

Believing InMagic: How RAD and Automation Have Changed the Glenbow Archives

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Two years ago the Glenbow Archives received word from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) that it had been awarded a grant under the Canadian Studies Research Tools Programme in order to compile and publish a guide to the textual records holdings. I was appointed project leader and was to be relieved of my regular archival duties for two years in order to complete the project. In October 1990, just a month after word was received of the grant award, I attended a workshop on the newly released *Rules for Archival Description (RAD)*, sponsored by the Alberta Society of Archivists and led by Kent Haworth, Wendy Duff and Heather MacNeil. The Glenbow Archives immediately adopted *RAD* as its standard and decided to use it for the repository guide. I immediately began to practice writing fonds-level descriptions according to *RAD*, and sent them off to MacNeil for comment.

Having already attended another Alberta Society of Archivists special workshop, on automation in archives, I had decided to use InMagic as the database software package for the project. I made my first SSHRC-financed purchases, a 386-megabyte IBM-compatible computer with accompanying software, and set up a data structure for the database which we planned to create. The structure is straightforward, beginning with an access point by which the database is alphabetically arranged. This is followed by fields for the essential elements of a fonds level description as prescribed by *RAD*, these being the title, dates of creation, physical description, biographical sketch/administrative history, custodial history and scope and content. Next are the note fields. The first note is for the source of the supplied title proper, which is essential when titles are composed, as are all of those in the Glenbow Archives. Following are the optional notes, which we agreed as an institution should be part of the fonds level descriptions: the immediate source of acquisition, finding aids, originals/reproductions, restrictions and accruals. Several fields were then added to the database to cover internal administrative needs. These consist of fields for the accession number, the location and the processor, and a tag for the purpose of future thematic guides. For the latter, twenty-five subject areas were identified in which the Glenbow Archives has strong holdings and for which it is hoped to produce special guides in the future. While compiling the main guide, we would tag entries for inclusion in one or more of the proposed thematic

guides. The final field in the data structure is a general-purpose field which doubles as *RAD*'s general note element.

In January 1991, when my new assistant — Bonnie Woelk — arrived, work on the project began in earnest. We immediately began drafting fonds level descriptions for Glenbow's textual records. No one could have predicted the dramatic changes which would take place in the Glenbow Archives because of *RAD* and InMagic and the SSHRCC project. Almost every aspect of day-to-day archival administration has been affected, from acquisition to arrangement and description to public reference service. The symbol of the philosophical and practical changes which have taken place at the Glenbow Archives in the past two years is a new reference desk. The links among the latter, *RAD* and InMagic will not be obvious, so I shall explain the connection.

First, some historical background is required. Almost since its inception in 1955, the Glenbow Archives has had two sections: Manuscripts and Photographs. Physically they were distinct, although they shared the same floor of the building. Each section had its own staff and its own reading-room and reference desk. Naturally, the Archives holds records other than textual or photographic, and these were divided between the two sections on a more or less logical basis. Manuscripts held custody of the sound recordings and microforms; Photographs got films, videotapes and documentary art. When materials first arrived in the Archives they were segregated by media and sent to the appropriate section, where material in each medium was accessioned in a separate register. Until 1988 there were ten accession registers: manuscripts, sound recordings, microfilm, microfiche, photoprints, photonegatives, slides, films, videotapes and documentary art. As early as 1986, however, it was obvious that the existence of two sections, which operated almost exclusively of each other, was inefficient and went against archival principles. In 1988, therefore, in a preliminary step towards reintegration, the ten accession registers were put aside in favour of a single accession register, which records the totality of each donation in a single entry.

Nevertheless, it was because of this traditional separation of the Manuscript and Photograph sections that when the institution applied for the SSHRCC grant, it proposed to do a guide only to the textual holdings. The intention was to await the outcome of the first application, and then apply for a grant to produce a similar guide to the graphic materials. The sections were still perceived as two distinct entities holding essentially separate bodies of records and having little, if any, overlap.

By February 1991, however, barely a month into the project, it became clear that the fonds being described were not purely textual. They were, in fact, overwhelmingly multiple-media. As the records were traced back to their original acquisition by the Archives, through donor cards and the ten pre-1988 accession registers, it was discovered, time and time again, that the fonds consisted of a variety of media. Family fonds, for example, almost always included family photos. At this stage, of course, we were extremely grateful that the multiple-media chapter of *RAD* was one of the first to be written and distributed.

Given the approximately 1,700 fonds level descriptions in the database and the guide being close to publication, it appears that 62 per cent of the holdings of the Glenbow Archives are multiple-media. These are predominantly a combination of textual records and graphic materials, although a surprising 16 per cent have a sound component; 19

per cent consist of three or more media. Only 29 per cent of the fonds are purely textual and only 8 per cent purely graphic.

The project team realized that the finding aids which had been produced in the past, detailed and useful though they were, did not tell the whole story. They were discrete finding aids covering only parts of fonds. The textual records were described predominantly at the file level, while photos were described almost exclusively at the item level. Sound recordings, at least interviews, had point-form abstracts written of them. *RAD* nevertheless very clearly states that records should be described from the general to the specific. We had been describing our holdings at more specific levels, without ever having described them at the most general. Nowhere had the institution actually produced a description which linked all the components of a single fonds in a multilevel description.

We suddenly saw *RAD* in an entirely new light. *RAD* was not just a prescribed format importing over-precise rules for describing things which had already been described — it was rather the tool needed to do what had never been done. It provided the theoretical basis and practical direction to glue scattered fonds back together. At this point the SSHRCC project working-title was changed from “A guide to the manuscript holdings of the Glenbow Archives” to “A guide to the fonds of the Glenbow Archives.”

In light of the progress of the SSHRCC project, staff came to a better understanding of the nature of the photograph section. We realized that this magnificent collection of 50,000 images, all represented in an exhaustive subject catalogue with corresponding reference prints, was just what it purported to be — a collection of 50,000 images. This is not to underrate the enormous value of such a finding aid to researchers. To put matter in perspective, however, we have renamed the catalogue the “image bank.” The photograph section has always been driven by the image bank. Photos were chosen for inclusion in the image bank because each could stand alone as an individual image without reference to the larger body of records from which it originated. These photos have always been described at the item level, never as a series within a fonds or collection. The only readily available public access point to the photographic holdings was the image bank card catalogue.

The problem here, which had long been recognized but unsuccessfully dealt with, was that a very large proportion of photographs held by the Glenbow Archives has never made it into the image bank. For example, the Southern Alberta Sheep Breeders [Association] donated its minute-books, wool sale records, membership lists, correspondence and a large number of photos of sheep. When the Photograph Section received these graphic materials, two images were chosen for inclusion in the image bank: a portrait of Mr. Benson, a well-known southern Alberta livestock producer, and a view of the Brooks auction market. The selection was perfectly justified for the purposes of the image bank. The other ninety-eight photos, however, were simply stored away, and were, for all intents and purposes, inaccessible to the public. To give another example, because the image bank is already full of photographs documenting early ranching life, none of the photos in the Smith family photo album were added to it, because they show nothing new about ranching. Nevertheless, they do document the unique existence of the Smith family. The dilemma was that these and several hundred thousand other photos not included in the image bank were virtually inaccessible.

What the SSHRCC project has enabled the Glenbow Archives to do is to save the photos of the Southern Alberta Sheep Breeders and the Smith family, and all the other non-image bank quality photos, from permanent oblivion by recording them in fonds level descriptions. (They have not been and probably never will be described at the item level.) Nevertheless, the fonds level description tells the researcher the dates, physical extent, purpose and general subject of the photos, as well makes the crucial link to the creator. During the course of the project, more than 1,500 accessions of non-image bank photos have been made accessible. We are already seeing the results of this descriptive exercise, as more and more researchers ask to see these "lost" photos. As for the image bank, the institution fully recognizes its enormous popularity and research value, and it is still being carefully maintained.

The implementation of *RAD* and carrying out the project have made it unnecessary to send researchers to two separate sections in order to find the parts of what are actually single fonds. The ever-growing database reveals everything which belongs to each fonds, and exactly where to locate the various media in the storage areas. In view of this comprehensive guide to the holdings, the institution no longer had philosophical or practical reasons to continue offering dual reference services, much less maintain two separate reading-rooms, two reference desks and two sets of staff. We had reintegrated intellectually, so the next logical step was to reintegrate physically. Renovations were undertaken in January 1992 in order to create a single new reading-room, and to provide one-stop reference service for researchers. The symbol of this intellectual reintegration of the holdings according to the principle of *respect des fonds*, and the resulting physical reintegration of reference services, is the single reference desk.

RAD and InMagic have had major repercussions on the way just about everything is done at the Archives, from the time the records come through the door to the time they are being gainfully consulted by researchers. For example, in anticipation of writing the biographical sketch or administrative history for the fonds level description, staff are much more assiduous at the time of acquisition about getting all the details which will be needed. The institution is developing a form to be completed by the donor asking for specific information.

The accession register is now on-line, moreover, so that staff can undertake automated searches to determine whether other records may have been donated from the same source. It also serves very well as a preliminary finding aid to recently acquired, but as yet unprocessed, records.

The institution is also developing the prototype of integrated inventories, which will describe at appropriate levels all the records in a fonds, regardless of media. We are experimenting with single archivists processing entire multiple-media fonds, and with a team approach where several archivists would be involved in the appraisal, arrangement and description of a multiple-media fonds. The most important thing is that we are preserving the integrity of the fonds. The first fully integrated inventory is for the CFAC Radio fonds, which consists of 3.75 m of text, 143 sound tape reels, 28 sound cassettes, 1,400 slides, 1,100 photonegatives, 500 photoprints and 30 film reels.

Photos, moreover, are now appraised at two levels. First, they are appraised and described as an integral part of the fonds. Secondly, they are judged as individual images for possible inclusion in the image bank. Thus, a photo may be described twice — in the automated database as part of the Brown family fonds, and in the image bank catalogue

as an image documenting butter-churning.

The on-line database itself is pure magic. It allows staff to conduct searches in minutes, which otherwise used to take hours, and it is capable of making search connections that were totally beyond the capability of a manual system. At present the database contains fonds level descriptions for 1,700 fonds; the entries average 250 words. The biographical sketch/administrative history field and the scope and content field are the main fields for searches. Both of them have been made keyword-searchable. In InMagic this means that every word, except for words such as "and," "the" or "from" are indexed, so care is taken to "build in" certain words. We have also developed data content standards to ensure that the resources of a powerful system such as InMagic are not wasted.

For a biography, for example, the standard is to give the full name of the individuals, any commonly used nicknames, the dates of birth and death, where they were born, when they came to Alberta, the names of spouses, including the family name of women, the names of children, including the married names of daughters, all main occupations and activities, places lived in, etc. In the scope and content field, we specify commonly requested forms of records which are not given in the physical description field, such as diaries, minutes, speeches, membership lists, school attendance registers, interviews, scrapbooks, etc.

The search capabilities of InMagic are almost limitless: names and subjects; demographic searches for such objects as all the people born in Wales, or people who settled near Millarville; particular forms of records, such as architectural plans or radio broadcasts. Complex, multicriteria searches, such as for diaries of ranchers who settled near High River before 1890, can also be undertaken. The latter is actually a combination of four separate searches of three different fields — a search of the biographical sketch field for ranching and High River, a search of the dates of creation field for dates earlier than 1890, and a search of the scope and content field for diaries. This particular search — which takes a total of twenty-three seconds — out of the extensive holdings relating to ranching, yields three records which meet all four criteria. The same search would take hours using a manual system.

InMagic also makes it possible to search for context and relationships not apparent through using a manual system. For example, the institution holds no records from the Sandgathe family. If one searches the name on-line, however, one gets two "hits." One is the fonds of John James Bowlen, a well-known politician. The biographical sketch indicates that Bowlen's daughter, Alice, married a Sandgathe. The second hit is the Town of Granum fonds, the administrative history of which indicates that the town's first mayor was a Sandgathe. Thus, the system can provide valuable leads for researchers, even when records of the specific family or organization being researched are not held by the institution.

Another very beneficial effect of InMagic is that when a member of the public inevitably makes the assertion "Grandmother donated some stuff to you people about twenty-five years ago," staff no longer cringe. A quick search of the source of acquisition field will identify exactly what material was alleged to have been donated.

It was initially supposed that a computer would be placed at the reference desk in late 1992, when the database was closer to completion. The partially complete database, however, proved to be so useful that a computer was placed at the reference desk almost

a year earlier than planned. This was to relieve project staff of the endless requests which were being received from reference archivists to do searches which were difficult to undertake using the card catalogue.

The institution had anticipated installing a public access computer in about three to five years, but the archivist's terminal in the reference room has proved irresistible to users. They keep edging the archivist out of the way, and spend so much time in the archivist's chair, scrolling through the results of yet another productive search, that some of them are in danger of being mistaken for the reference archivist. Archivists should not of course be surprised at the eagerness of the public, since libraries have been automated for years. A bequest recently received from the estate of a former regular researcher, moreover, has been used to purchase a public access terminal.

The database itself is nevertheless much more than a finding aid for researchers. It is an invaluable reference source in its own right. It reads like a 'who's who' of southern Alberta personalities and organizations. The database is also an effective collections management tool. It was used, for example, during the latest update of the acquisitions plan. It enabled staff to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of institutional holdings. Not only does it indicate how many fonds there are relating to the various collecting areas, but also descriptions of the current holdings can quickly be reviewed on-line to determine how substantive they are, how up to date, etc. The database is used as well to help draft the yearly workplan. A search of the finding aids field can produce a list of fonds which still do not have inventories, and the general note field often contains comments on specific processing needs. The system also allows staff to review institutional holdings and make rational decisions about deaccessioning.

New uses for the database, moreover, are regularly being found. It can be used, for example, to determine when to contact organizations for further transfers: a search of the accruals field indicates whether or not to expect further additions to the fonds, and the source of acquisition field indicates the date of the last accession. A search of the originals/reproductions field can produce a list of everything in microform and thus available for inter-institutional loan. The database will also be the foundation of the publishing programme for at least the next decade because, as mentioned above, one of the fields is for tagging specific fonds for inclusion in a series of thematic guides.

The automated system has also enabled staff to link the holdings in the Archives with holdings in other Glenbow departments. The Glenbow is a multidisciplinary institution, which under one roof houses a museum, art gallery, library and archives. Archival documents and artefacts which share the same provenance are frequently housed in different departments. For example, the Archives holds the correspondence, diaries and art notebooks of Roland Gissing, the artist; the Art Department has his paintings. The Archives holds the records of Norma Piper Pocater, an opera singer; the Cultural History Department has her opera costumes. The Archives holds the war journals of Major Ketchen; the Military History Department has his uniforms and medals. There are hundreds of other examples of artefacts which document the lives and activities of their creators as much as archival records, and of which we wanted to acknowledge the existence in the *RAD* descriptions. We were already documenting, in the associated materials note, the existence of archival records of the same provenance held by institutions hundreds of miles away. Why not therefore also mention artefacts stored on the next floor?

After considering the possibility of entering such information in a note, it was decided that what was really needed was a description at a level more general than the fonds level which would cross departmental boundaries. With the enthusiastic support of colleagues in other departments, the Archives have recently been experimenting with such a level of description, to which we have given the name "hyperfonds." Naturally, it is proposed to base hyperfonds descriptions largely on *RAD*. The hyperfonds level description for Gissing, for example, might read, in part,

ROLAND GISSING HYPERFONDS

1895-1986; (predominant 1944-1967)

26 cm of text. — 55 photographs. — 52 works of art

Roland Gissing, 1895-1967, was born in England and attended George Watson's College in Edinburgh, where he received his art training. In 1913 he came to Canada and spent ten years as a cowhand in southern Alberta.... His works are held in many private and public collections.

The Archives holds personal correspondence, diaries, art notebooks, news-clippings and photos of his family. The Art Department holds 35 paintings, 13 drawings and 4 prints.

Title based on contents of hyperfonds.

Gifts of Roland Gissing and Nonie Houlton, 1965-1989.

Inventory available for archival records.

Below this level, departments would continue to describe their portion of the hyperfonds according to the rules which apply: *RAD* in the Archives case and Canadian Heritage Information Network (CHIN) rules in the artefact-based departments.

These, then, are some of the dramatic changes which have taken place at the Glenbow Archives since the adoption of *RAD* and the introduction of InMagic. It is only the beginning, moreover, because we fully expect to discover many other new and innovative ways to put the automated system to work.

Notes

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