



Maine State Grange

Reply to:
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2018-19 Annual Report of the Maine State Grange Communications Director

Brothers and Sisters,

It is my distinct honor to again report to you some activities and accomplishments from this year's efforts. This is the fifth full year I have served in the capacity of Communications Director—a position created in January 2014 that both combined and expanded the historical roles of the publicity director and webmaster. My broad-based role includes assembling the printed Bulletin, maintaining the website, facilitating communication between and to State Leaders, advising on communication matters and providing information and resources to Subordinate and Pomona Granges.

During the past year, I published twelve monthly Bulletins without missing a deadline and wrote at least two columns each month. I am grateful to those directors and officers who regularly submit articles and support improving our internal communication.

I also continue to facilitate an email service that allows information to be sent directly to officers, directors, and deputies on short notice. Content includes fraternal concerns, reminders, and general information.

The website is now in its ninth full year of operation in its current form. The objectives for the redesign in November 2010 were simple. Some of the more important included:

- To encourage prompt posting and maintenance of information and resources,
- To control that posting process with some level of moderation and quality control,
- To allow users to find basic information and resources (such as applications, manuals, etc.) readily, and
- To allow users to subscribe to the site and receive email versions of posts.

We continue to achieve those objectives. Site visits have decreased slightly but website use is up. There have been just over 25,300 site visits from July 1, 2018, through August 1, 2019—an average of over 2,100 per month and over 69 per day. This represents a 6.3% increase over the previous year. However, these visits do not include subscribers who are receiving the posts without necessarily visiting the site. While subscription data is harder to track, the number of subscribers is increasing. (One reason data is harder to track is we are using a free delivery service.)

Our “open” rate for these emails recently has ranged from a low of 40% to a high of 50%. (The open rate refers to the number of people who actually open the email. Some email software allows the recipient to preview the email without actually opening it.) This compares to an industry average of 22%. This certainly suggests we are sending information of interest to our subscribers!

Of course, numbers do not tell the entire story. It has been personally rewarding to receive an increasing number of “Exciting Granges and Grangers” posts, celebrating our accomplishments and success. Also, members and non-members are also using the site as a vehicle for asking questions—these questions do not always appear on the site (unless they are of a general nature) but are handled by forwarding to the appropriate party or parties. Examples include inquiries regarding the sale of Grange Halls, media questions, availability of halls for rental, etc.

During this past year, I have continued to add resource documents and tools to our collection of communication resources available on the site. The page containing these resources is the most frequently visited by double that of any other page. There is value on our website.

Writing the monthly “Exploring Traditions” Column has been both inspiring and rewarding and I plan to continue to challenge members to give thought to “the Grange way of life.” It was both exciting and rewarding to assemble two years of columns into a book that is now being sold by National Grange and is available on Amazon.

Thanks to Heather Retberg of Halcyon Grange for her willingness to continue to share her columns for our monthly “View from the Farm.” Heather’s column frequently generates comments and emails of appreciation.

Media interest in the Grange has continued at a satisfactory rate. In part as a result of the publication of my book, Vicki Huff and I were invited to appear on “Maine Calling,” a statewide radio talk show. The producer said that call volume was high. It was also the day we set a new record for website visits.

A challenge we continue to face is deflecting the media’s interest in our declining membership and providing news that demonstrates we are still vibrant and have potential. This seems to be most attainable on a local level when a Grange hosts or sponsors an event. I repeat my oft-stated mantra, “It is easier to make news than to write press releases.”

Sharing successes and milestones is an important part of our ongoing communication. Photos are also great—and a photo or two with what we call a “cutline” can tell a story. (A cutline is media talk for the caption explaining the photo—usually a sentence or two.)

We did experience a fairly temporary difficulty with the website event calendar. After completing some software updates and other maintenance, the calendar was back online in a matter of a few days.

Looking ahead to 2019-2020 some objectives include:

- Providing some basic communication tools that are “ready to use” by Subordinate and Pomona Granges. If you have ideas and suggestions for what sorts of things would be helpful, let’s talk!
- Continuing to keep communication positive, helpful, and engaging.
- Reassessing the value and approach to the “In search of” and event calendar features on the website.
- Streamlining the site by removing outdated material and posts. For example, there are currently over 2,000 posts on the site.

- Research a method that would create an online directory or listings of Granges. I am often asked questions about Grange locations and contacts. I have had more than one person point out that it is inconceivable that an organization claiming to seek membership growth seems to make it hard for people to find and contact a Grange. While there are a number of challenges putting this together, I do think it is a worthy objective.

I would ask Grangers to remember that a goal is to keep costs associated with the website as low as possible by using “free” versions of software and applying a little creativity to how things get done. That said, technology costs continue to rise as software companies look to change from purchased software to subscription software. Another subtle trend is the need to address complexity by retaining services that in the past could be “do-it-yourself” projects. When working with any organization I often say, “The question isn’t what can we do, the question is what should we do based on the resources we have.”

I believe the primary role of any state position or function is to support Subordinate and Pomona Granges. But communication is not a “one-person job.” Individuals, Community/Subordinate and Pomona Granges can best support our communications efforts by providing positive news and information.

I will also continue to encourage more open communication throughout our Order. We must generate interest and excitement among our communities, prospective members, and ourselves.

With that background, our greatest accomplishment in 2018-19 is also our greatest need for the coming year. We must continue to increase participation and information, working to build a positive program of communication. The Maine State Grange website is an integral part and is becoming a “go-to” place for members and friends who wish to learn more about our Order.

If there is anything I can do to help you and your Grange, please let me know.

Thank you for your continued confidence and support.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Walter Boomsma', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Walter Boomsma

Maine State Grange Communications Director

<http://mainestategrange.org>