

**"Along Those Lines"** 2/17/2006 - [Archive](#)

## Bringing "Value" to Your Genealogical Society

We live in financially difficult times. Many of us have, as a result, made significant changes in our discretionary spending. We have deferred or given up non-essential items and statistics show that charitable contributions top out early in the year. In short, we have all had to become savvy consumers and many of us choose to spend our money on those activities that provide real enjoyment and value to us.

Genealogical society memberships are still a great value for your money. If you belong to a local society, each of your membership meetings is a social and educational opportunity with friends who share your "genealogy addiction." They probably also have additional projects that allow you to participate in indexing, publishing, and/or preserving records. If you belong to national genealogical societies and societies in those areas where you are researching your ancestors, you may be unable to attend the meetings, but you receive their newsletters, journals or magazines, and notices of new publications and news about records becoming accessible or, unfortunately in some cases, being closed to the public for so-called "security reasons." The information allows you to learn and to take appropriate action.

Unfortunately, as our incomes fail to keep pace with inflation and costs, many of us have had to make the difficult choice of whether to continue our memberships in various genealogical societies. Many societies' memberships have declined, particularly those that offer lesser value to their members. In my own local society, of which I am a director, we have been discussing how to add value for our existing members and how to draw new members. In "Along Those Lines . . ." this week, I want to offer some suggestions that your society may consider in order to add more value and make membership more attractive to existing and potential members.

### **Educational Opportunities**

A primary purpose of a genealogical society is to provide information to its members. This can take a number of forms. Publication of newsletters and periodicals is a valuable way to reach all the society members because each member has a subscription included in the value of his or her dues.

In addition, your society should be sending copies of each publication to local libraries and other libraries in the state with genealogical collections so as to get the word out to other potential members of what your society is doing and what it has to offer. A copy of your publications should be sent to the Allen County Public Library in Fort Wayne, Indiana, so that it will be preserved and so that its contents will be indexed in the venerable Periodical Source Index (PERSI). You may also want to develop relationships with other genealogical societies to exchange publications in a "trade-in-kind" arrangement. Their publications become part of your library too.

Presentation of a monthly program is an important part of the society's educational function too. Perhaps not everyone will be interested in research in one particular area, but when solid genealogical research methodologies and tips are presented, everyone benefits from the perspective. And, if you want to get the word out about your monthly meetings, make friends with members of the local press (including the smaller community newspapers), with libraries in your area, and with surrounding genealogy societies and send a letter and/or e-mail at least forty-five days in advance so that they can publicize your society's activities. You are sure to draw interested parties to visit and check out your society.

Your society may also wish to substitute an annual conference or workshop for one of its monthly programs. If your society is small and has a small budget, perhaps you can have several short lectures by members, invite genealogical vendors to exhibit, have the society sponsor a used book sale table, and serve sandwich lunch boxes prepared by a local delicatessen or grocery store. Charge enough to cover your expenses and add a couple of dollars more to the price, and then get started with publicity. Larger, more established societies may want to engage one or more regionally- or nationally-known speakers for a whole day of presentations, host more vendors, sell books, and give away donated door prizes.

### **Establish Special Interest Groups**

Do you know what your members and visitors really want? Our local society, the Florida Genealogical Society, Inc., in Tampa, has developed a questionnaire to try to find out. We put it on our website ([click here](#) to view) and we will be distributing paper copies at our next several society meetings. We will then compile the information to determine interest levels in various areas. Here are some of the ideas we will consider based on the responses we receive.

- Facilitate an informal roundtable discussion prior to each regular meeting to allow people to discuss their brick walls and successes, share information about research resources, suggest research methodologies to one another, and to discuss any other issues of genealogical interest.

- Establish Special Interest Groups (SIGs) where there is a significant interest level. That might include research in England, Ireland, Scandinavia, Germany, Italy, Eastern Europe, religious research, military research, immigration and/or naturalization, or computer topics. As part of our evaluation of topics, we plan to work with the main library in Tampa where the genealogical and local history collection is located. The library schedules and conducts a number of public genealogy classes. Where we can refer our members to existing classes, we will do so. We will offer to collaborate with the library to develop classes our members and visitors tell us they want or need and either develop the classes together or individually. We also will partner with the library to schedule meeting room

space and computer lab facilities if possible. Please note that SIGs do not have to meet in conjunction with the regular society meeting or at a public facility. Many societies' SIGs meet in members' homes.

- Develop special educational programs separate from the society's monthly meeting that focus on small groups of members' needs. For example, we already know that a few people in our society are researching ancestors in Missouri. Knowing this, we can research and present a short program specially tailored to that small group.

### Field Trips

I enjoy traveling with other genealogists "in a pack." Field trips to other libraries can be arranged in advance. Your members can carpool or charter a bus or large van, and plan to make a day (or more) of the trip. Our society is planning a joint meeting with the Pinellas Genealogy Society in Largo, Florida, and will then have a tour of the brand-new library and its extensive genealogical society. However, our society board is already discussing field trips to the Orlando Public Library, the Indian River County Public Library in Vero Beach, and the Polk County Public Library in Bartow. Each of these facilities is with three hours' driving distance and we can schedule a tour on arrival and then dig in to research in these libraries' excellent collections.

### Projects Of All Sorts

It's certainly easy to pay your society dues and then sit back and let other people do the work of running the society, but if you're the kind of person who likes to pitch in and have fun, volunteering with your local society can be extremely rewarding. We are fortunate to have people who are willing to get involved in projects of all sorts that can serve the society and the community at large.

Our local society last year had a group of volunteers working in the main Tampa library's Genealogy and Local History Department to go through the vertical file cabinets of genealogical folders, review the contents, and to create an index that we will publish. During the project, team members discovered original marriage certificates, Bible pages, and other primary documents. They also were thrilled with the sheer amount of historical material they found.

Many societies help preserve original documents by indexing them, photocopying them onto acid-free paper, digitizing them with scanners, and then make the facsimiles available to the public and protecting the originals by storing them.

Other societies get groups together and canvass cemeteries, transcribe monumental or gravestone inscriptions or plaques, and then index and publish a book. This is a way to preserve the data on the markers which may be eroding away, and it can be a fundraising project too.

### Summary

I happen to belong to about twenty societies worldwide, and I find my memberships are very beneficial. We recently had tickets to the road production of the hit Broadway show, *Wicked*, playing here in Tampa. The tickets were \$65.00 apiece. That money could pay for my annual membership dues in three small to medium-size genealogical societies. One night's entertainment or a year's genealogical information? Think about it!

Happy Hunting!

George

[Click here](#) to visit George's Web site for information about speaking engagements.

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