

# GPGS Volunteers!

MAKE A *difference*

by Susan E. Ball

The Grand Prairie Genealogical Society has developed a well-earned reputation for volunteerism by their extremely active group of 70 members who have embraced a number of projects.

Volunteers are photographing, indexing, and updating cemetery data for Grand Prairie indexes using FindAGrave and the GPGS website. According to John Wylie, over 80% of the known graves in Grand Prairie have been documented. Over the past



five years, a dozen members have helped inventory the cemeteries, with a cadre of six still very active. "This is where some of our new members first volunteer," shared John. In addition,

in response to a critical TxSGS need for managing their First Families books, GPGS agreed to store and ship the books for a nominal handling fee attached to each order.

The highest profile GPGS project utilizes the TxSGS Preservation Capture System.<sup>1</sup> Through encouragement by GPGS, the Grand Prairie Historical

Society purchased a second PCS; GPGS now operates two capture systems. With ten volunteers working 20 hours per week, nearly a thousand

volunteer hours have been logged so far this year.

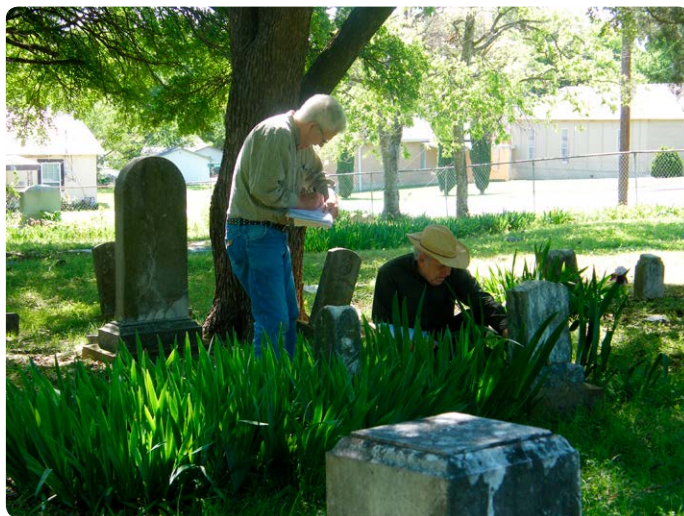
Grand Prairie also hosts the informal North Texas Genealogical Book Exchange that collects private book donations and “withdrawals” from ten libraries in the area. The books are sorted by state and the participating genealogical collections select from the book exchange volumes that supplement their libraries. “We’ve saved about 2,000 books from the fate of a dumpster,” estimated John.

Managing these many activities and projects requires dedicated leadership that remains fresh; the board members are rotated out or to new positions on a regular basis. “Eight years ago we created the position of President-Elect after having the same President for 9 years,” John explained. “We now encourage our nominating committee to change between 1/3 and 2/3 of the board each year. We allow people to move from job to job to keep some strong board members around.” He continued, “We systemized the nominating process. In my personal opinion, this is the single most important cause for our success.” To assist in maintaining society management continuity from one board to the next, GPGS relies on a Policy and Procedures Manual that is updated bi-annually.

Another key to GPGS’s success is that they are financially very secure. “Our only fundraisers are at restaurants in Grand Prairie,” John shared. “This allows our Lock-Ins to be free as a function of education. In addition, we pay our speakers very well, which means we get the best in the DFW area.”

Volunteering is emphasized at GPGS. According to John, “We ask our members for their time, not their

money. In 2007, we estimated about 300 volunteer hours but in 2016 we documented 950.” He continued, “We expect that the number of hours volunteered in 2017 will be even higher.” GPGS rewards their volunteers by listing their names in the newsletter and minutes. John explained, “When we recognize volunteers, we don’t list individual hours.” The desire is to encourage volunteerism without encouraging



unhealthy competition or comparisons. “We love our volunteers,” John shared. “Not only do we keep them busy, we select a ‘Volunteer of the Year’ whom we then nominate for consideration by TxSGS for their ‘Volunteer of the Year’ Award.”

The society meets throughout the year without a summer hiatus. The meetings consist of a program with announcements following the program. The board of directors manages the business of the society and simply reports as needed to the members. Again emphasizing the members, birthdays are acknowledged each month, new members and visitors are introduced at the start of each meeting, and members wear name badges at the meetings.

Rather than publish a quarterly journal, GPGS issues a monthly newsletter titled *Roots and Branches*.

“We’re a suburb and don’t feel that we should compete with either the Fort Worth Genealogical Society or the Dallas Genealogical Society, both of which do this well,” explained John. “The newsletter includes fun articles such as ‘guess the baby photo of a member’ and then features that member’s profile the following month.”

“We socialize a lot,” John confessed. “GPGS appreciates that physical networking is essential to compete with social media.” Consequently, the society mingles for 30 minutes prior to each meeting, at their free Lock-Ins, and at their restaurant fundraisers. “Most of all,” John shared, “we socialize when we work together. We encourage volunteer projects that use teams.”

GPGS has a healthy relationship with the Grand Prairie Public Library, which is enhanced by the tremendous support provided by the society. According to John, “We’re fortunate that the library essentially lets us run the ‘ROOTS room.’” He continued, “We help select books and pay for some when we can get an important book at lower cost.” Members of the society use the room for their own research and to tutor library patrons. To maintain a high level of support for the library, GPGS emphasizes at every meeting the need for members to spend time at the ROOTS room.

Through GPGS encouragement, the city of Grand Prairie placed a dedicated research computer in the Library ROOTS Room that is a repository for the many pages digitized by GPGS volunteers using the Preservation Capture System. “We currently have over 50,000 pages of Grand Prairie historical documents waiting to be installed on the



computer,” John boasted.

Embracing technology has led GPGS to host both a Facebook page and a Facebook group. The society newsletter is published digitally and emailed to members. In addition, GPGS’s newsletter exchange with other societies shares digital copies only. Consequently, the society’s postage expenses have dropped dramatically.

GPGS is involved in the local community and the larger genealogical community. “The society participates in a number of Grand Prairie leadership recognition programs,” John shared. With justifiable pride, he added, “We and our members often win.” Recognizing the importance of supporting genealogy on the state and national level, GPGS belongs



to TxSGS and the Federation of Genealogical Societies and shares their online newsletters among the Board and Committee Chairs.

A side effect of the strong leadership, financial security, and emphasis on volunteering is that the members “own GPGS.” This personal ownership of the society has provided incredible benefits to the society. “In ten years, our membership has nearly

doubled to about 70 people,” John shared, “and we now have distant members, members who don’t live in Grand Prairie.”

At a time when many societies are facing challenges, GPGS focuses on interesting projects, emphasizes volunteerism, develops dedicated leadership that remains fresh through frequent rotation, maintains a strong relationship with the local library, and preserves strong ties through social events. They did this by

examining what worked for them in the past, identifying areas that could be improved, and working together to build GPGS into a strong and vibrant society.

## Endnotes

1. Wylie, John, “GPGS Proves PCS’s Worth in Pilot Project,” *Stirpes* 56 (September-December 2016): 42-43.