

# Magazine Legend John Mack Carter Remembered By His Daughter Jonna On The Women's Sit-In 51st Anniversary at Ladies Home Journal



*Editor's Note: Reprinted with permission by Samir Husini.*

*John Mack Carter was not only a legendary editor with the distinction of editing all of the "Big Three" women's magazines of his time: McCall's, Ladies' Home Journal and Good Housekeeping, but he was also a mentor and a friend.*

*I first met him in the early 1980s when he came to the University of Missouri's School of Journalism School to speak to our class. It was a dream come true and the beginning of a lengthy mutual friendship and professional relationship.*

*March is Women's History Month, designated by a presidential proclamation to recognize the importance of the role of women in American history. In March 1970, an 11-hour sit-in happened in the Ladies' Home Journal office of John Mack Carter. It became a defining moment for him. He was always a man who believed in listening to the ideas of people, but on that day when a large group of women stormed his office and demanded he listen to them personally, he did just that. What started as a volatile protest turned into something different; it became a*

*turning point for his thinking when it came to the role of women in society and especially in the world of magazines.*

*What follows is an essay written for Mr. Magazine™ blog and newsletter by his daughter Jonna Carter, who today is a writer and columnist at her local newspaper in New Hampshire. Jonna reflects on growing up in the 1960s and '70s as the daughter of a magazine editor for the top three women's magazines of the time. As her father helped to transform the world of women's magazines during the feminist era, Jonna longed to be a part of the movement and watched as her father basically changed history in women's service journalism.*

*On this anniversary, March 18, of the infamous Ladies' Home Journal sit-in, please enjoy the essay from John Mack Carter's daughter, Jonna Carter and relive a moment of pivotal history in women's magazines.*

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## **Ladies' Man**

***Jonna Carter***



*Jonna Carter with her father the magazine legendary editor John Mack Carter (Photo courtesy of Jonna Carter)*

March is Women's History Month, so designated since 1987 by Presidential proclamation to honor the role of women in American history. I've never paid much attention in the past, but this year I'm feeling especially reflective.

I have my own unique historical perspective growing up as I did during the second wave of feminism of the 1960s and 70s. Out of the social upheaval of the 1960s, i.e. the Civil Rights movement, the Vietnam War protests and the sexual revolution, evolved the women's liberation movement. Not only did I grow up during this pivotal era, I grew up in the thick of it with a father who was both a target and a champion of the women's

movement.

My father was a women's magazine editor, and he moved his young family to New York where over the course of his editing career he would achieve an unprecedented trifecta as he took the helm first at McCall's, then Ladies' Home Journal, and lastly Good Housekeeping, the powerhouse women's magazines known in the publishing world as the "Big Three." In my father's 2014 New York Times obituary Leslie Kaufman wrote, "John Mack Carter, a Kentucky-born journalist...had the singular distinction of editing all of the so-called Big Three women's magazines and, in doing so, helped transform the genre during the feminist era."

At age 33 my father became the editor in chief of McCall's and began revamping its content from predominantly fluff pieces to more substantive articles about issues affecting women. This was 1961, two years before Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* sparked the women's liberation movement. In a 1963 New York Times interview he said, "Women's magazines were badly behind the times...They were failing to keep up with the rising educational levels in this country." I credit him with being cognizant, if not indoctrinated.



*John Mack Carter and daughter Jonna (Photo courtesy Jonna Carter)*

In the late 1960s the women's movement became organized and noisy, especially in New York City where radical feminist activists were attracting a great deal of attention as they strove to be heard and to effect societal changes through various avenues. The likes of Germaine Greer, Angela Davis, Bella Abzug, and the dynamic and glamorous Gloria Steinem, were all over television news and the front pages of the newspapers piled on our suburban kitchen counter. My father was acquainted at least peripherally with many of the heavy hitters, and he was paying close attention as women were integral to his livelihood. He had by this time transitioned to the Ladies' Home Journal.

I was living a cloistered suburban childhood, minutes from the very demonstrations demanding and creating change, and yet impossibly removed. I secretly longed to be if not Gloria Steinem, then recreated in her image. I was desperately shy and lacking in any degree of self-esteem, and to be possessed of the ferocity and determination, the overall confidence and composure of Gloria, was my dream. These women were absolutely consequential fighting for equality and eliminating hurdles in my future. I desperately wanted to be in the game and not merely a kid on the sidelines. Until it got personal. And scary.

In March 1970, in a demonstration designed to expose sexism and oppression in women's magazines, somewhere between one and two hundred feminist activists led by Susan Brownmiller, Ti-Grace Atkinson and Shulamith Firestone, stormed the editorial department of Ladies' Home Journal and held my father hostage during an 11-hour sit-in in his office. They were protesting the magazine's articles and columns, the role of women on the editorial staff, and advertising deemed offensive from companies profiting from the subservience and objectification of women. The protesters came armed with a list of demands, among them that editorial content be radically altered, that advertising be overhauled, that the magazine provide free daycare facilities on the premises, and that my father resign and be replaced by a woman. The demonstration was volatile, and negotiations in fits and starts continued into the night.

At home we were glued to the TV as the New York stations were broadcasting live footage and updates from his office. Overall things remained peaceful, but there were moments of physical aggression with protesters pushing their way onto his desk and helping themselves to his cigars. Shulamith Firestone actually lunged at him across the desk, but was blocked by her peers and talked down. At one point there was discussion by a few of the most extreme of throwing him out his fifth floor office window. Tensions were high in that office, and tensions were

high in our home. Late that night when this exhausted man walked through our front door I wept with relief.

My father was a brilliant man, but there are many. The quality contributing to my father's unique success was that he was genuinely interested in people's ideas and he listened. On March 18, 1970, he listened. The sit-in had a profound impact on him, and he later credited it as a turning point in his thinking. He began to balance and expand content so as to span the gamut of women's concerns and choices, and he became a vocal advocate for women's issues such as sexual harassment, job discrimination and women's health. Ironically, the Ladies' Home Journal slogan was "Never Underestimate the Power of a Woman," and he did not.

The sit-in had been a defining moment for my father, and such was reflected in the coming years as it drastically altered his magazines, and others followed suit. Eventually he was wooed by Hearst to Good Housekeeping, and management knew and always appreciated their prize. What they got was not the young spitfire, but the seasoned and compassionate feminist who had embraced a movement and an era.

As the sit-in had been a defining moment for my father, so it had been for me as well. It altered and expanded his thinking, his relationships with women, and his relationship with me. John Mack Carter was a southern gentleman and would never be a radical activist, but he was a feminist to the core, and this is the torch he so proudly passed on to me.

I overheard my mother once tell my college age children that their mother was a "radical feminist." I smiled to think how proud that would have made my dad!