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Descriptive Summary

Identifier  ICU.SPCL.NEFES
Title  Nef, Evelyn Stefansson. Papers
Date  1914-2010
Size  4.75 linear feet (8 boxes)
Repository  Special Collections Research Center
University of Chicago Library
1100 East 57th Street
Chicago, Illinois 60637 U.S.A.

Abstract  Evelyn Stefansson Nef was a puppeteer, librarian, and philanthropist. She was married to Committee on Social Thought founder John U. Nef, Jr. for 35 years. The collection contains her correspondence, personal papers and photographs, dating from 1914 to 2010. The bulk of the collection dates from 1964 to 2009.

Information on Use

Access
The collection is open for research.

Citation
When quoting material from this collection, the preferred citation is: Nef, Evelyn Stefansson. Papers [Box #, Folder #], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

Biographical Note
Evelyn Stefansson Nef was born on July 24, 1913 to Bella Klein and Jen Schwartz of Brooklyn. She had two older sisters, Rosalind and Julie, and a younger brother Myron. Her father died when she was 11, and Evelyn’s emotionally fragile mother went mute from grief. Evelyn attended Washington Irving High School where she developed an interest in puppetry and marionettes. (The Schwartzes were a talented bunch; Julie went on to perform with the Ziegfeld Follies under the name Julie Jenner.)

With her mother unable to care for the family, Evelyn spent much of her time in her late teens in Greenwich Village, where she met artists, writers, and dancers, and was briefly involved with architect Buckminster Fuller. In 1932 she married puppeteer Bil Baird and began performing with his marionette theatre. Though she and Baird divorced after 4 years, she continued to perform through the end of 1930s.
In 1941, Evelyn married Arctic explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson, 30 years her senior. During their marriage she served as a secretary and research assistant to Stefansson, and they amassed a large library of material on polar and subpolar regions. The Stefanssons and their library moved to Dartmouth College in 1951, where Vilhjalmur taught and Evelyn both taught and served as librarian for his collection. Evelyn herself wrote several books on polar geography and from 1969 to 1971 served as president of the Society of Women Geographers.

After Vilhjalmur Stefansson died in 1962, Evelyn moved to Washington D.C. to work for the American Sociological Association. In 1964 she met John U. Nef, Jr., professor in (and founder of) the interdisciplinary Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago. He proposed five days later and they were married in April of that year. Through Nef, Evelyn met such cultural and artistic luminaries as Saul Bellow and Marc Chagall, with whom the Nefs vacationed in France. In 1971, Chagall designed a mosaic for the Nef’s garden.

In the 1970s Evelyn studied psychoanalysis and opened her own practice in Washington. She served on various boards, including the Corcoran Gallery of Art, the National Symphony Orchestra, the Washington Opera, the MacDowell Colony, and the International Longevity Center. The Nefs were prominent at social events and in the society pages through the 1960s and 1970s, and into the 1980s. John Nef died in 1988.

Evelyn Nef’s life did not slow down after the death of her third husband. She continued to host musical evenings at her Georgetown home, whose guests included Supreme Court Justices Sandra Day O’Connor and Ruth Bader Ginsburg and cellist Yo-Yo Ma. Her philanthropic work continued as well.


**Scope Note**

The collection is divided into four series.

Series I, Personal, contains personal papers and ephemera, newspaper clippings, and memorials, arranged chronologically.

Series II, Correspondence, contains personal correspondence, arranged alphabetically by correspondent.
Series III, Audio-Visual, contains photographs, negatives, and slides of Evelyn Nef, family, and friends. It also contains two CDs of poetry readings.

Series IV, Oversize, contains photographs of Evelyn and John Nef and friends, including the Chagalls and Hannah Arendt. Because many of them are undated, photos are arranged alphabetically by subject.

Of particular interest in the collection are photographs of, and correspondence related to, the mosaic designed by Marc Chagall for the Nef’s garden in Washington, D.C. as well as many photographs of Chagall himself, most of them taken on vacation with the Nefs and his wife Vava (Valentina) in France. There is also a set of photographs from the baptism of Madeleine Albright’s twins, and several of Hannah Arendt with John Nef. Other notable persons whose correspondence or photographs appear in the collection include Margaret Meade, Sandra Day O’Connor, Judith Leiber, Eleanor Jackson Piel, T. S. Eliot, Sir Neville Marriner, Yo-Yo Ma, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Bill and Hilary Clinton, and Saul Bellow.

Related Resources
The following related resources are located in the Department of Special Collections:

http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/spcl/select.html

Nef, John U., Jr. Papers

Nef, Elinor Castle. Papers

University of Chicago. John U. Nef Committee on Social Thought. Records

Subject Headings
• Nef, Evelyn Stefansson, 1913-2009
• Chagall, Marc, 1887-1985
• Stefansson, Vilhjalmur, 1879-1962
• Nef, John U. (John Ulric), 1899-1988

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Series III: Audio-visual

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