

Descriptive Notes

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

Winter 2001

From the Chair

Bill Landis

ISAD(G): Thinking About How It Works for Us

The 2000 Finding Aids Fair (FAF), held during the Denver annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, provided an opportunity for U.S. archivists and other conference attendees to engage with the General International Standard Archival Description (ISAD(G)). Many visited the Description Section's FAF booth and some even filled out the short survey that accompanied the ISAD(G) overview and examples. While ISAD(G) is now six years old and has been strengthened by one open review cycle completed during the past two years, the 2000 Finding Aids Fair was the first attempt by the Description Section to present basic self-paced information on the international standard for the benefit of section members and other archivists at the annual meeting.

For section members who were not able to join us in Denver, the following URL will provide a good introduction to ISAD(G) and the FAF materials, the latter of which are now linked from the SAA Description Section Web site: <http://www.library.yale.edu/~dsmith/saa/saadescr.htm>. Just follow the link "[Description Section at the SAA Annual Meeting](#)."

The survey distributed at the 2000 FAF had three parts. The first solicited information about who survey respondents were. Of the 28 archivists responding to the survey, 86% were from the United States, 7% were Canadian, and 7% did not indicate their nationality. 32% of respondents had been in the profession 0-5 years, 21.5% for 6-10 years, 25% for 11-20 years, and 21.5% over 20 years. Regarding where they received their education as archivists, 54% had an MLS, 14% had some other Masters degree, 18% had done an apprenticeship or received on-the-job training, while 14% did not respond to this question. Finally, 50% of the respondents were academic archivists, 29% were employed by government, 14% work for not-for-profit groups, 3.5% were corporate archivists, and 3.5% were employed in a public library setting.

The second part of the survey listed the 26 descriptive elements for archival materials defined by ISAD(G) and asked survey respondents to indicate "the 10 that you feel, from your perspective as an archivist, are the most important and should be included in all archival descriptions." ISAD(G) states that "all 26 elements covered by these general rules are available for use, but only a subset need be used in any given description" (I.12). This question attempted to gather data about the relative importance given the various ISAD(G) data elements by respondents based on their own use of archival descriptive data. The number following each ISAD(G) element in both tables below indicates the percentage of respondents who indicated it in their "top ten."

ISAD(G) Data Element	%	ISAD(G) Data Element	%	ISAD(G) Data Element	%
Date(s)	100	Level of description	39	Appraisal, destruction, and scheduling information	7
Name of creator(s)	96.5	Reference code(s)	28.5	Related units of description	7
Scope and content	96.5	Physical characteristics/technical requirements	28.5	Note	7
Extent and medium of the unit of description	93	Immediate source of acquisition/transfer	25	Accruals	7
Title	82	Existence and location of originals	21	Existence and location of copies	7

Conditions governing access	82	Language/scripts of materials	21	Archivist's note	3.5
System of arrangement	68	Date(s) of descriptions	14	Publication note	3.5
Administrative/biographical history	64	Conditions governing reproduction	14	Rules or conventions used for description	0
Existence of finding aids	50	Archival history	11		

TABLE 1

The final part of the survey took the same 26 ISAD(G) elements and asked respondents to indicate "the 10 that you feel would be most useful to non-archivist end users of our descriptive tools (e.g., finding aids, MARC records)." This question attempted to gather data that would indicate if archivists felt a different subset of ISAD(G) elements would be useful to non-archivist end users of archival materials.

ISAD(G) Data Element	%	ISAD(G) Data Element	%	ISAD(G) Data Element	%
Date(s)	96.5	System of arrangement	50	Archivist's note	11
Scope and content	93	Physical characteristics/ technical requirements	36	Publication note	7
Conditions governing access	86	Existence and location of originals	32	Immediate source of acquisition/ transfer	7
Extent and medium of unit of description	78.5	Language/scripts of materials	28.5	Appraisal	3.5
Name of creator(s)	75	Related units of description	25	Rules or conventions used for description	3.5
Administrative/biographical history	71.5	Existence and location of copies	25	Archival history	3.5
Title	71.5	Level of description	21.5	Accruals	3.5
Existence of finding aids	71.5	Reference code(s)	18	Date(s) of descriptions	3.5
Conditions governing reproduction	53.5	Note	14		

TABLE 2

So, do the responses to this small survey suggest anything? Given the limited number of respondents, it is certainly important not to make too much of the data. However, the data from the second and third parts of the survey do provide some interesting food for thought. In comparing responses to parts two and three, only 5 respondents (18%) chose exactly the same 10 descriptive elements for both, which seems to indicate a fairly high level of recognition that the relative importance of data elements might change depending on whether one is an archivist managing collections, or an end user seeking information from those same collections. Certainly having a more detailed understanding of which elements of description are important, for both retrieval and informational purposes, to several of our traditional and developing end-user constituencies, and why they are important, is a critical piece of research that the archival profession needs to undertake.

The respondents to this survey were fairly evenly distributed in their number of years in the archival profession, somewhat biased towards a graduate degree-based preparation to enter the profession and towards employment in an academic or government setting, and overwhelmingly (no surprise here, given that the survey was administered at the SAA annual meeting) U.S. practitioners. It would be interesting to see how much agreement on the relative importance of ISAD(G)-defined descriptive data elements there is across a more international sampling of archivists.

Finally, the results of the survey do point to the fact that there are definitely some subsets of ISAD(G)-defined descriptive data elements about which archivists feel more strongly in the aggregate than others. So what? It seems

important, given increasing pressures to provide access to offsite end users via the Internet and to aggregate descriptive data from multiple repositories for the use of these offsite end users, that the U.S. archival community work towards a standard set of data elements that both end users and developers of retrieval and display software can depend on being present in all online descriptions.

From Table 1: Top-third-ranked ISAD(G) data elements that archivist survey respondents think are important for archivists	From Table 2: Top-third-ranked ISAD(G) data elements that archivist survey respondents think are important to non-archivist end users
Date(s) Scope and content Conditions governing access Extent and medium of the unit of description Name of creator(s) Title Administrative/ biographical history System of arrangement	Date(s) Scope and content Conditions governing access Extent and medium of the unit of description Name of creator(s) Title Administrative/ biographical history Existence of finding aids

TABLE 3

Table 3 above lists the ISAD(G) data elements that survey respondents ranked in the top third from the perspective of both archivists themselves and archivists' perceptions of what end users need. Of course we need more data on ourselves in this regard, and we desperately need input from a variety of communities of end users or potential end users of archival materials! But the little bit of data in Table 3 actually seems encouraging. Four of the six data elements highlighted by ISAD(G) as "essential for international exchange of descriptive information (ISAD(G), Introduction, I.12)" are contained in both columns. Perhaps the agreement reflected across the columns in Table 3 might give us a place to move towards a greater standardization of descriptive practice among archivists in the United States?

I encourage you to look at the 2000 FAF ISAD(G)-related materials on the Description Section Web site, and also to look at ISAD(G) itself (available at the International Council on Archives Web site at: <http://www.ica.org/>). I also invite you to send me any thoughts you might have (my e-mail is blandis@uci.edu) on how the Description Section and SAA might assist you in making better use of this international standard in your own descriptive practice and the access tools that you create. And finally, I hope to see you at the Description Section meeting at SAA's annual meeting in Washington, D.C. in August!

Please see the [EAD Roundtable's web site](#) for the Denver roundtable meeting minutes.

Minutes from the Denver Meeting

September 1, 2000

Welcome from the Chair/Reports from SAA Committees and Liaisons

Section Chair Holly Hodges opened the meeting and welcomed the 65-70 people in attendance. Kris Kiesling, Program Committee representative, announced that the theme for next year's conference is "2001, A Global Odyssey." The focus will be on globalization of archival practices (especially descriptive) and technology. She encouraged the submission of program proposals. Representing the EAD Working Group, Kris reported that it had been a relatively quiet year. They are gearing up to create a mechanism for change to the EAD DTD, and probably will create a web form for submission of suggestions. The EADWG received a NHPRC grant for two years of support, which will allow them to focus on issues and on moving to Version 2. Kris welcomed anyone interested in attending the Sunday morning meeting of the EADWG.

Kris mentioned the EAD Cookbook, which was put on the Web in August. Created by Michael Fox, it is an EAD

instruction manual covering software selection to markup. It comes with templates for Author/Editor, XMetal, WordPerfect, and four stylesheets. It is available from the EAD Roundtable web page at <http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/ead/>.

Kris also reported that SAA submitted to NEH in July a proposal for the reconciliation of RAD, APPM and ISAD(G). It would fund the work of a consultant and representatives from SAA's Technical Subcommittee on Descriptive Standards (TSDS) and the Canadian archival community to create a North American descriptive standard that could be used to generate not only MARC records, but to create finding aids, collection guides, etc.

Dennis Meissner, chair of TSDS, explained that TSDS is the sole subcommittee of the SAA Standards Committee and is responsible for evaluating and being a watchdog for standards that relate to description. While the past year was not as active as the previous one, last year the subcommittee dealt with the idea of adding linking subfields to MARC records beyond 583 and 555, specifically a subfield "u" link in other fields where it might be appropriate and useful. They provided real world examples for consideration. The proposal was approved at the ALA MidWinter meeting in January.

Following the completion of the revised second draft of ISAD(G), the subcommittee was involved with the development of inline examples to illustrate the rules. They also provided full-blown examples of ISAD(G) records.

The only true standard the subcommittee was asked to address on behalf of SAA was the proposed NISO standard for the Dublin Core metadata elements set. After a lively discussion on the CAIE list, they recommended approval of the 15-element set of Dublin Core metadata for use in general high-level resource discovery.

Other business undertaken by the subcommittee included an effort spearheaded by Bill Landis to evaluate SAA's continuing education offerings in description and descriptive standards. They were found to be piecemeal and skewed toward the MARC format and EAD, to lack comprehensive treatment of the principal aspects of description, and erroneously to assume an overall knowledge of the elements of description on the part of working archivists. The findings were forwarded to the Committee on Education and Professional Development.

TSDS sent a representative to the Canadian Committee on Archival Description (CCAD) fall rule revision committee meeting in Ottawa. CCAD has been well-represented in SAA standards bodies for years, and TSDS would like to become more involved and pay closer attention to what's going on in CCAD.

For next year, TSDS plans to articulate a comprehensive continuing education curriculum in the area of archival description, to update the descriptive standards page on the SAA web site, and to conduct a study of the Canadian Rules for Archival Description to get up to speed for work on the reconciliation of APPM and ISAD(G). Dennis closed by asking people to let him or Kris Kiesling know of issues in which the committee should get involved. Bill Landis added that they are hoping to proceed in a way that generates feedback to be sure that the updating actually creates a useful tool. During the year there will be a call, probably on the Archives list, for people to look at it and give feedback. Bill asked for everyone at the meeting to give feedback, because the standards are relevant to what we do.

Michael Fox reported in his capacity as SAA liaison to the Committee on Cataloging: Description and Access (CC:DA). He noted that all of the reports he planned to discuss are available on the ALA website. CC:DA oversees the Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules for ALA, and focused on three primary areas during the past year. The first area concerned issues relating to the reconceptualization of the concept of seriality, a revision stemming from the Toronto conference. Seriality was recast under the heading of continuing resources, which are subdivided into integrated resources and the more traditional serial, periodicals, journals, and newspapers. Fox pointed out that there is a whole class of documents whose content changes over time; individual components of them may change, making it impossible to identify what is new and what is old. Formerly, this class of documents was represented by manuals, handbooks or looseleaves which required interfiling, but on the web there is a whole series of web pages, databases, etc. that fall into the category of continuing resources. Fox suggested reading Jean Hiron's reports on the ALA web site.

In CC:DA's second area of focus, the taskforce on metadata (in which Fox participated) completed its work reviewing the relationship between traditional cataloging and other tools such as Dublin Core and EAD, in what is described as the resource description environment. Discussion of this issue is ongoing with the library community. The cataloging

community is taking seriously the fact that they no longer have the final word on description, and that MARC is no longer the only tool available.

The third issue addressed by CC:DA was Rule 0.24, the cardinal rule of AACR2 that mandates cataloging by form of material. Increasing numbers of multi-media documents pose problems for catalogers. How to describe a serially issued electronic cartographic object? A recommendation on Rule 0.24 went forward to the Joint Steering Committee, proposing to reorganize the cataloging rules not by form of material but by area of description. The concept was accepted by the JSC in principle but will require a multi-year process of rule rewriting. Fox announced that Susan Hamburger will be participating in that process as the new SAA liaison to CC:DA.

Fox also reported to the section meeting as the SAA liaison to MARBI, the ALA committee dealing with MARC21. He is a voting member of the committee as a representative of the ALCTS division of ALA, in essence giving the archival community a vote. MARBI also had three principal areas of activity. The first involved discussion papers about the issues of seriality being raised by restructuring and its accompanying rule revisions. The second related to creation of hyperlinks within catalog descriptions. Subfield "u" in the 856 field was renamed from "uniform resource locator" to "uniform resource identifier," bringing it in line with current usage and making obsolete subfield "g," the "uniform resource name." Subfield "y" was added in field 856 to allow text appearing as part of a hyperlink to be broken up, permitting the creation of a more attractive display. Subfield "u" was added to allow creation of hyperlinks from a variety of fields in the descriptive record, not just field 856. Thirdly, a new subfield code was added to field 583 (Action Note) allowing the identification of a specialized thesaurus from which action terms (e.g. microfilmed, deacidified) may be derived. This initiative originated in the preservation community, which is promoting a standardized vocabulary of preservation terminology. Fox suggested that it would be helpful for the archival preservation community to correspond with library colleagues so that archivists can adopt some of the same terminology. Archivists should also provide input in areas of archival action, such as processing terminology.

Fox closed by mentioning his work with the International Council on Archives' Committee on Descriptive Standards and announcing that ISAD(G) was issued as a second revised draft at the Stockholm meeting last year and would be ratified at the ICA plenary in Seville. He urged section members to look at it, particularly given the discussion of reconciling APPM, RAD and ISAD(G), in order to improve their understanding of what colleagues worldwide see as the common data structure standard for archival communication. The standard can be seen at www.ica.org/.

Holly Hodges called attention to the handouts provided by OCLC representative Susan Westberg, who was unable to attend the section meeting. Holly then introduced Debra Day, the incoming co-chair of the Awards Committee. Debra called for nominations, which are due in February, and asked that section members consult the [procedures on the web site](#).

Section Reports

Ann Hodges, Descriptive Notes editor, reported that two issues of the newsletter were produced last year, down from three the previous year. She requested that section members send her information and articles for the newsletter, and stressed the need for representation from all areas of the country.

Karen Spicher reported for Diana Smith on the section's web site. She reminded the audience that the site is linked to the SAA page, and supplied handouts containing the site's address. In future Diana will make announcements on the Archives list of newly posted newsletters, and will also post liaison reports. Diana would like to make the liaison reports more complete, and asked that any liaisons whose reports are not on the web site send them to her. Karen stressed that comments and suggestions for the site are welcome and should be sent to Diana.

Bill Landis, section vice chair, reported on the 2000 Finding Aids Fair. He encouraged visits to and feedback on the fair, which focused on ISAD(G) and use of the elements in the United States. He encouraged everyone to fill out the survey in order to generate a sense of what archivists think are the important elements, both for us and for users.

Bylaws

Section Chair Holly Hodges reminded meeting attendees that this was the first year the section had operated under the

bylaws. She reported that things had gone smoothly, with the exception of the absentee voting procedures. The steering committee struggled to stay within the bylaws and still make the absentee ballots available early enough to be returned in time to be counted. Holly asked members to be aware of the problem and to look at the pertinent section of the bylaws and give comments. Steve Hensen noted that problems with SAA's internal management software this year had made it difficult for the SAA office to provide the section's membership list, and that it would be easier to obtain in future.

Publication and Program Proposals

Kathleen Roe announced that she had almost completed negotiations to revise Frederic Miller's Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts. During the coming year she will be working on the revisions. Negotiations are ongoing as to whether the SAA publications committee will be willing to publish it electronically rather than in print. Kathleen asked for comments regarding what the Miller manual did well and for suggestions on areas that it did not address. Messages should be directed to her home address of KRoe122@aol.com.

Holly reiterated her hope to get good program proposals for 2001, and asked people to stay after the meeting to discuss ideas for next year's program.

Election for Vice Chair/Chair Elect

Holly offered the candidates, Susan Hamburger and Mary Lacy, the opportunity to add to their statements, which were printed on the reverse of the ballots. When both declined, the ballots were executed and collected. After tabulating the ballots, vice chair Bill Landis announced that Mary Lacy had been elected incoming vice chair. He thanked both candidates. Bill had no further announcements, but mentioned the number of good description sessions being presented this year and encouraged attendance and feedback. He noted that he would like to have a program at next year's section meeting. He warned that if people don't submit ideas, it will be on whatever he and Mary find interesting! He can be contacted at landis@uci.edu.

Program Sessions and Proposals

Susan Hamburger noted that Session 7, "User Studies in the Digital Age," was the most highly checked for intent to attend, and had a good turnout. She is looking forward to doing more research.

Kate Bowers reported on Session 5, "Image Access: Three Approaches to Cataloging and Image Collection Management," and summarized the three approaches presented. Denver Public Library uses traditional MARC cataloging into an OPAC, done at the item level. The Henry Ford Museum has a proprietary database, using item level description for individual images and a prototype for series of similar images. They also do records at the collection and folder levels. The Bancroft Library describes images in EAD, at all levels, by inserting item level description into the EAD finding aids. Their presentation included a table of encoding analogs, illustrating the ability to import and export the records in any form.

The floor was opened for suggestions on proposals. Kathleen Roe said that her organization has been debating how to use EAD and why are others are not using it. She would like to hear a discussion of why people are or are not using it. A suggestion was made to examine interoperability of data and how archivists can share information with libraries and museums.

Rob Spindler expressed interest in practices for administrative metadata related to digitization of visual images. It would be useful to identify what models are being used and to compare what information is being gathered by projects. Michael Fox suggested looking at the RLG preservation metadata set; Susan Hamburger suggested Berkely's MOA2 project as an example.

Elizabeth Dow called attention to the *Burlington Agenda*, which outlines eight areas needing research and suggests strategies. Steve Hensen noted the increasing proliferation of collaborative projects, and suggested studying the potential scenarios for integrating projects into a searchable national system.

Other Business

Tom Frusciano announced the creation of the *Journal of Archival Organization*. It is another venue for publication and an opportunity for students to publish research. He is soliciting articles. The meeting was declared adjourned.

News Notes

Grant from Delmas Foundation Supports Work to Increase Primary Sources Access Online

(from the January 2001 *RLG Executive Briefing*)

The Gladys Krieble Delmas Foundation has awarded a \$30,000 grant to RLG for a meeting in Toronto this March of experts on archival descriptive standards from Australia, Canada, Italy, Norway, Sweden, the UK, and the US. Carrying forward a project begun at Yale University, this group will create a new kind of encoded record to carry information about primary sources' creators--such as biographical background and agency histories. At the meeting, they will create a draft Document Type Definition for encoding "archival contextual information." As did the Encoded Archival Description standard, this effort will greatly enhance researchers' retrieval of primary source materials. The result will be a model for wide testing. In 2001, the International Council on Archives' International Standard for Archival Authority Records is under review; with this grant, the Delmas Foundation has funded work that helps ensure a concerted effort to vet that standard and help guide its future development. For more information, contact richard.szary@yale.edu or anne.van.camp@notes.rlg.org.

EAD Application Guidelines Online

Kris Kiesling

The EAD Application Guidelines are now available online at the official Library of Congress EAD web site (<http://lcweb.loc.gov/ead/>). The Guidelines are encoded in HTML; all see references and footnotes are linked to facilitate location of relevant information. The Guidelines join the EAD Tag Library, which has been available online for over a year. The EAD Working Group hopes EAD users will find these online tools useful, and welcomes your feedback.

EAD Help Pages Upgraded

Timothy Young

The EAD Help Pages site (<http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/ead/>) now offers extended help for EAD implementation in the form of an XML FAQ written by David Ruddy of Cornell University Library and the EAD Cookbook from Michael J. Fox of the Minnesota Historical Society.

The XML in EAD page (<http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/ead/xml.html>) covers many of the frequently asked questions about how XML differs from SGML and what steps should be taken to easily work with the XML version of the EAD.DTD.

The EAD Cookbook (<http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/ead/cookbookhelp.html>) is a guide to implementing EAD, using an example finding aid, complete with several style sheets and auxiliary files to take advantage of some of the most used XML software. The EAD Cookbook is intended to be downloaded in its entirety, so there are two versions available: one in Word 95 format, another as a PDF file.

Grants and Projects

The **San Diego Historical Society** received funding from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission for a two-year project to arrange and describe its photographic collections. The project cataloger will create cataloging records, arrange collections and create finding aids. * The **Albert B. Alkek Library at Southwest Texas State University** received a grant from the Texas State Library and Archives Commission to arrange and describe the first five years of the Editorial Series of the *Texas Monthly* Magazine Archives, a part of the Southwestern Writers Collection. The project archivist will create a finding aid, a MARC record, and a correspondents index for the collection.* **Smith College** is conducting a project to survey, appraise, preserve, arrange and describe records documenting the history of Smith College from its founding in 1871 to the present. The project will produce finding

aids and bibliographic records. * **Northeastern University Libraries** received an NHPRC grant for the project, "Documenting Boston's Under Documented Communities." The project was planned to arrange, describe, and make accessible the historical records of AIDS Action Committee of Massachusetts (AAC).

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