



Society Strategies

Federation of Genealogical Societies

P.O. Box 200940 Austin TX 78720-0940

Series Set VI Number 1&2

August 1991

Set VI Strategies for Program Chairpersons

Ten Seasonal Program Ideas

by Sandra H. Luebking

Supplemental Page

This strategy paper, written some years ago, is an FGS *Classic* that contains ideas and strategies still relevant today in society management.

This paper discusses ideas for society programs throughout the year, focussing on ideas for Fall, Winter, Spring and Summer.

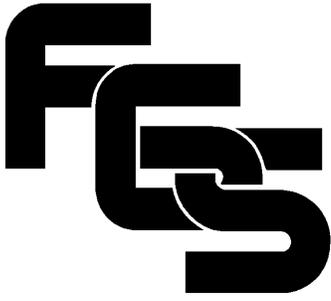
A novel way of looking at programs with suggestions suitable for all societies.

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FEDERATION OF GENEALOGICAL SOCIETIES

P.O. Box 200940 • AUSTIN TX 78720-0940

Series Set 6 Number 1

August 1991

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STRATEGIES FOR PROGRAM CHAIRPERSONS

TEN SEASONAL PROGRAM IDEAS

INTRODUCTION

General membership meetings provide an opportunity for societies to inform, entertain, and motivate members while attracting new members from those who are first-time visitors.

Most societies find the business portion of the meeting is best concluded prior to scheduled activities or program. The business meeting should be kept to a strict minimum and attention should be paid to allowing enough time for the program portion of the meeting. If necessary, a business meeting can be interrupted for the duration of the program and resumed at a later time or date.

SPRING IDEAS

Spring programs can address the coming vacation season, when researchers will be chasing ancestors far beyond their local area. Instructions on visiting courthouses, on interacting with records custodians, on note taking and abstracting, and on planning ahead, will help your members make the most from limited research time.

IDEA # 1: COURTHOUSE VISIT —

Move the program to the courthouse for an evening or a Sunday. Negotiations with county clerks might open the door to a "members' only session" at which a county representative discusses general record keeping principles and locations of oft-used materials. Follow this with a society member who gives a brief introduction to specific records — from a researcher's view. Then allow time for members to use the records.

NOTE: It is a good idea to limit attendance at this program to members only as your society will be responsible for their actions in the courthouse and in the use of records. The signing of a code of ethics statement, required for membership in many societies, identifies members who are committed to the preservation and conscientious use of records.

IDEA # 2: RESEARCH TRIP PLANNING

Spring is also the season for a serious discussion of the courtesies and formalities necessary to conduct research in records repositories: appropriate dress; calling or writing ahead for directions and procedural information; studying a guide to the collection you intend to use; limiting what you carry into the repository;

Ten Seasonal Program Ideas

copy-right restrictions; etc. Intersperse the practical with the frivolous — how to pack "wrinkle-free"; easy-care haircuts for men and women on the go; clothes and equipment for cemetery hunts, etc. The light-hearted approach to these latter subjects will make members more receptive to the "serious stuff" — especially the concept that researchers leave behind a legacy in the repositories they visit — a legacy from which the next researcher will benefit or suffer.

IDEA # 3: A NEW LOOK AT LAND RECORDS — Since nearly 90% of American, white males owned land at some point in their lives, the tracing of land is critically important to genealogists. Help members understand the different types of land records and what important clues can be located in them.

A program which details not only the types of deeds, but helps members recognize the methods by which family members transferred land title, can be very important. Maps can add flavor to the program and the speaker can be asked to demonstrate how to locate a piece of property on a map which illustrates section, township and range.

IDEA # 4: GETTING ORGANIZED — Spring is a great time to do housekeeping chores. It is important to establish priorities and determine what to keep and what to throw away. Yes! Sometimes items can be discarded! Outdated correspondence can be abstracted, addresses saved, but some actual letters tossed. Several methods of arranging material can be discussed including the positive and negatives of each. Members should be encouraged to arrange material in small categories and keep paper in each file to a minimum so that material can be easily located. After family folders have been created, material can be grouped according to

category such as military, probate, school, church, deeds, etc. If there is great deal of material for each of those folders, they can be divided again into groups such as "Military Records 1850-1900" and then "Military Records 1861-1865" until the categories are small enough to be contained in a single file folder. Costs should be discussed with an emphasis on viewing the sacrifice of hours spent attempting to locate a document.

SUMMER IDEAS

Turn program time into project time. Or just use this season as an opportunity for members to unwind and exchange information.

IDEA # 5: CEMETERY PICNIC —

A fun-event with a serious goal. Organize a cemetery recording session (with a rain-check date firmly in hand) and follow it with a family-style picnic at a nearby park or volunteer's residence. Members who prefer not to participate in the walking and recording of the cemetery may be willing to prepare or shop for food. A multi-purpose event in which everyone can play a role.

IDEA # 6: MY FAVORITE ANCESTOR

A time for sharing (but a limited time!). Ask members to identify their favorite ancestor and why s/he deserves that title. Explain that each discussion will be limited to five minutes. The President should appoint a timekeeper, provide a watch with a second hand and a noise maker to signal time is up. One clever idea to monitor this is to have an oversize sand-filled hour glass that requires five minutes for the sand to change sides. Give it to the speaker and when the sand is gone — so is he. Or, use a portable oven timer — one with a buzzer that cannot be ignored! This program can be great fun and

Ten Seasonal Program Ideas

interesting as members learn the qualities that make some ancestors more fascinating than others. The group may even want to vote on who has the most intriguing forbearer.

IDEA # 7: PRESERVING FRAGILE DOCUMENTS — Invite an archivist or an individual who sells preservation materials to speak. This individual does not have to be a genealogist. Ask the individual to discuss preserving several different types of paper, documents, photographs etc. Your group may have a type of document in which they are particularly interested, such as newspapers. If the speaker is given this information before the talk, the focus will be more specific and thus more helpful.

FALL IDEAS

For most societies Fall is a "back-to-business" season and programs are geared to the more serious aspects of research. This is the time to utilize speakers from other disciplines whose expertise can enhance that of the genealogist. It can also help people from other disciplines learn to appreciate genealogists.

IDEA # 8: NON-TRADITIONAL GUEST SPEAKER — Engage a speaker from a related field, such as a title searcher or an expert in historical photography or map making. Consider the specialties of nearby university or high school instructors: anthropology, geography, oral history, regional studies, archeology, etc. Prepare this individual by describing how you think his or her specialty can strengthen the study of genealogy. Many will feel they cannot help genealogists because they know little about the field. The program chairman should have ideas about how these related fields do pertain to

genealogy and what the members can gain by knowing about similar, but not identical areas of research.

IDEA # 9: SHARING SESSION —

Employ three or four society members who are experienced speakers and let them chose their own success stories. Or, permit any member to share — just be sure to limit the sharing to a definite time frame! Similar programs, but with a slightly different twist are "Rogues, Rascals and RapsCALLIONS." Not all of our ancestors were virtuous, of high principle, trustworthy and loyal to mother and country. In fact, some of the most interesting are those who managed to get into a little — or a lot — of trouble! If the program focuses on this type of ancestor, no one will feel s/he is the only one with an ancestor who came as a convict instead of a *Mayflower* passenger. Related programs are "A Special Woman in My Family, or "Have You Found An Immigrant Ancestors' Home? How?" This last program gives those with late arriving ancestors an opportunity to share their experiences with passenger arrivals, foreign research and perhaps foreign travels. *Be sure to note the time-keeping devices under Idea # 6.*

WINTER IDEAS

Winter scheduling of programs brings concern to those who live in the northern climate and who seldom have advance warning of inclement weather. It is a good idea to have a "fall-back" program that can be produced on an hour's notice if the speaker fails to dig out of the snow but members, closer to the meeting site, do.

IDEA # 10: "THE NO-FRILLS FALL-BACK PROGRAM" — Show a video or slides of the society activities (social and project-oriented)

Ten Seasonal Program Ideas

from the previous year (or years). The success of this program, of course, will depend on whether or not the group arranged for events to be photographed. If done with flair, this is a real crowd-pleaser and is a chance to showcase some officers and volunteers who are deserving of recognition. Draw attendees together with popcorn machines set up around the room and home-made signs saying “only those who are seated will be served hot popcorn!”

Another twist is to have tickets — prepared in anticipation of this event — with row and seat numbers. Assigned seats will bring new people together. Be sure you allow some time for informal conversation so that your mixer will permit mixing! With very little advance work (except for the photography, the editing for the show and being sure your equipment is in working order), this can be a great fall-back program. (And, if this performance is not needed in the Winter, you have a ready-made after-dinner show for your Spring workshop!)

END OF THE YEAR CHRISTMAS PROGRAM — Ask each member to bring a new

tree ornament that depicts an event in theirs or an ancestor's life or an ornament to honor the efforts of a society member. As members arrive, they draw numbers and in that sequence they briefly describe the ornament's significance before hanging it on the tree (or giving it to a more nimble person to hang). After punch and Christmas cookies for all, the decorated tree is removed and taken as a donation to a social service agency, children's classroom, or needy family which might otherwise go without a tree. Tip: arrangements for the disposition of the tree should be made well in advance of the decorating event. Call your city or town services administration for ideas on recipients.

Another Christmas idea is a favorite holiday recipe that was passed down through the family. Cookies, cakes, fudge, gingerbread men, apfıl kuchen, pfeiffer nüse, and other unusual pastries can make a delightful program. Ask each of the contributors to give a brief description of which ancestor was famous for the delicacy and from which region or country they came.

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STRATEGIES FOR PROGRAM CHAIRPERSONS

MORE SEASONAL PROGRAM IDEAS

INTRODUCTION

Most successful programs are the result of good planning. One of the most important aspects of arranging a program is to be certain that the invited speaker appears. Therefore, it is wise to confirm the **date, time** and **place** with your guest. If the speaker is invited for a conference or an all day workshop, confirm at least thirty days before the event. If the lecture is to be presented in a regularly scheduled meeting, a week in advance is sufficient.

SPRING IDEAS

IDEA # 11: TOMBSTONE STUDY —

The best time to visit the cemetery is early spring. Weeds and varmints are at a minimum and in spring everyone is eager to be outside. This is an ideal time to schedule a speaker who can discuss the best ways to read and copy tombstones and do the least amount of damage. The necessary equipment can be brought for a “show-and-tell” presentation. The time of day to read and photograph stones may also be included.

A variation to this lecture can include how to

locate old cemeteries in a given geographical area. Discovering maps, cemeteries, sextons, church burying grounds and city cemetery records are all interesting topics. Most genealogists find tombstone art and the various material used to construct tombstones relevant topics for their research.

IDEA # 12: ENLARGE THE FAMILY CIRCLE — Spring is a time of re-birth and rejuvenation. It is a time to consider the significance of family. An appropriate topic for this focus is the collateral family. Too many beginning genealogists highlight only the direct line and the nuclear family in their research. The importance of studying brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, as well as in-laws, can provide valuable information for society members. Ideas for identifying, locating and studying these lesser known relatives can be part of the presentation. If time allows, success stories and interesting relatives located can be part of the sharing process.

An added attraction to the focus on the broader family is the planning of a family reunion. Step-by-step methods for planning a successful family reunion are available in several current

MORE Seasonal Program Ideas

publications and magazines. Genealogists should remember there are many kinds of reunions — other than family — which can be helpful in their research. Organizations, military units, school classes, sororities and fraternal organizations all have held, and are currently holding, reunions. It is a good time to try to locate lost relatives.

IDEA # 13: REGIONAL, STATE and NATIONAL PROJECTS — With the season of rejuvenation comes energy and creativity. It may become comfortable for society members to focus only on their own organization and community and lose sight of what may be transpiring at a regional, state or national level. Various indexing projects, newspaper retrieval projects, records preservation projects, and primary source identification ventures can all be discussed. These activities are reported by both national organizations and various regional historical and genealogical societies. Ask ten of your society members to each research publications and newsletters and present a five-ten minute summary of their discoveries.

SUMMER IDEAS

IDEA # 14: LOCATING AND USING RESEARCH REPOSITORIES WITHIN A DAY'S DRIVE — Summer is the time for traveling — both near and far. It is amazing how many genealogists restrict themselves to research in their local library and do not venture even 50 or 100 miles from home. Often this is because they are intimidated about using a new and unfamiliar repository. This fear can be alleviated by discussing some of the basics of using the state library or archives. The program can detail not only the sources which are available, but even more important for the timid researcher, the best route to take, the parking facilities, restaurants or food dispensaries, open or closed shelves for research, photocopying mechanics,

helpful and accessible staff members and other basic concerns of the audience. If the members know what to expect before the trip, they will feel more comfortable venturing out. It may be possible for a more experienced member to accompany the novices for a field trip. These trips can provide rewards for everyone involved.

IDEA # 15: PLAT MAPS — Learning activities which take place indoors are always needed during summer heat. While challenging, learning to plat metes and bounds land surveys is a skill needed by many genealogists in their research. Many are surprised to learn that drawing a plat is not nearly as difficult as they were afraid it might be. For this lecture, the program chairman needs to find a **good** teacher. Helping the students learn step-by-step how to read the deed and follow the directions is essential. However, after the initial steps are learned and the students become proficient, they can help each other!

When the event is announced, request that each member of the audience bring a ruler and protractor. Pencil and paper can easily be furnished. It is a good idea to have several people in the audience who already have acquired the skill, so that they can circulate after the instruction and help members of the audience as they apply what they are learning.

Every genealogical researcher should be able to locate 40, 80, 120 acres on the section, township, range system. Once the survey system is explained and a few examples demonstrated, each member of the audience can be provided with a map with township and ranges marked. The leader then gives a land description and asks each member to place a “*” in the quarter section where the land is located. In the next description, the members of the audience, can place a “■” in the quarter section. Be sure that

MORE Seasonal Program Ideas

each member can perform the assignment. If not, the lecturer needs to review the material until each can accomplish the task. Land records are simply too valuable for the genealogist not to acquire this skill.

FALL IDEAS

IDEA # 16: RELIGION AND FAMILY — America's history is replete with the rise and fall of various church denominations, branches, sects, and persuasions. Although lectures which discuss the record keeping methods of various denominations such as Quakers, Presbyterians, and Roman Catholics, are helpful, they are not all the genealogist needs to know. Knowing the tenets of an ancestor's faith may be more helpful to understanding him than learning the date of his baptism. Learning about “the New Lights,” the “Great Awakening” and various waves of missionary and evangelistic fervor may help the genealogist understand why an ancestor migrated as he did, behaved the way he did and raised his children the way he did. This topic has the potential for several excellent programs and will interest those researchers eager to add “meat to the bones” of their ancestor's lives.

IDEA # 17: NO QUESTION IS TOO DUMB TO ASK — Arrange a panel of the more experienced researchers in the society. They will be available to TRY to answer questions from the audience. Too often genealogists do not adequately use the knowledgeable resources in their own community. There are reasons for this. None of us want to appear stupid, we may not know the “right” questions to ask, or we may not even know what it is that we don't know. In preparation for this panel, the leader should have some “plants” in the audience who will start the ball rolling with good, general, appropriate questions. This will encourage others to participate and will model the most helpful type

of questions.

Incidentally, the panel should be encouraged to admit when they don't know the answer. No expert knows it all. However, the question asked should not be ignored. Encourage someone to research the question and return to the group with an answer. Beginning genealogists will soon discover that even the experts must learn **how to** locate the information they need rather than be able to retain everything in memory.

If the society's membership is particularly timid, and you are concerned no one will rise to the occasion, ask the panel to develop their own questions as well as answers. The panel title will thus change to “Questions Most Frequently Asked,” or “Haven't You Always Wondered About ...”

The important thing is that the program address real, practical, and sometimes very basic questions, that often go unasked and therefore, unanswered.

IDEA # 18: YOUR IMMIGRANT ANCESTOR — Ask members to choose an individual or family and request they make a short presentation. When did the family come to this country? Why? Where did they come from? Do you know what port they left and where they arrived? Where did they settle? Why? Did other family members come? How can one locate the answers to these research questions?

MORE Seasonal Program Ideas

WINTER IDEAS

IDEA # 19: MIGRATION PATTERNS — Winter was the season for migration. The crops from the last harvest were in storage; the new not yet planted. The roads were frozen and could be traveled. This is the best season to learn about our migrating ancestors. One could study the avenues of migration — the roads, riverways, canals and railroads. The program could focus on the new geographical areas which opened for settlement at various times — upstate New York, the Northwest Territory, Trans-Appalachia, the Trans-Mississippi, the Gulf Plains, the Frontier West and the Far West. When did they open? Why and what records were produced? How did our ancestors migrate? What were the methods of conveyance? What were the advantages and disadvantages of ox carts, barges, wagons, and trains? Do records exist? Where might one look?

It is important to emphasize that people did not migrate as individuals, but rather in family and community groups. Who were the people who traveled with your ancestors? They may be closely related even though the name is not the same.

IDEA # 20: NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTION — LEARN A NEW SOURCE AND USE IT! Winter brings in the New Year and with it new resolves. It is time to learn a new genealogical resource. We each have our favorite sources to explore when tracing family history. Too often we become stumped if our old standbys cannot be located or do not bring the desired results. No individual researcher can possibly be abreast of all available sources. If each society member locates a source new to him or her, uses it and then reports back the results, each member's horizons will broaden. Perhaps the new source did not reveal the exact connection sought, but something new will always be learned. How easy or difficult was access and use of the source? Was it indexed? What kind of information did the source contain? What did it lack? What kind of genealogical problems would it likely solve, etc?

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Creative programs are not difficult to conceive, but they do require planning and organization. And, no program chairman should forget that some of the best potential speakers are within the society itself.

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