

# *Notes and Communications*

## *Subject Headings: the PAASH Experience*

by JEAN E. DRYDEN

The Provincial Archives of Alberta Subject Headings (hereafter referred to as PAASH) was developed in 1982 in order to provide a standard indexing vocabulary to be used in the preparation of indexes for all types of archival holdings, both audio-visual and textual. Although it was originally intended strictly for in-house use at the Provincial Archives of Alberta (PAA), PAASH is now used in a number of archives throughout Alberta and has been sent to a number of institutions across the country in response to requests from those interested in the work done at PAA. In view of the obvious interest in the issue of subject access to archival collections, and the wide dissemination of this particular indexing tool, it seems timely to provide more information about PAASH — what it is, how it developed, and some of the lessons to be learned from PAA's experience.

Although PAASH has undergone considerable expansion in the four editions which have been published, the basic format has changed but little; it consists of an introduction explaining the purpose of subject headings and how to use PAASH, several pages of free-floating subdivisions which can be used with any heading (subject to the limitations of the subdivision scope notes), the subject headings themselves, and the name authorities (which were separated from the subject headings in the 1984 edition). As stated, PAASH was intended to be used as the controlled vocabulary from which indexing terms were selected in order to provide subject access to all PAA collections, regardless of media. It is a comprehensive indexing vocabulary which attempts to deal as fully as possible with preferred terms and references to include as many preferred terms as required, as well as copious references from nonpreferred terms.

Nevertheless it is important to recognize what PAASH is not. It does not deal with the differences between content-based and provenance-based indexing or other theoretical aspects of subject access to archival material. It gives no guidance in deciding to what level to index (collection, file, item, etc.), a matter which has to be decided by each institution; nor does it provide any guidance on indexing methodology or detailed instructions on how to index. Because archivists generally have little, if any, formal training in subject indexing, they tend to seize on any tool that may solve the considerable problems in this complex area. Indeed, one novice archivist in Alberta hoped to use PAASH as an appraisal and selection tool. While sorting the miscellaneous papers she had been instructed to "archive," she thought that she could compare the subject of each document to see if that

subject appeared in PAASH. If it did, the document was selected for permanent retention; if not, the document was discarded. Only an amateur would have such high hopes for PAASH; nevertheless, it indicates in a rather exaggerated form the somewhat mythical status of PAASH as the solver of many, if not all, archival problems. A controlled vocabulary is indeed a powerful tool, but it cannot accomplish what it was not intended to do. However, a detailed look at how PAASH developed will certainly assist in establishing the place of PAASH and other thesauri within the broader field of indexing.

In late 1981, one of the government records archivists at PAA became extremely frustrated with the inconsistencies in the main entry cards (which provide access to the textual records from both government and manuscript sources). In organized archival fashion, she summarized the problems in a three-page memo circulated to all archivists. While some of the nineteen points in the memo dealt with broader issues such as inconsistencies in the format and style of the cards themselves, many of the difficulties were the result of the use of inconsistent, illegal, or nonexistent subject headings and the lack of consistent rules for filing them. This memo prompted a second memo from two other archivists who recommended that PAA adopt a policy of using Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) as its institutional authority, and that a thorough revision of the cards be undertaken to correct all existing subject headings and filing errors in accordance with established filing rules. It was clear that these memos expressed many of the frustrations experienced by all the archivists (and presumably many researchers), and a meeting was scheduled to discuss the problems in the card catalogue.

Some background is necessary to describe what PAA had been doing as far as subject indexing was concerned. It was not that the staff were totally ignorant of subject heading authorities. PAA had in 1969 developed a list called "Subject Headings for Indexing Manuscripts," by going through LCSH to extract the headings relevant to Alberta topics. A similar but not identical list had been developed for photographs, extracting those terms most likely to refer to visual images. However, neither had been kept up to date in accordance with LCSH revisions or local requirements. No mechanism existed for adding new headings; individuals added the headings they needed, perhaps after consulting a colleague, but certainly without looking at a current version of LCSH or any other authority. The individual may have kept a record of the decision by recording the new heading in his copy of the subject headings, but the new heading was never circulated to other archivists. In fact, not everyone had a copy of the headings, so new headings were often made up even though a preferred synonym already existed. A ratty old copy of LCSH was kept in the photograph cataloguer's cupboard, and occasionally consulted, but no one really understood exactly how it worked, let alone that more recent versions existed. Clearly the system had broken down in the absence of written procedures and proper in-house training of professional staff. A change was long overdue.

Archivists and senior staff met and agreed in principle that LCSH would become the authority. Various other points in the original memo were addressed. Some procedural decisions were made immediately; others waited upon an examination of a sample of the headings in the 1969 list to determine the extent of deviation from current LCSH practice. The solution to still other difficulties lay in other tools from library science such as *Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules* (AACR2) and *Canadian Authorities*, introduced to us by our newest staff member who was a recent library school graduate. Although most of us were ignorant of exactly what these tools did and how to use them, we accepted the recommendation of the "expert" that these tools would help solve our problems. In fact,

there was little understanding of just what we were letting ourselves in for by tackling the entire matter, but we moved ahead to the next step. This step-by-step approach meant that by the time we had realized the extent of the task we had undertaken, we were already in the centre of the swamp and had no choice but to continue to the other side. In retrospect, the step-by-step method was the only way to accomplish the task, but greater awareness of the implications of the task could have saved us some difficulties at various points in the process.

The comparison of a sample of our headings with those approved by LCSH revealed a non-conformity rate of 27 per cent. A further comparison of legal LCSH headings and those actually used in the card catalogue produced a number of headings which appeared in *no* subject heading authority. The results of the analysis and the options for achieving consistency in the subject headings were vociferously discussed. A consensus was reached: a) update the existing subject headings to conform as much as possible to LCSH (with the option to use *Canadian Subject Headings* where LCSH was not specific enough and retain certain deviations deemed indispensable to the needs of Alberta's history); b) revise the main entry cards to conform to the new list; c) use the new list to index all holdings regardless of medium; and d) revise all existing cards for all media. Broad timetables were worked out and revision teams appointed. The complexity of the entire issue was starting to dawn on the staff, and the cataloguing instructor from the local library technician programme was invited to give a workshop to initiate us into the mysteries of subject analysis in general, and LCSH in particular.

Naturally the priority was to prepare the subject headings themselves. A committee of three archivists began to create PAASH in the spring of 1982. Each of PAA's three sections was represented on the team — government records, manuscript, and audio-visual. One member had a library degree and thus was more familiar with LCSH and how it worked, but the other two caught on quickly. The existing headings were divided into three equal parts, and each person spent a tedious spring comparing existing headings with those in LCSH and its supplements, making them conform wherever possible, and adding new terms from LCSH that might be useful. Terms with no obvious LCSH equivalent or an equivalent which was not meaningful to the Alberta experience were kept in, but marked as being deviant.

As we pored over the big red books, it quickly became obvious that LCSH had a number of weaknesses and inconsistencies. While coming across some of the bizarre subjects people had written books about and the equally bizarre ways the Library of Congress had chosen to express certain subjects provided many opportunities for laughter, we had some doubts about the wisdom of our choice as the basis for our subject heading authority. Besides a number of headings which seemed downright silly, LCSH was geared to American subjects and systems of government, and was extremely cumbersome to use because of its size and system of supplements. The supplements were tangible evidence of another weakness — LCSH is always out of date because it takes so long for new headings for current topics to be approved and formally issued in a supplement. However, the alternative subject heading authorities one might consider were even less suitable. The headings in *Sears List of Subject Headings* were not nearly specific enough to support a collection of any size or complexity and *Canadian Subject Headings* dealt only with Canadian subjects which had no equivalent in LCSH and none too satisfactorily at that. LCSH had the advantage of being relatively well-known because of its wide use in North American libraries, and was flexible enough in the patterns it established to

accommodate a number of regional variations. Above all, it was comprehensive, dealing with virtually any topic one might require, as long as it was not recent. Whatever its problems, LCSH was the only viable alternative, and the team ploughed on through their respective sections of the alphabet.

The real work began as the committee sat down to discuss their lists, heading by heading. This should have been the easy part — merely to confirm three people's decisions made to achieve the general goals of identifying subject headings which would apply to the holdings of the PAA and reducing the size and complexity of LCSH so that all our staff would use the headings consistently. How wrong we were. The committee started with the best of intentions to make every decision with the purest motives and the good of the institution in mind. Decisions were to be reached after full and democratic discussion. However, the noblest motives did not always prevail. On days when everyone was in a particularly combative mood, decisions were made on a win-lose basis and the spoils had to be equally divided, that is, each person had to win by getting a heading of her choice if she had lost the last round. At other points, the chair caved in and permitted a deviation from LCSH for the simple reason that she was hungry or tired of arguing. At still other points, the chair threw democracy to the wind, and cut discussion short by making an arbitrary decision.

While the vast majority of headings caused no disagreement, the few that did caused arguments which raged intermittently for days, and involved all the staff (and on occasion experts). The heading leaving the deepest scars was that of *Ground-squirrels*. Admittedly no one but a zoologist calls those little animals most often seen squashed on Alberta's highways anything but gophers; nevertheless, their proper name is Richardson's Ground-squirrel. The chair's desire to keep the deviations from LCSH to a minimum caused her to call a halt to the war after the argument had extended to the Curator of Mammalogy at the Provincial Museum. The decision was to use *Ground-squirrels* with a *See* reference from *Gophers*. Visual evidence of the emotion generated by the Gopher War can be found in the first edition of PAASH which was illustrated at various points with little pictures of squirrels, chipmunks, and ground-squirrels. Even today, the gopher backers do not hesitate to bring up the issue if they feel the current argument needs evidence of past dictatorial behaviour.

Of course, some deviations were necessary. One of the brighter things we decided to do was document the deviations from LCSH. Since these were usually the matters which caused the most discussion and soul-searching, we felt that these headings should be indicated in some way. As well, we wanted this documentation in case we should automate and choose a system which included LCSH in its database so we would already know where the discrepancies were, and the reasons for them. The documentation consisted of a system of symbols. The # indicated a heading which differed completely from LCSH either because the PAASH committee chose to use an alternative which LCSH distinctly said not to use (e.g., PAASH uses *Blood Indians* instead of LCSH's *Kinai Indians*) or because the committee invented a heading because LCSH contained no suitable heading (e.g. *Travois*). The # also appears beside subdivisions (including free-floating subdivisions) which are used incorrectly according to LCSH usage. The \* means that the LCSH heading has been truncated or otherwise adjusted to suit our needs or reduce needless repetition. For example, LCSH uses *Indians of North America*; PAASH uses *Indians*. The + was chosen to indicate main headings or subdivisions which were legal headings, but the meaning as expressed in the scope note has been adjusted or changed from that

given in LCSH. The symbol is most often used to indicate that one or more aspects of a topic have been included under the most general heading, (e.g., *Immunization* was chosen to include specific procedures such as *Vaccination* even though the latter is a legal heading), or that one heading has been arbitrarily selected to describe a number of synonymous headings (e.g., *Docks* is used for piers and wharves, even though *Piers* and *Wharves* are legal headings), or when LCSH's meaning for a term varies significantly from commonly understood local usage (e.g., *Bones* in PAASH refers to such things as piles of buffalo bones, and not solely to technical works on the bony structures of vertebrates). The § symbol will be explained in the section on geographical subdivisions.

Even though this stage of the development of PAASH took place in a concentrated period of time, with the committee meeting on a daily basis, we found very early on that the need to remember decisions already made, or headings already chosen, taxed our memories. It helped to have three heads working on this, because discussion of a particular issue or heading would ring a bell in at least one mind and lead to a check of what had already been done. As mentioned, we might decide to choose one broad term rather than use several more precise terms in subject areas where very specific headings were not required, or we might decide to select one term rather than use a number of synonyms. This meant remembering to put in *See* references from all the nonpreferred terms and from any synonyms we could think of.

Of course, we were making broader policy decisions as well, although in the early stages we were not always aware of the implications of certain decisions, and occasionally we reversed our position. One of the biggest policy issues we addressed was the matter of geographical headings. The use of the mysterious designation *Indirect* was one of the most difficult aspects of LCSH to understand. It is simply a needlessly subtle way of saying that a geographical subdivision (such as a community, province, or country) could be added to a heading to make it more precise. In other words, instead of having numerous headings which simply said *Churches*, the references to churches in particular communities could be specified: *Churches — Edmonton*, *Churches — Camrose*, etc. The value of this rule was undeniable even if LCSH's statement of its application was virtually incomprehensible. However, considerable discussion was held over whether we should adjust the rule to permit the heading to be "flip-flopped" and allow the geographical name to come first. It was argued that this was necessary so the researcher interested in all aspects of a particular community could get all the relevant headings in one place, and it was felt to be particularly important for the photograph collections. The other side of the argument was that a large number of subdivisions could already be legally added to the names of communities and this should be sufficient. A compromise was reached. Certain main headings that LCSH did not consider to be legal subdivisions could in PAASH be used as subdivisions only under the names of communities and other geographical locations. These exceptions were indicated with a § symbol. In other words, certain combinations could be "flip-flopped" to ensure access both from the subject and geographic location. For example, *Zoos — Edmonton* was always a legal combination, but only in PAASH could one use *Edmonton — Zoos* as well.

Another policy decision requiring considerable effort was the choice of the free-floating subdivisions which could be combined with any main heading. Certainly not all of these were of relevance to Alberta, so a ruthless weeding of the nearly five hundred headings took place. In addition we did not always like the scope note which put limitations on the use of these subdivisions. Where we felt it was required, we adjusted the

meaning to make the subdivision more flexible or relevant to specific needs. We solved the problem of having another separate list of subdivisions which could be used under the names of communities by making *Edmonton* a pattern heading in the body of the listing and making that our model for all communities.

A third major issue in our task dealt with the matter of names. When we started, we had only the haziest notion of the difference between subject headings and personal or corporate names. Within LCSH itself, the distinction was not clear because, of course, many names are also subjects and LCSH includes many names. Therefore, we naively followed their example, and included names in the subject headings in the first edition of PAASH. Our confusion lay in our failure to make the distinction between access by provenance and access by content. We later realized that we do index by provenance, which is almost always a personal or corporate name, because the provenance forms the main entry on our catalogue cards describing the accession at the collection level. Thus, it was essential that our subject authority give considerable guidance on the formation of names, as well as subjects. By the time we issued the second edition of PAASH, we had separated the numerous names from the subject headings into a distinct name authority, except those which form pattern headings and are found in both places.

It was in this area that our librarian gave us much assistance by steering us toward the relevant chapters of AACR2 on which the names in LCSH were based, and gave us a more universal model from which we could construct headings geared specifically to our needs. AACR2 is not easy for the novice, but it is an indispensable tool for construction of name headings and it is worthwhile to get the nearest librarian to explain how to use the relevant chapters. Of particular concern were the glaring and imaginative inconsistencies in the headings for government departments. The AACR2 rule was quite clear, but here was another instance where we wanted to truncate the proper heading (*Alberta. Department of Agriculture*) to avoid repetition and thick runs of cards filed under *Alberta*. PAASH uses *Agriculture, Department of* as its model for the names of all government departments.

The work did not stop when the committee had finished going through the list. We had to go through it once more to ensure that all the *See* and *See also* references actually referred to something. Then we had to write an introduction that spelled out the details of the system and policies we had developed. This was the first time we had tried to articulate the rules we had set and at times we had second thoughts about whether we had simplified LCSH or created a monster of our own. At last, in August, our baby was off to the printer, and we heaved a collective sigh of relief. The PAASH committee members were, amazingly enough, still speaking to each other, and treated themselves to a well-deserved, expensive lunch.

When the volume came back and was distributed to all the archivists and indexers, we had little difficulty in training everyone in the use of the new headings. Most welcomed the more formalized structure, and plans were made to start using PAASH immediately to index all media, and to begin the lengthy process of retrospective conversion of all indexes, starting with the main entry cards. The first shock came when someone wanted a heading that she maintained was not in PAASH. This person was interrogated by the PAASH committee who were devastated that their great work was not perfect and would have to be changed. Nevertheless, after the shock wore off, the committee reluctantly admitted that new headings would likely be required, and turned their minds to designing

a mechanism to choose new headings in response to requests from indexers and to circulate the decision to all those holding copies of PAASH. We tried at first to save up the topics needing headings until it was worthwhile convening a formal meeting of the PAASH committee. However, this quickly proved unsuccessful because staff needed a decision immediately. Hence, decisions were often made by one member of the committee who would hastily go to the red books, check the supplements, and make a decision. The new headings were recorded, and ratified by the committee as a whole before circulating lists of new headings or updating the entire thing. Occasionally a one person decision is overturned, but this is rare, and the system seems to work fairly well, if somewhat haphazardly. As far as updates were concerned, we experimented with several systems of informing staff of new headings, including a proliferation of pink slips circulated to all holders (which caused a rebellion because everybody was spending copious amounts of time copying the same headings into ten sets of books), and retyping entire pages when a significant number of new headings were required to substitute for the old pages. Finally it was obvious that as long as our system was not online, it would be impossible to have everyone completely up to date. New headings were kept with the chair of the PAASH committee, and PAASH is updated and reissued annually.

The maintenance issue was complicated by the decision taken by the Directors of Alberta's Archives (now the Alberta Archives Council) to adopt PAASH as the province-wide standard for indexing archival material. This meant that we had to accommodate the wishes and needs of other institutions for new headings, respond to inquiries about interpretations of existing headings, and include them in our updating procedures. A provincial PAASH committee was set up to establish the above system. The PAA still retained responsibility for updating, reprinting, and distribution, but batches of new headings were to be approved by the provincial committee before they were added. A revised introduction to PAASH suitable for broader circulation was approved by the provincial committee in 1984. Considerable discussion took place regarding changes special archives such as university archives may wish to make to PAASH for their use, and there was some talk of the eventual need to establish special subcommittees for university or city archives. However, the vetting of new headings by the provincial committee has largely broken down, partly due to the pressures of time, and partly because relatively little response has been received from other institutions indicating that there is a pressing need for specialized new headings. PAA is prepared to add headings in response to specific requests, but there appears to be no need to maintain another committee if its function is to rubber-stamp decisions already made at PAA.

Would we do it again? The answer is an unequivocal yes. The consistency that a controlled vocabulary and name authorities brought to our main entry catalogue and our subject access procedures was well worth the time and effort involved. However, it is unlikely that we would do it again the same way. Of course hindsight is an excellent teacher, and one always knows more at the end of a project than at the beginning. Nevertheless, we could have been better prepared and more aware of the implications of the entire project. We obviously had little previous experience with thesaurus construction, but we could, and certainly should, have studied the library literature on the topic to alert us to the pitfalls others have encountered. Such a preliminary study would probably have increased our awareness of the purpose and application of the standard library tools which already existed, and almost certainly would have alerted us to the relationships between subject headings and name authorities. As well, the discovery that we had to add

new headings would not have been such a shock. It seems obvious now that no indexing vocabulary is written in stone, but our failure to understand that the ongoing need for maintenance would absorb as much or more time and effort as the construction of the original list meant that we were ill-prepared for the commitment required.

Implementation had undeniably been a problem. Our timelines for completing a conversion of all our indexes was overly ambitious, to say the least, and only the main entry cards have been completely converted. Nevertheless from 1983 on, all indexing done has been in accordance with PAASH, so any future retrospective conversion projects have definite limits. Again, librarians have had extensive experience with such conversion projects, and some awareness of this literature would have warned us about the difficulties involved.

For each institution to develop its own in-house indexing authority would require an immense investment of human resources, and the duplication of effort is hardly worth it. However, there is considerable potential for cooperative development of thesauri on a regional or provincial basis, as demonstrated by Alberta and Nova Scotia. However, even if an institution or group of institutions does not want to make the commitment involved in developing an indexing authority, it is essential that archivists become familiar with the librarians' tools. LCSH, *Canadian Subject Headings*, AACR2, and *Canadian Authorities* are all indispensable in giving the archivists better access to their collections, and reducing the plethora of eccentric systems which plague archival description. Automation is forcing archivists toward standards based on these tools. It is time that archivists stopped reinventing the wheel and started building on the foundation that already exists.