



Ruth Neely FRANCE

Intrepid journalist shattered barriers

New York City journalism had Nellie Bly and her ballyhooed race around the world by train, boat, sampan, rickshaw, burro and horse to beat the 80-day time line made famous by Jules Verne, one of many stunts in her storied career.

Cincinnati newspapers had Ruth Neely France.

Like Miss Bly, America's famous pioneering woman journalist, Miss Neely - who used her maiden name throughout her career - earned her reputation early this century through reportorial stunts ranging from flying a dirigible to sliding hundreds of feet down a fire escape device from the top of downtown Cincinnati's tallest building.

One of Cincinnati's earliest newspaperwomen, Miss Neely also was among the first women to work for a major metropolitan newspaper in the country - becoming an inspiring role model who helped crumble gender barriers in a profession then all-but-exclusively male.

Perhaps even more important was the broader, if intangible, message sent by her bylines in three Cincinnati papers over nearly a half century: that women need not regard any career as closed to them. Because if Ruth Neely could solo a dirigible, then who was to say that women couldn't do anything they wanted in the workplace?

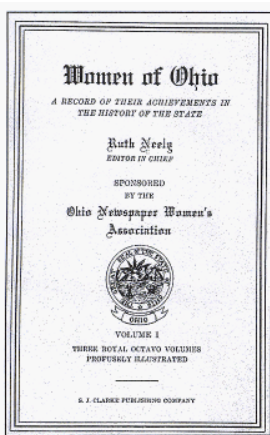
Of all the memorable stunts in a career that took Miss Neely from the old Cincinnati Commercial Tribune to The Post to the Times-Star and then back to The Post, perhaps the most impressive one was simply getting a newspaper job in the first place.

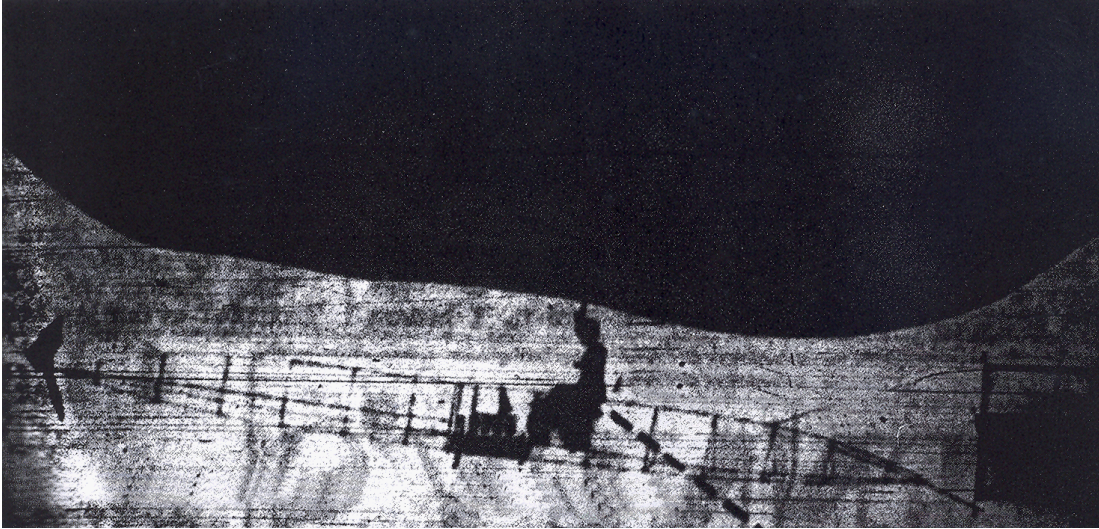
Born in Kentucky in 1874 or 1875 (conflicting accounts make figuring out her birthdate a stunt in itself), Miss Neely was the daughter of a lawyer.

In 1903, when she was working as a schoolteacher in Covington, she walked into the editor's office at the Commercial Tribune and asked for an unpaid trial "chasing down neighborhood items" in her spare time. Three weeks later, the editor told her to quit teaching and offered her a job at the paper.

It was a period when women were a rarity on city newspaper staffs, and when the few females in the newsroom generally had to choose between consignment to the women's department or being used almost exclusively for stunt stories. Miss Neely chose the latter path, realizing it would keep her closer to the "real" news than chronicling weddings, rhubarb pie recipes and changing hemlines.

As a stunt reporter, she distinguished herself at the first "flying circus," held in 1909 near Cincinnati. Aviation was then in its infancy, and Miss Neely was determined to get a personal experience story. Undeterred to learn that the primitive planes and airships at the show could accommodate only one person - the pilot - she persuaded the owner of a dirigible to allow her to make a "solo ascension." She almost came away with more than a story, because the big flapping crate drifted out over a lake. The wind, however, blew it back over land again; and she calmly dropped a rope to be pulled down - her nerves and story intact.





Heights figured prominently in many of her stunt stories. She later became the first woman in the nation to fly in an Army airplane - between Dayton and Cincinnati - as part of a recruiting promotion. Once, she climbed to the highest point on the Roebling Suspension Bridge for an interview with a startled worker repairing the span. And for another story, she slid 34 stories down from the top of the Union Central Building to test a wire fire escape contraption; two years later, the inventor broke his neck and died while conducting a similar demonstration in another city.

One of her most memorable exploits involved going undercover to write about conditions at the Cincinnati Workhouse, a target of reform efforts early in the century. Miss Neely, according to a Post story, got herself "incarcerated, fingerprinted, garbed in uniform and assigned to a cell" in order to write a human interest story about how women found guilty of "loitering" - in the chaste legal phraseology of the day - lived behind bars.

Miss Neely's sister happened to visit the workhouse that day with a group of fellow reformers from the Woman's City Club, who had helped the woman superintendent provide games, piano music, embroidery and other recreational items for the female prisoners. The visitors were pleased to find the inmates in good condition and spirits - particularly one in a freshly laundered uniform "smiling smugly at them."

When the club women realized who she was, they stared at each other in horrified consternation until one blurted out: "Mrs. Ross, it's your sister! It's Ruth!" Mrs. Ross is said to have replied: "Good heavens! What on earth has she done now?" After a few shocked moments, they realized it was just another of her sister's newspaper stunts.

The flair that she brought to such stories gradually led to more substantive assignments. She covered three national conventions, distinguished herself with her coverage of the 1913 Ohio flood and wrote award-winning stories on the 1931 funeral of U.S. House Speaker Nicholas Longworth, attended by President Hoover.

An ardent suffragette, Miss Neely - who in the 1920s was president of the Ohio Newspaper Women's Association - utilized her newspaper fame to become one of Cincinnati's most prominent activists in the battle for equal political and economic rights for women.

When the boys began coming home at the end of World War I in the fall of 1918, she wrote an article in the Woman's City Club Bulletin arguing that military demobilization should not curtail women's employment opportunities. Instead, she called for the "reorganization of our industrial army on a sane and equitable basis," and suggested the slogan "Plan to Set Your House in Order" as an appropriate motto for the business world. Of her many honors, one that she prized most was having her name among those listed on a bronze plaque in the main corridor of the Hamilton County Courthouse for "having helped to win the day for woman suffrage."

As an early member of the Woman's City Club, she was at the fore of the club's international goodwill work during the '20s and '30s. In the summer of 1932, the club and other local peace groups sent her as a delegate to the national peace demonstrations held in Chicago during the Republican and Democratic conventions, which she reported on for the Cincinnati newspapers. She also helped organize the Cincinnati Peace League and was active for years in the Foreign Policy Association.

In the mid-1930s, she left daily newspaper work to become a freelance journalist. In 1939, Miss Neely edited the three-volume "Women of Ohio," featuring biographical sketches of 1,200 women who had shaped Ohio and the world - yet had been overlooked in many traditional histories. She later worked in public relations and spent 12 years with the Public Health Federation before retiring in her late 70s in 1954.

When she died in August 1956 - at 81 or 82, depending on the disputed birthdate - her pall bearers included former colleague Al Segal, whose "Cincinnati" column was the longest running continuously published column in U.S. newspaper history.

"She was a reporter who cared so much for people she wrote about, she cried for them, went out of her way to do for them toward making their lives better," Segal wrote.

As Segal's fitting tribute made clear, Ruth Neely France on or off the ground - was forever reaching heights in a distinguished newspaper career that had a lasting effect not just on her profession, but on her city.