

Taking No Prisoners

[Black History Lost and Found](#)

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by Roger Witherspoon

On Monday, Feb. 1, the New York Times started a Black History Month series of photographs of black life in America in general and the civil rights movement in particular, called “Unpublished Black History.” These were photos taken by NYT photographers that never appeared in the Times, though in many cases, unadorned stories were published.

(<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/31/us/unpublished-black-history.html>)

The text accompanying the two-page spread said, in part “Photographers for The Times captured these moments, but then the pictures and negatives were filed away in our archives, where they sat for decades...”

There is no definitive explanation for the Times’ decision not to run the photos of Black men, women and children, professionals and blue collar workers, the glamorous and the mundane, Americans all, going about their daily lives.

The Times said, accurately, that they used to put more emphasis on words instead of pictures. They did earn the nickname The Grey Lady. But that wouldn’t explain why a story about the fire-bombing of Malcolm X’s apartment would not have the accompanying photo to show how close his family came to dying. Or why another didn’t show the thousands of Black men and women who participated in the first March on Washington in 1957. And why they chose to forego countless other pictures that would enhance the written word.

The present editors do say that “holes in our visual coverage probably reflect the biases of some earlier editors. They determined who was newsworthy, and not, at a time when black people were marginalized in society and in the media...”

Unfortunately, that half acknowledgement of the possibility of institutional racism throughout the NY Times for decades is not covered by weasel words about what might have occurred. The stain of racism was as much an indelible part of the news media in general –

including the Times – as was the ink, overflowing ash trays and paste-pots that littered the newsrooms. Photographers routinely covered events knowing that their work would never see the light of day.

That was especially true in the South, where some papers carried an occasional “Negro page” featuring acceptable events like Negro Day at the State Fair, while the rest of the paper either ignored Blacks or openly decried “nigger agitators.”

I first encountered this photo blackout in the early ‘80s when I was working on my first book, “Martin Luther King, Jr...to the Mountaintop,” a history of the civil rights movement and its most charismatic leader. Diana Clyne, my photography researcher, tracked down retired newspaper photographers from Birmingham, Alabama to St. Augustine, Fla., who were only too happy to go into their attics and pull down boxes of photos they took during the tumult of the ‘60s, knowing their papers would never publish them.

While southern papers were open in their journalistic racism, that sentiment was the same on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line. All of the New York City newspapers had separate and unequal pay scales for white and black journalists – if they had black journalists at all. The Times didn’t drop that practice until around 1979, and the rest followed in the mid-80s after the NY Daily News lost a costly discrimination lawsuit.

And many northern papers followed the unwritten rule that only white reporters could cover racial disputes. That is the reason why the world knows that three members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee – Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and James Chaney – were kidnapped near Philadelphia, Mississippi on June 21, 1964 and killed. The public was not informed that there were three other SNCC workers kidnapped and killed – the youngest a 14-year-old boy who was beaten to death – because they were black and didn’t count. It is questionable that northern newspapers would have mentioned Chaney at all if he hadn’t been with the two white victims. The track record was that black lives did not matter to the nation’s media.

And while even the hint of terrorism is major news today – if it is by Muslims, not if it is by armed white men in Oregon or Oklahoma – it was not widely reported or photographed that the final toll for Mississippi Summer was 6 murdered, 35 shot, 80 beaten, 1,000 arrested, 30 homes bombed, and 35 churches torched. White Mississippi was in open, murderous, rebellion, but terrorism by white Christians was not reportable or camera-ready news .

A half century later, the NY Times is to be commended for publishing the photos it refused to publish when they were timely and newsworthy. Perhaps other papers will follow their lead, and comb their archives and, belatedly, show their readers the diverse multi-cultural world that many still know little about. Perhaps some of their readers would realize that the

aspirations black and white parents have for their kids are not that different after all.

But it is unfortunate the Times did not take one more cleansing step and see fit to more accurately disclose the institutional racism it – and the rest of the news media – has finally overcome.