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Genealogical society offers help at library

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Unsung Heroes

For those who are looking up their family history, expert research help is available daily at the Huntsville Public Library. Some 16 Walker County Genealogical Society volunteers make it so.

Every day the library is open, Mondays through Saturdays, one Genealogical Society member remains on-hand to answer questions and keep the Genealogy-Texana-Local History room organized.

"They are providing daily support to the patrons who come into the library, helping them develop their search strategy, telling them how you actually go about researching your family tree, how to use the various pieces of equipment and materials in the collection, whether they're wanting to use the Treemaker on CD-ROM or the United States census on microfilm," librarian Judy Hunter

explained. "They're a great assistance to the library; we couldn't do without them."

Hunter said the society provides about 2,500 hours of volunteer service a year to the library. Additionally, each of 94 members either donates an item or pays for a book to be bound or microfilm purchased.

It's the society's goal to keep the genealogy collection growing and current. As society president Johnnie Jo Dickenson said, "the city can provide just so much with their budget."

According to Hunter, "there's just no way to calculate the society's monetary value to us. It's just invaluable to the library. I know many libraries which would give anything they had to have a group of volunteers as dedicated as those we have here."

Besides which, the library staff

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Richard Nira/ Huntsville Item

Bill Hill is one of the many Walker County Genealogical Society volunteers that help patrons in the Huntsville Public Library's Genealogy-Texana-Local History room.

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simply doesn't have the time to assist people with research as time consuming as this is. The genealogists have both the time and the expertise, said Hunter.

According to Dickenson, sometimes volunteers end up devoting an hour or two to assisting one individual.

"Because they actually have the hands-on knowledge and many of them have taken courses, they've actually had some training on how you do this," Hunter said. "A lot of times a library staff person can use the material, but may not have had the opportunity to have that kind of individual training. ... The volunteers have used many of the materials themselves, so they already know what the strengths of our collection are."

According to Gordie Reaves, the chairperson and coordinator of the volunteers, each person gives about three hours a day, about two to four times a month. When someone in the group can't make it, his or her place is often taken by Reaves,

who creates the volunteer calendar each month.

"Without Gordie, this would not run as smoothly as it does," Dickenson said. "I know there's going to be somebody there when they're supposed to be, because she sees that they are."

Reaves has been with the society for four years but has studied genealogy for about 30 years, doing most of her research in South Carolina and Georgia.

When library patrons come in, chance dictates whichever genealogical helper is available. The lucky ones might cross paths with Lucy Alice Stewart, a charter member from when the society was established in 1965. She's an authority on Walker County history, having worked on such books as those dealing with Walker County history and cemeteries.

Those who come in on Friday might find Bill Hill. He's been researching for about 30 years and with the society for six. His specialty is his home state of Louisiana.

When he's not answering questions, Hill spends much of

his time photocopying a set of genealogical books which are falling apart. They're going to be sent to a publishing company for republishing and the photocopies will give patrons an alternative for the duration.

Another volunteer is Mary Edwina Vick, the society's registrar. Vick is in charge of membership, as well as keeping the vertical files of Walker County families in order and updated. Her family is from Walker County and she's been involved in the society for over 20 years. Although Walker County is sort of her specialty, Vick has researched in many other states, such as Kentucky and Utah.

"Wherever a path leads me, I do research there," she said.

Some who come into the library may find their genealogy queries published in *The Huntsville Item*. Verna Baker Banes, the society's corresponding secretary, has been writing a genealogy column for the *Item* since 1991. It appears every Sunday in the Life section.

"I get queries from all over the United States, and I print them in my column," said

Banes, who has been with the society for 11 years. "The column is the one link here to introduce many people to the genealogical society."

For some volunteers like Hill, the program at the library is something they do for personal pleasure, just to get out of the house. For others, genealogy is an additive passion.

"If you like a mystery or puzzles, genealogy goes hand in hand with that," Vick said. "I think people want to have roots, they want to be connected, so I just enjoy helping them."

Banes agreed. "It's a mystery. I enjoy following the clues."

Still others feel that their work is helping hold families together.

"I feel that knowledge of your family is very important to all families," Reaves said. "A sense of family is one thing that's very important to me. I feel it's important for us to help our youngsters to learn about their family."

Other members who have volunteered throughout 1998 include: Ellie Wood (co-librari-

an), Beth Williamson (newsletter chairperson), Dawn Fendley, Julia Cox, Dawn Sims, Evelyn Frizzell, Jeane Scott, Linda Pettitt, Bill Dixon and Joyce Hilliard.

The whole program works because they all work together.

"As president of the society, I feel the success of this organization is due to fact that the board, the membership and the volunteers have a cooperative spirit," Dickenson said.

Additionally, Dickenson teaches an extended learning class on basic genealogy for Sam Houston State University. The next class starts on Sept. 24. For more information, call 294-3701.

"Johnnie Jo is the backbone of the society," Banes said. "She is the only professional genealogist we have in the county."

Another place to find info on the society is its web page at <http://personalwebs.myriad.net/~dickenson/wcgen.htm>.

Those interested in joining can attend the society's monthly meeting on the third Saturday of each month. The meetings are held at the library at 9:30 a.m.