# Interview: Marilyn Thompson discusses her decision to apologize for the *Lexington Herald-Leader*’s failure to cover the civil rights movement in the 1960s

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MICHELE NORRIS, host: From NPR News, this is ALL THINGS CONSIDERED. I’m Michele Norris.

The Sunday edition of the *Lexington Herald-Leader* in Kentucky carried the following front-page clarification yesterday: “It has come to the editor’s attention that the *Herald-Leader* neglected to cover the civil rights movement. We regret the omission.”

Until the 1960s, life in Lexington, as throughout much of the South, was highly segregated. Blacks and whites lived in separate neighborhoods, attended separate churches and schools and used separate restaurants, bathrooms and drinking fountains. When blacks challenged that system with sit-ins and protests, the stories were ignored or downplayed in the paper. Marilyn Thompson is the editor of the *Lexington Herald-Leader*, and she joins us now.

Marilyn, why did the paper decide to run this clarification, and why now?

Ms. MARILYN THOMPSON: Well, we actually took up a challenge that was thrown down by a former editor of this newspaper, John Carroll. He mentioned the fact that while at the *Herald-Leader*, basically the paper had not written about civil rights and had not done so dating back to the early years of the movement. And he made this very public statement, “We regret the error.”

We decided that that called for a very vigorous reporting project in which we did an audit going back to 1959, actually, to look at how this paper dealt with the civil rights marches and one of the most important stories of our time.

NORRIS: And what’d you learn?

Ms. THOMPSON: We learned that we had performed abysmally. It was a fairly stunning level of ignoring the story, all in the hopes, it turned out, by the then-editor of the paper that it would suppress some of the emotions surrounding these events and keep things calm.

NORRIS: And the irony, to some degree, is that in this case, the general manager and the publisher of the paper actually supported desegregation, but decided to pursue this strategy of trying to play down the civil rights movement.

Ms. THOMPSON: Yes, that’s exactly right.

NORRIS: Well, if he actually supported the aims of the civil rights movement, if he actually supported desegregation, why did he play down these stories?

Ms. THOMPSON: Well, I think it was part of the hysteria of the times. You know, it was frightening to much of the white leadership in the South to see blacks vocally and vociferously protesting their lack of civil rights.

NORRIS: What was the goal of the paper? Why do this? What were you hoping to accomplish?

Ms. THOMPSON: It’s — you know, in the fashion of great accountability journalism, it was an effort to go back, take the challenge as laid out by John Carroll and test its validity. It’s something that I wish newspapers would do more often. I’ve never seen a project of this type, to be quite honest. It’s archival research that’s rarely done in American journalism. But because John Carroll gave us this very compelling challenge, we were able to produce something that I think is very memorable reading for our readers.

NORRIS: It should be noted, Marilyn, that you are now the editor of the Lexington paper, the *Herald- Leader*. But in your previous role as a reporter for *The Washington Post* — and, I guess, going back to times when you were a young reporter, or younger reporter, in South Carolina, you had spent a lot of time working on a story, which brought you quite a bit of attention last year, tracking down the family lineage of Essie Mae Washington-Williams...

Ms. THOMPSON: Right.

NORRIS: ...the daughter of Strom Thurmond. You seem to be trying to get the South to acknowledge and atone for its past. Why is that important?

Ms. THOMPSON: I’m a white Southerner, and I guess I live every day with some element of guilt that comes from having grown up in a culture of segregation and knowing that I was essentially powerless at the time to do anything about it. I finally reached a point in my life where I’m not powerless to at least make this known to the American public.

NORRIS: Marilyn Thompson is the editor of the *Lexington Herald-Leader*. Thanks so much for speaking to us, Marilyn.

Ms. THOMPSON: Thank you, Michele.

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Paper Apologizes for Civil Rights Coverage

Associated Press

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LEXINGTON, Ky. — The *Lexington Herald-Leader* featured a prominent clarification on its front page yesterday, apologizing for the newspaper’s failures in covering the 1960s civil rights movement.

The notice accompanied a series of stories titled “Front-page news, back-page coverage” and decades- old black-and-white pictures taken by an independent photographer.

“It has come to the editor’s attention that the *Herald-Leader* neglected to cover the civil rights movement,” the clarification read. “We regret the omission.”

The report comes as the nation observes the 40th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Beneath the clarification were photographs of a Main Street march and a lunch counter sit-in taken by Calvert McCann, now 62.

Many of his pictures were undeveloped until last year, when University of Kentucky historian Gerald L. Smith was researching a book.

“If it had not been for Calvert, we wouldn’t have a visual record of this moment in Lexington’s history,” Smith told the newspaper.

Lexington’s newspapers at the time, the *Herald* and the *Leader*, occasionally published short stories about the local civil rights movement; photographs rarely appeared.

The papers merged in 1983 and the *Herald-Leader* is now owned by Knight Ridder.

“The people in charge of recording the ‘first rough draft of history,’ as journalism is sometimes called, ignored sit-ins and marches, or relegated them to small notices in the back pages,” *Herald-Leader* reporters Linda B. Blackford and Linda Minch wrote.

McCann, who is black, became interested in the civil rights movement while working at Michael’s Photography store, where he was a janitor and film processor.

“I just wanted to document it and tell the story for me and my friends,” McCann told the newspaper.

“During the summer, they would hire white high school students to work on the counter, but they never let me up there,” he said. “I always resented it because I knew more about the business than anyone else.”

The *Louisville Defender*, a black newspaper, and the *Courier-Journal* of Louisville covered the civil rights movement in the state. The *Herald* and the *Leader* shelved most news about blacks in a column called “Colored Notes.”

It was compiled by the newsroom’s only black employee, Gertrude Morbley, until 1969.

“That was really all the news we had,” said Audrey Grevious, a former leader in Lexington’s chapter of the NAACP.

“Without that, we wouldn’t have known anything that was going on.”

Former newspaper employees said management tried to downplay what happened locally.

“The rare march or protest that made front-page news usually involved arrests of demonstrators and was described in the terse, clipped tones of a police report,” wrote Blackford and Minch.

Robert Horine, a *Leader* reporter starting in 1958, recalled going to one of the first sit-ins.

“I talked to several of the people seated at the counter, and I had a story for Sunday’s paper,” he told the newspaper. “When I got back, the editors said, ‘Absolutely not.’ ”

The orders came from then-general manager and publisher Fred Wachs Sr., who died in 1974. Fred Wachs Jr. said his father supported desegregation but favored a cautious approach. “He didn’t like the idea of some of these rabble-rousers coming in and causing trouble,” Wachs told the newspaper. “He tried to keep that off the pages.”

However, the papers published national stories about the civil rights movement, such as the 1965 march in Selma, Ala., and the 1963 church bombings in Birmingham, Ala.

Thomas Peoples, a former NAACP leader, said the decisions were intended to retain readers.

“They catered to the white citizenry, and the white community just prayed that rumors and reports would be swept under the rug and just go away,” Peoples told the *Herald-Leader*.

Smith said he found evidence of Lexington sit-ins around July 1959, a year ahead of ones in other states that received publicity. Most of the city’s public places were desegregated by 1964.