

History of the Wheeling Area Genealogical Society

The Early Years

By Carol Bell

In 1970, thirteen people, the majority of them having participated in the Oglebay Institute class, *How to Climb Your Family Tree*, instructed by Monroe Worthington, decided to form a genealogy society. They were ahead of their time considering that several years later in 1977, the TV mini-series, *Roots*, caused an explosion of interest in family history.

The Wheeling Area Genealogical Society (WAGS) was founded September 22, 1970, at an organizational meeting held in the board room of the WTRF-TV building. Charter members attending were Helen Hartlieb, Charles Fortney, Helen Knierim, Ruth Moss, John Nation, Marie Nelson, Jessie Price, Eileen Shemenski, Audra Wayne, Lib Woods, Monroe Worthington, Evelyn Renshaw, and Marcella Steinman. The organization was given a name and a constitution and by-laws were adopted.

The purpose of the society was to get people together who were interested in obtaining sources and further information to aid in their family history research and to acquaint the public with the satisfaction that goes along with this “most fascinating and sometimes frustrating hobby.”

Charles Fortney, the first WAGS President and an employee of WTRF-TV, was granted permission for the society to meet in the WTRF board room during his tenure as president. Fortney was elected President every year until he moved to Florida in 1978. When Fortney retired from WTRF, he was honored by WAGS with a life membership. He died January 5, 2012. Harry Parshall, his successor, arranged for WAGS to meet at the Ohio County Public Library.

The first major project undertaken by the society was in 1973 when members helped pack and transport books in the West Virginia Room of the Ohio County Public Library on Market Street to the Library's new building on 16th Street. They unpacked and shelved the books in the new West Virginia Room. Later, this room was renamed the Wheeling Room.

The second major project also began in 1973. A five-member committee copied and compiled the Stone Church Cemetery Records dating from 1873 to 1925. Through the years, a vast number of old records have been located, transcribed, and compiled by WAGS members. We owe a huge debt of gratitude to all those members who have worked on the detailed extraction and transcription projects.

Since 1997 the governor of West Virginia has presented History Hero Awards in recognition of outstanding work and significant contributions to the preservation and dissemination of West Virginia history. WAGS nominees who have received this award are Audra Wayne, Phyllis Slater, Margaret Brennan John Logan, Mary Staley, Clarice Stanley, William Maxwell, Linda Cunningham Fluharty, June Jefferson, Nancy Roe, Phyllis Walters, Gloria Brinkmeier, Hazel Kirby, Glenna Dillon, Douglas Breiding, Diane Rhodes, Albert Lee Bourne, and Carla Tustin.

Evelyn Renshaw was the last active charter member. Evelyn was elected secretary-treasurer in 1974 and served for 28 years. She was a Wheeling Room volunteer for most of those years. She answered letters to the society on her old standard typewriter and kept detailed minutes, typed and in a notebook. When asked why her minutes were so detailed, she replied, "Because the minutes are the history of the organization." She exemplifies the grassroots effort and dedication that WAGS members possess. Renshaw died August 11, 2008.

Renshaw's detailed account of the society's formation and service can be found in *Lookout*, Volume 9, No. 2, June 2000.