

ChangeMasters All: A Series on Librarians Who Steered a Clear Course toward the Twenty-First Century

An Interview with Evaline Neff

Debra Engel

With a twinkle in her eye, red earrings dangling, and a sweatshirt emblazoned with a sailing anchor and the words “first mate,” Evaline Neff greeted me at the College Park (University of Maryland) subway station north of Washington, D.C. Neff’s professional career, which spanned five decades (1951–1999), exemplified a quiet leadership that in her own words was “just plain luck, being at the right place at the right time.” Neff helped pioneer librarianship when resource sharing began to combine with technology in the 1960s. She has the unique advantage of having worked in public, academic, and special libraries, as director in a multi-type library consortium, and as a federal grants officer. She is a former administrative librarian of the Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA) program (United States Department of Education), Library Services and Technology Act program (United States Institute of Museum and Library Services), and the former executive director of the Rochester (N.Y.) Regional Research Library Council.

At the age of seven, Neff sailed with her mother and father from the United States to Spain in a thirty-seven-foot sailboat. This was a significant experience that set the stage for her childhood. While her mother remained in Spain, Neff and her father continued their sailing adventures to Venezuela, through the Panama Canal to Tahiti. Neff attended elementary and middle school in Tahiti, then high school in Noumea, New Caledonia, which was the headquarters of the U.S. Army in the Pacific during World War II. At age eighteen, she was repatriated back to the United States on a U.S. troop ship when the captain of the ship convinced her to return before it became impossible to travel the Pacific. These adventures helped define her personality of self-reliance and fierce independence.

After returning to the United States in the mid-1940s, Neff served as an x-ray technician for two years in the U.S. Army Medical Corps. She was honorably discharged from the army in 1946. Her wartime training expanded to employment as a part-time x-ray technician, when Neff



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earned \$1.00 an hour at a civilian hospital and worked toward her undergraduate degree. She says, “I bless the United States Congress for the G.I. Bill. I wouldn’t have been able to go to college full-time without it.”

Neff attended Rosary College (now Dominican University) in River Forest, Illinois, and obtained a bachelor’s degree in library science in 1949. She traveled to

Mexico City College (now Universidad de las Americas in Puebla, Mexico), where she completed a master’s degree in Latin American Studies in 1951. She worked as an acquisitions librarian while attending Mexico City College. There she met the love of her life, Louis Neff; they were married in August 1951 at the home of Louis Neff’s parents in Littleton, Colorado.

Neff’s early career provided experiences in both technical and public services, and as a result she gained an appreciation for all types of library jobs. In her first decade of professional librarianship, she worked as a reference librarian (Denver and Queensboro [N.Y.] public libraries), a patients and medical librarian (Bronx [N.Y.] Veterans Administration Hospital), head of processing (Manhattan College, Bronx, New York), and as a cataloger (Naval Training Device Center Technical Library, Port Washington, New York). Neff feels that the experiences in different types of libraries and in a wide range of library positions assisted her in exploring possibilities in librarianship. This unique perspective also gave her the ability to build a vision for libraries. She utilized the knowledge she gained in every position to “look at libraries through a different lens.” In her first decade as a professional librarian, Neff changed positions six times, due to relocation because of her husband’s career, when seeking a better job, and when “opportunity knocked.”

Building on her knowledge of the medical profession, Neff particularly enjoyed her three years as patients and medical librarian at the Bronx Veterans Administration Medical Center Hospital, the second largest VA hospital

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in the nation (which was renamed the James J. Peters Veterans Administration Medical Center in 2004). At the hospital, her job responsibilities spanned various duties, including conducting extensive literature searches for the doctors, nurses, and visiting patients, and also delivering library books in the non-ambulatory wards. Neff learned that flexibility was the key to success in all of her library positions. "You just couldn't come into work and say, 'This is what I am going to get done today,' it depended on your patron. You built your library around the needs of the patrons."

Neff's husband, Louis, finished his doctorate at the New School for Social Research in New York City and subsequently joined the faculty of the Rochester Institute of Technology. When the couple moved to Geneva, New York, in 1961, Neff secured a position that started her career in library administration. She served as the assistant director of the Wayne County (N.Y.) Library System/Ontario Cooperative Library System from 1963 to 1967. During this time, Neff was a regular contributor to the local newspaper, the *Daily Messenger*. Neff wrote an editorial about the ways libraries contribute to their communities and the importance of being open to changing ideas. The words she wrote then are just as true today. She used a quote from Alex Dreier, an NBC newsman, to begin her reflections: "Today's libraries are much more than books alone. They are also art reproductions, music recordings, motion pictures, microfilms, meeting rooms for discussion groups. . . . They are beehives of activity . . . busy humming market places of ideas where the fields of interest are not narrowed to the educational or the cultural, but limitless as the space of man's own consciousness: a veritable treasure chest of facts and follies . . . a kind of intellectual service station."¹

Neff also expanded on the concept of a library as an "intellectual service station" and challenged her readers to talk with her about their perception of what makes a "modern, up-to-date library." In a newspaper article she wrote in 1967, Neff reflected:

As the car of the 1960s has been technologically refined and its performance improved, so does the library of the '60s have its refinements. These are reflected in the building, the services, and especially in the training of the librarian. Today's librarian has graduated from a liberal arts college and holds a master's degree in library science. To keep professionally fresh this librarian returns to school periodically for workshops in specialized areas, and to be appraised of new developments. Like the teacher of the '60s, the librarian of the '60s starts out with more skills, and must keep those skills sharpened. This librarian not only has the capability of organizing and managing library service for a demanding clientele, but also takes the initiative in promoting the library within the

community. The modern librarian is a bookman, administrator, and public relations person all in one energetically dedicated package. He or she is a person who knows that when you're through changing, you're through.²

Those comments anticipated many of the radical changes that were to come in the library profession.

When Neff joined the Wayne County (N.Y.) Library System in the early 1960s, she participated in expanding its library cooperative program.³ The Pioneer Library System (consisting of Monroe, Livingston, Wayne, Ontario, and Wyoming county library systems) was established as a multi-system cooperative. The county systems and their member libraries benefited from centralized book processing, interlibrary loan services, and reciprocal borrowing privileges. "The real winners were the patrons," says Neff. "We were able to improve library services to our patrons because we had more state-aid dollars funding the cooperative programs and services."

The cooperative library system made it possible for residents to borrow or return books to any of the sixty library locations. Still, the concept of reciprocal borrowing between libraries was new in the 1960s. What were the concerns? According to Neff, "Some library board members and librarians were concerned that their small collections would be raided—checked out to the residents of another county or another city or village. They just didn't like the idea of sharing."

Fortunately, the librarians who joined the cooperative and the members of their communities became the best advocates for the growing library system. "We were so much more efficient. Rather than each of the libraries compiling book orders, we compiled them cooperatively. We had centralized processing of library materials. Patrons could check out and return library materials to any branch within the system. We were able to demonstrate to the citizens that cooperative library service was a good use of their tax dollars."

The library cooperative provided rotating collections of books, films, and phonograph records. Training courses conducted by the library system and state library consultants were organized for member libraries, covering topics such as library management, supervision, reference services, storytelling, and service to children and young adults.

In 1967, Neff was given the opportunity of a lifetime when she was appointed the executive director of the Rochester Regional Research Library Council (RRRLC). During the 1960s, the state of New York began planning regional research library councils that were multi-type library cooperatives of special, public, and academic libraries. Acting on a recommendation from the Committee on Public Library Service, New York State Commissioner of Education James E. Allen Jr. appointed the Commissioner's Committee on Reference and Research Library Resources

(3Rs for short) in 1960.⁴ The primary goal realized by the committee was:

the only feasible way . . . to meet the reference and research needs of all types of library users in the state is to build when possible on existing research resources and to link those resources to each other by an extensive and well-ordered program of cooperation.⁵

After a long legislative battle to gain funding for the 3Rs program, in 1965 librarians and citizens were successful when, following the first Governor's Conference on Libraries, funding was secured from the governor's budget in 1966-67 and a \$25,000 grant was awarded in 1967. Building on the platform of library cooperation established in the Rochester area through a regional planning committee, the RRRLC received its charter from the New York Board of Regents.⁶ Harold Hacker, one of Neff's early mentors in librarianship, encouraged her to apply for the position of executive director. She was selected from a pool of thirteen applicants from across the nation. She was uniquely qualified for the position because of her experiences in special, public, and academic libraries, and in a library cooperative. However, in her own words, serendipity played a role. "I was simply very fortunate to be in the right place at the right time." Neff opened the RRRLC offices donated from the Appellate Division Law Library in the Hall of Justice Building in downtown Rochester. Library services were launched in 1968.⁷

What were the challenges in the early years of RRRLC? Neff grinned like the Cheshire cat when I posed that question. "The job was simply never done. You were always out there building relationships, working with member libraries, seeking secure and reliable funding. Funding was critical—probably the most critical issue." The composition of the Rochester board was unique in that the members were not librarians, but laypersons representing a broad spectrum of community concerns and interests. There were fourteen RRRLC board members, who sometimes seemed like fourteen bosses for Neff. She describes some of her personal challenges in the job: "I wasn't the most patient person in the world. I learned to be patient with the process of relationship building. Sometimes it just took longer than I wanted for solutions to be found. It could be frustrating." For example, "The 3Rs program has never had even minimally realistic funding."⁸ Even so, the board established the four highest priorities for the RRRLC, which included: rapid delivery, reciprocal-use privileges for borrowers, interlibrary loan (ILL) and copying services, and a combined union list of serials.

One of the earliest RRRLC services offered was the regional ILL network among the libraries. Another service was daily delivery to the member libraries contracted through a commercial delivery firm. The colleges and universities paid for the delivery service on a shared basis

(55 percent), while the private companies paid full cost.⁹ In 1970, a new patron borrower program launched, opening the collections of the member libraries to faculty, graduate students, and professional people affiliated with the participating member libraries. In 1973, the RRRLC media center opened a film cooperative at the State University of New York, Brockport.

Another large milestone for RRRLC was the publication of the first union list of serials in 1970. It was a two-volume list, including the journal holdings of thirty member libraries. "The union list was a viable product that established our ability to create a new service and deliver it," says Neff. The union list grew from more than twelve thousand titles in thirty-two libraries in 1970 to more than fifty thousand serial titles in one hundred libraries by 1984.

RRRLC was a success because many citizens and librarians collaborated to make it a success. Again, from Neff's perspective, it was a matter of timing. Resource sharing, cooperative projects, and professional development were issues faced by all types of libraries. In an article written for *Bookmark*, Neff commented, "People will continue to be the heart, soul, and brains of the council, and future plans must include the addition through recruitment, training, and inspiration of the best personnel that can be found to carry out the 3Rs mission with imagination and zest."¹⁰

John Lorenz, the Deputy Librarian of Congress, commented at the dedication of the Rush Reese Library (University of Rochester) in April 1970: "I am pleased that I can tell you that this region in the entire nation represents one of the highest levels of development of the concept of libraries interrelating and cooperating with one another in a planned, organized manner in sharing resources and services for the benefit of the users—students, business and industry, government, researchers, and all the people of the region."¹¹

Neff was a catalyst helping to break down institutional barriers between patrons. "It took a lot of talking to individuals—librarians, board members, and community members about what RRRLC could potentially offer to make it work." Of her role in the formative years of the library cooperative, Neff says, "In many ways, I could be neutral. I wasn't representing a particular library institution or a particular type of library. I was representing a cooperative network."

In the early 1970s, Cliff Carpenter, newspaper reporter for the Rochester *Democrat & Chronicle*, featured RRRLC in an article entitled, "Just Tons of Knowledge," noting:

I have a singular incompetence to simplify abstract happenings, and RRRLC is as abstract and as complicated to me as the mathematical calculation that puts astronauts on the moon. So let me sift it down to this. RRRLC, which owns no books of its own, is a 4-year-old interlibrary network or

clearing house linking more than 40 academic and research libraries in the Greater Rochester area. All the linked libraries cooperate in sharing its books and journals and research papers so that a person using one library can get anything he needs. A sort of alarm system operates through RRRLC and somebody comes up with it. The flood of information in printed form now has reached the point where no longer can a member of any profession keep up with what is happening in his area without help of the sort RRRLC is trying to fashion . . . and incidentally it is even prepared to help with translations.¹²

Summarizing those sentiments, Alexander R. Cameron, executive director of Rochester Area Colleges, Inc. (an organization of public and private colleges), commented: “The Rochester Regional Research Library Council is the only regionalization thing that’s really worked.”¹³

Even with support from member organizations and state aid dollars, funding was often the single largest challenge for Neff at RRRLC. For many of the early years, the RRRLC headquarters were graciously donated rent-free under the terms of a lease with the Monroe County Legislature and the courtesy and efforts of Judge Harry D. Goldman (associate justice, New York State Appellate

Division, and member of the RRRLC Board).¹⁴ “We learned how to communicate effectively with the state legislators,” says Neff. She found that working with legislators and working with member libraries of the council had similarities. Neff focused on patron needs. “The patrons came first. I met regularly with library directors for the purpose of establishing rapport and determining needs and expectations for RRRLC.” Communicating with legislators meant translating the services and products produced by RRRLC into meaningful results. “I called it your tax dollars at work,” says Neff.

In a letter of commendation when Neff left RRRLC in 1977, Robert J. Flores, chief of the Bureau of Regional Library Services, New York State Department of Education, wrote:

In congratulating you on this new development in your career, I would be remiss if I failed to recognize and express appreciation for your past contributions to library service improvement in New York State. I believe you stand in unique singularity, having served as director of both a public library system and a 3Rs [RRRLC] system. Your constant dedication to the identification and promotion of needs for improvement, even when not popular, clearly identifies the integrity I always associate with you.¹⁵

Career Highlights of Evaline Neff

Professional Experience

1951–1952	Reference Librarian, Denver Public Library, Denver, Colorado
1952–1955	Patients and Medical Librarian, Bronx Veterans Administration Hospital, New York
1955–1958	Head, Technical Processing, Manhattan College, Bronx, New York
1958–1959	Reference Librarian, Queensboro Public Library, Queens, New York
1959–1961	Cataloger, Naval Training Device Center, Port Washington, New York
1961–1963	Assistant Director, Wayne County Library System/Ontario Cooperative Library System, Canandaigua, New York
1963–1967	Director, Wayne County Library System/Ontario Cooperative Library System, Canandaigua, New York
1967–1977	Executive Director, Rochester Regional Research Library Council, Rochester, New York
1977–1999	Administrative Librarian, LSCA/LSTA, United States Department of Education/Institute of Museum and Library Services, Washington, D.C.

Selected Publications

- “Pioneer Library System: Multi-System Co-op,” *Bookmark* 24 (Dec. 1964): 76–82 [written with Walter F. Airel and Harold S. Hacker].
- “Rochester Regional Research Library Council,” *Bookmark* 28 (Apr. 1969): 214–19.
- “Fast Patent Copying Service: An Experiment in Specialized Resource Utilization,” *The Bookmark* 33 (Sept.–Oct. 1973): 23–26.
- “Program Audit” [reply to Program Audit Summary: State Aid to Libraries in New York], *Bookmark* 34 (Sept. 1974): 3–6.
- “Contracting in Library Networks,” *Special Libraries* 67, no. 3 (Mar. 1976): 127–30.
- “New York Case Study 1: Rochester—A Rural/Urban Mix,” in *Multitype Library Cooperation*, Beth A. Hamilton and William B. Ernst (New York: Bowker, 1977): 89–97.
- “Federal Funds: Library Services for the Physically Handicapped,” *American Education* 16 (Mar. 1980): 32–33.

At her celebratory sendoff from RRRLC Harold Hacker expressed his feelings: "Thank you, Evalu. You have presided so well over your growing RRRLC family—from fifteen in 1967 to fifty in 1977—with affection, humor, knowledge and drive."¹⁶

In 1977 Neff's career took another leap—into the world of federal administrative librarianship. Neff served for twenty years as a federal grants program officer in the U.S. Department of Education and the Institute of Museum and Library Services. There she managed LSCA funds of nearly \$20 million annually in grants to twelve states and U.S. territories. LSCA was a state formula grant program that fostered library resources and services through public libraries through grants awarded by their state libraries. The states and territories she served included Arizona, California, Guam, Hawaii, Illinois, Indiana, Nevada, New Mexico, New York, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. As a grants program officer, she had the opportunity to travel to these the states and visited grant-funded projects, monitored them in the field, and talked with the state or local librarians who had implemented the projects.

What were the job responsibilities of a federal administrative officer? Neff's eyes danced when I posed the question to her. "Sounds boring, doesn't it? But actually, it was never boring." The basic job duty was stewardship of federal funds, management of grants, compliance reviews, and audit resolutions. Neff admits there were "mountains" of paperwork, since grant applications, grant awards, compliance reports, and grant evaluations were all produced and delivered in print during the 1970s and 1980s.

As a special project, Neff administered federal grant funds for library services to the handicapped, a LSCA priority since 1966. She compiled an annual state-by-state report of the projects that were funded and implemented at the local, public-library level through the use of LSCA funds for the handicapped.¹⁷ She also assisted with grant applications and reports for several state libraries for the blind and visually handicapped. Neff says, "I wrote the annual report and in the narrative, I gave a sense of what the funded projects had meant to the patrons—who was helped and how they were helped by the federal funds. We had to show how the dollars expended helped improve library services."

Another area of her expertise was seeking ways to allocate federal grant funds for library services for individuals with limited English proficiencies. "It was a good fit for my skills. I was fluent in Spanish, which was one of the patron groups served through these federal funds. I had lived in another culture. And, I was committed to finding ways to serve underserved constituents." Again, the annual reports highlighted the standard expenditures she reported.¹⁸ The programs covered thirty languages and included telephone information and referral programs; provision of books, magazines, and audiovisual materials in foreign languages; storytelling for children in foreign languages; materials

dealing with English as a second language; and training for library personnel in the language and cultural values of immigrant communities. In fiscal year 1987, seventeen states and two outlying areas funded thirty-four projects to provide cultural and library services to an estimated 5.7 million individuals of limited English-speaking proficiency.

Neff claims it was the variety of programs and patron needs, and the continuing challenges of the field, that kept her interested and committed. "The job with LSCA/LSTA didn't stay the same. Patrons' needs changed, the grant opportunities changed, the personnel in the state libraries changed. The challenges changed as the field of librarianship embraced technology." Neff had experience turning visions into practical reality. Her background in program planning, creating workable budgets within a timeframe, talking with constituents, and implementing evaluation into the planning process provided a solid base of experience. As a federal administrative librarian, she was also occasionally called upon to collaborate with the congressional legislative staff. "Librarians are in the business of persuasion. We want to persuade our patrons that we have something to offer. We want to persuade our legislators and congressional delegations that libraries are a great use of tax dollars. And we want the legislators to know that libraries and librarians are accountable for every tax dollar expended."

Neff credits many people for her successful career and life journey—her father, husband, and colleagues. Her passion in retirement is sailing, which is also a metaphor for her life and career. She has often controlled the boat with a steady hand on the wheel. In her words, "It is not possible for anyone to control the weather; you just have to deal with it." As a librarian in a constantly changing environment, Neff responded to the winds of change and the shifting needs of patrons.

Neff's personal life has often challenged her. The loss of her husband in 1980 was "devastating," but she has continued on her life adventures with enthusiasm and sincerity. For the past twenty years, she has volunteered as a sailing teacher and helped members of her sailing club learn to become better sailors. She has been active with Singles on Sailboats (SOS). The sailing season begins in mid-April with the "IRS Cruise" and ends in November with the "Blue Lips Cruise." As one of the sailing coordinators, Neff is responsible for determining which boat owners plan to sail and how many crew members they request, along with crew capabilities. The sailing coordinator then matches a crew to a boat. Neff's interpersonal and communication skills honed from years of librarianship serve her well in her volunteer capacity. In addition to sailing, Neff enjoys traveling, and journeys almost yearly to Spain.

So how does Neff characterize her journey in librarianship? "It was the people," she says. "It was always the personal connection no matter where I worked." Neff feels that librarianship was a particularly good fit for her personality, skills, and abilities. She was flexible yet focused, quiet

yet enthusiastic and committed to the needs of library patrons in every aspect of her career. Most of all, she was determined to make a difference to help improve library services. Evaline Neff—a sailor and a librarian, who has sailed into the profession with passion and commitment, is an individual who has made a difference in librarianship.

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