

Descriptive Notes

The Newsletter of the Description Section of the Society of American Archivists Winter 1992-93

Je me souviens

Description Section's Montreal meeting highlights

Barbara Teague of the Kentucky Dept. for Libraries and Archives is the new chair for the Description Section. Any questions about the section, including requests to be placed on the meeting agenda, may be directed to her at 502-875-7000.

Tom Frusciano of Rutgers University is the new vice chair for the section. He will assume the position of chair after Barbara Teague's tenure is over next year.

Penelope Krosch stepped down as Coordinator of the SAA Finding Aids Fair and invited people to contact the new chairman if they wished to take over the position. Krosch noted that this year's Finding Aids Fair included computers.

Amy McColl, Pennsylvania Area Consortium of Special Collections Libraries, announced that a group of archivists in the City of Brotherly Love have been formulating name authorities for non-name authority file (NAF) Philadelphia-area names since 1987. The project is funded by an NHPRC grant. The list now totals over 5500 names and the group would like to expand the list to include subject headings, increase the number of participants, and raise awareness of the project.

SAA Liaisons Reports:

Michael Fox, ALA MARC Advisory Committee, circulated a two-page report sent to the CAIE which contained provisions adopted for non-bibliographic records of institutions and generally expanded the idea of description to include things such as maps.

Jackie Dooley, ALA Cataloging Committee: Descriptive Access, reported that discussions for a combined LC name and subject file were under way.

Richard Szary, Library of Congress Network Advisory Committee, discussed the factors involved in local/regional networks. He explained that libraries have done more to explain why information exchanges are important and necessary, and that archives could make similar statements in support of the need for networks.

Kathleen Roe, CAIE, reported that Sharon Thibodeau will replace her as chair. She reported on CAIE efforts to address the issues of authority information and subject indexing for archival materials. Roe encouraged involvement with SAA committees which are open to everyone. She informed the group that the International Council on Archives is working to issue a statement of principles for archival description.

Marion Matters (reporting for Vicki Walch of the SAA Standards Board), declared that the board is interested in input from SAA members. She emphasized that the Board does not set standards but facilitated discussion.

Suzanne Warren, Art and Architecture Thesaurus, announced that a second edition is planned to supplement the first edition of the AAT. As they have no records of who purchased the volumes, they are surveying user bases to determine how the Thesaurus is being used. An electronic DOS-based edition of the AAT has been developed and is available for \$125 from Oxford University Press. The second edition, due out in 1993, will total five or six volumes.

Sharon Thibodeau, NARA Archival Information System Development, reports that NARA staff and contractors are translating information from a prototype to allow dial-in users to NARA's catalog by 1995.

Jim Corsaro, Alabama/New York NHPRC map grant project, discussed the development of standardized procedures for cataloging maps. The joint case study resulted in the cataloging of 3,000 series. The project confronted the questions of what level of description was necessary. Corsaro stated that usually archivists deal with themes because at the item level one loses context, yet maps can differ greatly even within a series. Questions about how to handle the differences in archival map collections versus library map collections, which indexing vocabularies and cataloging format to employ, and a host of other issues were confronted and are discussed in the project's report which will provide guidelines for map description and should be available in early 1993. Corsaro emphasized that the guidelines will not be an authoritative source and that more input in this area is needed.

From the Chair

From the section meeting minutes, it is evident that there are many avenues for volunteering services and ideas to several of the ongoing projects. I urge everyone to become involved by contacting me or any of the various representatives who are mentioned in the minutes. The section has certainly benefited from volunteerism in the past. A specific example of volunteerism over many years is the work of Penelope Krosch She has served ably and labored mightily as coordinator of the Description Section's Finding Aids Fair for many years. Thank you Penny! Penny's years of effort on this activity ended with the Montreal meeting, and we must now find another member of the section who is willing to undertake coordinating this yearly showcase. If you are interested, please contact me. The Finding Aids Fair is an important activity of this section, and a volunteer to carry on this tradition would be greatly appreciated.

Last year's section chair, David Carmicheal, is also looking for volunteers to assist him in updating the 1976 SAA publication *Inventories and Registers: A Handbook of Techniques and Examples*. This publication is sixteen years old, which considering all the activity in archival description in that time period, practically equals a century. David is willing to coordinate the work of an ad hoc committee that will revise this publication and make it useful for the 1990's. Contact David if you can contribute to this undertaking.

I am always interested in hearing from section members about how the section can be more useful, or suggestions for further projects which the section should undertake. I expect to get lots of call from those of you out there in descriptive land!

Barbara Teague

NewsNotes

The Western Reserve Historical Society reports the successful completion of a grant to process the papers of Cleveland philanthropist Frances Payne Bolton, who also served as a Congresswoman for 29 years. The publication of a 30-page summary guide to the 175-foot collection contains descriptions of the various series, photographs, and biographical information on Bolton's life. The publication also provides details on Bolton's husband's papers (Chester Castle Bolton, whose Congressional seat she assumed upon his death) as well as her family's foundation (The Payne Fund). Detailed inventories are available at the Society.

Cataloging of the **Rosenbach Museum and Library** uncollected British and Continental literary and historical manuscripts has been completed by Manuscript Cataloger Elizabeth E. Fuller and assistants Karim Tiro and Constance Kimmerle. More than 1,000 individual items have been described in 235 records in RLIN.

Highlights include the manuscripts of two-thirds of Joseph Conrad's novels, including *Lord Jim* and *Nostromo*; William Henry Ireland's Shakespeare forgeries; Bram Stoker's working notes for *Dracula*; portions of Charles Dicken's *Pickwick papers* and *Nicholas Nickleby*; manuscripts of Robert Burns, thought to be the largest collection outside of Britain; Oscar Wilde's *Salome*; Dylan Thomas' *Under Milk Wood*; and important collections of letters of Charles and Mary Lamb, Thackeray, and Ruskin. A collection of Alfred Tennyson letters was found to contain an equal number of

letters by the pioneering photographer Julia Margaret Cameron. A script entitled "Mahomet the Impostor" was identified as an English adaptation of a Voltaire play. The Rosenbach's RLIN cataloging is part of PACSCL's "Initiative for the 1990's" funded by a grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts.

After five years, the **Library of Congress's NUCMC Team of the Special Materials Cataloging Division** (formerly the Manuscripts Section of the Special Materials Cataloging Division) has input over 11,300 entries into RLIN. Averaging around 2,000 entries a year, the NUCMCers have been at it since 1987, working with a staff of six catalogers, one technician, and an editor. Every recent submission to NUCMC has been input into RLIN; in fact NUCMC's printed volumes are produced directly from RLIN tapes. In addition to the manuscript collection entries, the project has added tens of thousands of names to the Name Authority File. Also since 1989, brief accession records have been input.

Many state historical societies and universities' special collections are part of the recent entries. North Dakota, Nebraska, Maryland, California, and Colorado's historical societies, as well as Rutgers, University of Washington, University of North Dakota, and numerous small colleges throughout New England are now on RLIN via NUCMC.

Chadwick-Healy, the history micropublisher, plans a 1993 release, *Index to Subject and Corporate Names in the National Union Catalog of Manuscripts Collections, 1959-1984*. The volume will complement their two-volume index to personal and family names found in NUCMC. Chadwick-Healy also has plans to issue the NUCMC volumes, including their indexes, on CD-ROM.

The New York State Archives has released three new or updated finding aids. *The Mighty Chain: A Guide to Canal Records in the New York State Archives*, *The Lusk Committee: Records of the Joint Legislative Committee to Investigate Seditious Activities*, and *the Guide to Records of the Department of Correctional Services*.

Mighty Chain is mighty big--117-pages describing 360 record series documenting New York's canals from the earliest Erie Canal route surveys to the completion and operation of the Barge Canal. The records span 1794 to 1958, with most dating from 1817 to 1926, and total over 2,560 cubic feet. The Correctional Services guide describes nearly 4,000 cubic feet of records which detail the facilities and practices of penal institutions throughout the state over two centuries. Juvenile reformatories, men's and women's reformatories, as well as prisons are represented in these records which document the lives of tens of thousands of individuals who passed through the criminal justice system. Because New York was a leader in innovative programs in penology, these records represent a valuable historical resource. By far the smallest of the three finding aids, the Lusk Committee guide describes 50 cubic feet of records from a NY State Legislative Committee investigating individuals and organizations during the "Red Scare" of 1919-1920. Emma Goldman, John Reed, Marcus Garvey, the ACLU, and IWW were some of the targets of the committee's investigation and information on all, plus many others, is found within the records.

All three finding aids contain brief histories of their subjects, along with indexes to the finding aids themselves. All can be obtained free of charge by contacting the Research Services Unit, New York State Archives, 11D40 CEC, Empire State Plaza, Albany, NY 12230.

From the Land of the Maple Leaf

New reports discuss subject indexing and archival fonds

The Bureau of Canadian Archivists' Planning Committee on Descriptive Standards has released two reports relating to description practices. A brief summary of each follows. Each report may be purchased for \$5 (Canadian) by writing to: Bureau of Canadian Archivists, c/o Canadian Council of Archives, 344 Wellington St. Room 3020, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, K1A 0N3. For more information, call 613-996-6445.

Subject Indexing for Archives: The analysis of archives and the retrieval of the information they contain gives rise to numerous questions. How can we create an efficient and user-friendly indexing system? Can we apply existing

indexing standards to the analysis of archival records? How can archives be indexed while still taking into account the methods and principles of their creation and organization? How can consideration be given to users' needs? Hence the importance of undertaking a more detailed and extensive study of the problems connected with analyzing and retrieving information in archival records. The report of the Subject Indexing Working Group addresses these questions. It provides a general picture of all the elements to be considered when setting up a system, examines the needs of the users and the nature of the records being described, and the principles underlying indexing itself. It enables archivists to reflect on the questions relating to the analysis and retrieval of information.

The Archival Fonds: From Theory to Practice: This volume provides an in-depth examination of the evolution of thinking about the concept of the archival fonds. This volume is composed of three essays each a distinct work in itself, the three brought together under the editorship of Professor Terry Eastwood. The general introduction summarizes the main issues which the three authors analyze, and suggests some of the directions in which further examination is needed in order to develop rules for description to yet a higher stage.

Submissions to *Descriptive Notes* are not only encouraged and welcome, they're necessary. Send information about your institutions descriptive activities to: Dan Linke, NY State Archives, 9C71 CEC, Empire State Plaza, Albany, NY 12230. FAX: 518-473-7573.

DEADLINE FOR THE SUMMER 1993 ISSUE: MAY 15, 1993

1992-93 Description Section Officers List

CHAIR

Barbara Teague
Kentucky Department of Libraries and Archives
Public Records Division
P.O. Box 537
Frankfort, KY 40602-0537
PH 502 875-7000
FAX 502 564-5773

VICE- CHAIR

Tom Frusciano
Rutgers University
Department of Special Collections and Archives
169 College Avenue
New Brunswick, NJ 08903
PH 908 932-7006
FAX 908 932-7637

STEERING COMMITTEE

David Carmicheal
Westchester County Clerk
2199 Saw Mill River Road
Elms ford, NY 10523
PH 914 592-5614
FAX 914 592-5160

Linda J. Evans
Chicago Historical Society
Archives and Manuscripts Dept.
Clark Street at North Avenue
Chicago, IL 60614

PH 312 642-4600
FAX 312 266-2077

Alden N. Monroe
Alabama Dept. of Archives and History
624 Washington Avenue
Montgomery, AL 36106
PH 205 242-4152
FAX 205 240-3433

COUNCIL LIAISON
Elizabeth Yakel
2355 Lancashire
Apt IB
Ann Arbor, MI 48105
PH 313 662-1891

Archival frontiers

Electronic records pose new challenges for description

by Hugh Shinn

Computer records' influence is felt in most aspects of daily life - banking, transportation, and communications to name a few. Their presence is felt in the archival world as well, as electronic records are deposited in archives and archivists must devote resources to make them accessible. A great deal of care must be taken to ensure the proper description of these electronic records.

Though there are many issues to consider in "archiving" electronic records, only one small aspect of describing them will be discussed here. Historically, records have been described by records managers as record groups or series, or, by layman as "that bunch of stuff over there." Computer records require additional description at the series and the variable level to make them useable by both fellow archivists and researchers.

At the series level of description there must be an indication of the record size, block size, the number of records per case and so on. Without this information, the programmer cannot instruct the computer to manipulate the data properly. Consequently, errors will abound. These errors are easily detected in that the computer will probably reject the commands that are issued by the programmer (who will become increasingly irritated).

Description at the variable level of electronic records is equally important. This involves the identification of the variable's position, its type (e.g. numeric, character), and the valid codes that accompany it. Incorrectly described variables will not automatically lead to rejected computer programs but may result in subtle errors that are undetectable without a high level of investigation into the record's origin.

Both concepts are related to the idea of arrangement already practiced with paper records. The difference lies in the detail required for electronic records. If the same degree of detail were used to describe paper records as with electronic records, we would not only say that a series was arranged alphabetically, but we would note how many sheets of paper were in each folder and what type of information was found on each sheet.

Records managers usually maintain accurate information on data files from their inception through their active life and it is the electronic records archivist who must obtain this information before it is lost due to time, staff turnover, or short memory. Unlike paper records which can gather dust in an attic or basement for decades, archivists must intervene soon after, if not before, the electronic records' active life ends in order to gather necessary information to interpret the records. Unfortunately, electronic records sometimes arrive without this information and deciphering is painstakingly time-consuming or often impossible. Without proper monitoring and description, computer records can easily become the electronic version of "That bunch of stuff over there".

Hugh Shinn, a Senior Archivist at the NY State Archives and Records Administration's Center for Electronic Records, has explained what he does for a living to relatives at holiday gatherings one too many times.

This section, *Archival frontiers*, is devoted to the discussion and dissemination of information about new archival topics relating to description activities. Submissions are highly encouraged and welcome.

| [Previous issue](#) | [Next issue](#) | [Return to Section Newsletter page](#) |