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Jim Willhite
Oregon State Library

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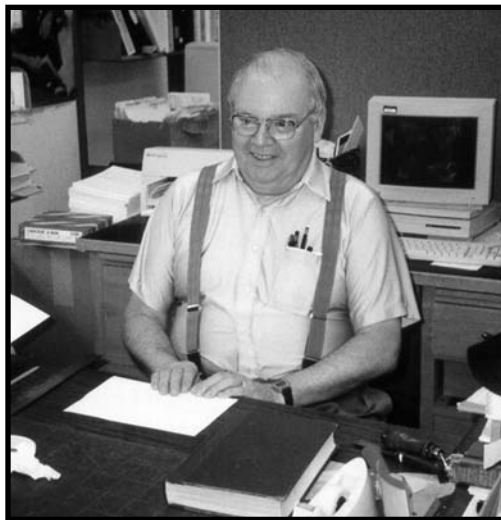
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A Day in the Life of a Librarian for a Genealogy Society

by *Jim Willhite*
Oregon State Library



Way back in the early 40s I used to accompany my dad as he delivered heavy black fuel oil to apartment houses and industrial buildings. The first thing he would do upon arrival was find the “Building Engineer,” as he called them; others might use “Maintenance Man” or “Janitor.” These people kept the building functional, with no engineering training, likely only “on the job training.” Similarly, I’m the “librarian” for the Willamette Valley Genealogy Society (WVGS) located in Salem, Oregon—a strictly volunteer position with no formal librarian training or education required.

WVGS has about 150 members, from all walks of life, mostly retired. I retired from the Office of Highway Safety, Federal Highway Administration, as a Highway Engineer in 1988. In 1990 my wife and I returned to Oregon and in the early 90s, I became active in the Society and began acquisition of what is now a sizable collection of genealogical CDs. This slowly evolved into responsibility for all types of genealogical materials, books, microfilms, CDs, etc. I am assisted by three other WVGS members in routine but necessary tasks such as keeping track of the books, audiotapes, and videos in the WVGS collection, managing the acquisition and flow of the periodicals into the State Library’s

collection, and loading any new CDs into the Virtual Drive program.

WVGS is a non-profit 501 (c) (3) organization dedicated to educating the public on how to do family history research, and to providing the necessary resources to do this research. WVGS has an agreement with the Oregon State Library (OSL) which assists us with this task. OSL provides us with the facility to house the genealogy resources, plus some technical expertise to maintain the computers and microfilm reader-printers. In turn, WVGS provides two members experienced in family history research to assist the public at all times the Reference Room is open, and to answer genealogical correspondence; the genealogical resources and much of the equipment needed to utilize the resources such as the microfilm readers; and other volunteers who do book repair, cataloging, and scanning of archived material.

WVGS’s financial support comes from member dues and donations, occasional small grants, and the sale of WVGS-developed publications. These monies are used to purchase books, periodicals, CDs and sometimes equipment for OSL. Since the collection is housed in the State Library, Oregon material is emphasized, although the collection now includes resources from all states.

I have done this volunteer activity for seven or eight years. Primarily I serve as an acquisitions librarian, and a focal point for donations. I work closely with OSL staff in developing the collection. Another WVGS member and I confer with the OSL assigned coordinator and meet as needed to discuss progress on various issues and any problems concerning OSL staff and WVGS volunteers that may surface. The State Librarian and his staff are truly most helpful in assuring that our needs and the needs of the public are met.

WVGS acquires genealogical material by both purchase and donation. Donated material is from estates, or from the public who feel they would like to make their



genealogical collection available to others. It can be in the form of books, periodicals, newsletters, CDs or even research notes on specific surnames. Donated material often comes in by the bagful or a few boxes, but we have received as many as 26 boxes from a single donation. There is a significant amount of genealogical material that flows into the OSL system on a regular basis. Most of this material goes to my home while it is processed, much to the chagrin of my loving wife. I check all donated material to see if it will be useful to OSL, and also see if we can find a home for material not useful for the OSL collection.

Whether the material is donated or purchased, I check the OSL electronic catalog to be sure they do not already have it. Space is limited in the library so we do not keep duplicate copies with the exception of some Oregon material kept in the Oregon collection.

For a number of years WVGS had a very generous donor who wanted to make the OSL collection of genealogical CDs one of the best in the Northwest. After the collection surpassed several hundred CDs, WVGS invested in a system to install all the CDs onto a hard drive accessible by two computers so it was no longer necessary to handle the CDs individually. This created another major task for the “librarian” (sometimes my spouse—as I attended other business) of loading all the CDs onto the hard drive, most requiring about 25 minutes per CD. OSL’s collection has continued to grow and today is about 500 CDs. We are again looking into how we can best expand it to meet our future needs.


WVGS maintains a limited library of instructional videos and audio cassettes, and books, other than recent membership purchases. Recent purchases are made available to the donor first, and then kept for a short time for other members to look at before turning them over to OSL. Oregon books are an exception and are turned over to OSL as soon as they have been acquired.

Periodicals and newsletters are often donated by members and sometimes received through an exchange program with other societies. WVGS also subscribes to a few of the major genealogical periodicals for OSL.

Books and periodicals OSL has no use for are made available to other societies and libraries at no charge, or put on the monthly meeting sale table, with proceeds going to the WVGS book fund.

As librarian, I maintain a shelf list of WVGS material and the books and CD’s not yet in OSL’s catalog, and lists of genealogical-related periodicals available at OSL. I also write a monthly library report for the WVGS newsletter to keep all members informed.

One of the more nerve wracking aspects of the job is ordering the books and CDs. My biggest fear is ordering something OSL or WVGS already has. Thankfully it has only happened a few times over the many years. The OSL electronic cataloging system is now fully automated, but that was not always the case, and it has gone through numerous transitions, which left glitches and can cause a novice like me problems in trying to be one hundred percent sure something is not in the system.

The other volunteer hat I wear for OSL is doing book repair a half day each week. On occasion this is the first stop for donated books that need a little care before being put into the system for public use. It also alerts me to genealogical books in the OSL system that cannot be repaired, and that need to be replaced. 

About the Author

In 2001, Jim Willhite received the Margaret Epley Volunteer Award from the State Library in recognition of his outstanding service.

