In celebration of our 25th Anniversary Year, we are including feature articles about various aspects of the organization's history. This month, we feature the history of the FEEFHS web site.

History of the FEEFHS Web Site
by Milan Pohontsch

Early beginnings

An interesting fact about the FEEFHS website is that it was the first genealogical Web portal. Under the leadership of the founding president Charles M. Hall, John Movius established the FEEFHS website in May 1995. There are no screenshots available for the early versions of the site. The website was text-oriented; containing no graphic images. It was hand-coded in lite-html. The website was immensely popular because FEEFHS provided to its member organizations a Web presence based on low monthly costs. In the mid-nineties the large majority of genealogical organizations also did not have access to affordable html programmers. FEEFHS on the other hand was able to provide such a service.

Here are a few early statistics. In December 1996 there were 230,183 visits to the FEEFHS website, in January 1997 already 300,172. These are large numbers, especially in light of the fact that the Internet user had to pay the provider for every minute being online. In February 1997 the internal website index listed 138,225 unique words in 2,158 files, 12 months later it jumped to 192,846 unique words in 3,266 files.
FEEFHS was conceived as an umbrella organization for the individual genealogical societies worldwide. Focus was on east and central Europe, without ethnic, religious, or social distinction. FEEFHS conferences were held all over North America, focusing on local sources available in the area. Over time the focus changed to providing classes and one-on-one instruction related to performing successful research for conference participants. Since 2010 the meeting point for the annual conference was fixed in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Major changes in design and subject focus over the past years

The FEEFHS website underwent major changes over the past years. Repositories of documents were added or replaced by links to materials on other websites. In March 2003, the FEEFHS landing page received some color, its first graphic image, and maps.
Also in March 2003 the Google search engine replaced the internal Web Portal Index, that had grown to over 1 million unique words in over 6,000 files. In October 2004 the FEEFHS logo was changed and additional colors were added.
In 2005, the first e-News was sent out via a distribution list. After the 2008 conference held in Pittsburgh, the first photographic images found their way onto the FEEFHS website. Improvements in graphics and user-friendly navigation within the content was introduced in early spring 2012.
[Screenshot from August 20, 2008]
In 2015, two major changes were introduced: 1) the new FEEFHS logo representing the four political empires that dominated Europe, and 2) the name change from the Federation of East European Family History Societies to the Foundation for East European Family History Studies.
Switched to Drupal in early 2017

Since January 2017, the FEEFHS website used the Drupal content management software. This has advantages and disadvantages. The biggest advantage was, that maintaining a website in Drupal is not difficult. Content can be added or deleted very easily without the constant uploading of files to the hosting server. This cuts down the costs of maintaining our website – especially since FEEFHS was and still is a non-profit organization. The biggest drawback of switching to Drupal was the loss of uniqueness. The Drupal structure is rather rigid, custom modifications are possible through the use of user-contributed modules, but there may not be a module for a desired feature. After the first Drupal-based site went live, it was decided to utilize more color in the website theme.
User accounts for forum

The first version of the Drupal-based site contained a forum for exchanging research-related information among registered users. It took only a few weeks to realize that the majority of new account requests were being made by spambots, instead of genuine users. Usually 3 to 5 spam requests were made per week. After about one year, the FEEFHS
Latest website and what it presently offers

The website today still focuses on Eastern European research and grants access to resources of various countries, regions, specific nationalities, religions, and miscellaneous topics. Its external links are continually checked and updated, as needed. There are also various maps, some of which are high resolution and can be downloaded. The archive section of the website provides access to the FEEFHS journals that were published from 1998 to 2008. Prior to volume 6, the official publication was the FEEFHS Newsletter. These are also included in the archive. The website is also used to promote the annual FEEFHS conference next held in early August 2018 in Salt Lake City. Another section of the website is devoted to announcing conferences and events related to genealogical research in east Europe.

What will be added in the future?

In the future, a visitor to the FEEFHS website will find more and more content, including keyword search in various publications. The number of external links to various sources are constantly growing. Another page will be created to provide access to various webinars or online classes. A section with access to various online gazetteers will also be introduced. Additionally, it is planned to have pages related to the research of small Slavic minorities, such as the Sorbs (a.k.a. Wends) or Kashubes.

All these changes are time consuming and are done by volunteers only. Therefore, it may
FamilySearch Community Pages Update

As noted in February, FamilySearch has recently created a new FamilySearch Community where people can obtain free genealogical help from anywhere in the world. The geographic coverage of these groups continues to grow and now includes major Slavic countries in addition the Germanic countries previously announced. In these groups, you can ask questions about records, get translation help, learn about upcoming learning opportunities, and more.

FamilySearch is also calling for experts to participate in these community groups to help share information and answer questions about Eastern European countries in these community groups. If you have some expertise in research for any of the geographic areas, you are invited by FamilySearch to sign up and start sharing what you can to help others in their research. Those involved with FEEFHS are particularly invited to join the Central and East European groups, including the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Germany, Poland, Russian Empire, and Switzerland.

For more information about these Community Pages see the FamilySearch Genealogy Research Community article in the FamilySearch Wiki, where you will also find links to the individual community research groups.

Early Bird Registration for the FEEFHS 2018 25th Anniversary Conference is Now Open

Registration is now open for the FEEFHS 25th Annual East European Family History Conference to be held August 6-10, 2018. The program will be at the Salt Lake Plaza Hotel, convenient to the nearby Family History Library for research.

Celebrate FEEFHS 25th anniversary with us and learn from the experts in Slavic, Germanic, and other aspects of East European Genealogy.

This year's program features tracks in German, Polish, Austro-Hungarian, Czech, Slovak, Russian, Jewish, and DNA research. Pre-Conference Workshops are offered on August 6-7 on Finding the Village of Origin, Cyrillic for Beginners, Navigating Internet Resources, and German Document Recognition. You can preview the conference schedule here.

Please visit the conference website for full details and registration information. Reserved lodging at the conference hotel is available at a special discounted rate for early-bird registrants.

Please forward this information to family members, friends, colleagues, and members of
The Foundation for East European Family History Studies (FEFHS)

25th Annual
East European Research Conference
August 6-10, 2018
Plaza Hotel, Salt Lake City, Utah

Featuring:
Nationally recognized Speakers and Specialists
Individual Consultations
Research at the nearby Family History Library

Tracks and Classes:
German Research
Polish Research
Hungarian Research
Czech and Slovak Research
Russian Research
Jewish Research
Research Essentials (DNA)

Information and Registration: FEEFHS.org

Click on the flier image to go to the FEEFHS Conference page, where information about the conference is posted. Check back for more information as the 2018 conference nears, including early-bird registration information, hotel details, and more.

Donate to FEEFHS