Genealogical Society Marks 50 Years During Trying Times

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WHEELING — British novelist, playwright and poet Sir William Gerald Golding may have said it best when speaking about the past.

“My yesterday’s walk with me. They keep step, they are gray faces that peer over my shoulder.”

Golding’s words could very well be the impetus behind the reason hundreds of people have sought the wisdom of professional past-seekers who make up the membership of WAGS – Wheeling Area Genealogical Society. The group’s home base is located within the Ohio County Public Library which is now closed to the public due to the coronavirus pandemic.

WAGS was the brainchild of 13 local residents who founded the society on Sept. 22, 1970. Their intent is and remains dedicated to preserving Wheeling area genealogical data.

However, several factors have resulted in fewer active members or even a 50th anniversary celebration. WAGS Co-Director Carol Bell summed up the 50 years, noting the group has gone from “microfilm to digital.”

“With COVID, we can’t have our anniversary dinner, and we aren’t able to get into the library where our research material is located,” Bell said last week.

Bell said the early members of WAGS – all volunteers – are responsible for hundreds of documented histories they researched, recorded via handwritten or typed articles, all before the dawn of digital technology. Their resulting research has brought light to many families seeking information about their ancestry. Many of the volunteers’ own ancestry research are located at the library.

“We have a roster of 120-plus members, but there are only a few active members. And right now, we can’t do much without being at the library,” Bell explained.

She joined WAGS about 15 years ago after seeing a meeting notice in the Wheeling newspaper. Bell is responsible for sending out the newsletter to members, but there is little to report at this time.

WAGS sponsors lecture series that have been widely popular, similar to the library’s Lunch With Books program. WAGS members had presented two programs on local churches before the pandemic hit. The remaining seven lectures in the series are on hold.

Like many social and civic groups, WAGS has seen a decline in membership. And with the advent of digital access to so much information, many people can do research from their homes via computers. As the internet came along and changed a genealogist’s life easier forever. Ancestry.com was launched in 1996 followed by many other online resources. Suddenly researching family histories was much easier and more fun, and WAGS moved into a new era,” Bell noted.

Bell said her interest in genealogy surfaced in 1977 when she watched the TV series “Roots.” “I was working as a chemist in Atlanta for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. I made regular trips home but after watching ‘Roots’ I couldn’t wait to get home and talk with my parents and grandmother to learn more about the families,” Bell said.

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Now retired, Bell splits her time between Wheeling and Atlanta and has written two books that detail the history of her family. Bell gives a lot of credit to the founders of WAGS who she said put in countless hours of research. They also manned the first Wheeling Room located on the lower level of the library to help people do research and to protect the room from theft.

Thanks to the work of WAGS and under the watchful eye of library staffer Diane Rhodes, a beautiful, expanded Wheeling Room is located on the main level of the library. The room is kept locked and no bags, briefcases or purses are allowed to be taken inside. Rhodes is most helpful when someone is seeking a particular topic of research.

Also, WAGS information and events website can be found at www.wagswv.org.

Wheeling Mayor Glenn Elliott is expected to present a proclamation noting WAGS' 50th anniversary during an upcoming council meeting.

Source: