

## ***RADical Surgery: A Case Study in Using RAD to Produce a Thematic Guide***

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### ***Résumé***

Cet article examine l'utilisation des *Règles pour la description des documents d'archives (RDDA)* pour la production d'un guide thématique inter-institutionnel sur les sources généalogiques des centres d'archives et de recherche albertains. L'auteur soulève les problèmes rencontrés dans l'utilisation des *RDDA*: l'adaptation des *RDDA* aux besoins des généalogistes, l'application des *RDDA* aux documents archivistiques non traités, la négociation avec des pratiques descriptives institutionnelles distinctes et l'ajustement aux limites imposées par la présentation même du guide. L'auteur poursuit en examinant la manière dont l'équipe a solutionné ces différents points et compare les résultats avec un projet similaire d'utilisation des *RDDA* pour la préparation d'une liste syndicale inter-institutionnelle en Colombie-Britannique.

### ***Abstract***

This article discusses using the *Rules for Archival Description* to produce an inter-institutional thematic guide on genealogical sources in Alberta's archives and research centres. The author raises issues encountered in using *RAD* on this project, such as the need to tailor *RAD* for genealogical researchers, applying *RAD* to unprocessed archival documents, dealing with differing institutional descriptive practices, and working within the limitations imposed by the guide's presentation format. The author goes on to discuss how the project team responded to the issues and makes comparisons with a similar project involving the use of *RAD* in the preparation of an inter-institutional union list in British Columbia.

The *Rules for Archival Description (RAD)* have been a part of the Canadian archival scene since 1990. From the time when the draft rules first were issued many Canadian archivists have put *RAD* to use in developing archival descriptions. While it is intended as a data content standard for all types of archival descriptive tools, most archivists have concentrated on implementing *RAD* within their own

repositories to produce manual and automated catalogues and inventories.<sup>1</sup> Canadian archivists have comparatively little experience with using *RAD* as a standard to produce inter-institutional descriptive tools. It is for this reason that I read with such interest the article by Christopher Hives and Blair Taylor entitled “Using Descriptive Standards as a Basis for Cooperation: The British Columbia Archival Union List Project,” published in *Archivaria* 35, which describes issues encountered in using *RAD* as a data content standard for an inter-institutional finding aid.<sup>2</sup> Many issues that they faced in compiling the *British Columbia Archival Union List* (hereafter cited as the *BCAUL*), David Leonard and I also faced in compiling an inter-institutional thematic guide, *Tracing Your Ancestors in Alberta: A Guide to Sources of Genealogical Interest in Alberta's Archives and Research Centres* (hereafter referred to as the *Guide*).<sup>3</sup> Although the issues to which each project gave rise were similar, the means adopted to resolve the issues in some cases were quite different. It may be helpful to others faced with the task of compiling an inter-institutional research tool to discuss the solutions that we adopted in compiling the *Guide*, as well as how and why the solutions that we adopted differed from those chosen by the compilers of the *BCAUL*.

At the root of every archival description is the desire to facilitate access to archival documents. While archival description initially sought to impart information about archival sources to archivists, it now has evolved into a function aimed at providing tools for researchers. As Luciana Duranti observes, “already in the 1930s in Europe, description began to be seen as a means for making the user independent of the archivist’s specialized knowledge, and to be aimed primarily at compiling instruments of research for the user, not the archivist.”<sup>4</sup> Her statement is supported by a handout I received at the first *RAD* workshop that I attended, which characterized archival description as the attempt to “represent as accurately as possible for users what exists in our archives so that they can find, as independently as possible, what they are looking for.”<sup>5</sup>

The *BCAUL* and the *Guide* are no different in respect of their aim to communicate information to researchers. Where they do differ is in the type of audience with which they seek to communicate. While the *BCAUL* aims to impart information about archival documents to the general researcher, the *Guide* is aimed at a very specific audience: the genealogist. This focus on a particular audience sets all thematic guides apart from other types of archival descriptive tools. Writing on the evolution of archival description, with particular reference to Europe, Luciana Duranti states that “the descriptive activity acquired a non-evaluative character as a consequence of the recognition that its products, in order to be useful for every kind of researcher, had to serve none in particular.”<sup>6</sup> While her analysis accurately portrays most descriptive tools, the thematic guide caters to only a special type of researcher and, consequently, is evaluative in nature.

The inspiration for compiling a thematic guide to genealogical sources came from a desire to assist genealogists in discovering sources of information in Alberta about their ancestors. As we wrote in the preface:

As archivists ... we have received many queries over the years from genealogists, about archival sources and how they might be used. It gradually became apparent that very few such researchers were as informed

about the sources held in Alberta's archives as they would like to be. Many times we have sympathized with the disappointment of genealogists unable to complete their ancestral research, and also their frustration when they feel certain that useful documentary evidence does exist somewhere.<sup>7</sup>

For my own part, I look upon genealogists with less disparagement than some of my colleagues. Aside from some of the more scholarly uses for genealogy, such as demographic studies and medical research, I see the search for information about one's ancestral lines in terms of the very human search for the meaning of one's existence, the need to put one's life into some kind of context.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, I saw the compilation of the *Guide* as a means of assisting people to do some important psychological and spiritual work.

Thus, in compiling the *Guide*, our goal was to prepare a tool that would be of direct use to genealogists in their hunt for sources. Indirectly, we hoped that it would also help archivists assist genealogists visiting their institutions, recognizing that the demands placed on archivists to deal with growing volumes of records of increasing complexity coupled with shrinking financial resources with which to do it often makes it difficult for them to give genealogists the individualized time and attention sometimes required. It was in this context and with these goals in mind that we set out to prepare the *Guide*, with partial funding for the project from a Canadian Council of Archives Special Projects Grant administered by the then Alberta Archives Council.

Since the objective of the *Guide* was to provide information about sources for ancestral research, we naturally included only descriptions of material deemed to be of genealogical significance. However, we wanted to provide information about as many sources as were relevant; we therefore included descriptions of the records of the sponsoring agencies of repositories as well as manuscript holdings. Conversely, the *BCAUL* described only manuscript holdings, on the grounds that the scope of the project needed to be kept to reasonable limits and the location of these sources are less obvious to the researcher than is the case with the archives of sponsoring agencies.<sup>9</sup> To keep the project to a reasonable scope, we decided to limit the *Guide* to material containing information on a number of families or individuals, as opposed to listing personal papers relating to a single family or individual of interest to only a small audience. We also chose a cutoff date of 1975 to select material for inclusion, on the assumption that most genealogists could obtain recent information from other sources, such as family members or documents in their possession. Material created entirely after 1975 was not listed unless the subject matter related to an earlier period (e.g., photocopies made after 1975 of original documents, the creation of which predated 1975, or genealogical manuscripts prepared from original sources that predated 1975). We then prepared a preliminary list of repositories and research centres, which we later contacted to make an initial determination as to whether they held material of genealogical interest. Some repositories were eliminated from our list based on this initial survey. We next visited or contacted the repositories with material of genealogical interest to gather the information we needed to prepare the descriptions for the *Guide*. Drafts of our descriptions were circulated to the contacts at the repositories to solicit opinions on the accuracy of our descriptions. We were very fortunate in that we met with excellent cooperation from every repository with which we dealt.

Having determined the scope of the publication, we next decided upon its presentation format. Our choice was to present the data as a bound volume that would be 13.5 x 21 centimetres (8.5 x 5.5 inches) in dimension. In contrast, the *BCAUL*, as described by Hives and Taylor, is intended to be transferred to a special file created by the University of British Columbia Library, where it will be available on line for those with access to the UBC Network;<sup>10</sup> the final version may be distributed on microfilm or CD ROM. We found that the limitations of our uni-dimensional medium of communication determined some of our decisions, a point to which I shall return later.

We decided to divide the volume into chapters according to categories of records or material, each relating to kinds of information the genealogist might wish to collect to flesh out the life of an ancestor. The result was a book divided into fourteen chapters as follows:

- I. Information Files
- II. Vital Statistics Records
- III. Church, Cemetery, and Funeral Records
- IV. Census Records
- V. Education Records
- VI. Health and Social Service Records
- VII. Land-related Records
- VIII. Immigration and Naturalization Records
- IX. Employment Records
- X. Association and Union Records
- XI. Business and Trades Licensing Records
- XII. Legal Records
- XIII. Election Records
- XIV. Non-textual Sources

Within each chapter, the entries were listed alphabetically by title under the name of the repository in which the material is found. Each entry was given a unique number for indexing purposes.

We treated duplicate records in a different manner from that of Hives and Taylor in the *BCAUL*. "Duplicate records," they indicate, "are described only when the material is germane to the institution's acquisition policy.... For example, if an entire fonds has been copied, and the whereabouts of the original material is no longer known, then a description of the duplicate fonds is included. On the other hand, if material has been received by the archives as part of a routine diffusion

programme then it is not included in the union list.”<sup>11</sup> Our approach was to list any duplicate records of genealogical interest under the name of the repository in which the originals are held, if known. If the whereabouts of the originals could not be ascertained, the copies were listed under the name of the custodial repository, regardless of whether the duplicates fit the acquisition mandate of the custodial repository. We indicated the location of the copies in a separate note at the end of the entry and by means of an “MC” for multiple copies under the entry number in the guide to alert the researcher to the fact that there was more than one location for the material being described.

Once the question of scope and presentation format had been decided, we turned to the question of the data standards to be used. While *RAD* was the obvious choice in determining data *elements*, initially we were unsure whether we should attempt to use it as the data *content* standard for the *Guide*. I will admit that I was reluctant to use *RAD* because I had an imperfect knowledge of the rules. I had in my possession only those portions of *RAD* that had been published at the time, that is, in 1990. Also, I had only attended one two-day workshop on how to apply the rules, given at the ACA conference in Banff, so I did not consider myself entirely competent in their use. *RAD* was new, and I was new to *RAD*. The chief reason, however, that we were reluctant to adopt *RAD* as our data content standard was that it seemed to require the inclusion of a great deal of information that would be of little or no use to our intended audience—genealogists.

*RAD* sets out two levels of description to allow archival institutions flexibility in their description policy.<sup>12</sup> The first, and least comprehensive level includes the following elements:

Title proper/Statement(s) of responsibility. –Edition statement. –Class of material specific details. –Date(s) of creation or, when this is not applicable, first place of distribution, etc.: name of first distributor, etc., date of distribution, etc. –Extent of descriptive unit. –Administrative history/Biographical sketch. –Custodial history (or alternatively a note on transfer). –Scope and content. –Note(s). –Standard number.<sup>13</sup>

*RAD* specifies that these elements are required as a minimum when they apply to material being described.<sup>14</sup> As we were supplying the title proper, the statement of responsibility and edition statements were not used. However, *RAD* requires that a note on the source of the supplied title be included.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, information about the first place of distribution and the name of the distributor was not required for any of the material described in the *Guide*. The required elements, then, for the type of material we were describing were as follows:

–Title proper. –Date(s) of creation. –Extent of descriptive unit. Administrative history/Biographical sketch. –Custodial history (or alternatively a note on transfer). –Scope and content. –Source of supplied title note.

Even at this minimum level, we still had concerns that a descriptive entry based on *RAD* would include elements of little use to the genealogical researcher. In the final analysis, we decided to play rather fast and loose with *RAD*: we used it as the data content standard for the *Guide*, but with some modifications to suit the perceived needs of our audience.

The information needs of the genealogist differ from those of the general researcher and other specialized users. One facet of this difference lies in the degree to which an understanding of the context of the creation of archival documents is necessary to decoding their meaning, making use of them, and judging their worthiness as sources. An analogy may serve to clarify this point. The average user of a statistical software package needs to know only how to make the software perform the functions he or she wishes to carry out. A programmer, however, may be interested in the lines of programming that comprise the software package, while a mathematician might be concerned with the algorithmic assumptions underlying the statistical functions that the software performs.

The scholarly historical researcher is akin to the user who is interested in the structure of the software and how this relates to its functions and the data the software can potentially produce. The genealogical researcher, on the other hand, is more like the general user, who is concerned only with the functions the software can perform and the data that thereby can be produced.

I do not wish to imply that the context of the creation of archival documents is unimportant for the purposes of archival description and should be abandoned in favour of descriptions focusing on content.<sup>16</sup> Quite the contrary. Archival descriptions portraying the context of the creation of fonds and their component parts are an essential means of preserving the unique qualities of naturalness, interrelatedness, authority, and impartiality that archives possess, and of elucidating content.<sup>17</sup> The value of archival documents to the genealogist will be determined by the functions carried out by the creator of a given body of archival documents in the same way that the value of a statistical software package will be decided by its structure and underlying algorithmic assumptions. Nevertheless, while archival description, as *RAD* prescribes, should concentrate on portraying the context of the creation of a fonds and its constituent parts as a basic means of revealing content, detailed contextual information may be more important to certain users than to others. For the typical software user, much of what permits the software to perform its functions is transparent, concealed behind user-friendly views and pull-down menus. A similar approach justifiably might be taken in describing archival documents for the genealogist, who need be concerned with the structural and functional complexities of a fonds only in as far as they facilitate ancestral research.

Using this approach, the custodial repository would be responsible for the analytical work of assigning archival documents to their appropriate fonds, arranging and describing them accordingly for the purposes of moral (in the Jenkinsonian sense) and intellectual preservation, and communicating about the content of documents to researchers. This level of description, which is akin to writing the programme for a statistical software package, might be referred to as “primary” description. The kinds of descriptive tools that most likely would be produced as a result of primary description are inventories and catalogue entries. Compilers of thematic guides would then, based on research needs evaluations, extract the amount of contextual information from primary descriptions needed to convey the type of data to be found in the archival documents being described. Equivalent to the creation of user views and pull-down menus, this activity could be referred to as “secondary” description.

Just as users should be presented with the structure of a statistical software package and its underlying algorithmic assumptions to make proper use of it, one could argue that genealogists must understand the full context of the creation of archival documents in order to ensure the authenticity of those sources and thereby the likelihood of their historical factualness.<sup>18</sup> However, at some point users must rely on experts, as there is simply too much information of too great a complexity for them to be completely informed. I would maintain that genealogists have a right to expect of archivists that the sources we offer are authentic (in the diplomatic sense of the word) and impartial (in the Jenkisonian tradition) by virtue of their placement in a *bona fide* archival repository and their proper care and handling by an archivist. The fact that we may not be fulfilling this responsibility as archivists is a moot point.

This understanding of our audience's perceived needs led us to conclude that genealogists would not gain much from information about the custodial history of the records, which often involved a straightforward transfer of the archival documents from the creator to the repository. We also decided that a note on the source of the supplied title it was unnecessary to include in a thematic guide geared towards genealogists. Further, availing ourselves of rule 1.8B (which permits a rearrangement of the notes), we organized the notes according to our assessment of their relative usefulness to the genealogical researcher.<sup>19</sup> These adjustments to *RAD* resulted in a detailed entry in the *Guide* consisting of the elements outlined below.

- A. Title
  - Date
  - Extent
- B. Biographical sketch/administrative history
- C. Scope and content note
- D. Finding aids
- E. Restrictions
- F. Reference number

In any given entry, however, only those elements needed to describe archival documents adequately for genealogical purposes were included. Therefore, when there were no access restrictions on the material, we did not include data element E in that particular entry. Similarly, if a separate biographical sketch/administrative history was not deemed to be relevant for the purposes of using the archival documents for genealogical research, element B was omitted from the descriptive entry and the provenance of the material was conveyed in another fashion. We added alphabetical designations for the data elements to avoid confusion in those cases when data elements were not included. Since *RAD* does not prescribe a particular presentation format for entries, our decision was to create a *de facto* header for each entry from the title, date, and extent elements and begin a new paragraph for subsequent elements. The overall result we felt was a record that was both less confusing to the researcher and more economical of space.

We thought *RAD*'s use of the archival term "fonds" might be confusing to genealogists unfamiliar with research in archives. We had to harken back to our objective, which was not to create a nicely contrived example of how to implement *RAD*, but to produce a useful tool for searching out genealogical sources. While the introduction included a section on the meaning of the term fonds, our uncertainty as to whether every researcher would read this section before proceeding to the entries led us to conclude that a more traditional nomenclature might be less confusing.<sup>20</sup> Thus, we elected to use the term collection as the blanket term to describe both a fonds and a collection as these terms are defined in *RAD*.<sup>21</sup> Nor did we even end all of the descriptive entries with the term collection. We made this decision because much of the material we were describing was, strictly speaking, neither a fonds nor a collection—a point to which I shall return later—and also because we chose to use the terminology of the custodial repository to describe the nature or the form of the material when we thought it would assist researchers and archivists to link the description in the guide with the actual material. An example of the resulting descriptive entry appears as **Figure 1**.

It should also be noted that we provided no individual entries in the chapter on non textual sources, preferring to offer a more general discussion of these sources. We based our decision not to create individual entries for sound recording and photography collections on the fact that these tend to be artificial collections retained by most repositories; the descriptive entries for them would have been quite uniform and uninformative.

Before turning to a detailed discussion of the qualifications and interpretations that we made with respect to the *Rules for Archival Description* and how we applied them to the specific descriptive entries in the *Guide*, I would like to discuss the most confounding aspect of applying *RAD* as the data content standard for this project.

*RAD* is premised upon the idea that the way in which archives are described depends on their arrangement; thus, the rules "assume that the material already has been examined, arranged, and the information necessary for description being compiled. The rules are, therefore, most usefully applied at the stage when arrangement has been completed and formal description starts."<sup>22</sup> *RAD* is also based on the idea that all description should proceed from the general, being the fonds, to the specific, being sub-fonds, series, files and items:

in order to place the description of a series that is part of a fonds in context, one must have a description of the fonds of which the series is a part. Users must know the context in which the records they are consulting have been created. It is incumbent upon archivists to have intellectual control of their holdings first at the fonds level, before proceeding to lower levels of description.<sup>23</sup>

One of the most challenging aspects of using *RAD* as the data content standard for the *Guide* was that, often, the archival documents that we were describing had been neither arranged nor described; nor had the information necessary for description been compiled by the custodial repository. Frequently, the basic analytical work that takes place during arrangement, in which the relationships between archival documents are mapped out and placed in the context of the greater whole,



had not been carried out. Many times the only information on which a description could be based was to be found in simple box lists of accessions. Sometimes, not even this much information was available, the only source of information being the records themselves.

Naturally, since in many instances the necessary arrangement and background work to description had not been carried out by the custodial repositories, archival descriptions of material that we were intending to include in the *Guide*, such as they were, did not proceed from the general to the particular. For example, at the Provincial Archives of Alberta the unit of administrative control is the accession. Accessions may consist of entire fonds or collections, or portions of fonds consisting of single series, portions of series, a few files, or a single item. Each accession is described on a main entry card that is placed in the Archives' card catalogue. In addition, an inventory may be prepared. Inventories may describe single accessions, being fonds, as in the inventory of United Church Records, or only part of a fonds, as with the inventory of Vital Statistics Registers. The compilers of the *BCAUL* may not have encountered this problem to the same extent as we did in compiling the *Guide* because they were describing only manuscript holdings, which are often less structurally complex and transferred in fewer accessions than records.

Reconciling the principles in *RAD* with a chaotic archival reality is certainly made a more challenging task in cases when the compilers(s) are not directly associated with the custodial repository of the archival documents being described, as often happens in the compilation of inter-institutional research tools. Compilers of union lists, guides, and the like cannot simply walk into a repository and arrange or rearrange archival documents to reflect the structure of the fonds, even if this is what should be done to ensure the proper intellectual preservation of the material being described and to meet the preconditions set forth in *RAD*. As someone who is not directly attached to the custodial repository, the compiler of an inter-institutional union list or thematic guide must deal with material as is.

Faced with dealing with the vagaries of the descriptive practices of so many different repositories, we might have considered postponing the compilation of the guide until the necessary preconditions set forth in *RAD* had been met. However, we judged this to be an unacceptable course of action as we had no idea at the time how long it might take for all archival institutions in the province to adopt *RAD* as a descriptive standard, or even if all of Alberta's archives and research centres would do so. In the end, we saw it as an important and urgent enough goal to communicate about archival documents of genealogical interest that we decided to forge ahead. As the old saying goes, "fools rush in where angels fear to tread."

We certainly considered taking the same approach to resolving this issue as taken in the *BCAUL*, which was to create a single entry for each fonds retrospectively.<sup>24</sup> This was a very fitting solution to the problem for the *BCAUL* for a couple of reasons. First, because the *BCAUL* is directed at a general research audience, its compilers could make no assumptions about what kind of archival documents might be of interest based on the perceived needs of a particular group of researchers. The *BCAUL* had to be non-evaluative by the very nature of its audience. Second, the goals of the *BCAUL* project, as Hives and Taylor point out, were broader than

those of traditional union list projects, designed simply to provide researchers with information about manuscript holdings. The *BCAUL* project also sought to facilitate cooperation between provincial institutions in acquisition, conservation, and education, as well as to disseminate information about descriptive standards to archivists working in repositories throughout the province.<sup>25</sup> As the *BCAUL* was being used as a pedagogical tool, its compilers were naturally concerned with creating detailed and comprehensive descriptive entries that outlined the full scope of each fonds, following the principles and rules outlined in *RAD*. We judged that a different approach would be better suited to the *Guide*.

### Figure 1

#### *Detailed Descriptive Entry*

III-25	<p>A. <b>Roman Catholic Church, Oblates of Mary Immaculate, Province of Alberta — Saskatchewan Records.</b> - 1842-1984. - 196 m.</p> <p>B. This Roman Catholic congregation came to western Canada in 1845, establishing missions at Ile-à-la-Croix in 1846 and Fort Chipewyan in 1849. The primary goal of the Oblates was to evangelize and introduce Christianity to the native people. During the settlement period of western Canada, the Oblates established many new missions and spent increasing amounts of time with the growing white population. The province of Alberta-Saskatchewan has its western boundary along the Alberta-British Columbia border, its southern border along the Canadian-American border, its northern border at 55 North latitude and its eastern border following the South Saskatchewan River from the Alberta-Saskatchewan border to Saskatoon and then extended to the Manitoba border. On January 20, 1921, the Province of Alberta-Saskatchewan was formed from the vicarates of St. Boniface, St. Albert, Saskatchewan and Athabasca Mackenzie.</p> <p>C. Includes registers of the parishes maintained by the Oblates of Mary Immaculate in north-central Alberta and part of Saskatchewan.</p> <p>D. Published guide and accompanying microfiche inventory available. Alphabetical name index to the parish registers also available. This index, the information for which was taken from the actual parish registers, will provide details about baptismal, marriage and burial dates as well as names of spouses and children. Be aware that the index is not complete and may contain inaccurate information; therefore, the actual parish registers should be checked to verify information obtained from the cards. To view the register, a key for the parish name can be found in the top right-hand corner of the index cards. The Reference Archivist has the list of the keys. Once the parish has been identified, contact the Oblate Archivist in St. Albert to obtain authorization to view the actual register.</p> <p>E. Written permission to view parish registers is required from the Oblate Archivist in St. Albert</p> <p>F. Various.</p> <p>G. Documents are written in French.</p> <p>H. A list of parish registers can also be found in <i>Genealogical Resources in the Edmonton Area</i> by the Edmonton Branch of the Alberta Genealogical Society. Other Oblate records are held by the Oblates in St. Albert and McLellan.</p>
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As already noted, the *Guide* was simply intended to communicate information to genealogical researchers about archival documents; there was no pedagogical objective. In addition, the *Guide's* intended audience was quite different from the general researcher towards which the *BCAUL* was directed. Furthermore, the *Guide* was to be published only in hardcopy form, while the *BCAUL* will be available in digital form as well as hardcopy. The solution that we adopted reflected the *Guide's* aims, audience, and final physical form.

We created separate entries for fonds (whether that fonds consisted of many archival documents, a single series, or a single item) or collections only if the material was described at the level of the fonds/collection in its custodial repository. Otherwise, we created entries for material at the level at which it was described in its custodial repository. In cases where the descriptions of material in the custodial repository consisted only of box listings of accessions, we described the material at the level most appropriate to highlighting its usefulness for genealogical research, which usually amounted to describing records series. This resulted in an unevenness in the level of the material in each entry of the *Guide*. Typically, the material comprised only a portion of a fonds, for example Seed Grain Relief Files (entry VI 12)<sup>26</sup> or Alberta Provincial Police Investigation Cards (entry XII 7),<sup>27</sup> which are properly described as series.

We took this approach for a number of reasons. First, we judged that describing material in the context of its fonds when the descriptions in the custodial repository did not do so might make it more difficult for the genealogist and the archivist alike to connect the descriptive entries in the *Guide* with the actual material. Second, we thought that describing archival documents within the context of the fonds—a much larger group of material, sometimes not consisting entirely of material of genealogical interest—might obscure relevant information. An example using three entries from the *Guide* might serve best to illustrate this point. The material described in these entries is all held at the Provincial Archives of Alberta and originates from the Alberta Department of the Attorney General. Lacking a policy on what forms a fonds at the Provincial Archives (whether minimalist or maximist) and an analysis of the archival documents to determine to which fonds they should be assigned, I shall assume for the purposes of this example that the material described in each of these three entries should be assigned to the fonds of the Department of the Attorney General. In the *Guide*, entry IX 6 describes records from the Inspector of Legal Office, entry IX 32 deals with records of the Veteran's Volunteer Reserve, and entry XII 12 describes Divorce Action case files.<sup>28</sup> The first two entries, arguably sub-fonds within the fonds of the Department of the Attorney General, appear in the chapter on Employment Records, while the third entry, a series in the Department of the Attorney General fonds, is found in the chapter on Legal Records.

The entries are shown as they appear in the *Guide* in **Figures 2, 3, and 4**. If we had attempted retroactively to create a single entry for these records at the level of the fonds, the entry we would have created might have looked like that in **Figure 5**. Such an entry would have made it much more difficult for genealogists to identify archival material containing information of genealogical interest. In addition, the space constraints of the physical format of the *Guide* might have limited the amount of detail we could provide on those archival documents of genealogical

interest. Furthermore, describing archival documents of genealogical interest in the context of their fonds would have made it impossible to organize the entries into separate chapters by type of record. We probably would have had to list all types of material under the name of the custodial repository, an arrangement of the entries that we considered less helpful to the genealogical researcher.

**Figure 2:**

*Sample Entry from the Guide*

IX-6	A.	<b>Inspector of Legal Office Records. - 1905-1946. - 25 m.</b>
	C.	Employee listings, pay sheets and job descriptions regarding terms of employment of various personnel employed by the Department of the Attorney General, including the court houses.
	D.	Arranged chronologically by locality.
	F.	73.322 and 75.126

**Figure 3:**

*Sample Entry from the Guide*

IX-32	A.	<b>Veterans' Volunteer Reserve Records. - 1940-1945. - 10 m.</b>
	C.	Oaths of office and case files relating to terms of employment of those veterans of World War I who maintained a home alert during World War II.
	D.	Inventory available.
	F.	66.166, 72.369, 75.126, and 76.250.

**Figure 4:**

*Sample Entry from the Guide*

XII-12	A.	<b>Divorce Action Case Files. - 1921-1972. - 33 m.</b>
	C.	Case files maintained by the Department of the Attorney General on each divorce which took place in Alberta containing court claims, judgements and related documentation.
	D.	Inventory available.
	F.	75.126 and 79.104
	H.	Divorce action files are also maintained by the court in the judicial district in which the divorce was granted.

**Figure 5:*****Example of Descriptive Entry Which Describes Material Within the Context of the Fonds***

- A. **Department of the Attorney General Fonds. - 1905- . -**
- B. The Department of the Attorney General was established in 1906 when it inherited the duties previously held by the Attorney General for the North-West Territories. One of the first acts passed by the legislature of the newly formed province of Alberta was the Attorney General's Act of 1906. The Act established the office of the Attorney General. The Attorney General was to be concerned with all legal aspects of government and with the administration of justice within the province. Many acts administered by other departments contain provisions for the involvement of the Attorney General when legal matters arise. Thus, beyond the administration of the Attorney General's Department, the Attorney General supervises the legal aspects of all government operations.
- Within the Attorney General's Department, several branches have developed over the years. Departmental responsibility acts tended to change from time to time. However, there are several functions with which the Attorney General has been consistently involved. The areas over which the Attorney General has always held administrative responsibility include acts pertaining to the courts; land titles; various officers, such as sheriffs, justices of the peace, commissioners for oaths, registrars, judicial officers, coroners, and notaries public. Other functions with which the Attorney General has been involved include: the inspection of legal offices; administration of succession duties; the administration of estates; the protection of neglected children; the administration of acts relating to juvenile delinquents; Policing; liquor control; debtor assistance; the administration of various boards; securities control; the inspection of public service vehicles; and the provision of legal counsel to government departments . . . [a brief administrative history of each main functional area could follow]
- C. Fonds consists of Inspector of Legal Office records (1905-1946); Veterans' Volunteer Reserve Records (1940-1945); Divorce Action case files (1921-1972); Civil and Criminal Court Records (1881-1971); Criminal Case Files (1890-1968); Debtors' and Creditors' Ledgers (1908-1971); Civil Law Case Files (1910-1975); Prisoners' Admittance Ledgers (1926-1967); Registers of Procedures in Foreclosures (1918-1954); Sheriffs' Summons (1923-1935); Bailiffs' Files (1940-1972); Justice of the Peace and Magistrate Case Files (1897-1975); Notary Public Files (1882-1956); Alberta Provincial Police Membership Lists (1918-1932); Alberta Provincial Police Staff Files (1918-1932); Alberta Provincial Police Crime Investigation Files (1917-1932); Alberta Provincial Police Investigation Cards (1918-1932); Deceased Soldiers Files (1919-1925); Corporate Registry Records (1905-1983); Licensed Bartender Records (1911-1916); and Liquor Permit Applications (1906-1928)
- D. Inventory available
- F. 65.118, 66.166, 67.171, 68.261, 69.180, 69.204, 72.369, 73.322, 75.125, 75.126, 76.250, 77.227, 79.104, 79.266, 79.289, 79.290, 83.198, 83.208, 83.276, 83.387, 83.442, 84.67, 85.279, 85.451, 89.278, 89.351, 90.99,

We might have been able to circumvent some impediments associated with describing the material within the context of its fonds by indexing material of genealogical interest, to point researchers to relevant documents described in an entry for a given fonds. We saw this approach, however, as less direct and therefore possibly more confusing to the researcher. Multi-level description might have provided us with another avenue of bypassing some problems associated with fonds level descriptions. This approach would have allowed us to highlight material of particular interest to the genealogist while still placing a description of it

within the context of the fonds. An entry based on this approach might have yielded a description something like **Figure 6**. As the example illustrates, however, such an approach would have yielded a lengthy entry possibly spanning several pages. We considered it easier for researchers to use entries no longer than a single page in length. Of course, automation of the *Guide*, as planned for the *BCAUL*, would have made the length of the entries less of an issue. It should also be noted that the rules for multi-level description were not available, even in draft form, during the compilation of the *Guide*.<sup>29</sup>

Like Hives and Taylor, we found it necessary to qualify and interpret the rules in *RAD*. What follows is a description of how we applied specific rules to create descriptive entries in the *Guide*.

### *Title*

The title was assigned based on the name by which the material is commonly known in the custodial repository, usually taken from the inventory of the documents and sometimes directly from the documents themselves. In assigning a title to a fonds or collection, we followed rules 1.1B4, 2.1B2 and 3.1B3 on the supplied title proper for a fonds.<sup>30</sup> Instead of adding the word fonds immediately following the name element, however, we used the word “collection” for the reasons to which I have already alluded, unless the material commonly was identified by another name (e.g., Brimacombe Papers). The rationale for this admitted inconsistency was that we assumed that this terminology would make it easier for the researcher and/or archivist to link the descriptions in the *Guide* with the actual material. In assigning a title to parts of fonds, such as sub-fonds and series, we applied rule 3.1B5b, which specifically addresses this situation, and gave the material a designation that appropriately described its form.<sup>31</sup>

### *Date*

The date element refers to the years during which the material was created. We pointed out to the researcher that the information in the archival documents may refer to events that predate the creation of those documents. We chose to supply an end date of 1991 for all open fonds of which the custodial repository is receiving regular accruals; however, we did not add a note that further accruals were expected, since genealogists would not likely be interested in material of such recent vintage. Although rule 1.4B3 of *RAD* states: “if the unit being described is a reproduction, give the date(s) of creation for the reproduction,”<sup>32</sup> when the material had been reproduced on microfilm, we chose to give the dates of creation of the originals, thinking that the researcher otherwise might have been misled into believing the material only provided information about events that took place on the date given for the reproduction. In addition, we chose to show significant gaps in the date span of material in a separate note at the end of the descriptive entry.

**Figure 6:*****Example of Descriptive Entry Which Describes Material Within the Context of the Fonds Using Rules for Multi-Level Description***

- A. **Department of the Attorney General Fonds. - 1905- . .**
- B. The Department of the Attorney General was established in 1906 when it inherited the duties previously held by the Attorney General for the North-West Territories. One of the first acts passed by the legislature of the newly formed province of Alberta was the Attorney General's Act of 1906. The Act established the office of the Attorney General. The Attorney General was to be concerned with all legal aspects of government and with the administration of justice within the province. Many acts administered by other departments contain provisions for the involvement of the Attorney General when legal matters arise. Thus, beyond the administration of the Attorney General's Department, the Attorney General supervises the legal aspects of all government operations.
- Within the Attorney General's Department, several branches have developed over the years. Departmental responsibility acts tended to change from time to time. However, there are several functions with which the Attorney General has been consistently involved. The areas over which the Attorney General has always held administrative responsibility include acts pertaining to the courts; land titles; various officers, such as sheriffs, justices of the peace, commissioners for oaths, registrars, judicial officers, coroners, and notaries public. Other functions with which the Attorney General has been involved include: the inspection of legal offices; administration of succession duties; the administration of estates; the protection of neglected children; the administration of acts relating to juvenile delinquents; Policing; liquor control; debtor assistance; the administration of various boards; securities control; the inspection of public service vehicles; and the provision of legal counsel to government departments . . . [a brief administrative history of each main functional area could follow]
- C. Fonds consists of Inspector of Legal Office records (1905-1946), Veterans' Volunteer Reserve Records (1940-1945), and Divorce Action case files (1921-1972).
- D. Inventory available
- F. 66.166, 72.369, 73.322, 75.126, 76.250 and 79.104
- A. **Inspector of Legal Office Records. - 1905-1946. - 25 m.**
- C. Sub-fonds consists of employee listings
- D. Arranged chronologically by locality
- F. 73.322 and 75.126
- A. **Veterans' Volunteer Reserve Records. - 1940-1945. - 10 m.**
- C. Sub-fonds consists of oaths of office and case files relating to terms of employment of those veterans of World War I who maintained a home alert during World War II.
- D. Inventory available.
- F. 66.166, 72.369, 75.126, and 76.250.

### ***Extent***

The extent element usually equalled the total linear extent of the material being described. We did not follow rule 3.5B1 for the description of textual records and give the linear extent of the records followed by the phrase “textual records,” as we thought this would be redundant, given that the titles we used often incorporated a phrase describing the physical form of the material.<sup>33</sup> We used rule 1.5C on giving other physical details about the specific class of material being described whenever we thought it would provide more useful information to the researcher.<sup>34</sup>

### ***Biographical Sketch/Administrative History***

As mentioned previously, this element was included only when we thought it would be helpful to the researcher. For example, we included brief administrative histories in many entries for association records to assist the researcher in making a connection between the aims of a particular organization and the interests of their ancestor. In the case of vital statistics records, contextual information was provided in the chapter introduction outlining the evolution of the process of civil registration in the Province of Alberta and its antecedents. When the title of the entry might have misled the researcher as to the provenance of the material but a detailed administrative history was unnecessary, the provenance of the material was simply alluded to in the scope and content element; for example, entry XII 6 describes Alberta Provincial Police Crime Investigation Files as “... case files maintained by the Department of the Attorney General....”<sup>35</sup> In the case of information files, the title of the files that included the name of the compiler of the collection was sufficient contextual information. Similarly, since material was described in each chapter under the name of its custodial repository, entries that described the records of the sponsoring agency often needed little more contextual information than that provided by the name of the custodial repository appearing above the entry.

In retrospect, rather than taking the approach we did with the biographical sketch/administrative history option, we might have included this element as a sort of “authority file” in an appendix of the *Guide*, to which researchers could refer for detailed contextual information if they wished. This would have allowed us to follow the rules in *RAD* while keeping our descriptive entries clear, concise, and to the point.<sup>36</sup>

### ***Scope and Content Note***

We chose to describe only those portions of fonds or collections that we thought would be of interest to genealogists—as opposed to describing the general contents, nature, and scope of the material being described according to rule 1.7D of *RAD*.<sup>37</sup> Another approach would have been to use the rules for multi-level description.



### ***Finding Aids***

This note is a combination of the note on arrangement and the note on finding aids in *RAD*. We used this note to provide researchers with an explanation of how to use the collection and what tools are available to assist them. Our intention was to give researchers enough information to allow them to determine the amount of time they might need to do research in the material being described, and what prior information they would need to obtain before using the material. This note was specifically aimed at reducing the incidence of genealogists arriving at an archives unprepared and expecting to depart with a complete genealogy of their family a short time after their arrival.

### ***Conclusion***

As this discussion of our experiences reveals, there were many twists and turns along the road to producing the *Guide*. Faced with numerous challenging issues, our intention was to keep the perceived needs of our specialized audience firmly in mind in devising solutions. We were limited in our options, in some cases, by the presentation format of the *Guide*. In working through the issues, we did not always arrive at the same solutions as adopted in the case of the *BCAUL*, in large part because the aims of the two research tools were so different. Nor did we always follow the prescribed *RAD* rules, opting instead to perform *RAD*ical surgery. Though not true to *RAD* at all times, I think we have been true to the concept of archival description as a means of communicating about archival documents to researchers. I also think we have been faithful to the notion that descriptions of documents within the context of their creation are the best means to reveal information about their content to researchers. We decided that the task of intellectually preserving archival documents by means of archival descriptions containing detailed contextual information could be left to the custodial repository, or to research tools with an archival pedagogical purpose such as the *BCAUL*.

The ultimate test, I suppose, is the reaction from the researchers; the response so far has been that both archivists and, what is more important, genealogists have found the *Guide* useful. Although our decisions were not always in conformity with it, the *Rules for Archival Description* were, nevertheless, an invaluable aid to producing the *Guide*. *RAD* brought to our attention the possibility of including certain descriptive elements that, sometimes, we would not otherwise have thought to include. It also forced us to be much more conscious of the descriptive decisions we were making. Finally, *RAD*'s standardized approach to archival description resulted in our being more systematic in our approach to describing the material we included in the *Guide*. Would we make the same decisions today as we did while compiling the *Guide*? In some cases, the answer is yes, and in others, no. Today, the choices we would make would be shaped by the recently released rules for multi-level description and other revisions to *RAD*, recent writings on authority control and wider experience with the *Rules*. Nevertheless, the process of compiling the *Guide* was an irreplaceable learning experience. By outlining the issues we faced in preparing this inter-institutional thematic guide, by comparing it to a simi-

lar project in the *BCAUL* and explaining the decisions we took, I hope we have made the task of producing other thematic guides easier for archivists in future and have paved the way for improved results.

### Notes

- \* My thanks to Dave Leonard for collaborating with me on *Tracing Your Ancestors* and for providing useful comments on this paper.
- 1 See, for example, Susan M. Kooyman, "Believing in Magic: How *RAD* and Automation Have Changed the Glenbow Archives," *Archivaria* 35 (Spring, 1993), pp. 340-341; Heather Heywood, "Facing Reality: Implementing Descriptive Standards at the Archives of Ontario," *Archivaria* 35 (Spring, 1993), pp. 335-339; Elspeth Reid, "The Presbyterian Church in Canada Archives Recataloguing Project," *Archivaria* 34 (Summer, 1992), pp. 91-108.
  - 2 Christopher Hives and Blair Taylor, "Using Descriptive Standards as a Basis for Cooperation: The British Columbia Archival Union List Project," *Archivaria* 35 (Spring, 1993), pp. 71-85.
  - 3 Victoria Lemieux and David Leonard, *Tracing Your Ancestors in Alberta: A Guide to Sources of Genealogical Interest in Alberta's Archives and Research Centres* (Edmonton, 1992).
  - 4 Luciana Duranti, "Origin and Development of the Concept of Archival Description," *Archivaria* 35 (Spring, 1993), p. 52.
  - 5 Handout received at the *RAD* workshop held in conjunction with the 1992 ACA Conference in Banff.
  - 6 Duranti, "Origins and Development of Archival Description," p. 52.
  - 7 *Tracing Your Ancestors*, p. iii.
  - 8 An entire volume of *Archivum* has been devoted to the subject of archives and genealogical sciences, and includes articles that address the reasons why people undertake genealogical research. In one of the articles, Christian Wolff hypothesizes that the upsurge in the interest in genealogy has to do with the breakdown of the family. International Council on Archives, *Archivum XXXVII* (Paris, 1992).
  - 9 Hives and Taylor, "Using Descriptive Standards," pp. 73, 75.
  - 10 *Ibid.*, pp. 73-74.
  - 11 *Ibid.*, pp. 74-75.
  - 12 Planning Committee on Descriptive Standards, *Rules For Archival Description* (Ottawa, 1990), pp. 0-9.
  - 13 *Ibid.*, p. 1-7.
  - 14 *Ibid.*, p. 1-7.
  - 15 *Ibid.*, p. 1-12.
  - 16 There was a great debate about content-versus context-based description back in the early to mid-1980s centering around the Vancouver Island Project; see Gordon Dodds, "Provenance Must Remain the Archival Bottom Line," *Archivaria* 18 (Summer, 1984), pp. 4-7; and Richard C. Berner, "Vancouver Island Project Fails to Grasp the Significance of Provenance," *Archivaria* 18 (Summer, 1984), pp. 7-8. Articles such as David A. Bearman and Richard Lyttle's, "The Power of the Principle of Provenance," *Archivaria* 21 (Winter, 1985-86), pp. 14-27, reflect the viewpoint that descriptions containing provenance information are the best means of retrieving information about the content of archival documents. *RAD*, of course, is also premised on this thinking.
  - 17 See Heather MacNeil, "The Context is All: Describing a Fonds and its Parts in Accordance with *Rules for Archival Description*," in Terry Eastwood, ed., *The Archival Fonds: From Theory to Practice* (Ottawa, 1992), pp. 195-225, for a discussion of the nature of archives and its relation to archival description.
  - 18 The relationship between the authenticity or genuineness of documents and their historical truthfulness is an interesting question. Luciana Duranti writes in "Diplomatics: New Uses for an Old Science (Part I)," *Archivaria* 28 (Summer, 1989), p. 17, that "the origin of diplomatics is strictly linked to the need to determine the authenticity of documents, for the ultimate purpose of ascertaining truthfulness of facts represented in them." She makes the distinction between documents which are:
    - legally authentic - bearing witness on their own because of intervention by a representative of a public authority attesting to their genuineness.
    - diplomatically authentic - written according to the practice of the time and place indicated

in the text, and signed with the names of persons competent to create them.

- historically authentic - attest to events that actually took place or to information that is true.

She, then, goes on to discuss the concept of genuineness in relation to the concept of authenticity, making the distinction between documents which are:

- authentic - exhibit the presence or absence of elements of form
- genuine - truly are what they purport to be

Duranti further makes the point that there can be no historical inauthenticity in the same way as there can be legal or diplomatic inauthenticity, because historical authenticity has to do with the truth or falsity of a document.

Although, as Duranti points out, the coincidence of legal and diplomatic authenticity has declined, there is still some connection and historical truth can still be inferred from legal and diplomatic authenticity. Hence, it follows that, if an archivist, by means of an analysis and understanding of the provenance of archival documents, can ascertain their diplomatic authenticity, the likelihood of historical authenticity can be inferred.

19 Planning Committee, *Rules For Archival Description*, p. 1-43.

20 Lemieux and Leonard, *Tracing Your Ancestors*, p. 6.

21 *RAD* defines a fonds as:

The whole of the records, regardless of form or medium, automatically and organically created and/or accumulated and used by a particular individual, family, or corporate body in the course of that creator's activities or functions.

and defines a collection as:

An artificial accumulation of documents of any provenance brought together on the basis of some common characteristic, e.g., way of acquisition, subject, language, medium, type of document, name of collector, to be treated for description purposes as a descriptive unit under a common title. *RAD*, D-2, 3.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 0-2.

23 *Ibid.*, p. xv.

24 Hives and Taylor, "Using Descriptive Standards," p. 75. Hives and Taylor write that for a description to be included in the *BCAUL* it had to be either a fonds or a collection; however, problems were encountered because:

Material has been described in various ways [by the custodial repositories], often deviating from the principles upon which *RAD* has been built; for example, series have been described without a description of the fonds, in violation of the *RAD* principle that one describes downward from the general to the particular. In addition, the various media components of a fonds, such as cartographic and textual records, have been described separately with no linkages among parts; fonds have been described as a number of separate accession units with no connection among the individual accession descriptive records; fonds have been described as collections; and so on.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 72.

26 Lemieux and Leonard, *Tracing Your Ancestors*, p. 82.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 146.

28 *Ibid.*, pp. 109, 116 and 148.

29 *RAD*, pp. 1-8 and 1-9.

30 *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2, 2-4, and 3-6.

31 *Ibid.*, pp. 3-8 and 3.9.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 1-23.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 3-17.

34 *Ibid.*, p. I-35.

35 *Tracing Your Ancestors*, p. 146.

36 The application of authority control is discussed in Max J. Evans, "Authority Control: An Alternative to the Record Group Concept," *American Archivist* 49 (Summer, 1986), pp. 249-61, and Terry Cook, "The Concept of the Archival Fonds: Theory, Description and Provenance in the Post-Custodial Era," in Terry Eastwood, ed., *The Archival Fonds: from Theory to Practice* (Ottawa, 1992), pp. 64-73.

37 *RAD*, p. 1-40.