

**MARJORIE
BOWERS
PAXSON
1923-2017**



**WOMEN'S
EDITOR
TO
PUBLISHER**

Marj Paxson was a journalism pioneer, who advocated for working women and women in journalism. Over the course of her 42-year career, she fought the limitations of the glass ceiling.

Marjorie “Marj” Bowers Paxson was born in August 1923 in Houston. At Lamar High School, she fell in love with journalism. She wanted to attend the University of Missouri but her parents made her attend the nearby Rice University for first two years. In 1942, Missouri classes were full until six weeks later when most male students were drafted into World War II. This provided increased opportunities for female students. After graduation in 1944, Marj joined the United Press in Lincoln, Nebraska, making \$25 a week.

At United Press, women had to sign an agreement allowing any man to take her job when he returned from war. After working for two years, Paxson was replaced by a man with no previous journalism experience. The week she lost her job, she landed a job with the Associated Press in Omaha. She stayed for two years until she returned to Texas in 1948, where she was offered the position of society editor at the Houston Post.

One of her greatest accomplishments was to getting brides’ pictures off the front-page of the Sunday edition for more issue-oriented features. When the newspaper’s owner - former Governor William Hobby – asked for an exception for a friend’s daughter, Paxson refused. As women’s editor, she couldn’t publish hard news, even when she tried to cover a state PTA convention. In 1952 Paxson moved to the Houston Chronicle, where her women’s section became the first city newspaper to feature pictures of black brides.

By 1956, Marj needed a fresh challenge, so she moved to the Miami Herald. She and her colleagues lobbied for stories on birth control, sexual revolution, and women’s health issues. Unexpectedly she received an offer in 1968 to become the women’s editor at the St. Petersburg, Florida Times. Herald assistant managing editor Al Neubarth advised her to take the job because “nobody would look out for Marj but Marj”. After the women’s pages were disconnected, she knew she had to leave. When she won a 1969 Penney-Missouri award for editing the best women’s section, she started looking for job. When editors found out, she was fired.

Paxson moved to the Philadelphia Bulletin, which still had a women’s section, but the features editor didn’t like her judgment. Then the Bulletin eliminated the women’s section. In 1975, she was offered the editorship of Xilonen, an eight-page bilingual daily newspaper published in Mexico City for the United Nations World Conference for International Women’s Year. Paxson always thought this was her most gratifying work. After returning, the Bulletin wouldn’t run the series she wrote about the issues addressed at the conference.

With the Bulletin in financial trouble, 54-year-old Paxson was at a career crossroads. She learned that former boss Neubarth was now the head of the newspaper chain Gannett Company. When she wrote him, he arranged for her interview at corporate headquarters in Rochester, where she showed interest in becoming a managing editor or publisher. In 1976, while assistant managing editor at the Idaho Statesman in Boise, Paxson received the Women in Communication’s 1976 Headliner Award for her work as the Xilonen editor.

In 1978, she moved to the Public Opinion in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, becoming Gannett’s fourth female publisher. Her final stop was the Muskogee Phoenix in 1980. When Marj was told that women weren’t allowed to wear pants at work, she showed up the next day in a pantsuit – and abolished the policy. That evening, many female employees purchased pantsuits and wore them to the office the next day. When the Phoenix publisher was a great way to end her career, Paxson retired in 1986.

She donated \$50,000 and her personal papers, plus a \$13,000 Gannett Company contribution, to the University of Missouri to create the National Women and Media Collection. In 2001, Marj received the Sadie Lifetime Achievement Award from the Association for Women in Communications. Paxson died in June 2017 at age 93. In 2020, she was posthumously inducted in the Oklahoma Journalism Hall of Fame.