

NECROLOGY

LEWIS EDWIN NEFF
1892-1966

Lewis Edwin Neff was born on May 29, 1892 on a farm near Downsville, New York, in the beautiful foothills of the Catskills. He was four months old when his father died leaving a library of ancient and modern history and classical books. At the age of five he walked two miles to attend the rural school.

When Lewis was six years old, his mother sold the 400 acre farm and moved with her children to Walton where the best school in the county was located. Before he was eight years old he had read the Bible completely through twice and remembered what he read. At that age, he was baptized a member of the Methodist church. He began reading history and classics from the home library and from the public library. His photographic memory retained the knowledge which he gained and remained with him through life. He learned to enjoy poetry as he heard his mother recite poems she had learned in school.

Before graduating from high school, Lewis Edwin began working for a farmer during the summer vacation to make money for his college expenses. At the age of fifteen he earned tuition to enter Cornell University by passing two separate stiff examinations for scholarships, competing with older boys. With the help of his mother, who moved to Ithaca to provide him a home there, he graduated.

He became a member of the debating team, joined Delta Sigma Rho debating fraternity. As a debater he never lost a contest. In his junior year, he was elected to Phi Beta Kappa scholastic society and the next year received his A. B. degree cum laude. He then completed his law studies while serving as assistant instructor in Economics to help with expenses.

Lewis Edwin Neff was admitted to the practice of law in Oklahoma in 1918. He settled in Muskogee where his older brother William was practicing law and they formed the firm of Neff and Neff. They made a speciality of land titles. Verdicts which the firm won on appeal of law suits to the Supreme Court became the law in the new state.

While Mr. Neff evaluated evidence of heirship in litigation involving all issues on valuable Indian property, he became proficient in tracing family lines. The work was very exacting but he had a natural talent for it dating from boyhood, when he recorded data given by family relatives. An efficient linguist, he soon learned enough Indian dialects to know if an interpreter was translating questions and answers correctly. He could converse with simple words in Indian language.

When he registered as a candidate for the state legislature from Muskogee County, he was regarded as a mere boy with no chance of election. Not long out of college and without funds for a campaign, the boy walked over the county, met the voters in their homes and places of business, discussed their problems with them. He became the youngest member ever elected to the state legislature, up to that time and for a considerable time afterwards. During the two terms he served, 1915 to 1919, he authored a bill creating a City Court for Muskogee, a Free State Fair for Muskogee County and was responsible for the usury laws which were badly needed and are still in force.

**LEWIS EDWIN NEFF**

Mr. Neff always had a strong interest in government and politics. He could give the name and date of service of men who had been elected or nominated for office at the national level from the beginning of our nation and of some mayors.

In late 1925 the firm of Neff and Neff moved to Tulsa, and their sister, Lucinda B. Neff joined them as private secretary and office manager.

Lewis had a great desire for travel to see new places and visited every state in the Union at a time when transportation was slow, uncertain and often lacking in comfort. Then he visited every country in North America and the British Isles. Finally he made a trip around the world and traveled to every continent.

He acquired a ranch in the Deep Fork bottoms of over 4,000 acres where he made a hobby of raising horses, cattle and grafted pecans.

During the boom in the East Texas oil field, Mr. Neff opened a branch law office at Longview, Texas, and later one at Wewoka near the Seminole oil field while keeping his main office in Tulsa.

After the death of his older brother William from pneumonia in 1936, the law partnership ended and Lewis took less interest in trial law. Soon after his mother died in 1944, he decided to renew his youthful hobby of searching for family ancestors. He did research in Scotland on a branch of his mother's family and in Switzerland on the Neff ancestry and collected a great amount of data from related families over the country, one having the name of Nave in Tennessee was of the Neff family. He discovered he was descended from William Brewster, Ruling Elder of the Mayflower Pilgrims who came to America to escape religious persecution in England.

Gradually Mr. Neff let his interest in Mayflower history take precedence over his desire to complete and publish a Neff Family History. He often expressed regret over the delay and expected to finish the work later, but it was not completed.

In 1947 Lewis organized the Society of Mayflower Descendants in the State of Oklahoma. After serving two terms as governor of the Society, he became historian and began compiling a book which gave the line of descent of all who joined the Oklahoma Mayflower Descendants. At the same time he worked out lineages for people who did not know they had Mayflower ancestry.

After his appointment as chairman of the General Mayflower Membership Committee in 1964, Mr. Neff spent much time in the next two years organizing Mayflower Societies in seven large western states and later completed organization in the three remaining states making a truly national group. He brought in many new members with new lines of descent. He worked without compensation as he solved many difficult genealogical problems and aroused great interest in the Pilgrim migration in America.

In 1957 Mr. Neff was elected Counsellor General of the national society, the first general officer to be chosen from west of the Mississippi. He was given a standing ovation which lasted for several minutes. Late in 1966 Mr. Neff was called to fill a vacancy in the office of Historian General and took up residence in Boston. In addition to the work of the office he started to compile a new Mayflower Index which would list the names of everyone who had proved descent from a Mayflower passenger,

together with all names of ancestors and spouses in the line of descent. It was a monumental task that took him well over a year.¹

Lewis Edwin Neff was elected Governor General of the National Society in 1900. His first official act was to move the files and records of the Mayflower Society from Boston to the Mayflower Society House in Plymouth on property owned by the General Society. He then had a fire-proof vault constructed on the rear of the tea-house which was remodeled for an office. He contributed generously toward the cost. In 1903 this building was dedicated as the *Lewis Edwin Neff Cottage* after an impressive dedicatory oration given by the Honorable Maurice H. Thatcher, the only living member of the original Panama Canal Commission.

During his administration Mr. Neff published much genealogical material in the *Mayflower Quarterly*, the official publication of the organization. Much of this he had discovered by research in England and Holland. He looked upon the Mayflower migration as having great historical significance. In this he was in agreement with the early British authors who state that but for the success of the Pilgrim settlement at Plymouth in 1620, America would have been settled by the French and Spanish and never would have become an English speaking nation. Mr. Neff wanted a Society that would be historical in its purpose and an everlasting credit to the able men who had organized it. He also wanted members to be worthy of the organizers and a Society that a man would be proud to have served as Governor General.

He was a member of the Society of Genealogists, London, England, the Swiss Historical Society, the New England Historical and Genealogical Society, the New York Genealogical and Biographical Society, the Oklahoma Historical Society, the East Tennessee Historical Society, the Filson Club and the New Jersey Historical Society.

Mr. Neff accumulated a library of thousands of books, mostly history and read all of them. He also had collected a vast amount of material for his Five Generation Project which would bring all descendants of all Mayflower passengers who left descendants, down to about the time of the Revolution. He made several trips to England and Holland and, while there, made many new discoveries regarding the early Pilgrim families and their ancestry. He learned that Brewster and Winslow were descended from royalty and that probably Standish was, and that possibly others were also. He found great satisfaction in making a new discovery.

Ancestral societies interested Mr. Neff from a historical viewpoint. He was Chancellor of the Descendants of the Colonial Clergy, a Baron in the Baronial Order of the Magna Charta, a member of the Order of the Three Crusades, 1096-1192, Sons of Cincinnati, Huguenot Society and of the Sons of the American Revolution.

Mr. Neff served in the Coast Artillery in World War I. He was a member of the American Legion and a member of the Tulsa County, the Oklahoma State and the American Bar associations.

He had a subtle sense of humor, was kind and sympathetic, generous in his charities, especially to destitute families. He had a strong determination that held steadfast in a decision, a methodical approach to a question. Other attorneys valued his opinion on points of law and his

¹ Copies of the three volume set of the *Mayflower Index and Mayflower Descendants in the State of Oklahoma*, books which were compiled by Mr. Neff, are in libraries all over the country and in the British Museum.

ability to recognize when a law suit was involved in a question. His legal training was of great help to him in his genealogical research.

Lewis Edwin Neff passed away on May 23, 1908 from heart failure. He had plane reservation for another trip to England to start the following day. Surviving him are his sister Lucinda B. Neff of the home who had been closely associated with him in his legal and genealogical work; a nephew, the Reverend William Neff, Jr., pastor of St. Andrew's Presbyterian church, Tulsa, and several other aunts and nephews. Interment was in Memorial Park, Tulsa. Telegrams, telephone calls and floral tributes came from across the nation and from England to honor an able man who asked nothing for himself but was always ready to help others.

Tulsa, Oklahoma

—Lucinda B. Neff