

Descriptive Notes

The Newsletter of the Description Section of the Society of American Archivists

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From the Chair

Rob Spindler

Descriptive Choices in an Age of Abundance

It really wasn't very long ago that archivists had a pretty good idea of how archival description was supposed to be constructed and how descriptive tools were supposed to be implemented. It used to be pretty simple to write a finding aid in a format you liked, using a word processor or a database, write a MARC-AMC catalog record from the finding aid using APPM and LCSH, throw in some local headings to enhance access, and then send the MARC record to the local system and one (or both) of the bibliographic utilities. Some of us even sent finding aids to the National Inventory of Documentary Sources for microfilm redistribution and indexing. Sure it wasn't perfect, there were few rigorous standards, and we really didn't know much about how effective this was for our users, but at least many of us seemed to do the big things the same way.

Now we are approaching descriptive chaos. We have so many tools available and so many process options that it is very difficult to make sense of them, and even harder to make choices amongst them in the context of our institutional missions and resources and the absence of any qualitative data. Choices must be made since very few institutions can afford to use all the tools that are now available, and now the choices made even at very basic levels of processing impact the rest of the work flow. The challenge must be to incorporate new roles and standards into the processing routine so that finding aids, or the data behind them, can be used to derive many different hardcopy and electronic products.

I recently tried to map out all the descriptive tools and products our department currently uses, or is trying to implement, and the data flow is mind boggling. We currently have internal databases for accessioning and inventory, database and word processing files for finding aids, a repository guide for photographs, database index records for brief item/small group level description, filename management for digital image files of photographs, USMARC catalog records going primarily to our local online catalog and OCLC but also appearing in RLIN, microfilmed finding aids indexed in ArchivesUSA, and portions of finding aid text on the web. We are looking at implementing EAD for web access and delivery and also discussing Resource Discovery Format and/or Dublin Core descriptions for direct internet discovery of digital image files. The matrix of tools and levels of description (item, group, collection, repository) is becoming unmanageable and it is not clear that any of these tools can justifiably be eliminated. But what happens when we are called upon to justify the costs?

Can one repository do it all? Is there any research out there that says any one repository should do it all? It is clear that libraries and archives are moving toward a descriptive environment that facilitates resource discovery through a variety of channels and access points. Given what we believe to be the fast changing information needs and seeking behavior of our traditional patrons and the storied "virtual" patrons we will reach through the internet, we probably do need to facilitate multiple access paths. I would greatly prefer to do this on the basis of solid research rather than our tradition of supposition.

Abundance is simultaneously a blessing and a curse. We have the potential to greatly expand the accessibility of archival resources to new and needful audiences, but determining process costs and a sense of the value added by different descriptive activities is increasingly difficult. With new technologies we have many new opportunities to build evaluative mechanisms into our systems so we can begin to capture the raw data we need to evaluate use (please don't talk to me about web page hits--show me printout and download figures, puhlease!). With data in hand we can begin the arduous and sometimes embarrassing task of testing our processes, but only archivists can do this research and the time is indeed upon us. Let us establish funding programs for basic research, leverage the good graduate

research coming from our archival education programs, and establish collaborations between groups like the Description Section and the Reference, Access and Outreach Section to learn about the value of archival description. Only then will we make good descriptive choices in this age of abundance!

News Notes

EAD Application Guidelines to be Published in Summer

A subgroup of the EAD Working Group met in Ann Arbor at the Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, the first week of November to begin drafting the EAD Version 1.0 Application Guidelines. The subgroup consisted of **Jackie Dooley, Michael Fox, Steve Hensen, Kris Kiesling, Bill Landis, and Janice Ruth**, with assistance from **Greg Kinney** of the Bentley. Since the November meeting, multiple drafts have been produced, and comments and suggestions from WG members have been incorporated. A draft was sent to paid reviewers at the end of January. SAA will publish the Guidelines this summer.

Program Proposals Accepted for Annual Meeting

Susan Hamburger, member-at-large for the Description Section, submitted two session proposals for the 1999 Pittsburgh meeting which were both accepted by the program committee. The first session, endorsed by the Manuscript Repositories Section, explores "Who Has the Record?: The Role of Descriptive Standards in Providing Access to Archival Information in Union Databases." Steve Hensen will provide some new information the project to reconcile APPM, RAD, and ISAD(G). Susie Bock examined 1,225 archival web sites and analyzed the 364 with finding aids for key component parts by type of repository and form of presentation. She will report on her findings and their significance for standardization of finding aids on the Web. **Bill Landis** will discuss standards for creating finding aids for union databases. **Rob Spindler** will chair the session.

The second proposal, endorsed by the Manuscript Repositories Section and Technical Subcommittee on Descriptive Standards, looks at, "Tobacco, Human Radiation Test, and Asbestos Litigation: The Impact of Current Events on Archives Programs." **Bob Horton**, in "Good Cases Make Bad Law: Learning from the Minnesota Tobacco Records Depository," will give a status report about the Minnesota Tobacco Records Depository focusing on how to define and articulate archival concerns, particularly description and access, in a situation where other concerns have dominated the debate. **Kathleen O'Connor's** presentation, "'Non-burn or Glow' Litigation Research: Making Your Existing Finding Aids Work," will explain how to use existing finding aids to the best advantage when faced with asbestos and human radiation testing research needs. **Karen Benedict** will chair and comment on the papers. The session originally included **Greg Bradsher** discussing the process and collaborative effort with researchers to refine and redescribe finding aids to access information on Nazi gold. His paper instead will be featured in one of the three plenary sessions.

Thesaurus of Catholic Diocesan Terms

The **Association of Catholic Diocesan Archivists** is planning to develop a thesaurus of controlled Catholic diocesan terms. The creation of this thesaurus has been necessitated by the increasing professionalization of Catholic diocesan archives and archivists, the increasing number of finding aids and catalogued records, and the growing use of repositories by researchers of Catholic documentation.

At the business meeting of the ACDA 1994 Summer Conference, the project of creating a thesaurus was proposed and

the committee, co-chaired by **Kinga Perzynska**, of the Catholic Archives of Texas, and **Christine Taylor**, of the Archdiocese of Seattle, was established. The Thesaurus Committee prepared a grant proposal and in May, 1998, the ACDA learned of the approval of the financial co-sponsorship of the project by **Raskob Foundation for Catholic Activities, Inc.** of Wilmington, Delaware.

The project to prepare the controlled vocabulary of Catholic terms should be finished by the beginning of the year 2000 and should result in the publication of the *Thesaurus of Catholic Diocesan Terms*. It will provide a resource, mainly for archivists of diocesan collections, to aid in gaining intellectual control over materials. The thesaurus will allow for standardized descriptions and cataloging of the collections in Catholic diocesan archives and other Catholic repositories, as well as enhanced access by diocesan staff and researchers to those collections. It is planned for use in conjunction with *Library of Congress Subject Headings*, *Art and Architecture Thesaurus*, and *Thesaurus of Graphic Materials*.

Texas Catholic Conference Records Project *Schlankey*

Margaret

The **Catholic Archives of Texas** announces the opening of the records of the Texas Catholic Conference (TCC) in July 1998. The TCC, one of thirty state conferences in the United States, is currently the only state conference to have processed their records and made them available for scholarly research. CAT's archivist, **Kinga Perzynska**, embarked on this groundbreaking project because she saw the value of TCC's records to researchers seeking information about the post-Vatican II Church in Texas. Perzynska applied for funding to the **Scanlan Foundation** of Houston, which approved grant monies for the two-year project. Project archivist **Margaret Schlankey** was hired to appraise, arrange, and describe the records.

State Catholic conferences proliferated after the Second Vatican Council. The Council strongly recommended increased cooperation among bishops in the same region or state to further the Church's goals and provide better service to the Church's members. Four state conferences existed prior to the Council in order to monitor legislation in their state governments. Texas bishops discussed the need for the Church to present a unified front in public policy decisions prior to Vatican II, but it wasn't until they met in Rome during the Council that they decided to form a state conference.

Correspondence, reports and formal statements are just a few of the records that document TCC's work in public policy. The records also show the organization's numerous other activities. Acting from a strong belief in ecumenism, the Conference involved itself in cooperative works with other Christian denominations and members of the Jewish faith. TCC was the first state conference to bring together lay and clerical leaders from each of the dioceses in Texas to discuss their work and coordinate activities on a statewide basis. Records of the TCC's Education Department provide evidence of the changes in curriculum and administration in Catholic schools over the past 35 years. Volunteers for Educational and Social Service (VESS), an organization that provides volunteers from around the country to schools, hospitals, and other social service organizations in Texas, exists under the auspices of TCC and its materials are also included in this record group.

A retention schedule for the TCC offices was produced to guide future record transfers to the Archives. *A Guide to the Records of the Texas Catholic Conference* is available for \$10.00 (including shipping and handling) from the Catholic Archives of Texas, P.O. Box 13124 Capitol Station, Austin, TX 78711, 512-476-6296.

SAA's Lesbian and Gay Archives Roundtable (LAGAR) announces the availability of *Lavender Legacies: Guide to Sources in North America*. The guide contains detailed information on the collections and access procedures of more than fifty archival repositories across the U.S. and Canada, both community-based and in mainstream institutions, which hold significant archival collections pertinent to LGBT history and culture. The guide is available at: <http://www.archivists.org/units/lagar/guide.htm>.

More Project News

The **Dayton Art Institute** is conducting a one-year, grant-funded project to process institutional records. The project staff will review previously processed materials, perform holdings maintenance, collect and process materials within various departments of the museum, assist with processing a backlog of materials, and assist with drafting policies and procedures. The **Lewiston Public Library** in Lewiston, Maine, plans a project to process the records of the **W.S. Libbey Co.** Funded by the City of Lewiston and Maine Historical Records Advisory Board, the project is designed to prepare the Libbey collection for public access. The W.S. Libbey Co. collection dates from the 19th century and documents a major manufacturing enterprise in central Maine. The **Peabody Museum of Archaeology & Ethnology** will carry out a three-month summer project to process the **Dr. Hallam H. Movius Papers**, a large anthropology and archaeology collection. The papers consist of over 187 linear feet of field diaries and journals, bibliographic and data cards, professional correspondence, annotated maps and site drawings, as well as photographic materials documenting Professor Movius' distinguished career in European and Asian archaeology. **Union Theological Seminary, Burke Library**, in New York City, will process the papers of the **Fund for Theological Education**, a collection comprising ca. 150 cubic feet. The FTE, established in the early 1950s, became a leading force in support of excellence in theological study and the wider inclusion of African Americans and Hispanic Americans in theological education. The project was scheduled to begin in March and to be completed in approximately four months.

Please submit items for future issues to Hodges@library.uta.edu, or to:

Ann Hodges
The University of Texas at Arlington
University Libraries, Special Collections Division
P.O. Box 19497
Arlington, Texas 76019-0497
Fax: (817) 272-3360
Phone: (817) 272-3000, ext. 4963

The Society of American Archivists has published *Encoded Archival Description: Context, Theory and Case Studies*. This book makes available in a single volume the twelve articles that were published in the summer and fall 1997 issues of the *American Archivist* (vol. 60, nos. 3 and 4). The authors of the six context and theory papers all were members of the original EAD development team. They explore the context within which EAD was developed, the essentials of its structured approach to encoding finding aid data, and the role that EAD is meant to play in individual repositories and for the archival profession as a whole. The six case studies were written by archivists at Harvard University, the Library of Congress, the Minnesota Historical Society, the University of Vermont, the University of Virginia, and Yale University.

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\$40 (SAA members \$30) plus shipping (U.S.A. \$6.75; Canada \$9.50; all other countries \$10.50). Prepayment required. Visa and MasterCard welcome.

To order, contact Troy Sturdivant at SAA.
Telephone: 312/922-0140
Fax: 312/347-1452
e-mail tsturdivant@archivists.org

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