

## Local historian Rob Neufeld remembered as true scholar, WNC treasure

Asheville Citizen Times, Oct. 2019

by John Boyle

<https://www.citizen-times.com/story/news/local/2019/10/23/local-historian-rob-neufeld-has-died-remembered-local-treasure/4069732002/>



*Photo contributed by Henry Neufeld.*

Longtime Citizen Times columnist Rob Neufeld, a highly respected local historian known for his love and respect of his adopted Western North Carolina mountains, has died after battling Lou Gehrig's Disease.

Neufeld, 65, who garnered numerous awards for his research and writing, continued his "Visiting Our Past" column for the newspaper till the end. Neufeld died Sunday, Oct. 20.

"He wanted to do it as long as he could," his wife, Bev Robertson, said Oct. 23. "On Saturday, he had two friends over at different times helping him with his writing. He probably has a column ready for next week."

Robertson was only half-joking about that. The paper published Neufeld's "Portrait of the Past" feature, his last, Oct. 23, two days after his last "Visiting Our Past."

Neufeld was a New York City transplant who came to Asheville with Robertson in 1988, shortly after they married, for a job with the Buncombe County Library system. Neufeld and Robertson, who is director of the Mars Hill University Library, raised their two sons here, Henry, 29, and Nathan, 27.

The couple met while getting their master's degrees in library science at Columbia University in New York City. Neufeld held degrees from Swarthmore College and Columbia, but he came to love his adopted mountains like a native.

He especially enjoyed hearing from locals he wrote about who appreciated his deep research and writing style.

"It really gave him joy," Robertson said. "He loved this area, he loved the people here. He was just a curious guy, so that was always behind it from the get-go."

## Remembered for 'the quality of his character'

In August, the Western North Carolina Historical Association unanimously [voted Neufeld the recipient of its 2019 Outstanding Achievement Award](#). He became the 66th winner, joining luminaries including author and poet Fred Chappell; and Doug Orr, president emeritus of Warren Wilson College.

Mountain native Jim Buchanan, an association board member and former Citizen Times editor and columnist, said Neufeld's legacy will "live on due to the quality of his character.

"Perhaps more important, and I suspect he would've agreed with this statement, the legacy of many, many individuals and an entire culture will live on thanks to his careful and diligent chronicling of the people, places and events of these mountains," Buchanan said. "He carefully distilled and bottled them, and we'll forever be able to take a sip when the mood strikes us."

In an August interview, Neufeld said he was honored to have held a position for so long that allowed him to tell the stories of the region.

"The thing I'm most proud of is being able to tell people's stories and making the connection to that time, and putting their lives in historical context," Neufeld said then. "Mostly I did that by focusing on people's lives, so that people know what it's like living another person's reality."

Robertson said Neufeld also recently received the Rob Neufeld Service Award from the Old Buncombe County Genealogical Society, which will now be awarded annually "to someone who exemplifies his spirit."

Former state legislator and Buncombe County Board of Commissioners Chairman Nathan Ramsey said Oct. 23 he was notified by the governor's office last week "that Rob would receive the Old North State Award." Rep. John Ager, D-Buncombe was planning an event to present this award to him.

"Regrettably, I should have started the effort to recognize Rob earlier, and I feel very badly that he did not know he had received this award," Ramsey said, noting that multiple people had written letters of recommendation to the governor's office. "I haven't seen Rob in many years, but when I read in the Asheville Citizen Times that he had ALS, I felt he deserved a statewide award."

Neufeld was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's Disease, or Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, in April 2018. In January of that year, he had noticed an involuntary clenching of his hand, which he thought was carpal tunnel syndrome, and then in March tightening of his calves.

An incurable disease, ALS affects nerve cells responsible for controlling voluntary muscle movements, eventually curtailing functions such as walking, talking and chewing. Those with ALS remain cognitively sharp but steadily lose most physical functions. The disease has no cure or treatment to reverse its progress.

Neufeld never succumbed to self-pity, though, remaining determined to write and work. In fact, he felt the disease sharpened his writing and focus.

## 'Grace and hospitality'

Allan Tarleton, an Asheville attorney and chairman of the Western North Carolina Historical Association, said the first time he met Neufeld in person came in August when presenting the association's award at Neufeld's home.

"In addition to the grace and hospitality extended by Rob's family to a crowd of invaders, what struck me most about that afternoon were the presence of other local historians and writers who obviously appreciated and respected Rob's work and remarkable energy, and Rob's clear intention to keep on working despite the advanced level of his condition," Tarleton said. "Both of those circumstances led me to understand how much it meant to Rob to be able to write his columns on Western North Carolina history and how appreciated his stories have been by so many readers, most of whom, like me, never had a chance to meet and thank him."

While he was most well-known for the history columns, Neufeld also reviewed books for the paper and played key roles in regional reading programs, including a seven-year stint as director of the Together We Read program and more recently as director of Mountain Lit. Acclaimed author Ron Rash described Neufeld as "the person who has done more than anyone else to promote reading in this region."

Neufeld also was the author of four books, two of local interest and two collaborations with novelist Gail Godwin. He was previously a library administrator for Buncombe County.

His newspaper column likely reached the most readers.

Geoff Cantrell, former regional editor and Mountain Folkways columnist of the Citizen Times, as well as a board member of WNCHA, is also a mountain native. He personally knew Neufeld but noted that the historian touched the lives of many people he never met.

"I think it is most telling that Rob Neufeld will be missed by people who never even met or knew him, except through the pages of the Citizen Times, whether in print or online," Cantrell said. "And those methods of the message are worth noting because Rob, with a historian's frame of reference, understood both the increasing move to digital and the lasting power of print. In my last conversation with him, he said with some pride, 'I get clicks.' He also got respect, trust, friendship and love."

As Tarleton put it, "Page 3 of Citizen Times won't be the same."

Robertson said a memorial service will be held for Neufeld in spring 2020.