

Big Sky Roundup

QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER OF THE
MONTANA STATE GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Desirée Funston

When I started my genealogy education journey, I learned that the first step in successful research is developing a narrow, focused research question. We start by making a conscious decision about what we want to learn so that we don't waste time researching aimlessly.

I was taught to write my research question at the top of that day's research log and to maintain a laser focus on the resources that are most likely to answer the question. Should I be distracted by a tantalizing but unrelated bit of evidence, I was to make note of it and quickly set it aside, returning my concentration to that day's goal.

But those tantalizing bits are just so...tantalizing. A shiny little object flashes out us from an endless slog through all the Smiths and Johnsons in the census records. An energetic and bushy-tailed squirrel streaks across the two hundredth page of handwritten and microfilmed deeds we've looked at today.

We can give in, just this once, can't we?

Yes, fellow researchers, we can. Every once in a while, we can skip our well-balanced, healthy, responsible meal and instead indulge in the genealogical equivalent of cake for dinner. Pursue that distraction and revel in the pure joy of spontaneous research.

If you find something really good, I hope you will share it with us. Send it to editor.roundup@gmail.com, and we may publish it in a future edition of The Big Sky Roundup.

Now, go finish your dinner.

OFFICERS:

President: Desirée
Funston (2023 - 2026)

Vice President for
Programs: Stacey
Corcino (2024-2026)

Vice President for
Development: Julie
Bushmaker (2025-2027)

Secretary: Dianne
Klinski (2023 - 2027)

Treasurer: Terry Atwood
(2013 - 2026)

Registrar: Margaret
Kemner (2024-2027)

Newsletter Editor:
Desirée Funston



MSGs EXECUTIVE BOARD MEETING SUMMARY

Dianne Klinski, Secretary

7 January 2026, 10:00a via Zoom

Board members in attendance: Desirée Funston, Stacey Corcino, Julie Bushmaker, Terry Atwood, Margaret Kemner, and Karen Huck.

The following reports were accepted by the Board:

Minutes from the 8 October 2025 Meeting, Treasurer's Report, Vice President for Programs' Report, Vice President for Development's Report, Registrar's Report, Library Report.

Unfinished Business:

Membership dues - Review of membership income and operating expenses for the past ten years. Membership dues have not changed since 1999. Further discussion tabled until next meeting.

New Business:

Upcoming online class - Sons and Daughters of WWII presentation, 17 March 2026, 2pm (see page 6 for more information).

Google Workspace - MSGs qualifies for a free Google Workspace for Non-profits account. Users will be able to save information onto a single Google drive, enabling Board-wide access. Set-up is underway.

Strategic Plan review - Discussion of goals and progress to date. Review will continue at the next Board meeting. A report will be available in the April 2026 newsletter.

Next Meeting: Friday, 27 March 2026, 9am via Zoom or Google Meet (TBD).

Local Society Updates

Butte-Silver Bow Genealogy Society

The Butte-Silver Bow Genealogy Society spent November working together on research questions from members and making plans for our annual Christmas gathering. In December we came together at a favorite local restaurant to share food, laughs, and a white elephant gift exchange.

Now that the new year has arrived, we are ready to get back to work. We held our annual business meeting on 8 January and elected officers for the year. They are: Ann Monaghan, president; Kathy Moore, vice president; Ed Metesh, treasurer; and Linda Lee Holmes, secretary.

Julie Bushmaker and Gloria Rogers presented a very interesting program on using AI for genealogy, and Gloria shared a family story she had prepared with the help of ChatGPT. We are all eager, although perhaps a bit trepidatious, to try out these new tools and the various ways they might assist with our projects.

We considered programs for the upcoming year. Some ideas are voter records, land records, state research, digitizing records, immigration records, ethnic research, census records, and Family Tree Maker 2024. We will develop a more definite schedule at the next meeting after members have a chance to consider what they are most interested in discussing.

We are really looking forward to the new things we will learn in 2026.

-Linda Lee Holmes



Do you possess strong attention to detail; excellent spelling, grammar and punctuation; and some experience using the graphic design platform Canva? If so, the MSGS Board wants you! We are seeking a **newsletter editor** to produce quarterly issues of ***The Big Sky Round Up***. Interested? Please send a statement detailing your qualifications to admin@montanamsgs.org.

Yellowstone Genealogy Forum (Billings)

Yellowstone Genealogy Forum members Kay Cahill, Laura Haefer, Kathy Robins, Janet Clark and Shelley Green attended the Montana State Genealogy conference in Great Falls, 18-20 September. At the gathering, Kay won a Journal Jar, which is a Mason Jar filled with tips on how to write a family history. The Journal Jars were created by Great Falls Genealogy Society.



At our regular meeting in October, Melody Dodson, who grew up in McCone County, spoke about her America Doorstop Project, a program preserving stories about agricultural history. After publishing books on Nebraska and Montana ag history, she's working on one for North Dakota.

At our November meeting, Neal Gunnells, executive director of the Huntley Project Museum, presented a history of the federal irrigation project created in the early 20th century to bring water to arid land northeast of Billings for farming and settlement. If you haven't visited this gem of a museum in Yellowstone County, please go, particularly if you have Eastern Montana ancestors.

During 2025, YGF president P. J. Smith and member Heide Reed logged many miles in Billings and surrounding areas teaching genealogy classes to residents in senior-care facilities. Some of their students then visited our Genealogy Library in person.

YGF members continue to present programs for the Billings Community and Senior Center (BCSC), including one about Montana women serving in the U.S. military in November. We also sponsored a community cookie exchange in December.

Volunteers staff our BCSC genealogy library two hours every weekday. Our library computer now has several PDFs of valuable local genealogy data, which is available to the public. They include an index of obituaries from *The Billings Gazette*, 1956-1970; Yellowstone County marriage records 1881-1899; history and locations of cemeteries in Yellowstone County; Carbon County cemeteries; and Yellowstone County School Censuses, 1914-1930. We also have Smith Funeral Home and Billings First Congregational Church records. This extensive research tool is the result of hundreds of hours of work by previous and current YGF members. Current president, P.J. Smith, digitalized the information to make it more accessible to the public. Thank you P.J. and others involved!

-Mary Parker

Lewis & Clark County Genealogical Society

Fall in Helena was beautiful last year, and Lewis and Clark County Genealogical Society enjoyed some great programs.

In October we had the privilege of hearing the story of John Kunz from Great Falls. He was born in a Nazi slave labor concentration camp during World War II. He arrived in the U.S. as a refugee at age six and his family settled near Great Falls. He shared the sobering and riveting story of his family's journey, survival, and gratitude. It was an amazing story and reminder about how the events in Germany with the Nazi regime are not very far behind us.

In November I presented about my work with the Navy and Defense POW-MIA Accounting Agency and their effort to account for servicemen from World War II, Korea, and Vietnam who have never been accounted for. They are now using DNA to identify remains of unknown soldiers. They are going back to war graves, crash sites, shipwrecks, and any place they can find remains to recover them and use DNA and other sources to identify them. My role is to find living family members who share mitochondrial and yDNA with the serviceman, find and confirm contact information for them, and report it to the Navy. It's a remarkable program.

Our December holiday party had to be canceled at the last minute when the library closed early due to a dangerous wind storm that came through and brought down huge pine trees and other trees all over town. No doubt the same storm came through your area that day.

In other Helena news, the new Heritage Center at the Montana Historical Society opened its doors in November. It's a stunning building with state of the art exhibits and technology. Contrary to the past, it's now open seven days a week, including weekends. We are excited to host the state conference there in September! The research library will be opening in the next few months and we are very excited to get in there and research again.

-Julie Walker



IN MEMORIUM

Barbara Pearson Dean, 30 March 1937 - 3 December 2025

We have been notified that Barbara Pearson Dean, a member of the Park County Genealogy Society, passed away in December. Our condolences to Barbara's loved ones. Her [obituary](#) is on the Billings Cremation & Burial Services website.

UPCOMING VIRTUAL PROGRAM

Preserving the Greatest Generation: World War II Genealogy at the National Museum of the Pacific War



Museums can play a vital role in their communities by offering genealogy programs to preserve the stories of past generations. Courtney Carr, WWII Veterans Legacy Programs Manager, at the National Museum of the Pacific War in Fredericksburg, Texas, will introduce the Society of Sons and Daughters of WWII Veterans. This genealogy focused membership initiative honors, preserves, and shares the stories of America's "Greatest Generation."

The program provides descendants an opportunity to connect to other families while also documenting their loved one's lived experiences for future generations.

Courtney is an enthusiastic public historian who holds a MA in Public History from Arizona State University. She has extensive leadership experience in museums and nonprofit management, and served in the U.S. Navy for 12 years.

Tuesday, 17 March 2026, 2:00p

Register here: <https://streamyard.com/watch/E9sM5HNZ6hiC>



Calling all family historians! Missoula Public Library's annual **Family History Writing Contest** is underway.

Memorialize your family history and compete for cash prizes: \$100 for first place, \$50 for second place, and \$25 for third place. Submissions will be accepted 1 October 2025 through 1 March 2026.



For further details please visit

<https://www.missoulapubliclibrary.org/family-history-writing-contest/>