

Descriptive Notes

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

Summer 2004

From the Chair

Chris Prom

I'm thankful to the members of the section for the chance to serve as chair over the past year, and especially to members of the steering committee and section leadership—Kelcy Shepherd, John Rees, Diane Ducharme, Tara Zachary Laver, Mary Lacy, and Ann Hodges. Their work on behalf of the section has been a key to our success over the past year.

In case you haven't looked at the description section website, lately, Diane has redone it in fine fashion. Kelcy has been busy putting together a great finding aids fair regarding approaches to describing unprocessed collections and making information about them available to our users. And John's steady leadership as newsletter editor is well worthy of praise.

You won't want to miss the section meeting Friday morning in Boston. We'll be receiving updates from Kris Keisling on the publication of Describing Archives: A Content Standard and on the Archivist Toolkit Project, as well as the progress of EAC. These are all developments we need to follow closely. In addition, we can look forward to a program by Jerry Simmons and Patti Williams describing their use of authority control in non-MARC systems.

It is a very exciting time to be an archivist, and description is where much of the action is happening. See you in Boston!

Section Meeting Agenda

Fri., Aug 6

8:30-10:30 AM

I. Welcome from the Chair

II. Section Reports

Descriptive Notes - John Rees

Section Web Site - Diane Ducharme

Finding Aids Fair - Kelcy Shepherd

III. Reports from SAA Committees and Liaisons

EAD Working Group - Kris Kiesling

DACS - Kiesling

SAA Technical Subcommittee on Descriptive Standards (TSDS) - Brad Westbrook

Encoded Archival Context - Daniel Pitti

US MARC Advisory Board (MARBI) - Michael Fox

ICA Committee on Descriptive Standards - Fox

OCLC - Pam Kircher

RLG - Anne Van Camp/Merrilee Proffit

ALA Committee on Cataloging: Description and Access (CC:DA) - Susan Hamburger

Archivist Toolkit Project - Westbrook

ALEPH - Bob Sink

2005 Annual Meeting - Elizabeth Kaplan/Kathy Marquis

IV. Ongoing Business

2003 sessions sponsored by Description Section - Chris Prom

Ideas for 2004 program sessions - Kelcy Shepherd

V. New Business

VI. Election of Vice-Chair/Chair-Elect (results announced at the end of the program)

VII. Program

C. Jerry Simmons from NARA will describe how its ARC system mixes topical subject thesauri and corporate name authority files drawn from multiple sources. One major challenge is meshing controlled vocabularies of differing formats and creators together in one system and in a single catalog record. Other challenges for this indexing approach include training the "description archivists," specificity and context issues without pre-coordinated subject headings, and applying MARC21-style authority control in a system that isn't MARC compliant.

Patricia Williams of the National Air and Space Museum will then cover the evolution of non-LC subject headings used in cataloging NASM's archival collections. She will highlight the application of NASM's recently published *The Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum Directory of Airplanes: Their Designers and Manufacturers* and NASM's plans to convert the vocabulary into a database appropriate for inclusion in the Smithsonian's SIRIS database of archival holdings.

Section Endorsed Sessions

12. MARC and EAD: Making Archival Surrogates Usable and Accessible

Thurs., Aug. 5

3:45-5:125 PM

The Internet has increased publicly available information concerning archival collections. But has this made them more accessible? "Accessibility" refers to cognitive accessibility and the knowledge researchers require for utilizing Web-based archival information effectively. This session presents the results of usability tests on the ability of undergraduates, genealogists, academic scholars, and librarians to make use of MARC records and EAD finding aids. Findings discussed will include search patterns, interface design, archival terminology, and navigation.

13. Facilitating Description: Developing Standard Series

Thursday, August 5

3:45-5:15 PM

Developing standard series description helps solve a variety of challenges faced by the modern archivist. Effective resource allocation, streamlining processing, assisting appraisal, and translating technical language to various researcher audiences are but a few. One archivist will discuss the successful application of the standard series paradigm and how it can be applied across the archival enterprise. Two archivists will then explore their experiences developing common series description for engineering, science faculty, and biomedical scientist papers.

31. The Perfect Is the Enemy of the Good: Re-thinking the Problem of Backlogs

Fri. Aug., 6

2:00-3:30 PM

Almost every archives faces the never-ending problem of backlogs of unprocessed and under-processed materials. The presenters will describe initiatives that address the backlog problem by reporting on a survey methodology used to set processing priorities and develop processing plans; a strategy used to determine appropriate levels of arrangement and description for backlogged collections; and the Association of Research Libraries' "Exposing Hidden Collections" initiative, a profession-wide effort to develop new approaches to reducing backlogs.

40. EAD Outsourcing: The Nitty Gritty of Working with Encoding Vendors

Fri., Aug. 6

4:00-5:30 PM

Many repositories are finding the use of vendors for the EAD encoding of finding aids a financially viable proposition. Balancing limited resources for in-house encoding can be daunting. Panelists in this session—through brief presentations and round-robin discussion—will address topics such as vendor encoding processes; factors that influence quality and pricing; implementing encoding specifications; and pre- and post-vendor processes, such as in-house quality control. Audience questions and participation are encouraged.

41. Pursuing Our Own Pasts: Archives and History

Fri., Aug. 6

4:00-5:30 PM

In the late 20th century the archival profession in America developed an identity increasingly distant from its roots in the academic history discipline. How, in the 21st century, do we understand the intersections between archives and history? Are archives historical? What are the implications of the technical turn in archival work? This session will address these questions, probe our professional past, and provide historical perspective on what it means to be an archivist today.

Also Of Interest ...

59. All for One and One for All? Cataloging All Kinds of Collections in One System

Sat., Aug. 7

1:00-2:30 PM

Historically libraries, archives, and museums (even within one institution) had their own cataloging systems and some level of standards. Material was often thought to be unique and different and was, therefore, cataloged differently. With the Web, there is a growing trend to have all kinds of collections, collectively viewed as “cultural resources,” housed in one catalog. The speakers will look at the pros and cons of “unified” cataloging and consider relevant questions.

Technical Subcommittee on Descriptive Standards

Wed., August 4

1:00 PM-4:00 PM

Standards Committee

Wed., Aug. 4

10:00-12:00 PM

EAD Roundtable

Sat., Aug. 6

8:00-9:30 AM

EAD Working Group

Sun., Aug. 7

9:00-12:00 AM

Finding Aids Fair 2004

Backlog on the Front Burner

Join us in Boston for the annual Description Section Finding Aids Fair, "Backlog on the Front Burner: Arrangement and Description Strategies for Unprocessed Collections." The Finding Aids Fair will be open in the Exposition Hall Friday, August 6, 2004, from 7:30 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. Members of the Description Section will be available at the Fair periodically throughout the day.

This year's theme focuses on a variety of approaches for dealing with processing backlogs. Strategies include improving access to information about unprocessed collections, redefining processing to include the concepts of partial or minimal

processing, and implementing arrangement and description at varying levels as appropriate to the collection. Finding aids will include accession lists, collection level catalog records for unprocessed materials, and examples of collection and series level description.

Archivists have faced the problem of processing backlogs for decades. Recent research and collaborative initiatives have once again drawn attention to so-called "hidden collections" in archives and special collections. The Fair will highlight these efforts and the day to day strategies of a diversity of repositories.

If you're one of the lucky few with no unprocessed collections, take the day off! But if you're among the majority of archivists dealing with a backlog, stop by the Finding Aids Fair to learn practical approaches for addressing these issues. If you've developed a strategy of your own, please submit a sample finding aid and a brief description of your methods.

To submit entries, please contact:

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Metadata Minute

John Rees, Newsletter Editor

Rather than write a full-blown article for this issue, I have cobbled together some topics that crossed my desk in the past few months that had a direct impact on my day-to-day work.

First, NLM's Web Archives went live in May, in co-ordination with the launch of our web redesign (<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/about/archives.html>). All new pages display document category and permanence level information in the footer. Also, users of the Search the Site function now have an "Archives" results folder that contains previous versions of updated pages that fit our permanence selection criteria. Metadata-generated links take users between current and older versions of the document. Finally, our Technical Services Division is creating MARC records for all permanent resources and adding extended cataloging metadata, such as authorized name versions and controlled subject terms, back into the HTML headers. The process is very labor intensive so don't let anyone convince you (esp. vendors) they have a turnkey solution to your electronic resource management and preservation!

As part of our future plans for archiving non-HTML documents, I have learned a lot about JPEG 2000. The future replacement for the JPEG image standard, it completely changes the way images are produced, described, processed and stored. At the heart of the technology are the 7 information "boxes" that comprise the total file. Two of the three optional boxes are of particular interest to us: IPR and XML boxes. Using the IPR option, creators can imbed intellectual property controls within the file. Likewise with the XML box, creators can imbed XML schemes within the image file, such as an EAD instance. The University of Connecticut is currently engaged in an application wherein EAD DAO groups link to a JPEG2000 file that contains the <c0x>-level encoding within the XML box (http://charlesolson.uconn.edu/Works_in_the_Collection/Melville_Project/IST_Paper3.pdf). Not only is the image better described from a technological standpoint, but it now carries the entire context of the EAD instance with it! Who said EAD is a dead horse....

Second, the recently released report for the ERPANET/CODATA seminar on the Selection, Appraisal and Retention of Digital Scientific Data (<http://www.erpanet.org/www/products/lisbon/LisbonReportFinal.pdf>) has some interesting things

to say about the reusability of electronic data. Most of us understand the difficulties associated with selection and preservation of these resources, but others are now becoming concerned that the data is unusable outside the creating disciplines. Throughout the meeting participants urged the need to better capture the contexts in which data is created. We may not know the future uses to which the data will be put and it is essential to capture contextual details to maximize future value. It is great to see two disparate communities, scientists and archivists, come together and discover they have a common interest.

Finally, I am sure many of us read Herbert von de Sompel's announcement of the mod_oai Apache software module project (<http://www.modoi.org/>). The project's exciting goal is to expose content accessible in Apache Web servers via the Open Archives Initiative Protocol for Metadata Harvesting (OAI-PMH). The unfortunate part of the announcement is its brevity. The web site does not offer any more details, so I guess we will have to wait.

News Notes

ALEPH ILS Archival Accessioning Module

Robert Sink, Center for Jewish History

The Center is implementing its first ILS and Ex Libris has created an accessioning module for us. It's not perfect, but it may be the only major ILS vendor that offers such functionality.

The module was not constructed from scratch, but rather takes the existing acquisitions functionality and adjusts it to archival needs. Since this Archival GUI (as it's called) tweaks existing tables, it is not ideal but seems to meet 70-80% of our needs for accessioning archival collections. Some refer to it as the Donor GUI since the adjustments were made to accommodate donations rather than fit archival gifts into the Vendor/Price model used for acquiring books. Although some of it is designed to handle tasks specific to the Center, they tried to keep the needs of other archives in mind as development progresses. Ex Libris promises to make the Archival GUI "supportable" (i.e., provide support for it out of the Chicago office), "reproducible" (make it available to other clients), and "upgradeable" (provide an upgrade path going forward). The Archival GUI is nearing its final form, and more information will be shared when it is completed. For those of you attending the North American ALEPH Users Group (NAAUG), Sink will show the current version of the Archival GUI at a session at 1:45 PM on Tuesday June 15th.

Also, several colleagues expressed an interest in creating an ALEPH Users Round Table within SAA. Sink drew up a mission statement for such a group and is collecting the names of 20 members as required by SAA for forming such groups. He hopes to have the group established in time to meet at this year's conference.

Archives of American Mathematics Finding Aids

The AAM at the Center for American History on The University of Texas at Austin campus has placed over 60 of its finding aids on the Texas Archival Resources Online (TARO) web site (<http://www.lib.utexas.edu/taro/index.html>).

The Center for American History is a special collections library, archive, and museum that facilitates research and sponsors programs on the history of the United States. The Center supports research and education by acquiring, preserving, and making available research collections and by sponsoring exhibitions, conferences, symposia, oral history projects, publications, and grant-funded initiatives.

Persons interested in conducting research or donating materials or who have general questions about the AAM should contact Kristy Sorensen, Archivist, k.sorensen@mail.utexas.edu, (512) 495-4539. More information about the AAM, including links to our finding aids can be found here: <http://www.cah.utexas.edu/collectioncomponents/math.html>

Old is New Again at PSU

Sue Hamburger, Manuscripts Cataloging Librarian

The recently processed Mortlake Collection of English Life and Letters, 1591-1963, is described using the calendar method.

Because Harold Mortlake collected signatures, letters, and documents on a piecemeal basis, rather than describing it only to the series level, Hamburger decided to revert to manuscripts tradition and do a calendared folder listing by name with brief descriptions of the contents. She's already had one researcher ask for the letters mentioning Charles Dickens.

The finding aid is available online at
<http://www.libraries.psu.edu/speccolls/FindingAids/mortlake.html>.

EAD at University of Minnesota

Leslie Czechowski, Archivist

The University of Minnesota Special Collections and Archives has embarked on an EAD implementation project. The project will run from March 2004-June 2005.

The project has three main parts: Train staff to implement EAD as part of their regular descriptive practice; Encode legacy finding aids; Selection and implementation of delivery mechanism.

Visit <http://wiki.lib.umn.edu/Staff/FindingAidsInEAD> for project details, helper files, progress reports and links to completed finding aids, of course!

Describing Archives: A Content Standard (DACs)

The much anticipated release of the new content standard for describing archival materials will occur at this year's annual meeting. Kris Kiesling will spend some time during the Description Section meeting discussing the work and its application. DACs is the result of several years' work that originated as the joint US-Canadian CUSTARD project. Irreconcilable differences led to the dissolution of that project, however the US team continued its work towards this new content standard with fruitful accomplishments.

CUSTARD U.S. members:

Michael Fox

Steve Hensen

Lynn Holdzkom

Margit Kerwin

Kris Kiesling

Bill Landis

Lydia Reid

The manual will be on sale for the first time at the SAA Publications booth.



Vice-Chair/Chair Elect Candidate

At press, the one reluctant nominee to come forward is John Rees. Other nominations will be heard at the Section meeting.

Brief bio: Since 2000, John has been Associate Curator of Modern Manuscripts at the National Library of Medicine where he supervises all processing, description and cataloging activities. He is also a member of the NLM's Electronic Archive Working Group and Metadata Committee. He previously worked at the Library of Virginia (1993-1995; 1997-1999) as an archivist and manuscripts cataloger, at the Center for American History, University of Texas-Austin, and for a private antiquarian book dealer in Austin. He has a MLIS from UT-Austin, a MA in Southern Studies from Ole Miss and a BA in American History from Mary Washington College. A member of SAA since 1995, he has edited the Description Section newsletter since 2003.

Beantown Beckons!!!

Description Section Meeting, Friday, August 6th, 8:30-10:30 AM