

Island County Research & Archivist by Ralph Seefeld

Before I moved to the Island at the end of 1994 I had been doing genealogy for a couple of years since my retirement and my father (who lived near Freeland) had been collecting all of the family information that he could come up with. He put it all together in loose-leaf binders (printed on his Brother word processor) and sent copies to all of his nearest kin – maybe a dozen in all. When I arrived on the scene we worked together, updating his work with all of the information that I had collected and reformatting it all using my computer. Not long before he died in 1996 we shipped off copies again to the nearest kin. That was a milestone of sorts, and not wanting to beat my head against all of the brick walls I was finding, I decided to take another direction.

I had benefitted greatly from information collected by individuals in areas where my ancestors had lived, cemetery records, vital records – you know what I mean. I figured that I could collect information here and make it available to others as a payback, and since this is a small county, I figured it was do-able. So I began my “job.” I scoured all the sources I could find (from the Island County Historical Society to Seattle Public Library and a few other repositories) for cemetery information, found some, but it was all between 10 & 40 years old. So I began walking the Island County cemeteries and recording the information. While I was scouring sources I also found census pages, both hard copies and microfilms, so I began transcribing those. Then I took out subscriptions to all three Whidbey newspapers as well as the Everett Herald and began cutting out obituaries, pasting them onto pages and filing them alphabetically in binders. Then I acquired a scanner and – well, you know where that led. I expanded this task by going to newspaper repositories – with a hand-held scanner – collecting old obituaries as well. And as long as I was looking through all the old papers I started collecting vital statistics – births, marriages, divorces, and deaths, putting them into databases in my computer. I no longer add to these databases except for the deaths. I add death information from obituaries as I collect them.

So, you see, this job just sort of grew (like Corky) or evolved (like a resistant bacteria strain). I joined our society (then a club) having already done a lot of this, then went to the board to see if they would be interested. When I left that board meeting I was the Director of Archives!

Scroll ahead to now. Lately I have been revisiting some of the cemeteries I walked 8 to 10 years ago to update my records. This has not gotten to our web site as yet. I am still collecting obituaries from current papers, but lately have not been visiting newspaper repositories – most of the available papers have been finished, but not all. There are many at the News-Times office that have not been collected – not available elsewhere. I have kept in touch with the Washington State online archives. They have our vital records databases on their site now.

Here is what I consider to be the most important job to be continued if I should be unable to do so:

Current Obituaries:

1. Scan the obituaries as they appear in the Whidbey Island newspapers, or, alternatively, collect them from the newspapers' websites. (The Record and News-Times put all of their obituaries online.) Optionally include the Everett Herald and the Stanwood/Camano News (both also online). I consider Camano Island obituaries less important for us to do since the Camwood Genealogy Society is doing a good job of that already.
2. If necessary, clean up the copy with a graphics program (I use Paint Shop Pro), format them to fit nicely on 5 1/2 x 8 1/2 pages.
3. Print two copies.
4. File one copy in our binders, forward the second copy to Janet Enzmann at the Island County Historical Society.
5. Purchase paper and ink as needed for printing all of the first copies, submitting receipts to the Society treasurer for reimbursement. (The museum has offered to reimburse me for their copies, but I have considered that cost to be my donation to the museum.) Also purchase binders as needed for housing the growing collection of obituaries.
7. (Optional) Update the Deaths database from any obituaries collected. We could simply stop, if desired, and call it a database of deaths from 1875-2008, for example.

Other jobs of lesser urgency:

A. Update the cemetery records.

1. Take a copy of the current cemetery list, paper and pen or pencil, a brush or whisk broom to the cemetery. Pruning shears may also be helpful. Also a small mirror for reflecting light on inscriptions.
2. Walk the cemetery in list order, comparing the list with the stones. Make corrections if needed. Update the records if the stone has changed. Record the stones of any burials not on the list. The full inscription should be recorded.
3. Transfer the corrections and new data to the database used for printing the cemetery books.
4. Repaginate the data.
5. Prepare a new index (from scratch, because of the repagination).
6. Save all cemetery book data on a removable device (I use a Zip disk).

B. Photograph gravestones

1. You will need a digital camera that can hold many photos, or else a battery-operated computer that they can be transferred to. Most good digital cameras can be set for lower resolution in order to store more photos in the camera, but be careful to keep the inscriptions on the stones readable.
2. Take a copy of the cemetery list with you to the cemetery.
3. Photograph each gravestone as you walk the cemetery according to the list.
4. If you can't photograph a gravestone due to poor lighting or other reasons, mark it on the list to be done later at a better time of day.

5. Transfer the photos to your computer.
6. Using a graphics program (such as Paint Shop Pro) crop each photo to show the stone only, to reduce file size.
7. Change brightness or contrast if necessary to make the photo more readable.
8. Reduce the file size of each photo to 300 kb or less, using the graphics program or Microsoft's photo size reducer (free download). (The site that accepts your photos will give you guidelines.)
9. I haven't done this yet. The next step would be to get the photos online. There are gravestone photo sites available that will accept them, or, perhaps our web site? I haven't looked into that possibility.

C. Finish the historical obituaries collection.

1. Contact the editor of the Whidbey News-Times to see about arrangements for access to their newspaper archives. The following assumes that arrangements have been made.
2. Take a portable computer and a hand-held scanner to the newspaper office.
3. A digital camera (preferably with a tripod) may be necessary for obituaries in the crease of bound newspaper books.
4. Also take a list of the obituaries and their locations that I prepared before I got my hand-held scanner.
5. Scan the obituaries or photograph them.
6. Follow steps 2 to 5 of the current obituary procedure. Most of the obits will require more extensive clean-up than the current ones.
7. If we ever finish scanning what they have at the News-Times office, it would be a nice touch to prepare an index for them of the obituaries that they have in their archives. I did this for the Record when I finished theirs.

Note on C: I have used only obsolete equipment for the on-site scanning. I understand that there are later hand-held scanners available, but the prices scare me off. I use an old one that only works with Windows 3.1. So I use it with an old decrepit IBM Thinkpad. If anyone wants to take on the rest of this project I would be glad to donate this equipment.

Well, I hope this has been what you are looking for. These are the things that I do, not necessarily what someone else will do when I stop, so I'm not sure you could call it a description of job requirements. Anyway, have fun with it.

Ralph

P.S. When I respond to requests for obituaries, etc. I label myself as "Archivist." Doreen is also an archivist, but she is "Director of Archives." I hope I'm not stepping on anyone's toes.