State of the WSHS

By Leslie Waggener, WSHS President

Mission: The Wyoming State Historical Society is a non-profit, membership-driven organization that encourages the study of Wyoming history. We believe to study the past is to understand the present and prepare for the future.

‘Membership-driven’ is a key component of the Society’s mission, and is vital to our success on a local, county, and state level. But for a variety of reasons, the number of memberships in our nearly 70-year-old organization has significantly declined from the mid-1990s. Examining this and related issues can assist us in understanding where we are today and help in steering the ship toward “Growing a Vibrant WSHS,” which is the theme of next month’s newsletter.

When we began examining the issue at hand, we were stunned to learn that memberships have declined from about 2,500 in the early-to-mid 1990s to just shy of 1,200 today—a drop of more than 50%. That means there are far fewer members engaging with the Society as we study the past to better understand the present and prepare for the future. It also means an equally staggering drop in revenue, making it challenging to adequately fund current and new initiatives.

I present here an example of an important unfulfilled initiative. Many successful nonprofit organizations rely not only on an active board and other passionate volunteers, but also an executive director. In the Society’s strategic plan for the years 2004–2009 a key objective was to hire a full-time executive director by 2007. Fast forward to 2022, and the Society still has not achieved this goal, because the budget simply won’t allow it. In preparing for these two issues of Wyoming History News, we asked the leadership team and other Society members for their input on enhancing WSHS strengths and addressing its challenges. Like those working on that 2004–2009 strategic plan, several mentioned the importance of having an executive director.

The Society’s total net income for fiscal year 2020–2021 was about $214,000. The main sources were from the Wyoming Department of State Parks and Cultural Resources ($90,000); membership dues ($49,000); the calendar, books, and other sales ($27,000); donations ($18,000); funds from the Society’s endowment ($16,500); and grant income ($13,000). This funding supports Wyoming History Day, WyoHistory.org, the Lola Homsher Research Grant program, the scholarly journal Annals of Wyoming, backing for treks and annual meetings, the monthly newsletter you’re currently reading, other printing costs, and more. It also pays the salary of the executive secretary, who works hard to ensure day-to-day operations of the Society are successfully carried out. (As a side note, the $90,000 from the state was reduced to $70,000 for the upcoming fiscal year.)

What if we could make membership our primary means of support? A large body of active members allows for a vibrant organization that can successfully develop and fund current and new initiatives. Declining memberships result in fewer chapter leaders and active participation, which in turn leads to burnout, which can then lead to less engagement and a reduction in chapter activities—and then even fewer members and financial resources.

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From the President...

I’m looking forward to the annual meeting in Wheatland from September 9 to 11 hosted by the Platte County Historical Society! I’ve been hearing wonderful things about its plans. To find out more, see the registration form in this issue of Wyoming History News. Please fill out your registration and join us for what promises to be a fun and interesting visit, with time as well to discuss important Society business. On the docket are findings from the Society’s Membership Task Force (a story in this issue introduces the committee’s work), news and discussion on a WSHS rebranding initiative, and updates on other exciting initiatives, including more on the Society’s upcoming online programming channel on YouTube. Importantly, I’d like to discuss with you the contents of the two-part series in this and the next issue of Wyoming History News.

This issue of WHN features reports under the banner “State of the WSHS,” and the next issue will present ideas under the title “Growing a Vibrant WSHS.” The basis for information presented comes from Society members themselves gathered through conversations with them as well as direct questions I’ve raised with WSHS leaders and others.

What prompted this series? Over the past six years of my membership on the Executive Committee, beginning as First Vice-President and then, over the past two years, as President, I’ve noticed certain strengths and challenges in the Society. I asked myself, “Am I alone in what I’ve seen?” I began asking questions of other WSHS members to gather their viewpoints. But I not only sought to delve into strengths and challenges, I wanted to know how to build on the strengths and address the challenges. These questions and the quest to answer them led to this series. At least, I hope the information will lead to deep and thoughtful discussions about the path ahead for the Society.

I’d like to recognize my husband and Society member Robert Waggener for his great assistance in asking questions, participating in discussions and meetings, conducting research, compiling information, and helping write the series. My thanks also go to Executive Secretary Linda Fabian for her patience and assistance as we asked for loads of data. Additionally, I appreciate the Executive Committee, Membership Task Force, and other Society members for all their helpful feedback, kindly given, as I peppered them with requests and questions.

See you in Wheatland the weekend of September 9th!

Leslie
Can we do it? Not if we’re caught in a vicious cycle. Someone quipped to me, “Will the Wyoming State Historical Society become history?” I think we can answer that with a resounding “No,” but it will take members across the state and beyond pitching in—whether big or small—to turn the ship. We’ve lost 1,300 memberships since the early-and mid 1990s. What if we can attract many new members, including young people and families who can bring renewed energy to our Society? If each one of those new members contributes not only passion, energy, and knowledge, but also dues and donations, we can accomplish many things, and not just the hiring of an executive director.

As I climb down from my soapbox, I hope you’ll agree that the benefits of adding new members to WSHS is of great importance to our Society. Please join me in inviting friends, families, and colleagues to join WSHS as we not only celebrate and enjoy our state’s history, but promote its study through local and statewide programming, conversation, and fellowship.

(Continued on page 4)
Memberships Steadily Decline Since Late 1990s

The number of memberships in the WSHS has steadily declined since the late 1990s and early 2000s. Though exact numbers are not available in terms of peak membership and the year(s) that occurred, an article in the spring–summer edition of *Annals of Wyoming* stated that there were between 2,300 and 2,500 memberships in the early-to-mid-1990s. By 2013, the total number of memberships had declined to 1,580, according to the *Annals* article. That’s an approximate 35% decrease over two decades. The sharp decline has continued in the past decade, as well, as the current membership stands at 1,160. This is a decrease of about 26% since 2013, and 54% since the early-to-mid 1990s.

Currently, there are 18 chapters in the state affiliated with the WSHS. Some are very active, whereas others are struggling and even on the brink of dissolution. Four chapters remain defunct, another two have ceased affiliation with the WSHS, and there are at least six historical societies in the state that are independent of the WSHS, including one that recently formed in Sheridan County, the Clearmont Historical Group. Following is a breakdown:

**EXISTING CHAPTERS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Name</th>
<th>Membership</th>
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<td>62</td>
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<td>Campbell County Historical Society</td>
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<td>Carbon County Historical Society</td>
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<td>Converse County Historical Society</td>
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<td>Fremont County Historical Society</td>
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<td>Weston County Historical Society</td>
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<tr>
<td>At-large (no county affiliation)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,160</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**DEFUNCT CHAPTERS (And Year Dissolved)**

- Big Horn County Historical Society (2011)
- Cokeville Historical Society (see *)
- Greater Yellowstone Historical Society (2014)
- Uinta County Historical Society (2016)

**CEASED AFFILIATION WITH WSHS**

- Sheridan County Historical Society**
- Teton County Historical Society***

**SOCIETIES NOT AFFILIATED WITH WSHS**

- Big Horn City Historical Society
- Clearmont Historical Group
- Jackson Hole Historical Society and Museum
- Niobrara County Historical Society
- Sublette County Historical Society
- Washakie County Historical Society

*The Cokeville Historical Society became a non-profit organization under the WSHS in 1967. The year it dissolved was not immediately available, but an online search shows that the CHS was active through at least 2009.

**The Sheridan County Historical Society incorporated in 1966 as a member of the WSHS, but separated in 2018 when the chapter affiliated with the Museum at the Bighorns in Sheridan. There is an effort underway to revitalize a historical society in Sheridan that is affiliated with the WSHS, and another goal is for that revitalized chapter to celebrate Sheridan County’s rich history in collaboration with the Museum at the Bighorns and other groups.

***The Teton County Historical Society chartered in 1965, and ceased affiliation with the WSHS in 1997.

Chapter members, such as **Ross Burmaster** of the Goshen County Chapter, often volunteer to share news of the Society at community events.
Current Strengths, Those to Build On

Our strengths are many. They reside in you, the Society’s members. You volunteer, generously donate, provide historical activities to your local communities, and so much more. WSHS members have shared with us why they believe the Society is a robust organization. Here are specific thoughts we’ve heard from our leadership team, Membership Task Force, and others:

* Members who volunteer for leadership positions at state and chapter levels. Thank you!
* Executive Secretary Linda Fabian’s dedication, strong work ethic, and institutional knowledge.
* The Wyoming Historical Foundation (WHF), which works closely with WSHS and actively fundraises for us. We wouldn’t be viable without its work.
* Donations from members who give beyond regular dues to fund vital WSHS programs, such as the WHF, Wyoming History Day, the Lola Homsher Research Grant program, and WyoHistory.org.
* Major financial support WSHS provides to Wyoming History Day, an affiliate of National History Day, that teaches 6th to 12th grade students critical thinking, writing, and research skills. Society members also judge at regional and state contests.
* WSHS-supported WyoHistory.org, created in 2011, is a respected, go-to source for anyone interested in studying the state’s history.
* Annals of Wyoming, founded in 1923, continues as a highly-regarded publication.
* The Lola Homsher Research Grant program, funded and managed by WSHS, provides needed travel funds for state, national, and international scholars to explore and publish on Wyoming’s history.
* Wyoming History News (WHN) and the Society’s website broadcast information about WSHS activities and member news. Newly introduced WHN inserts publicize museums and archives around the state.
* Publishing assistance to Wyoming authors through the Society’s Publications Committee.
* Vibrant chapters that provide varied activities, including events for young people and families. However, there are also glitches in this area (see “Challenges”).
* Society members who offer expert presentations about state and local history. WSHS is creating a speakers list to further inform others about your great work!
* Treks and annual meetings that bring together members from across the state and beyond to celebrate and learn about Wyoming’s rich history, and to work for the betterment of the Society.
* Virtual get-togethers held quarterly since 2021 to hear chapter needs and allow for a more inclusive voice.
* Upcoming online programming channel through YouTube to provide fresh, interesting, and up-to-date programming for members and the public.
* Financial viability despite losing significant membership since the mid-1990s and early 2000s (for more information on membership issues, see “Challenges”).

Creating this list increased our already high level of pride in the Society. We hope you find the list equally affirming. As a member recently said, “When I look back 30 years ago, I’m blown away by what we’ve accomplished.”

The Society’s prestigious Awards Program recognizes individuals who strive to preserve history. Scott and Jacey Bauman won a preservation award for their work on the historic College Inn Bar in Douglas.
Challenges to Address

Our organization has great strengths, but we do have many challenges to address. We learned this firsthand in discussions with the WSHS Executive Committee, the WSHS Membership Task Force, participants in the quarterly virtual get-togethers, and other Society members. Below are some of the challenges we’ve heard about:

*Membership numbers declining. Upon further exploration, we found a dramatic reduction of more than 50% in the number of memberships since the mid-1990s (see details in separate stories).
*Shortage of chapter leadership, caused in part by membership decreases. Longtime chapter leaders are facing burnout.
*Struggling chapters, with some on the verge of dissolution. Beyond this, two chapters have ceased their WSHS affiliations, and four others are defunct.
*Aging membership. Most members are more than 60 years of age. We appreciate all members, older and younger. However, younger members help the Society grow. This isn’t a new issue. A 1994 WSHS member survey revealed nearly identical circumstances.
*Lack of ethnic and cultural diversity in the membership body and in Society leadership, including the Executive Committee.
*And concerning the Executive Committee, a robust mechanism is not in place to recruit passionate leaders who bring vision, fresh perspective, energy, and a can-do attitude to the Society.
*With some exceptions, few activities to attract and retain younger members and young families. Recruitment drives are few and far between.
*No Executive Director position, a need identified by the Society for at least 20 years. This person could enhance chapter support, membership recruitment, fundraising, partnership development, advocacy efforts, and more.
*Limited follow-through on past strategic plans due to many causes, including insufficient funding for planned initiatives.
*Need more active search for new funding sources, such as grants as well as advertising and merchandising dollars.
*Despite some 40% of our annual funding coming from the state, advocacy with the Wyoming State Legislature and state agencies is lacking.
*Partnership development should be enhanced. Collaborations could help with programming, promotional efforts, staffing, and costs. Partners could include other historical entities, the educational sector, local and state leaders, the media, and others.
*Disconnect between chapters, even when geographically close. This despite being in a digital age when ‘connecting’ is so much easier.
*Although some chapters do so, engagement with non-members in state and chapter events is not emphasized.
*Cumbersome, confusing, and inconsistent dues structure. At the state-level, ‘Standard’ dues are $40. But chapter dues vary widely, from zero to $15, and some chapters charge varying amounts for individual and joint memberships. Streamlining could assist with online possibilities for joining WSHS. Also, dues are handled twice, first at the chapter level and again at the state level, which creates more work for volunteers.

We believe we can overcome each of these challenges. We submit them to you with a request. Is there one thing—big or small—that you personally would like to do to help us address these issues, either on a local, county, or state level? Working together, we can build a more vibrant Society.

WSHS member Senator Al Simpson (Ret.) was a huge favorite for Wyoming History Day kids traveling to Washington, D.C. Here he demonstrates his favorite trick of flipping a silver dollar off his shoe into his shirt pocket.
Task Force Examining Major Membership Challenges Facing the Wyoming State Historical Society

Any organization worth its salt greatly appreciates its active members. And WSHS certainly appreciates you! We know, though, what new members and leaders can bring to the Society: energy, passion, fresh ideas, how to create a TikTok video (okay, the last one is mine). Although, speaking of TikTok, we know, too, that those younger members are the continuing legacy of an organization. Without younger folks joining the Society, it’s difficult to stay relevant and viable. These issues were keenly discussed in a WSHS virtual get-together in April, and the result was the formation of the WSHS Membership Task Force of interested Society members to examine causes of a continuing membership decline and to find ways to encourage new membership.

The task force is led by WSHS Executive Committee member Cheryl O’Brien (Fremont County Historical Society/northwest Wyoming representative). Others are Jessica Flock (Albany County Historical Society), Mike Jording (Weston County Historical Society), and Heidi McCullough (Converse County Historical Society). This active group has already met several times, and has generated a number of ideas. They will present their findings at the WSHS Annual Meeting in September, and will also present an overview of their findings in the September issue of Wyoming History News under the banner “Growing a Vibrant WSHS.” My sincere thanks to these dedicated Society members for taking on what is one of the most challenging issues facing WSHS today.

The Society has been a primary sponsor of Wyoming History Day, a national competition for students in grades six through 12, since 1979. This image shows a student explaining her exhibit to judges during the recent 2022 State History Day competition in Laramie.

WSHS President Leslie Waggener learned the fine art of “witching” for unmarked graves during the 2019 annual meeting in Sublette County.
Platte County Historical Society Hosts 69th Annual Meeting of the WSHS

Welcome to Platte County, Wyoming—home of many living and nonliving historical characters!

In a recent survey residents were asked to select their favorite Platte County character from the past. The list of characters is long and colorful. But who was selected as the favorite?

Was it the first gamekeeper of Yellowstone, Harry Yount? Nope, after all, he only made it one winter in Yellowstone alone. Was it Jacque LaRamie? Of course not. He lent his name to that town west of the Sybille Canyon instead of keeping it here in Platte County. Maybe Charles Guernsey won the popularity contest? Of course not. Was it Tricky Riggle? The cowhand who was heartbroken by his fiancée’s unfaithfulness and took matters into his own hands? Was it Tom Horn? The detective charged with killing little Willie Nickell?

The hands down favorite was Wyoming’s very own majestic beast, Steamboat, the famous rodeo bronc! He was known for discharging hundreds of cowboys, snorting like a steamboat, was the first animal to be selected to an athletic hall of fame. His image is everywhere – hats, shirts, jackets, helmets, popcorn bags, soda fountain cups, and most importantly, license plates that spread the good image of Wyoming wherever our vehicles travel.

See Steamboat’s old barn and learn more about our famous characters of the past when the Platte County Historical Society welcomes members and guests to the Wyoming State Historical Society annual meeting in Wheatland the weekend of September 9-11, 2022. Attendees will be treated to tours, interesting talks, great food, entertainment, and the presentation of awards to dedicated Society members. And, most importantly, help to direct the future of the Society during the general membership meeting.

Registrants will enjoy all our community has to offer, and then some. We’ll kick off the event on Thursday evening with a no-host get together at Guadalajara Mexican Restaurant, on Friday morning the Executive Committee will meet, followed by lunch in downtown historic Wheatland at our quaint Pocket Park. Saturday morning will be the all-important General Membership meeting where the future of the Society will be discussed, and important votes being taken, plus an announcement of new board members.

The prestigious annual Awards Luncheon will follow where recipients of the Society’s awards will be celebrated, followed by book-signings, tours and more. Saturday evening you will enjoy our special guest, WSHS member and award-winning author John Davis will talk about Tom Horn. John will share his extensive research about Tom Horn’s trial, and will be available to sign books. Wheatland’s own Cheeky Ladies will round out the evening with some fun entertainment.

Sunday will find us traveling to Guernsey where the ladies of the VFW will feed us before we head to historic Sunrise, Wyoming for a private tour hosted by WSHS members John Voight, and Geri and George Zeimans.

Registration is $95 for members, and $105.00 for non-members. The deadline is August 26, 2022. The registration form is enclosed in this issue of Wyoming History News. You’ll find a list of accommodations on page 11, along with a tentative schedule of activities.

There are many other places to visit in Platte County if you plan an extended stay. We are home to two state parks—Guernsey and Glendo. We have numerous historic sites in Platte County, including Register Cliff and Oregon Trail Ruts, both nicely managed by Wyoming Parks & Cultural Resources; not to mention the beautiful CCC structures and museum at Guernsey State Park. Plus the Quebec 1 Missile Alert Facility, now an historic site, not far to the south of Wheatland along Interstate 25. You might need reservations there so make sure to investigate by visiting its website.

Updated schedules will be in your packets when you register. Be sure to look inside right away—there might be a few surprises!
A Quick Look at the Platte County Historical Society

The Platte County Historical Society joined the Society’s federation of chapters in the mid-1950s. Since then it has remained an active chapter of the Wyoming State Historical Society. The chapter meets the last Tuesday of each month from September to May. Officers and board members are each responsible for hosting one program a year (a total of nine). Over the years members and guests have enjoyed a plethora of presentations relating to state and local history.

Chapter activities have been many, including tours of Platte County ranches, conducting oral histories of Platte County residents, one of its members produced a booklet about the Airport and Landing Fields around Wheatland, and it assisted the Town of Wheatland with developing a gallery of past and current mayors. Chapter meetings have included talks about Johnny Gordon, a local rancher who made violins and was said to have given Governor Carey the idea to create the Wheatland Irrigation District. Several years ago the chapter hosted a reburial and historic sign placement of three Oregon Trail pioneers whose graves had been disturbed. That project won them an Activities Award from the Wyoming State Historical Society. Additionally, the chapter assisted with moving the historic Axford Schoolhouse from its rural outpost to the Laramie Peak Museum. Locals often provide some of the best programs, like when Duane and Tiny Walker came to talk about their lives growing up on “The Peak.” One of our members, Nancy Curtis, is a successful publisher of western books out of her home in Glendo. We have a scientist among us (a couple of them), artists, authors, teachers, engineers, airplane mechanics, musicians, lawyers, archaeologists, and the list goes on, including those who are always there to set up and take down chairs. Everyone jumps in and participates, no matter what is asked of them. We could spend a lot of time bragging about what each of our members bring to the table, but we’ll let you experience it for yourself.

The chapter has a strong partnership with the Platte County Library, the Platte County Record Times, KYCN/KZEW Radio, the Laramie Peak Museum, the Platte County Art Guild, the Sunrise Historic and Prehistoric Preservation Society (SHAPPS), museums in Hartville and Glendo, and the Wyoming National Guard. We consistently have 75-80 members, and more than 30 people attend each meeting/program. Rick Robbins, president of the chapter, says “We like to keep our business meeting short so our members and guests can enjoy the speaker.”

Current officers include: Rick Robbins, President; Mary Jo Birt, Vice President; Kathy Price, Secretary; and Diana McDonald, Treasurer. Our board members are Linda Fabian, Tara Jo Darling, Barb Schaffner, Sam Freedburg and Gail Thompson.

The chapter is thrilled to welcome you to Platte County for the 69th Annual Meeting the weekend of September 9th. We’ve got big things planned for you (in addition to the business of the Society), and hope you will join us. Bring a friend or two!

Be sure to register by August 26, 2022
Welcome Special Guest John Davis at the 69th Annual Meeting of the Society

The Platte County Historical Society is thrilled to announce that award-winning Wyoming author and historian John Davis will speak at the Annual Meeting on Saturday evening, September 10th.

John, a retired lawyer living in Worland, is a long-time member of the Society and serves on the Awards Committee. He is recognized as an authority on the history of Tom Horn, the person, his troubles, and the trial. Horn, a stock detective for the Pinkerton Detective Agency, is part of Platte County lore in that the Kels Nickell homestead was located just southwest of Chugwater at Iron Mountain, and that’s where Kels’ son, fourteen-year old Willie Nickell, was murdered.

Candy Moulton wrote, “John has a passion for history, especially if it is flavored with law, order and justice.” John’s talk will focus on 1902 when all of Wyoming and much of the West followed the trial of Tom Horn for the murder of the fourteen-year-old boy. John’s book, the only full-length account of the trial, places it in perspective as part of a larger struggle for control of Wyoming’s grazing land.

John practiced law in Worland, Wyoming from 1973 until 2016, when he retired. He has written A Vast Amount of Trouble, which chronicles the 1909 Spring Creek Raid; Goodbye, Judge Lynch, which looks at the vexing troubles with vigilantism in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century; Wyoming Range War: The Infamous Invasion of Johnson County (2010); and The Trial of Tom Horn (2016). The last two books were each given the Wyoming State Historical Society Award for historical writing for their respective years of publication. We hope you will join us for the 69th annual meeting of the Society and enjoy all Platte County has to offer. Registrations are due by August 26th.
Lodging: Ask for the Wyoming State Historical Society group rate.

Host Hotel: Best Western Torchlight Inn, 1809 16th Street, Wheatland, WY. 307-322-4070. $89.99 plus applicable taxes (block of twenty rooms).

Other Hotels Close-by: Super 8, 2401 16th Street, Wheatland, WY. 307-322-2224. $94.00 plus applicable taxes (block of twenty rooms).

Other opportunities: Search https://www.airbnb.com to find out about delightful vacation rentals in Wheatland. RV Parks listed at https://wyplatteco.com/wheatland/ and look for lodging, plus the Town provides minimal dry camping spaces for free (donations helpful) at our Lewis Park.

Optional Tours & Activities (places may be subject to change):

Thursday, 9/8/22
5:30 p.m., No-host dinner with your Platte County friends at Guadalajara Mexican Restaurant, 1803 16th Street.

Friday, 9/9/22
9 a.m. to noon – Registration and Self-guided tour of the Laramie Peak Museum, 1601 16th Street.
9:30 a.m. - Executive Committee Meeting, Covenant Lutheran Church, 1863 South Road
Noon – Lunch at Pocket Park in Historic Downtown Wheatland
1:00 p.m.- Tractor Tours of Murals and Historic Downtown Wheatland
4:00 p.m. – Living History Cemetery Tour
5:30 p.m. – Dinner and talk about the largest, privately owned irrigation district in the United States, All Saints Episcopal Church, 605 11th Street

Saturday, 9/10/22
9 a.m. to 10 a.m. – Registration at the Laramie Peak Museum, 1601 16th Street.
9:00 a.m. – General Membership Meeting, 10th Street Social Club, 812 10th Street.
12:30 p.m. – Annual Awards Luncheon, 10th Street Social Club
5:30 p.m. – Dinner featuring special guest John Davis. followed by the Cheeky Ladies, 10th Street Social Club.

Sunday, 9/11/22
8 a.m. – Breakfast at the Guernsey VFW, 42 S. Idaho Avenue.
10:00 a.m. – Special tour of the historic mining town of Sunrise, Wyoming.
Annual Meeting Registration Form
Enclosed. Due by August 26th.
Accommodations and Schedule Info
Start on Page 8

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS AND THANK YOU DONORS

Fort Bridger Historical Association
Loni and Brian Redden, Robertson
Bill and Elizabeth Betenson, Centerville, UT

Goshen County Historical Society
Shelly Duncan, Lingle
Maggie Younger, Torrington
Francis Ahern, Torrington

Platte County Historical Society
Tracy Hall, Wheatland

South Lincoln County Historical Society
Allan and Carol Harwood, Diamondville
Cathy Larson Knight, Kemmerer