complete opposite of the public picture that has been broadcast of him," said attorney Thomas J. Guilfoil, Cardinals secretary and general counsel who is one of Bidwill's closest confidantes. "He is a curious mix of great reserve and great warmth. He is not a simple man."

Cardinal President Bing Devine says



Bidwill "doesn't go out of his way to put himself in a favorable light. He doesn't blow his own horn."

And he has no desire to start blowing it, says William V. Bidwill, who repeats a joke about his middle initial standing for "vague" instead of "Vogue."

"We consciously try to avoid personal publicity, to avoid the cult personality kind of thing. Our primary purpose is selling the players, the team, the game," he said. "That's what the fans coming through the turnstile want to see."

But on this particular morning, Bill Bidwill did agree to a personal interview — as personal as possible, that is, with a man who is difficult to know on a casual basis.

With his dark, slicked-back hair and bushy mustache, the 53-year-old Bidwill sat in a chair looking like a cross between Teddy Roosevelt and a Buddha in wire-rimmed glasses and a pinstriped suit. His

facade is all business, but glimmers of his sense of humor poke through.

Without warning, he will pop a pun or share a favorite anecdote, like the one about how the old Grand Theater — once a stripper's stage — was torn down to make room for Busch Stadium.

"That just goes to show you that St. Louis is the only city where football has replaced sex," he said.

Bill Bidwill speaks slowly and, for a big man, surprisingly softly. He is most talkative when the topics are his favorites — football, the Georgetown Hoyas basketball team, football, naval military history, football, Italian food and football.

He is an avid follower of *Dr. Who*, the British science fiction-fantasy television series full of the dry, hokey humor Bidwill seems to enjoy most. "I'll be bleary-eyed, but I'll stay up to watch it," he said of the show that airs at 10:30 p.m., Sundays, on KETC-TV, Channel 9.

His favorite book is Gordon Prange's *At Dawn We Slept*. "It's an exceptionally well documented account of the Pearl Harbor situation," said Bidwill, who studied history and government in college and served on a submarine squadron during a two-year hitch in the Navy.

He favors bow ties, explaining that he "used to wear them years ago and they are great for soup eaters. You can carry one in your pocket and pull it out when ever you need it."

Unlike many executives, he makes his own telephone calls. "It's not the New York way, but it's the way I do it," he said. "It saves time, and I think people appreciate it."

His pet peeve? Right off the bat, he could name nothing. But during a telephone phone call a few days later, he said he had thought of one.

"Trying to get a third cup of coffee at the Crystal City Marriott in Washington, D.C.," he said. "You have to plot to try and get one."

He grows most distant when the conversation is steered toward his family and his personal life.

He doesn't play golf, avoids large social functions and claims no "real hobbies."

"This (the Big Red) keeps me busy enough," said the man who is one of the National Football League's most "hands-on" owners, taking part in every aspect of the club's operation.

Small wonder he prefers to talk about the pigskin. The sport has been his life. And just like a controversial game, that life has included a number of struggles that, undoubtedly, have left scars.

Bill Bidwill grew up on the west side of Chicago. His late father, Charles W. Bidwill, was a colorful, outgoing sportsman who ran race tracks and acquired the old Chicago Cardinals in 1932. "There was a lot of hero there for me," Bidwill said of his father, who died in 1947.

Among Bidwill's earliest memories are going to the Cardinals' training camp when he was around age 7, "messing with the equipment, hanging out and just staying out of the way."

Of his youth, he says he was "trained concurrently for racing and football" — carrying water buckets, working ticket windows and, in his 20s, scouting players.

Being engulfed by sports at such an early age sounds like a child's dream. Or, at times, was it a nightmare? Bidwill shrugs his shoulders at the suggestion.

"At the time, it never seemed that special. Many think it must have been a special position to be in, but it was just normal for me," he said. "I never knew anything else."

When the Cardinals came to St. Louis in 1960, Bidwill's older brother, Charles Jr. (better known as Stormy) was president. Stormy remained in Chicago, and Bill, as vice president, moved with the team.

BIDWILL

from preceding page

Coming to St. Louis was "was a little hard at first," Bidwill acknowledges. And it grew even harder when, in 1962, his world was dramatically shaken.

After Violet Bidwill Wolfner (Bill and Stormy's mother) died that year, her second husband, Walter Wolfner, challenged her will bequeathing the football team and a large part of her estate to her sons. For the first time, 30-year-old Bill Bidwill learned that he and his brother had been adopted. Wolfner dropped that bombshell when he claimed that the Bidwill brothers were not entitled to their inheritance because their adoption had been illegal.

After a string of messy court proceedings spotlighted by the media, the Illinois Supreme Court ruled in 1963 that the brothers had been legally adopted and they should not be excluded from their mother's will.

In talking about his life, Bidwill skips over those rough years. "That was a long time ago," he said.

Likewise, he doesn't mention Stormy. The brothers had operated the Big Red together until 1972 when Bill Bidwill bought out his brother's interest in the club. Today, Stormy lives in Chicago where he is president of Sportsman's Park race track. Although friends have said the brother's split was personal as well as professional, Bidwill says their relationship is "fine." And he waits for the next question.

In contrast to some topics that seem taboo, Bidwill seems to enjoy his relationships with a number of people in the football Cardinals organization — not so much with the players, associates say, but more those in administrative positions who have been with him for years.

"He has a burning loyalty to the people he hires," said Jim Bakken, a former Cardinal kicker who is now athletic director at St. Louis University.

Walking through the stadium offices on this morning, Bidwill exchanges greetings with various staffers. In the equipment room, he grins as veteran equipment manager Bill Simmons reminisces about the day actress Susan Anton filmed a cigar commercial in that very spot.

"There's a lot of kibitzing around here," Bidwill said. "I don't know that I would say this is a family, but there are a lot of people who have been here a long time."

Some of these longtime employees have been upset in the past by Bidwill's image as a tightwad. It's a label that has been associated with the Big Red owner on more than one occasion, like in the mid-1970s during a much publicized dispute over the Cardinals' wage and personnel policies. At



GOOD TIMES, STORMY WEATHER: Bill's father, Charles Bidwill Sr., was a flamboyant sportsman and a hero to his son. But his death and the resultant struggle for the ownership of the Cardinals revealed the painful fact that Bill and his brother were adopted.

the time, many players accused Bidwill of being, in a word, "cheap."

More recently, the club has received less criticism for the salaries it is willing to pay players. But friends and associates say Bidwill's "scrooge" image persists, and they call it unfair.

"He is the most 'uncheap' man I know," Guilfoil said. "The football meetings are always held in posh places, and Bill always takes more people with him than any other owner. All his people go first class."

Nancy Keenoy, Bidwill's secretary for more than 10 years, mentions the NFL players' strike in 1982. At a time when other owners were laying off personnel, Miss Keenoy says, Bidwill "kept everyone on full time."

"People ask me what it's like to work for Bill Bidwill. He is very loyal to his employees," she said. "He has so many good qualities that are hidden and not brought out in public."

Others point to his generosity toward charitable causes. Bidwill, a Catholic, was educated in Jesuit schools and graduated

from Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. One of his favorite charities is Boys Hope, a Jesuit program founded in St. Louis that provides education and housing for homeless boys.

Earlier this year Bidwill also launched an athletic scholarship fund at St. Louis University, a Jesuit institution where one of his sons is a student.

In the past, Bidwill often has insisted on anonymity with his personal donations. But that may change.

"I always felt (a charitable contribution) was a private matter, but that possibly may have been a mistake. The charity might have benefitted more from the attention that I could have made for it," he said.

But he seems to have no plans of reversing his position on other forms of personal publicity, especially involving his family.

In 1960, Bidwill married the former Nancy Lavezorio, a Chicago native who attended Villa Duchesne high school in St. Louis. Like her husband, Mrs. Bidwill shuns personal publicity and, through

Bidwill, declined a request for an interview.

The couple owns a home in Clayton and has four sons — William Jr., Michael, Patrick and Timothy — and one daughter, Nicole, ranging in age from mid-teens to early 20s. Like their father, Bidwill's offspring have grown up surrounded by the glamour of professional football. They also have known some of its grit.

Friends say the Cardinals owner has worried about the impact certain football controversies have had on his children. "He knows they have classmates who make snide remarks about him and say things about the team," one friend said.

But the Cardinal owner says his sons and daughter "have weathered everything pretty well. Their skins are pretty thick by now," he said. "They have to be."

He talks about them accompanying him on football trips and how the older boys have worked at training camps and in the locker rooms. When William graduates later this year from Georgetown University, he will officially join the Cardinals organization in some capacity, Bidwill says.

"Right now, I think all my children would like my job," he said. "That's pleasing, of course, but it wouldn't disturb me if they didn't. I want what makes them happiest."

He will admit, however, to times when it would have been easier on his family to have lived away from St. Louis and for him to have been an absentee owner.

"I could live in, say, Chicago and commute on weekends, but I don't want that. I wouldn't be part of the community that way," he said. "I won't say I never considered moving, but it feels right to be a part of the community."

Along with owning the Cardinals, Bidwill owns the Ticketmaster ticket service and is an investor in Hannegan's Restaurant and Pub on Laclede's Landing.

Pasta and bow ties

Earlier this year he was elected to the St. Louis Zoological Park Commission, a governing body for the zoo whose prestigious membership generally is limited to civic leaders.

With pride, he claims to have "the only handmade bow tie with the Zoo's logo," a gift that was, in part, the idea of commission president and Bidwill's friend, Robert F. Hyland, regional vice president of CBS and general manager of KMOX Radio.

During those days when Bidwill openly was considering relocating his football team, he perplexed many by continuing to profess "a deep affection for St. Louis." Edward Watkins, the Big Red fan who led the "Keep the Birds in the Nest" campaign, says he believes the Cardinal owner is sincere about his feelings for the city.

"One thing kept him here more than anything else — his affection for the St. Louis community. No stadium is built yet. All he has is a commitment from people that they will try and do something," he said.

Watkins described Bidwill as "the type who doesn't sit around worrying about his image." "And I kind of respect him for that," he added.

Nor is Bill Bidwill the type who admits to regularly listening to radio call-in programs or giving local sports pages more than a glance. Instead, he says he gets most of his sports news from his own UPI wire machine, installed on a suggestion by Bing Devine. He also subscribes to a number of out-of-town newspapers.

"I read the papers in other cities where someone else's ox is getting gored," he said.

These days Bidwill describes himself as "very healthy." He is on a low-fat diet, admittedly a problem for such a big fan of this town's Italian restaurants. "I've

But where's his bow tie? He opens his jacket, pulls out a maroon tie and, before you can say 'touchdown,' he ties it in a neat little bow.

been all over the country, and I can't find Italian restaurants as good as the ones in St. Louis," he said.

Finally, he says, he is no longer hooked on Gelusil. There once was a time, he says, when he would start popping the indigestion tablets the morning before a game and continue taking them until the gun sounded.

"I have worked very hard over the last few years not to get too high or too low for a game. It's

too hard on you," he said. "If you don't get too high, you can't sink too low."

As this meeting ends, a reporter expresses two regrets about the interview. One regret is that it took place in Devine's office instead of Bidwill's office, a room reportedly full of antique furnishings and memorabilia that, no doubt, would have provided a more personal — perhaps too personal? — setting.

"It's too messy," Bidwill said of his office.

But he does remedy the second regret — that he was not sporting one of his famous bow ties — by opening his jacket, pulling out a maroon tie and draping it around his collar. Before you can say "touchdown!," he ties a neat little bow.

"What does the farmer call his goat who walks backward in the rain?" he asks as he escorts a reporter to the door.

"A reversible rain goat," he answers, chuckling. "It is terrible, isn't it? Really terrible." ■