Neff, Merlin Lee (1906–1964)

BETTY CAROL PATTERTON SPALDING

Betty Carol Patterson Spalding, MMUSED, MMUS (Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan), has lead orchestras and choirs along with lessons in violin, viola and piano, for 40 years. She worked in western Canada, U.S.A., Puerto Rico and Jamaica. She has taught in music conservatories and also started music conservatories in the music departments. As a genealogist, she has written family history.
Merlin Lee Neff was a well-known Adventist author, educator, and administrator. He was the chairman of the English departments at Walla Walla and La Sierra Colleges and a book editor for the Pacific Press Publishing Association for twenty-one years. He was also assistant editor of *Signs of the Times*.

A third-generation Seventh-day Adventist, Merlin Neff was born on July 20, 1906, in San Antonio, Texas, to Virginia-born Elmer Lee Neff and Kansas-born Cora E. Hiatt.¹ He was their only child. Elmer Neff was a Seventh-day Adventist minister in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.² In 1883, Merlin Neff’s grandfather, Abraham Neff, became the first president of the newly formed Virginia Conference of the Seventh-day Adventists.³

Merlin Neff graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1927 from Pacific Union College. In 1931, he earned an MA degree and in 1938 a doctoral degree, both from the University of Washington in Seattle. He also received an honorary a doctor of law degree from Walla Walla College.⁴

Neff married Ethel Maxine Ogden on May 22, 1930, in Seattle, Washington.⁵ The couple had one son, Merlin Junior.⁶

While working at Walla Walla College, Neff started a radio speech class to encourage students to develop their vocal technique through radio speaking. The class broadcasted around the college campus. This opened the door for the students to be able to broadcast on the radio station in town from their studio on campus.

Merlin Lee Neff died August 8, 1964, in a Fullerton, California, hospital and is buried in the Fairhaven Memorial Park, Santa Ana, Orange County, California.⁷ In a final tribute to Dr. Neff, Ron Graybill wrote:

He was liberal in his hatred of injustice and mediocrity. He was liberal in his love of art and people. He was liberal in his education and scholarship. And he gave liberally of the talents he had. And he wanted to liberate our minds from tradition for tradition's sake alone, from narrowness of vision and ambition. He had seen the waste land through which we could pass if we clung to mere forms. He knew that our danger was that we would be remembered—if at all—not as lost violent souls, but only as the hollow men, the stuffed men. He left behind 21 books, but even if he had never written a line, his passion for excellence and relevance will be translated into the life-language of hundreds of the young people he taught.⁸

Among the twenty-one books he wrote were the three volume *Our Heritage of Faith* and the five-volume children's set *The Bible Pageant*.

**SOURCES**


**NOTES**


