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## Growing a Vibrant WSHS

By Leslie Waggener  
WSHS President

We're throwing a lot of ideas your way in this issue. And they're not just my ideas, or those of WSHS leadership. They're from members all over the state and nation, many of whom responded when they saw the "State of the WSHS" issue last month. It's basically been one big brainstorming session. I've personally been gratified to see how many people care about our Society and want to see it succeed.

Choosing which priorities to pursue based on all these great ideas will take concrete steps going forward. However, the most immediate priority to establish engaged, passionate, continuous, strong leadership is to evaluate the current leadership structure at the state level. The secretary's role is not defined in the Society's bylaws. But the leadership role of the WSHS Executive Committee is. That group "exists to provide continuity of knowledge, guidance, oversight, and management direction."

A key word in that sentence is "continuity." Continuity of effort is key, but the structure of a constantly changing executive committee presents a challenge. This is where a newly created WSHS Executive Director position could become a linchpin of leadership continuity and growing a vibrant Society. The director would not supplant the role of the governing committee or the secretary, but would enhance their work by providing continuity of effort in enacting the Society's initiatives.

To better understand the role of an executive director in a historical organization, I interviewed one. This person is a highly successful director of a small museum in Wyoming. I asked for her reaction to the "State of the WSHS" issue. She responded, "My reaction to the story on declining membership is that this is not unusual in the museum world now. The avid museum supporters of mid-21st-century are aging out, and so we all need to create a new model for attracting the younger generation. A paid director leading that charge for WSHS is a concentrated step to solutions." It was kind of her to make time for me that day as she was busy preparing for a trip to Jackson to raise funds for the museum. It wasn't lost on me that additional fundraising is another benefit to having an executive director.

I also took time to review job expectations for the museum director who was interviewed. Here are highlights, rewritten for the WSHS:

- ◆ Provide leadership in all aspects of Society operations.
- ◆ Lead the development, implementation, and carry-through of short- and long-term plans.
- ◆ Carry out Executive Committee directives.
- ◆ Identify annual program objectives and develop capital and operating budgets that will allow for the financial and programmatic success of the WSHS and support its strategic directions.
- ◆ Enhance the WSHS's visibility by building strong relationships with appropriate cultural and civic organizations, government officials, and community leaders.

*(Continued on page 3)*

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**From the  
President. . .**

I find I have mixed feelings as I write this column, my last as WSHS president. I must admit that talking a monthly column off my busy to do list feels rather good, but more so I'll miss this means of interacting with all of you. Over the past two years as president, I've felt even greater enthusiasm and care for the Society. It'll be difficult to transition away from a direct role in steering the ship. But no goodbyes here, only au revoir. I've frequently asked you in my columns to stay active at the chapter and state levels of the society, and I commit to doing so myself.

Mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead is quoted as saying, "No one who achieves success does so without acknowledging the help of others. The wise and confident acknowledge this help with gratitude." Although I can't say I'm always wise or confident, I can say any success I've had as president is due to others who have helped me. Executive Secretary **Linda Fabian** has been my guide and mentor, and the soul of patience as I continually peppered her with ideas. Members of the Executive committee have offered their insights to me whenever they were needed. WyoHistory.org editor **Tom Rea** always found time to get back to me on questions and suggestions. The ad hoc Membership Task Force of **Cheryl O'Brien, Heidi McCullough, Jessica Flock, and Mike Jording** spent many hours

addressing the issue of declining membership. And they did so cheerfully! And then there are all of you who have emailed, called, and joined me in conversation at treks, chapter and annual meetings, and other gatherings. You're the ones who make the Society fun, interesting, and worthwhile. I have certainly felt that way about you since I became a member more than 20 years ago.

My passion for our Society is what prompted the writing of these last two special editions of *Wyoming History News*, which examine strengths and challenges while also addressing potential paths forward. I do hope it has been helpful. And that we can build an even more vibrant Society together.

I can't end the column without thanking my husband, WSHS member **Robert Waggener**. He's joined me on almost every Trek since my first in 2002, and it was during one of those early treks that he proposed to me on the banks of the beautiful Green River. And he's been my constant fabulous proofreader for my columns. Finally, he has been invaluable in helping to pull together these last two special editions of *Wyoming History News*. He spent many, many hours participating in meetings, researching, interviewing, organizing, discussing, listening, writing, and, yes, at times debating with me (okay, arguing). Whatever success I've had as president has been because of his assistance.

Au revoir, dear friends. I hope to see you for many more treks, annual Meetings, and other WSHS events.

*Leslie*

*(Continued from page 1—Growing a Vibrant WSHS)*

And as I listened to a number of WSHS leaders and members across Wyoming and beyond, I heard agreement that an executive director could lead efforts to energize and engage members of all ages; recruit active WSHS leaders representing the state's ethnicities, cultures, and age ranges; provide boots-on-the-ground assistance to chapters; help to revitalize defunct chapters and welcome unaffiliated chapters; go after grant funding and raise additional monies through fundraising and marketing; facilitate educational workshops; create annual reports to share with the membership that charts the Society's progress; seek partnerships and sponsorships for WSHS initiatives and events; and advocate with state legislators (remember in the August issue the drop in state funding from \$90,000 to \$70,000 this fiscal year?).

## Identifying priority focus areas to address declining memberships

By Cheryl O'Brien  
WSHS Membership Task Force chair

Over the past few months, our WSHS Membership Task Force (MTF) met regularly to examine the causes of declining WSHS memberships. We identified short- and long-term measures the Society should take to encourage new memberships. Our recommendations were recently shared with the WSHS President and Executive Committee for their review.

Short-term plan focus areas identified by the MTF include: (1) recruiting more diverse groups in WSHS to promote a more inclusive and expanded membership; (2) 'rebranding' WSHS with an updated image and message; (3) identifying new partnerships with other groups; (4) promoting membership recruitment drives; and (5) developing a social media plan.

Long-term plan focus areas include: (1) developing an overall plan with scheduled follow-up; (2) reviewing dues structure and membership dues issues; and (3) examining staffing needs to determine if changes are needed.

How to pay for the position? The loss of some \$50,000 in dues and donations from declining membership numbers as well as the recent \$20,000 reduction from the state totals about \$70,000. Recouping that money could go a long way to paying an executive director's salary, and then the director could start working on buttressing the director position by growing the membership numbers. In turn, that grows a more vibrant WSHS.

The past two strategic plans compiled with great effort by the Society included the need for an executive director. In my discussions regarding the state of the WSHS, at times I would hear the adage, "You have to spend money to make money." I believe the Society has reached a watershed and should strongly consider the benefits of investing in the position of an Executive Director.

Specific action items were identified by the MTF for each priority focus area to help carry out WSHS objectives. For example, new partnerships with other organizations could enable the WSHS to share programs, events, audiences, staffing needs, and costs. Therefore, exploring partnerships and relationships with museums, libraries, chapters, and youth groups can be mutually beneficial and expand interactions with the WSHS.

We're taking the first important steps by recognizing, identifying, and addressing declining membership issues. A new challenge will be developing and implementing a WSHS plan that specifies how to follow through with the plan. Monitoring and evaluating the plan and tracking changes in membership will need to remain a WSHS priority so that the plan can be updated and modified as needed.

We appreciate our fascinating Wyoming history! Help us to ensure that more people are aware of WSHS membership benefits, the many programs and events they can take part in, and the diverse historical topics they can learn more about!

***Encourage a friend or relative to join the WSHS!***

***How about a gift membership to that person who has everything!***

## Members must share in building a vibrant WSHS

By Mike Jording  
WSHS Membership Task Force member

In the mid-1990s, despite a roster of 2,000+ members, there was concern within the Society's leadership that if the membership-driven organization was "to grow and realize its potential," then "members must share in planning and evaluating the Society's products and services."

Since that time, the number of memberships has steadily declined, and now stands at 1,160, with about 42% joint memberships and 48% single memberships. In similar fashion as 1994, WSHS President Leslie Waggener requested and received volunteers to serve on a committee to evaluate the value of being a WSHS member, as well as ways to increase membership.

The four-member WSHS Membership Task Force (MTF) reviewed the Society's purpose statement as written in the bylaws. Although the statement was more involved than we expected, the MTF values the last sentence: "It shall encourage in every way possible an interest in Wyoming history." To that end, the MTF has developed a list of focus points to address with the Executive Committee and the WSHS membership.

There must be value from being a member of the Society. In 1994, a survey conducted by then WSHS Executive Secretary Dave Kathka found that a majority of members strongly valued the publications, such as the journal *Annals of Wyoming* and the newsletter you are now reading, *Wyoming History News*. To no one's surprise, participation in local chapters was a strong reason for membership, too. The MTF believes that those values of membership remain unchanged for the most part. Some of the most valuable benefits of membership are the publications and interactions within county chapters.

Not surprising then, when the MTF reviewed the Society's current membership recruitment efforts and how the state and county chapters interact, we felt the necessity of maintaining strong ties between the WSHS main office and chapters. Other states

separate state and local memberships, but Wyoming has maintained a close and mutual relationship between the state organization and the county and local chapters. And to that end, the MTF believes that there remains significant mutual benefit to the Society's present organizational structure.

Probably the MTF's most interesting finding was the realization that the current concerns of declining membership are much like those in 1994, and probably 30 and 40 years before that, too. Our committee has valued the work behind the 1994 Society survey, and our discussion and planning have followed much of the outline from that previous era of the WSHS.

The ultimate goal of this new initiative is to re-discover and appreciate the purpose and value of being a member of the Society. To that end, the leaders of the Society ask you to join in the planning and evaluation of membership in the Society.



The Society has been a major supporter of Wyoming History Day since 1979. Here a 2022 Wyoming History Day participant presents on a historical topic in the Performance Category. It is common for several state winners to place at National History Day held each year at the University of Maryland.

***Interested in learning about a planned gift to the WSHS? Contact Linda at [linda@wyshs.org](mailto:linda@wyshs.org).***

# How do we engage younger generations?

By Heidi McCullough  
WSHS Membership Task Force member

Ensuring that our Society thrives and achieves the status of ‘Vibrant’ relies on engaging and including children, teens, and young families. They’re the very picture of vibrancy and can bring life and energy to any organization. We’ll need to work within their world for them to want to fit the WSHS into their lives. That means offering programs to directly engage children as well as families. For example, if every meeting requires parents to find daycare, they are likely to seek other more inclusionary groups.

Family friendly, interactive events and programming means that the whole family has fun and spends time together! In Converse County, we have a group called the ‘Emerging Historians.’ The focus is engaging younger members in history through fun activities. Treks and tours are promoted as family friendly, and parents and grandparents are encouraged to bring their children and grandchildren. Hands-on activities are scheduled around special occasions, such as Valentine’s Day, when children and others decorate fans while learning about the historic use of hand fans to communicate and flirt with others. During the holidays, adults and kids make sugar plums and exchange white elephant gifts.

Parents interested in history most likely want to share it with their children, but oftentimes chapter and statewide activities have no programming to interest young people. Consider that perspective the next time you are helping put together an event or tour.

Finding ways to incorporate history into interactions with the community—for example, a local celebration or parade—is another way to introduce history to potential new members. Older chapter members can dress up in period attire, and share stories of local history with children and their parents (focus on keeping the stories short and entertaining). Likewise, wouldn’t it be fun for a group of parents and their children to participate in a parade together while donning costumes reminiscent of an interesting period of the community’s history?

To help fund our Emerging Historians’ program, the chapter hosts an annual Prohibition Party for those 21 and older. History is added to every aspect of the 1920s-themed bash with period costumes and decorations, along with Prohibition-era cocktails (how about a highball, old-fashioned, or Singapore sling?) and gambling games (think chuck-a-luck, faro, keno, and Spanish monte). Table tents and posters have historical tidbits, and a table is set up with information on what the WSHS does and how to join or volunteer.

The WSHS *will be* vibrant in the future if more members creatively share their love of history with children and young families, and also hold fun fund-raisers to help pay for emerging-historian programming. Ensuring a vibrant future for the Society rests in our hands.



Converse County youths were the focus of a chapter meeting in which they did a program that included their Wyoming-history-themed parade floats made with shoe boxes. One of the major action items for WSHS leadership and chapters to consider is how to engage more young people and young families.

***Interested in making a planned gift to WSHS for future generations? Contact Linda at [linda@wyshs.org](mailto:linda@wyshs.org) for details.***

# Priority focus areas to encourage new memberships

The WSHS Membership Task Force was formed earlier this year to address a major concern facing our organization: a steady decline in the number of memberships over a nearly three-decade period. For several months, MTF chair Cheryl O'Brien and members Jessica Flock, Mike Jording, and Heidi McCullough met on a regular basis to come up with ways to help answer the following question: how can we encourage new memberships while also retaining our existing members? The result of their meetings was the development of a list of short- and long-term focus areas, which was presented to the WSHS Executive Committee in August and are now shared with all of you.

## Short-Term Plan Focus Areas

1. Rebrand the WSHS with an updated image/design/promotional slogan. Develop a new message to broaden the scope and inclusion of history. Action items follow: (1) make the WSHS more marketable; (2) develop a more eye-catching logo, and use that logo on new marketing materials in both digital and print media; and (3) utilize the rebranding and new logo to promote historical anniversaries, annual events, themes, collectible stickers, etc.
2. Include additional/diverse groups (family, children, students, travel/history enthusiasts, people from different ethnicities, government, etc.) in WSHS communications, leadership, programs, and events to promote a more inclusive and expanded membership. Action items follow: (1) incorporate historical events (tours, demonstrations, programs) that are family friendly, kid-focused, and interactive; (2) spotlight diverse historical events and populations; (3) invite groups such as government officials, library boards, local civic organizations, etc., to join WSHS; and (4) invite local and state officials to provide opening remarks or take part in recognition programs or contests at WSHS events.
3. Promote membership recruitment drives with WSHS tools including an updated resource guide (speaker list, online programs, articles, etc.) and statewide marketing. Action items follow: (1) foster

relationships between local chapters and the state organization for shared resources, programs, treks, help, and support; (2) have digital resources available to local chapters for programs and assistance and how-to technical guides (e.g., "Inviting government officials to events" or "How to create a media release"); and (3) identify struggling and inactive chapters and develop new relationships to help build them back up.

4. Identify new potential partnerships with other organizations and groups to share programs, events, audiences, staffing needs and costs and to increase awareness of WSHS membership benefits. Action items follow: (1) explore partnerships between museums and local chapters for program and volunteer ideas; (2) partner with libraries for shared resources and mutually beneficial shared programming; and (3) reach out to youth groups (Boys and Girls Clubs, Wyoming History Day teachers and students, home school students, Boy and Girl Scouts, sports clubs, FFA, 4-H, etc.) for volunteers and to build relationships with future historical enthusiasts.
5. Develop a social media plan (evaluate annually) to actively promote WSHS and its events and programs. Share program information and contacts with chapters and other interested groups. Action items follow: (1) upgrade WSHS website, including a chapter resource guide; (2) create a statewide event calendar; (3) utilize social media to engage a wider audience using the new logo and marketing; and (4) consider obtaining professional advice on social media improvements.

## Long-Term Plan Focus Areas

1. Develop an overall plan to increase WSHS membership, including how the WSHS will ensure follow through.
2. Review dues structure and membership dues issues, and consider whether changes need to be implemented to provide for a more streamlined process.
3. Examine paid and unpaid staffing needs to determine the most effective model (Executive Secretary, Executive Director, Regional Ambassadors, etc.) to help facilitate WSHS purpose and communication, and increase membership.

## What will you bring to the Executive Committee if elected?

By Leslie Waggener

The strength of a membership-driven organization like the WSHS is just that, its members—and leading this charge are the volunteers elected to serve on the WSHS Executive Committee. While working on this two-part series, we visited with numerous people across the state and also out-of-state to get their ideas on how to grow a more vibrant WSHS. We included questions to candidates for the Executive Committee. It's this group of committed members who essentially govern the Society, so it's important to understand each member's understanding and perception of the WSHS and their role in it. Each candidate was asked to express views on the Society's strengths and challenges and to relate how he or she can assist in enhancing the WSHS. Their replies are worthy of consideration, even despite this year's voting deadline has passed, and we would like to share some highlights.

**Dave Marcum** of Cheyenne welcomed the questions we threw at him, and suggested that questionnaires be sent to Executive Committee candidates every year with responses included in *Wyoming History News* to help members decide how to cast their votes. We see his point. Biographical information is useful, but doesn't adequately express a candidate's outlook. In essence, what is each candidate bringing to the WSHS table? Dave also encouraged the Society to boost partnerships and provided specific examples including the online broadcast of statewide talks in the chilly winter months; establishing history month/year activities with K-12 schools, colleges, and the university; producing documentary-style videos in partnerships with entities such as Wyoming PBS; and more actively involving the Society in efforts to boost Wyoming tourism. Great advice, we believe, especially when it comes to historical tourism. Who better to help grow a love for Wyoming's history than us, a statewide group of history enthusiasts and experts! Overall, adds David, "When thinking about the WSHS, what product does it deliver? Why would a person want to join?" With our membership numbers in decline, these are important questions to ask ourselves, and, more

importantly, to answer.

**Heidi McCullough** of Douglas sees many positives for the Society including fellowship and friendships built on common interests, proactive and open-minded members, and good leadership. Yet, she also notices the decline in membership, remarking, "Thankfully, the membership we have is passionate and engaged, but many chapters are finding that the membership is aging out and new member numbers are down." Heidi had another interesting observation. She perceives a disconnect between chapters and the main office as well as between other chapters. Point taken! In a large geographic area with low population, it takes awareness to notice when our efforts are siloed. As David advised, partnerships of all kinds are to everyone's benefit.

**Jessica Flock** of Laramie has long been the Society's social media guru, so it's no surprise that her recommendations followed along those lines. For instance, she suggests that our social media channels capitalize on historical anniversaries and commemorative celebrations. And, in fact, WSHS celebrates an anniversary next year by turning 70. Now, that's something to celebrate! Jessica also suggests that the Society partner to develop and promote a "Wyoming History Passport" that could be similar to the America the Beautiful National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands Pass. A visitor could bring their Wyoming passport to state historical sites to be stamped and then personalize the book with commemorative stickers and notes about their experiences. The national program even includes a special Junior Ranger Passport for kids. With the Society's treks and annual meetings, the passports could be fun for all of us!

**Andrea Lewis** of Pinedale noted that she has lived out of state for several years so is just now getting back into the swing of things in Wyoming. She participates with the Sublette County Historical Society, so is getting grounded again on being an active member of WSHS.

I encourage the WSHS to not only list candidate bios as part of the election edition in *Wyoming History News* each summer, but also answers to a questionnaire sent to each candidate. Possible questions include: What do you believe is the current state of the WSHS? If you believe there are positive attributes, do you have ideas to build on those? If you believe there are problematic issues, what ideas do you have to address them? How will you personally help grow a more vibrant WSHS?

# Members Share Their Thoughts

A number of WSHS members shared ideas and points to consider after reading the August issue of *Wyoming History News*, which focused on the theme “State of the WSHS.” Some comments have been edited for brevity.

**Member from Campbell County** Concerning the issue of declining memberships, one thing we could do is encourage more non-members to attend treks. Also, we need to do more to attract the newer generations, as that is how we will keep history and the WSHS alive.

**Another member from Campbell County** Connection to the communities is an issue for me. I suggest a working group to establish relationships with local schools, community colleges, and the university. I think this group could also connect with newspapers, museums, Wyoming PBS, and Wyoming Public Radio to inform the public what the Society is doing and what it hopes to do. I also suggest considering a way to fund scholarships for history majors at the community college and university level. This might help to get young people interested in the work of the Society, and I also encourage the creation of an annual award for Outstanding Wyoming Historian.

**Member from Crook County** I just got done reading the August *Wyoming History News* and loved the in-depth examination of the Society as it currently stands. The information is also motivating me to get more involved. Are there any committee holes that need filled, or are there any ways that I can help out remotely? Thanks!

**Member from Laramie County** It’s easy to lose touch with the chapters, and they are the true heart of the society. Leslie, you’ve done a great job reaching out to them—how do we make them feel like they’re not on their own? You’ve started to address this, but we need to make the chapters aware of what each other is doing—people may want to attend events from other chapters. Also, it would be great for each of the chapters to figure out what other similar groups are in their area, and work toward collaboration, not competition.

**Member from Natrona County** Thanks for starting this conversation!

**Member from Sheridan County** My compliments on your well thought out article “State of the WSHS” in the August *WHN*. You did an excellent job of capsulizing not just the weaknesses and challenges facing the organization, but also the strengths. I appreciate that you outlined approaches to solve the most outstanding issues through the WSHS Membership Task Force. Too often leaders stress the problems that “we” must solve without any plan for who is “we.” Consequently, nothing happens to solve the difficulties.

**Member from Colorado** I applaud you for tackling a very important subject in the August issue of *WHN*. Four quick reactions: (1) The decline in membership is concerning, but not surprising as other service organizations have declining membership, too. Younger generations don’t appear to be joiners. (2) It seems wrong to me that certain county societies are severing their WSHS affiliation. (3) I joined the WSHS in 1983 and have felt the State of Wyoming should do more to support the Society. The state budget may have more money per-capita than other states, so should be more generous. Sadly, going from \$90,000 to \$70,000 indicates the opposite. (4) Overall, it’s a tough situation, but won’t get better without talking about it.

**Member from Tennessee** Can the WSHS tie into a local event with its own programming? For instance, perhaps WSHS can promote local art events and tie them to area history, such as a chapter-sponsored local re-enactor presenting on a historical topic. Think mountain men, veterans, railroad workers, mining, etc. Turn it the other way, too. Encourage businesses to sponsor WSHS events. A couple of prominent law firms in Tennessee with a focus on historic preservation sponsor an annual meeting that has break-out sessions on areas of interest, such as the built environment, legal issues, etc. To increase audience and interest, we historians need to “get out of the box” of book history.

**Member from Virginia** Out of 52 chapters (“companies”) of the Jamestowne Society, only 15 regularly take advantage of the free space offered in our *Jamestowne Society Magazine*. When potential members read the magazine and see no local events, they may think it’s not worth joining. I urge all WSHS chapters to submit news at least five times a year, even if just a tidbit—it’s good marketing. Also, each member has a “story.”

(Continued on page 9)



*(Member comments continued from page 8)*

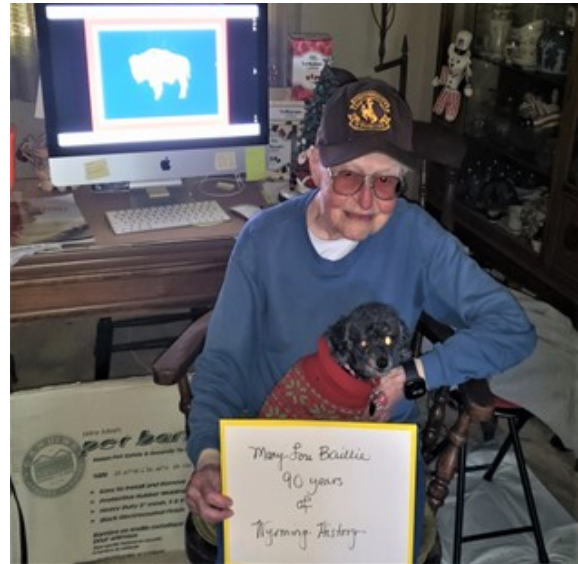
I looked up our Jamestowne membership in Wyoming and found four. What was their path of migration from Jamestowne Island, Virginia, to Wyoming?

Who were their ancestors? Because of Wyoming’s large geographic area, more Zoom meetings are probably in the future. All history is local. I challenge any Jamestowne company that says they can’t find a speaker. They’re not using their imagination.



Heidi McCullough and “the gang” at a Converse County Prohibition Party.

***Tell others about the fun of learning Wyoming history with us at the WSHS!***



Marylou Baillie, USN (Ret), is a native of Casper and served in the military for thirty-years. She recently celebrated enjoying 90-years of Wyoming history. Marylou is a long-time member and lives in Tracyton, Washington. She loves receiving *Annals of Wyoming* and *Wyoming History News*.



The Wyoming Historical Foundation, the fundraising arm of the Society, recently published *Wyoming History in Art*, featuring the works of the late artist David Paulley, from Osage. Members of the Foundation presented the Upton Library with a print to honor Dave’s memory. The Each year the Foundation hosts two “non-event” fundraisers that benefit the Society’s general operating fund and special projects.







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