

Changing Places: Changing Lives

State History Conference

Local history: local historians

Introduction

The District of Tea Tree Gully was entirely rural during the 19th century and well into the 20th century. In 1855, a census revealed some 1,440 persons lived in the District. In 1954, the population had increased to 2,561. The population has grown by 4000% in the last fifty years.

The challenge for the City of Tea Tree Gully's local historian is to collect, preserve and promote the history of an area which has rapidly changed in a relatively short space of time, while clearly representing the community in its diversity and population. Gone is the era when the lives of the community were so closely intertwined. The pillars of the corner shop and local postie have been superseded by national 'megamarts' and global technologies. Urbanisation has got in the way of history; the need for more residential land, combined with vandalism of heritage buildings has seen a decrease in physical heritage. Those with local knowledge of our history are passing away or do not see the value in documenting their knowledge.

Local historians act as teachers, marketers, custodians, and crusaders combating the general public's apathy towards history. To address these issues requires creative thinking, commitment, and the space to experiment.

I would like to look at the role of a local historian and ways the City of Tea Tree Gully use to promote the history of the area.

The Role and Objectives of Local History Room at Tea Tree Gully

The City of Tea Tree Gully opened its local history room in 1991, it has remained part of the Library.

As part of the City of Tea Tree Gully Library, Local History aims to provide information and facilities for the public, a resource for Council and a contribution to the history of Australia and focus on four areas:

- The community history of Tea Tree Gully
- Research into local family history (Genealogy)
- Support to local heritage organisations and activities
- Communication and education of local history

Whilst the main role of Local History is to research and document the history of Tea Tree Gully, this is intrinsically linked to the need to share this knowledge for community benefit.

To do this I would like to talk briefly at the following areas;

1. Invest in time, resources and people
2. Be active
3. Make it personal
4. Use technology
5. Use family history
6. Experiment

Invest

The investment of time and resources is vital for success. In the perfect workplace you would be supported appropriately with finance and time. I am fortunate that I work for an organisation that has invested financially in the position and resources. I began three days a week working in Local history and events and now am employed full time in local history.

Invest in volunteers: These are the people who expand the work that you would do if you only had the time. We currently have four volunteers who specialise in family history and four other volunteers who work on a variety of projects.

Invest in resources: Have a decent history collection (A collection of local history books from South Australia and general history books on businesses and events in SA history. In addition resources that will enable people to research their family, eg Birth Death Marriages BDM would be a great asset). If possible resources that allow research more widely into Australian history eg: BDM for other states, shipping records, Directories. Purchasing resources can be expensive but selection of a few records each year that would be widely used like the BDM's will slowly built your collection. Some records we have obtained for free, such as SA Railway employees and Death notices for the Advertiser from 1991 to 2005.

We have been fortunate that the Library has invested the money in the Ancestry online family history database. Last month we had 135 people use the database with an average time of 1 ½ hours each. We conduct monthly hands on training sessions in how to use Ancestry.

Invest in: Appropriate archival material for long-term preservation of material. This will also give the public reassurance that you are serious about collecting the past and provides peace of mind that donations will be looked after.

Currently Local history has an annual budget of \$3000, last minute spending frenzies at the end of financial year often get us a few more resources not planned for. Of this \$2000 will be spent on books, microfiche, CD Roms and \$100 on equipment, photo processing etc.

Be active

Be active in the promotion of your work. Here are a few ways we promote the history of Tea Tree Gully.

Promote your work

The City of Tea Tree Gully, like most councils, produces a quarterly newsletter where we try to have an article in it. We aim to make this article interesting and light hearted, never anything too heavy or dominated by facts and dates.

Topics in the past have covered early Christmases, notorious local identities and local hauntings.

Bus tours & Walking groups

The Library in conjunction with the Tea Tree Gully Historic Society run bus tours to historic sites in the district. The Council pays for four buses per year and the Historic Society run the tour. In this way we promote the City's history while providing an opportunity for fundraising for the Society. These tours have proven so popular that to date the Historical Society has run 10 this year.

This helps achieve some of Council's stated aims of bringing people into the district, supporting local businesses and exploring the future of tourism in the area.

Engage with school children

The City of Tea Tree Gully Library is fortunate to employ a Children's and Youth Services Officer whose role is bring children into the Library. On the occasion when local history features, we attempt to make the sessions as hands on as possible show them older items from the collection, aerial maps, how we store items, why we wear gloves when handling objects.

Instead of factual lectures try presenting history from different perspectives. I presented a school group with the "mystery Golden Grove". Golden Grove is a suburb of Tea Tree Gully and it is alleged that its name derives from local landowner Adam Robertson whose last ship he commanded was named the Golden Grove. In fact the ship Golden Grove disappeared three years before Adam was born. We present information as to why we think the story isn't true and presented possible theories backed up with historical records. The children find this interesting and feedback from teachers has been very encouraging.

This year we worked with 3 year 7 classes from St David's Catholic Primary using the local cemetery as a way of discovering more about the local area. Not only did we have children coming in on their own account but parents who were inspired by their child's project to learn more about their own family.

Use technology

Increase access to your collection through technology. Promote your resources using new technology as it becomes available.

- The Council's website has two sections where we are able to place information on the history of the area. Firstly the heritage section which contains information on some historical people and buildings in the area and secondly the Library section where we are able to promote the resources we have, the events we run and the assistance we can provide.
- The City of Tea Tree Gully is using community television to carry stories of local interest to residents such as Council services, local successful businesses, Councillor interviews, upcoming events. It is shown on Community TV Channel 31 on a fortnightly basis. The Mayor has been interviewed about her family history to promote History week.
- To keep information current and brief the Library is developing a blog, I am aware that other Libraries are now using wikis, facebook and specialised websites to interact with their community and wider historians and genealogists.
- Digitising photographs and having these available on the Library catalogue allows access outside the Library from the Library's catalogue.
- Training of staff and patrons goes hand in hand with news tools, they need to know how to use the resources to get the best out of them.

What is viewed on the web is merely a selection of what we collect and offer so it is well worth the time to keep these web pages fresh, accurate and up to date, to entice your audience to return.

Make it personal

People who have never had an interest in history are usually astounded if you can relate it to them personally.

In discussions with staff about their family history I am often surprised that many do not know their past beyond their grandparents. Offering to find out more about their

family raises their interest but presenting them with hard facts about their families will often bring a look of surprise and curiosity.

Once you have their attention they will be unknowing ambassadors for the work that you do. They will promote the collection and your work without thinking about it.

Make history personal by asking the general public for their stories. In 2000 we published a book of reminiscences to celebrate the Centenary of Federation. This actually was an excellent excuse for us to fill a gap in our collection covering the time span 1950 – 1980 and gave the opportunity for people to have their stories in print.

Build networks

Get to know the people in your community who either know the history of the area or are involved in community groups or organisation that focus on history.

We are supported by Council with the selection and training of volunteers by the Volunteer co-ordinator. Build networks: With your staff and managers, they are the people who will support you in your work, promote what you do and encourage you.

There is always a flow on effect as volunteers, staff and patrons become ambassadors for Local History often informing family and friends of our activities and generally spreading the word.

Connect with the local historical society, by forming strong links with the society I have completed projects that were initiated by the Library and were never completed due to lack of staff time. One of these projects was the photographing headstones in the local cemeteries proved too time intensive for staff so it was handed over to the society. Members of the Society completed the task in six months, have produced a CD with all the images on it and now sell it as a fundraiser.

Historical society members are often very knowledgeable about the area and I use two ladies as my 'sages of the past'. Not everything is recorded in the history books, so having people whose families have resided in the area for generations is invaluable. The connection is two ways, the Library is able to provide some storage space and meeting space for the group in exchange for information and support when needed.

I also belong to an informal SALHING group (South Australian Local History Information Networking Group) where local history officers from councils and volunteers meet every two months at a historic repository for a tour. The group is contactable on email for sharing of idea's or discussion of issues.

Family History

Family History has become very popular in recent years. At Tea Tree Gully Library we have built up this collection and provide experienced volunteers to assist patrons in family history, run workshops and lectures on aspects of family history. We have four family history volunteers who are in the Library 3 days per week and on average see 12 –20 people per week, spending anywhere between 10 minutes to 7 hours with them.

The volunteers are well briefed in local history and so if local family descendants come in they are pounced upon and encouraged to provide information to be placed in the Library. More often than not it works. As part of History Week this year, we encouraged residents to do their family history and place a copy in the local history room. This had limited success but a programme that I believe is worth pursuing and

so we now continue the project on an ongoing basis. To promote this event we approached the Mayor and offered to research her family history so we could use aspects of it to promote “ Put down your roots @ your library”. The Mayor was more than surprised with the information we were able to uncover and has asked us to continue her research.

Experiment

I'm an enthusiast in experimenting with ideas that will promote history and the work that we do. If it doesn't work, you tried, move on. These are some of the ideas we have tried;

- Lock-ins for family historians: Open the Library after hours, provide free food, drink and access to the collection, while providing experienced help.
- Bus tours: theme them, we have tailored several on themes, eg 3G's GG, Glen Ewin and the Gully, Fine Wine and Ale Tales, a tour of the hotels and wineries in the district.
- Walking tours of the local cemetery on Halloween.
- Journaling: how to encourage people to write their family histories, having a core cross section of the community, sending them five questions per week and having them place their answers on a blog.
- This year we have created a year long programme of events for local history. It covers the events and resources that we have available and provides an opportunity to promote our resources. I believe this to be very successful, it allows patrons to see we are serious about history. Feedback from this has been very positive, next year we hope to get the programme professionally printed.

I don't believe there is one way to promote the history of an area, but by using some of the points I have talked about, your collection will grow and interest will grow. I don't expect to make mammoth leaps in the collection, but every new photograph, every snippet of information not previously known is an achievement. Because the community is so diverse and large a range of different techniques are needed to address different ages and interests to engage people with the past.

Biography

Daina Pocius is currently the Local History Officer for the City of Tea Tree Gully, a role she has held for the past seven years. With a background in history and a Graduate Diploma in Museum Studies, Daina faces the daily challenge of the three P's of history for the Council: Procurement, Preserve and Promote. She has extended this challenge to her personal life - her research of dead Lithuanians has extended beyond an interest into an obsession!

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