

A Tribute to Dale Wahl

By Carolyn Schott

"I've been chasing these dead folks for a lot of years," was often Dale's opening to one of the many genealogy presentations that he did over the years. It was also his humorous and down-to-earth way of describing his enthusiasm for family history research, an enthusiasm that spilled over and was contagious to the many researchers he helped.

Dale Lee Wahl passed away on June 13, 2008. He will long be remembered in the German-Russian (GR) community for his overwhelming generosity of spirit, kindness, and encouragement, but also for the great vision he had for German-Russian researchers to widely share research efforts and data in order to help each other.

His far-reaching impact was visible in the number of comments posted by people from all over the world, his German-Russian family, on the Dale Wahl online memorial board (<http://www.grhs.org/vr/dale.htm>).

If you ever met Dale Wahl, you know he wasn't shy about family history research. He had a strong clear vision for the results that he wanted to see posted on the website, and he worked energetically, enthusiastically, and tirelessly to make it happen. (Allyn Brosz)

Guide, mentor and inspiration, Dale introduced me (like so many others) to the techniques and happy pursuits of tracking down my German from Russia ancestors. His generosity with his time, his own research and inexhaustible enthusiasm were an overwhelming force of nature. Along with many others who also fell willing victim to his genial genealogy trap will remember him fondly and miss him much. (David Holzworth)

Dale was passionate about German-Russian genealogy. He began his research with his own family, but his interests expanded as he became equally passionate about supporting others in their research. He was widely recognized for his joy and generosity in helping others.

Dale's passion in life regarding family history was passed on to anyone that had contact with him. You knew if he could help other people find their roots, he was happy. (Diane Martin)

He helped me on several occasions when I was stuck with my research - always with a generous spirit - as if I was the only person who may want information. (Erika Bekermeier)

Not long after he knew something of what I was looking for, I received a large package of information and a letter in early 1996. It began "Dear Ralph, After starting to run your family down I ended up finding much more for you than I thought I had! I think this is about the all time second biggest package I ever threw

in the mail like this..." What a package it was, which, along with his words of encouragement, got me going down the right path. (Ralph Schlinker)

From the day I began my genealogy searching, even just a casual question to Dale brought pages of research and help from him. I so enjoyed working with him and he was the first person I always went to with a question. (Lori Doerr)

It was so very important to him for anyone to have the resources available to help them in their research. If someone could not afford a membership, Dale would provide... and gave a year's membership... (Elli Wise)

Dale Wahl was the heart and soul of our organization. He was a brilliant and amazing man with multiple talents and always ready to help anyone in their research. I stood in awe of him. Dale was one in a million who so unselfishly spent his money and time unearthing archives and helping one and all with their research. (Alvina Ballinger)

For Dale, every request was worthy of an in-depth response. He never went halfway. When someone asked for advice on how to research a specific family, the typical response from most of us would be a short and simple "have you tried such-and-such records?" Not Dale.

Dale helped me for years and was the first to help me with the Knodel research. He snail mailed me hundreds of pages of research. (Charlotte Knodel)

I was ever amazed that a simple inquiry like "I'm looking for the xyz family" led to a 5-page reply with documented sources. (Carolyn Schott)

More important than simply providing data, he acted as a mentor to many to get them started on their research or give them clues along the way. He was always there to offer those tidbits of advice that helped one learn the ropes of genealogy research so they could go further on their own than they would have been able to without his help.

I have known Dale for many years and it's safe to say that he has been my mentor as I have gone down this wonderful journey of learning about my family and my heritage. I find it very hard to think of a world without Dale to smooth the waters when things got tough and to come up with that next little gem of knowledge that I needed. (Murray Gauer)

He was sort of a leader and "father figure" in my research. (Wilhelm Kemendics)

I even remember him sympathizing with me, encouraging me not to give up, and giving me some tips on what to do when I confessed early on in my research that reading microfilm made me slightly seasick. I remember asking him "How does anyone DO this??" No aspect of research was too small (or silly) for him to give help. (Carolyn Schott)

I was almost giddy when he contacted me a few months ago asking for some info that I had on some Ottmars. Wow I have something my hero wants, what a

privilege to give a little back from the huge amount that I have taken. (Don Hochstatter)

Dale had a unique gift as an encourager, saying just the right words to persuade someone to hang in there, not give up, keep searching, and they would find what they were looking for.

Dale was certainly the consummate researcher and inspiration for many of us to continue our research with greater tenacity and depth than thought possible. (Jack Schafer)

I was such a novice 18 months ago and Dale was so kind about helping me get my quest begun. (Joanne Hertz Townsend)

While his words of advice addressed research issues, they often had broader life applications, reflecting his many years of experience. In his naval career, he was always trying new things and learning more. And he encouraged researchers to do the same...keep learning....

Dale often counseled me and others to be open to connections. Yes, Lutherans did marry Catholics and move to Lutheran colonies (or vice versa), get over it, they still do ... keep learning. (Jackie Peterson)

His impact went beyond family research. His caring and concern was focused on the individual, far beyond the genealogy work being done. Dale truly cared for each person that he worked with.

I worked with Dale on a book and found out through e-mail that he wanted to know you as well as help you find your family. (Diane Martin)

He had been such an inspiration for me personally. He had the patience to unknowingly lead me through the most awful time in my life. My husband was first very ill and then died. Dale gave me a "job" helping with his gathering and cataloging of information... That "job" helped me immeasurably to hold onto my perspective while caring for Leon. I could escape for a while each day or so without leaving the house and without neglecting his need for my constant presence. I am forever grateful. (Mary Emer)

He was a tremendous support through my cancer and treatment. He helped me a lot with my own research... He truly touched my life even though we've never laid eyes on each other. My heart is sad. (Heather Landmesser)

He ...helped my family find missing data, as well as a relative who literally got lost in the bureaucracy of a Seattle-area nursing home. (Velma Jesser)

It's "special people" like Dale Wahl that makes being married to a German-Russian a "good" thing. I've seen few men with a heart as Dales' - so loving, kind, caring, and sincere. As busy as Dale was (I usually saw him at meetings or convention) he always had time to stop and say "hi" and "how is your day today?" (Debbie Kilwien)

In addition to helping individuals with their research, Dale was a leader with a clear vision for how volunteers, working together in teams and learning new skills, could contribute their data and the information they'd learned for the greater good of all German-Russian researchers. This was something he'd learned in his naval career, as one performance evaluation makes clear: "Chief Wahl uses a positive and forceful type of leadership that creates an effective office with a high level of morale.... By being willing to take the time and personal interest in each individual man, Wahl to a great extent has been responsible for his command's high advancement in rate percentage resulting in high morale on the part of all hands."

Reflecting on one of his naval jobs, Dale wrote: "I found it easy to lead this group of volunteers in a productive learning experience. We were able to share and all benefited more from our efforts than anyone could studying by himself." He carried this learning into his work with GR researchers.

He is the ultimate team builder bringing people together to work on projects and thinking of something bigger than their own needs, that of sharing the data widely so all can be helped with their research. (Carolyn Schott)

Dale saw the key to building great teams as simple – involvement. He wrote: "But the deeper I got into the people aspects of management in an organization of this size, the more appreciation of the things that were not being taken care of. I could relate to the voids I found, and with the help of the strong Chiefs Mess we were able to involve the young men in the development of the team spirit we strived for. We didn't discover any new magic or formula, just involvement."

He taught me all about my German- Russian heritage and then encouraged me to give back by taking on numerous genealogy projects and helping others as he had helped me. (Gayla Ohlhauser Gray)

Dale not only could visualize new directions for [German-Russian] research but he had a way of making us want to help work on still another project. How many of us are now able to read German and Cyrillic script because Dale knew that we could do it? (Elaine Morrison)

He signed up new members left and right and recruited them further to volunteer which eventually led to the creation of this wonderful family of GRs. Dale was excellent at getting people to put their differences aside and getting people to work together on projects. (Rich Aspenleiter)

I always hated to turn Dale down on anything he asked me to help with. One of the few responsibilities I remember telling him I didn't have time to take on, I've since "inherited" since he passed away. I guess Dale had the last laugh on THAT one! (Carolyn Schott)

Dale was a hard worker, and it often seemed he worked on genealogy projects round the clock. This was evidently part of him from an early age, as he writes about one of his first jobs in the Navy: "I learned that I could not sit around doing nothing like some people can. I found that I had to have something constructive to do."

But he never seemed to think of any of these research projects as “work,” but rather as a delightful game, the most fun ever. He often invited people to volunteer by saying “join in on the fun!” genuinely wanting to give everyone the opportunity to have as much fun as he was having.

And as more people joined in the fun and teams were created, he recognized the need to help individuals connect with distant cousins, co-workers on German-Russian genealogy projects, colleagues at other organizations and in archives around the world.

He connected me to so many good people, family, in the best most universal sense of the word. I miss him terribly and am privileged to have known him. (Jackie Peterson)

Many of the people that Dale hooked me up with would become my friends, cousins, and one in particular, would eventually become my best friend and soul mate. See what he was capable of! (Rich Aspenleiter)

Dale Lee Wahl was a well-known name for Russian Germans in Germany and in Russia as well. (Viktor Pflaum from Germany)

We learned to know Dale as an active family researcher and we had also a cooperation in publishing the census data of Bessarabian villages from mid 19th century. With this work, Dale remains with us in memory. (Ingo Rüdiger Isert, Bundesvorsitzender, Bessarabiendeutscher Verein e.V.)

Dale’s attitude about working together on teams to share data spread to other organizations, such as the Society of German Genealogy from Eastern Europe (SGGEE). Members of the Germans from Russia Heritage Society (where Dale was a member for years) are not the only ones to remember Dale.

Dale was the key point person in the extraction of the St. Petersburg records. It was he that encouraged Marcia Momose to create the group of volunteers to extract the Volhynia portion of these records. And this group of volunteers were a catalyst in the formation of SGGEE a few years later. (Jerry Frank, SGGEE)

Dale was a pretty down-to-earth guy, and so he also had his “salty” moments. Throughout his life, he had little patience for anyone who didn’t seem to want to help others or work together to help the team or organization’s mission and goals. From his autobiographical notes: “I learned to work with civil service personnel. I never came to understand many of these people. We were involved with direct support of the Vietnam war, and most of them could give a damn less. They were glad to get the extra overtime for the money. I saw people doing as little as they could during their normal working hours so they could get that overtime. I felt that as a group of people they were dancing to a different drummer than the rest of the world as I recognized it.”

Early on, Dale also had the vision of how we could best use technology – both to connect with our German-Russian cousins and colleagues around the world, but also to share data with one another.

Dale and I go way back to the early days of Pixel... involved with seeking ways of sharing information on the new forum, the world wide web. Back then, Dale had the vision, along with others, and it has evolved to where we are today. (Duane Stabler)

Dale... will be missed. He got me started with research in 2000 and working with the Clearing House projects, as well as the Odessa Library. We didn't always see things the same way, but I have always respected this dedication to... our GR ancestry. (Marty McMahan)

But above all else, Dale emphasized sharing data. In an article he wrote for the Bessarabian Newsletter just a couple months before his death, he wrote: "...to grow the organization, we must grow our data...." He always stressed that we would be most successful in working together and opening the doors wide to our members to share the information we all find through our research, through our translations, through our indexing of records. By sharing data, we help each other...which will make us strong as a team and successful as individual researchers.

His genius was to encourage involvement by including everyone in the process with the understanding that we share our research. (David Kilwien)

I always enjoyed Dale's updates on new acquisitions and his tireless efforts to make new resources available... it seems everywhere I looked records were extracted and made available through Dale's efforts. (Kenneth Messmer)

And when I see his name at the head of a website, I know it's something special. (Annette Cook)

But what always surprised us was that he would share almost everything he had, emailing leads or clues he had found or mentions of our ancestors whenever he had found something new - and he always found a lot! (Lew & Dona Marquardt)

He always looked forward to new skills and resources for us all. My head would almost explode trying to process all of the information that he had at his fingertips. (Ellen Barnhill)

And what would Dale expect of us now that he's gone? He would expect us to carry on, to fulfill his vision by encouraging each other, working together in teams, and sharing data. He'd be proud to see how many are already thinking about how we can, as a team, carry on Dale's work.

Dale's passing leaves a big hole in both my heart... It is now incumbent upon us to keep this effort going. (Ray Heinle)

Many of us were privileged to know him personally and knew his deep dedication to the GR research efforts. You will be missed by many Dale, but the fruits of your work will live on and be available to many for years to come. (Diane Wandler)

His voice might be silent but his vision can live on for many more years. We should use the foundation that Dale (and others) have built to further our heritage. (Duane Stabler)

I've heard it said that we will go on, and I trust that we will, but I also believe that Dale will be impossible to replace. (Rich Aspenleiter)

We sure will miss Dale. But like he once told me life goes on, so laugh when you can and always have a song in your Heart. (Dennis Schott)

On several occasions as we worked on files together he would say: "You know, our ancestors up there in heaven are sitting in their rocking chairs smiling down on us." Now Dale is right up there amongst them sitting in a rocking chair and he too is now smiling down at us. He sowed the seed and its harvest will multiply. With these harvests his dreams will be fulfilled! (Elli Wise)

The lessons about hard work that Dale learned in his youth and in his career...and the experience he had building teams...and his vision for a thriving and forward-looking team of researchers resulted in Dale working round the clock tirelessly for our GR community.

Sources for this article include the memorial webpage at www.grhs.org/vr/dale.htm and Dale's own autobiographical notes in his family history files. An earlier version of this tribute article appeared in the Heritage Review.

The Life of Dale Lee Wahl

Dale Lee Wahl was born in Twin Falls, Idaho, in 1938, the oldest of Theodore and Josephine (Martin) Wahl's three children. When he was about four years old, his family moved first to the town of Worley, Idaho, a small town on an Indian reservation, then later to Lake Pend Oreille.

There the family lived in a tent on the edge of the lake while Theodore worked hard to support his young family, working for the WPA, as a part-time bartender, and as a civilian gate guard at the Navy Recruit Training Center.

Dale's mother also had a challenging job, keeping house and watching two young boys. In some autobiographical notes, Dale describes this time in his life:

During the day time when mom was working on the housework she had to do, I remember my brother and I being tied in little rope halters to our own trees. We were tied off so as not [to] be able to get hold of each other, and our toys were pinecones and dirt...Mom seemed to always be washing in an old washtub and washboard, and hanging the clothes out or taking them down...and in between, she was cooking on the stove in the tent or washing the dishes. It was raw survival, times most children being raised today would [n]ever know as possible. However, we were warm, dry, fed and cared for.

The family returned to Worley, where Theodore worked as the town sheriff until he was drafted into the Army near the end of World War II. When the war was over, he returned to Worley and resumed his job as sheriff. Dale's memory of this:

With dad being the sheriff we were watched very closely in this small town. We always had to be on our best behavior. Anything less and we heard about it.

In his high school years, Dale went out for many sports. And even in his youth, Dale was a hard worker. His jobs included working as a farmhand, carpenter, truck driver, bulldozer operator, lumberjack, as well as driving tractors, caterpillars, and self-propelled combines. He even had to dynamite stumps while working on the farm.

Despite making good grades in high school, at 17, he left home to join the Navy. The Navy helped form some of his attitudes on planning for the future: "I learned about hard work, and long hours without rest. I learned that there was a lot of work performed on a ship which requires a strong back and little mental aptitude. It did not take long for me to understand that I did not want to do this type of work the rest of my enlistment."

During this time in the Navy, he earned his high school GED, therefore receiving his diploma *before* his class at home had graduated from high school! By the age of 19, he had become a Third Class Gunners Mate – the youngest "GM3" in the

fleet at that time. From this experience, Dale wrote "I learned to take pride in a job well done."

He received an honorable discharge from the Navy just before he turned 21 and returned to Worley. It did not take long for him to realize that the odd jobs available were not the way he wanted to spend his future. Instead, he reenlisted in the Navy, becoming an Aviation Electronics Technician.

He served in the Navy until 1978, in roles with ever-increasing responsibility. He was a member of a flight test crew, performed and supervised aircraft maintenance, served as a logistics manager. He was also hand-selected by a vice admiral to be the maintenance chief for his ship. During his naval career, he received numerous letters of appreciation and earned over 20 medals and commendations, including the Navy Achievement Medal.

He retired from the Navy in 1978, then worked at Tacoma Boat Building and the Lockheed Martin Corporation. After his naval career, he also earned both his bachelor's and master's degrees.

On the family front, Dale married June Oberg on June 24, 1961 in Memphis, Tennessee. He has four children and nine grandchildren. He coached Little League baseball and enjoyed fishing and camping with his family.

Dale had a number of hobbies, including coin collecting and gardening. He also had his own woodworking business for several years and made many beautiful pieces of furniture for his home.

In 1989, he joined GRHS and this began his 20-year passion for family history and genealogy research. He began with his own Wahl and Wall families, tracing them through the Dakotas into Russia, then back into Germany as early as the late 1500s. From his own research, his interests expanded to help others learn about their families.

Dale died on June 13, 2008 of cancer.