

Cataloging Rules in the Departmental Records Branch

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THE appearance of Sherrod East's paper on "Describable Item Cataloging" in 1953 brought to the attention of the archival profession a new, specialized technique of records control in an archival depository.² Although as late as 3 years ago this system of cataloging was still suffering the growing pains normal to any adolescent, it nevertheless had by 1953 passed the experimental stage of its development and had become properly "set in its ways." There remained, however, the compelling necessity of codifying the rules observed by the catalogers in the practical aspects of their work. That we could never have gone beyond the first of the existing thousands of catalog entries without rules of a sort is obvious; but uncoded rules — because they so often remain unrecorded — have a way of becoming more frequently forgotten than remembered; and because they are largely invisible they cannot — as should every rule, good or bad — be subjected to any interpretive process in determining their applicability or inapplicability to a problem of cataloging as it is encountered.

My purpose in this paper is to show how the catalog of the Departmental Records Branch, through its recently codified rules,³ has come of age. On the basis of these rules I intend to discuss (1) the chief considerations that motivated us to formalize them; (2) the

¹ The author is assistant chief of the Departmental Records Branch. His paper is a revision of a lecture delivered before the First Institute on the Preservation and Administration of Archives: Advanced, in the conference room of the Departmental Records Branch, The Adjutant General's Office, at Alexandria, Virginia, on July 12, 1955. (The institute, conducted by Ernst Posner, was organized by the American University in cooperation with the National Archives and Records Service and the Maryland Hall of Records.) This presentation supplemented an introduction to "describable item" cataloging, by Sherrod East, Chief of the Departmental Records Branch, and was followed by a summary, by Dr. Posner, of the unique significance to the archival profession of the DRB cataloging "experiment."

² *American Archivist*, 16:291-304 (Oct. 1953).

³ Departmental Records Branch, "Standing Operating Procedures," Section 8, "Rules for Subject Cataloging" (Washington, 1956); cited hereafter as "Rules." When presented in 1955, this paper was based on the first edition of the "Rules," issued in that year. All references have now been altered to refer to the cited 1956 version.

units of descriptive entry; (3) our standards for discretionary cataloging; (4) the organization and arrangement of the catalog; and, finally, (5) the format and content of the catalog card. The rules themselves are organized under the following main paragraph headings:

- 8.01 Principles of Subject Cataloging
- 8.02 Units of Descriptive Entry
- 8.03 Mandatory Cataloging of Particular Categories of "Describable Items"
- 8.04 Discretionary Cataloging
- 8.05 Catalog Organization and Arrangement
- 8.06 Subject Headings
- 8.07 Format and Content of Catalog Cards
- 8.08 Cataloging of "Permanent Servicing Requests"
- 8.09 Disseminating Cards
- 8.10 Withdrawal or Revision of Entries
- 8.11 Separate Maintenance of World War II "Period" Catalog
- 8.12 Catalog Maintenance

FORMALIZATION OF RULES

With respect to my first topic, the necessity for formalizing our rules: the Special Reference Section, which administers our catalog so well, is surely among the groups to benefit least from the systematic presentation of "rules" by which it has so long been guided. The need of two other, larger groups for cataloging "insight" has been more insistent. These are, on the one hand, our archival staff, upon which we depend for reliable drafts of catalog entries when mandatory cataloging is involved or for the "spotting" of other significant "describable items" at random as they are encountered; and, on the other hand, the users of the catalog, whether members of the depository staff or official or other authorized "customers" of the reference service that the depository provides to all comers.

Our conception of the form these rules should take and of the points they should cover took into account both the similarities and the differences between our technique and that of librarians. As those who are familiar with library practices should agree, both the best librarians and the best users of libraries meet on the common ground of understanding and acceptance of the rules by which they are equally guided. For example, the user of a library is within his rights if he expects to find, in the library's catalog, entries for all the books that the library has accessioned and shelved, and he may well complain to the management if he does not find them. In this depository, since we declare boldly that we have adapted the li-

brarian's technique to the archivist's purpose, the gravity of our responsibility for laying down rules under which we could achieve for archives what the librarian has long since achieved for library materials has weighed heavily upon us.

In particular we have wished to establish criteria for the selection of items to be cataloged, beyond, of course, those items (such as accessioned series) the cataloging of which is required; for we were — and we are — very much concerned lest the catalog reflect a few series or record groups in comparative detail while reflecting not at all or disproportionately some other portions of our holdings. This concern was shared by those of our friends in the American archival profession who had watched (if occasionally with a suspicious eye) the growth of our idea. For example, when Solon J. Buck read Mr. East's paper in the *American Archivist* he took occasion to write Mr. East as follows:

. . . I take it that by "describable" you mean not only capable of description but worthy of description. Although some people have assumed, because of the emphasis I have laid on overall description of archival material, that I was opposed to more detailed treatment, such has not been the case. What I objected to was detailed treatment of all the items in a few groups and the relegation of everything else to a backlog. I take it from your article that you are not doing and do not propose to do anything of this sort.

I think that Mr. East cannot object to my documenting my remarks from his private files to the extent of mentioning that I find in his "Buck" folder the carbon of an assurance, duly dispatched to the former Archivist of the United States, that his "assumptions about the describable item being one worthy of description on a selective basis is correct in so far as the cataloging of items below the series level is concerned." We thus arrive at the fork of the road and part company with the librarian, whose main unit of catalog entry — the book — is particular enough to suit him and all users of his catalog. The archivist must recognize his inability to compete with the librarian in cataloging adequacy so long as he confines his entries to those descriptive of the archival main unit of entry, the series; for records description "becomes particular [only] when it passes below the series level to the detailed list." ⁴

UNITS OF DESCRIPTIVE ENTRY

Thus, it can be seen that before we could attempt a codification of rules we had to be sure of our units of descriptive entry. Less-

⁴ National Archives, "The Preparation of Detailed Lists of Records" (*Staff Information Papers*, No. 17, Feb. 1951), p. 1.

than-series "describable items" present an almost endless variety of form and type, meriting cataloging not only because of their inner qualities but often because they hang together on that elastic thread of the series, so obvious to the archivist but sometimes invisible to all others. Interestingly enough, since every type of material to be found in a library (whether pamphlets, maps or atlases, brochures, broadsides, or just books) can be found in an archival series, we find ourselves treating what would be the librarian's main units of entry as essentially "analyticals" of the series, the archival main unit of entry. Before we could lay down for the depository operating staff a yardstick against which the "worth" of an item could be measured, we found it necessary to state precisely our "units of descriptive entry," as series, individual documents, and dossiers.⁵ Our units of catalog entry are thus reduced to simple, understandable dimensions, if we admit that the unit we refer to as a series is intended to embrace also those units known as subseries. Beyond the series we find the individual document (or the single piece) and the dossier. Each catalog entry that is not in itself descriptive of a series relates the document or dossier cataloged to the series of which it is a part. For example, a catalog entry describing an individual document, a personal letter from General Eisenhower to the Military Governor of Paris, reveals that the document is to be found in the series of records kept by the Secretary of the General Staff of SHAEF (Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force) a fact of the utmost significance to the user of the catalog who is concerned about the reliability of both the entry and the item to which it points. In another example the "Rules" illustrate the importance of establishing series relationship by showing how an especially important but "unsigned" statement of policy is properly cataloged only when identified as follows:

In records of the Office, Chief of Staff, Civil Affairs Division (RG 122), general correspondence files, under CAD 014 (9-22-42) (1).

DISCRETIONARY CATALOGING

Of our three units of descriptive entry — the series, the individual document, and the dossier — we require the cataloging of the series only. By this rule we ensure that all records in custody (except temporary records earmarked for disposal or other disposition) are represented in the catalog. Under ideal conditions — those under which documents are filed perfectly in perfectly conceived file schemes in their active stage, and are distinguished and perfectly

⁵ "Rules," par. 8.02. See also National Archives, "Detailed Lists of Records," p. 2-3.

described by series in their archival stage — we should need go no further in providing entries for other “describable items,” since each series in archival custody would contain exactly the expected documents, no more and no less, in exactly the intended arrangement; and each would have been described in the catalog for exactly what it is, no more and no less.

But the frailties of file creators and archivists alike are responsible for far-from-ideal conditions, with the result that the emphasis on “overall description of archival material,” in Dr. Buck’s words, gives way to the desirability of “more detailed treatment”; and even the National Archives, as has been noted, has developed rules for the detailed listing of records below the series level. In our depository we get this greater detail, within the general objective of “describable item” cataloging, by the *discretionary* cataloging of selected items. Nevertheless, in order that the catalog may reflect as evenly as possible the heterogeneous collections in custody, no record group is combed for such items, except in the most extraordinary circumstances. Instead, the suitability of the item for cataloging is determined by answering questions such as these:⁶

(1) Is another copy of the item already covered by a catalog entry? If so, would any useful purpose be served by inserting an additional entry to identify another (perhaps a better) copy filed in another record group?

(2) Is the nature of the series of which the “describable item” is a part such as to render unnecessary the cataloging of its components? In other words, is the existence of the item apparent from the series entry already in the catalog? (For example, the finding of an important item concerning “jungle warfare” in a series intended to pertain to “mountain warfare” would suggest the desirability of cataloging that item so as to bring it under reference control.)

(3) Could the item be located readily through other finding aids, whether created by the agency of origin or prepared in the depository? (For example, would any useful purpose be served by introducing into the catalog an entry pertaining to a particular paper on “special operations” that is mentioned already in the depository’s *Guide to Psychological Warfare Records*?)

(4) When the introduction of an appreciable number of entries is being considered, is there a pressing need, from the point of view of the reference service, for introduction of the proposed entries?

(5) Does the item possess substantive significance?

With respect to the substantive reasons for regarding a less-than-series item as “worth” cataloging, we have named four kinds of records that meet our standards, as follows:⁷

⁶ “Rules,” par. 8.04a. See also National Archives, “Detailed Lists of Records,” p. 6.

⁷ “Rules,” par. 8.04b. See also the categories of significant items “suggestive of a possible standard” in National Archives, “Detailed Lists of Records,” p. 8.

(1) Documents containing decisions or instructions made or imparted at high levels (international, national, departmental, or bureau levels).

(2) Documents directing, explaining, or requiring the observance of particular procedures that in themselves are more than casually significant. These may take the form of manuals, handbooks, staff studies or other special reports, classification schemes (for example, those pertaining to program management, filing, and other administrative activities), and serial directives.

(3) Summarizing documents, such as annual and periodical reports, conference minutes, histories and historical monographs, and statistical compilations, when the subjects or events summarized are in themselves significant.

(4) Documents originating with, or concerning, persons of renown.

Before leaving the absorbing topic of discretionary cataloging, I should mention the kinds of items we reject from cataloging consideration. These are items constituting parts of a series projected for transfer to the National Archives or other depository within 2 years; items constituting parts of a series the whole of which is being recommended for disposal within 2 years; and items dated prior to September 1, 1939, unless they bear materially on events, programs, or policies of the World War II or postwar periods.⁸ Furthermore, the depository recognizes the importance of emphasizing the cataloging of documents pertaining to the postwar period in its present cataloging work.⁹ Obviously, our 8-year experience in cataloging has until recently been concerned with World War II records, but as we begin to plan the retirement to the National Archives of such of those records as are of permanent value we must anticipate the day when our holdings will consist entirely or largely of postwar records.

CATALOG ORGANIZATION AND ARRANGEMENT

The DRB subject catalog is a dictionary catalog in which all of the several types of entries are arranged in one general alphabet.¹⁰ The three types of guides employed to indicate the main catalog divisions are known as alphabetic, agency, and functional guides. The tabbed or visible portions of these guides occupy respectively the left, center, and right positions in the card trays, and are also

⁸ "Rules," par. 8.04c.

⁹ "Rules," par. 8.04d.

¹⁰ See East, in *American Archivist*, 16:291-304. The present discussion of the catalog's organization and arrangement reflects developments since the publication of that paper. The members of the DRB staff, past and present, who have made significant contributions to these and previous developments include, but are not limited to, Thomas Blades, Helene Bowen, Philip Brower, Martin Claussen, Ann Davis, Betty DeMonde, Della Hunt, Janet Martin, Barbara Melton, Seymour Pomrenze, Sarah Powell, and Mary Swann, besides Mr. East and the author of this paper. Mrs. Powell recalls that she "filed the first card"; she is chief cataloger at present.

differentiated by contrasting colors. The identical sets of the catalog that have been deposited at strategic points in the Pentagon are similarly organized; and the separate catalogs maintained by the various records sections of the depository — catalogs of their holdings only — are similarly organized but with less complexity because of their smaller size.

Each "agency" guide is presented in the style of a "history card," narrating concisely the facts of the agency's establishment, functioning, organization, reorganization, and dissolution if terminated. Each such card is based on the corresponding DRB record-group summary, and may refer to that summary for further details.¹¹ As a special variety of "agency guides" we provide a number of "type agency" guides, behind which are filed, as appropriate, entries pertaining to military units, installations, or other agencies. In this manner are brought together all entries pertaining to given "type agencies," which range in the general alphabet from "armies" to "wings."¹²

Finally, the general catalog organization provides for three types of "helpful" entries: (1) "filed" references, which may be references from terms not used as subject headings to the headings chosen in lieu of them; (2) "see also" references, to guide a user of the catalog to another heading under which he may expect to find related material; and (3) "informational" entries, occasionally introduced to account for records not in custody when one would normally expect to find them in the depository or when they may otherwise be of intimate current interest to the depository staff or the Department of Defense.¹³

From this discussion of "guides" we can perceive the foundation upon which the catalog entries themselves so firmly rest. Each entry is itself filed under at least two major categories of subject headings or "cross-references": (1) under one or more "agency" headings or "author" headings, depending on how many major commands or other agencies are represented in a given item described; and (2) under one or more "functional" headings, depending on how many major functions are represented. In addition, a given entry is occasionally filed under (3) one or more special headings, such as a code word, a title (of a document), a personal name, or a geographical name, depending on whether the item has any special peculiarities that are worth cross-referencing. The partic-

¹¹ "Rules," 6-9.

¹² "Rules," 11. Thirty-two "type agency" guides are provided.

¹³ "Rules," 12-17.

ular rules governing the use of each of these three categories of subject headings have been stated in great detail.¹⁴

"Functional" headings are intended to provide for the filing of each catalog entry under at least one function to which the "describable item" relates. The "Rules" organize these headings topically into 13 major groups, as follows:¹⁵

- A Administrative and Management Services
- B Budget, Fiscal, and Contractual Services
- C Combat Operations
- CA Civil Affairs in Occupied or Liberated Areas
- F Facilities
- I International Affairs
- M Matériel
- O Operational and Logistical Services
- P Personnel Services
- T Training (other than unit training)
- TP Categories of Trained Personnel
- TU Troop Units: Organization, Training, Movement
- X Collective Headings

Each functional group is amplified by defining each heading pertaining to it. The "Administrative and Management Services" group, for example, is represented by twelve separately defined headings:

- A-1 Organizational Planning, General
- A-2 Records Administration Programs
- A-3 Reports and Forms Controls
- A-4 Historical Programs
- A-5 Inspections, General
- A-6 Public Relations Programs, General
- A-7 Production-Achievement Awards
- A-8 Legal Affairs, General
- A-9 Legislative Affairs
- A-10 Military Justice
- A-11 Claims and Litigation, General
- A-12 Management Improvement Programs

It is important to note that this grouping in no way corresponds to the alphabetical arrangement of the catalog but reflects rather the logical relationships of the functions defined. Thus, the heading "Organizational Planning, General" will fall under the letter "O" in the catalog, and the next heading ("Records Administration Programs") under "R." A relative index of the functional-heading

¹⁴ "Rules," 19-30.

¹⁵ Appendix 8-A.

definitions is provided as a separate appendix to the "Rules,"¹⁶ as is an alphabetical arrangement of the functional headings that corresponds to their actual arrangement in the catalog, except that the necessary "agency" and "special" subject headings are interfiled with them.¹⁷

FORMAT AND CONTENT OF THE CATALOG ENTRY

We have concerned ourselves so far with the broad lines of the organization of the catalog, with only incidental reference to the format and content of the single entry. The format shown on p. 300 is applicable to the cataloging of any of the three units of descriptive entry (the series, the individual document, and the dossier) and is susceptible of adaptation to meet the particular requirements of even the most extraordinary varieties of individual documents.¹⁸

The "coded attribution and location data" at the upper left corner of the card corresponds to the call number on a library card, for it is often possible to call for the item cataloged, as needed for reference or other purposes, by mention of these data alone. They appear usually in three lines: the first line indicates, by symbol, the particular section of the DRB that has custody of the item; the second line shows the number of the record group to which the item is attributed; and the third line indicates the control number of the particular records "job" under which the record or records described were originally brought into the custody of the depository. We have initiated recently a procedure whereby the catalog entries prepared on records "jobs" that consist of more than one series can identify precisely such series, in this part of the catalog card, by adding, parenthetically after the job number, "S1," "S2," and so on, identifying the first, second, or other series of a particular job as determined by our requirements for the processing of accessioned materials. Finally, we express our "attribution and location" data for our "reference collection"¹⁹ and microfilms in somewhat different styles, as follows:

AGAW-G
Ref Coll
1048

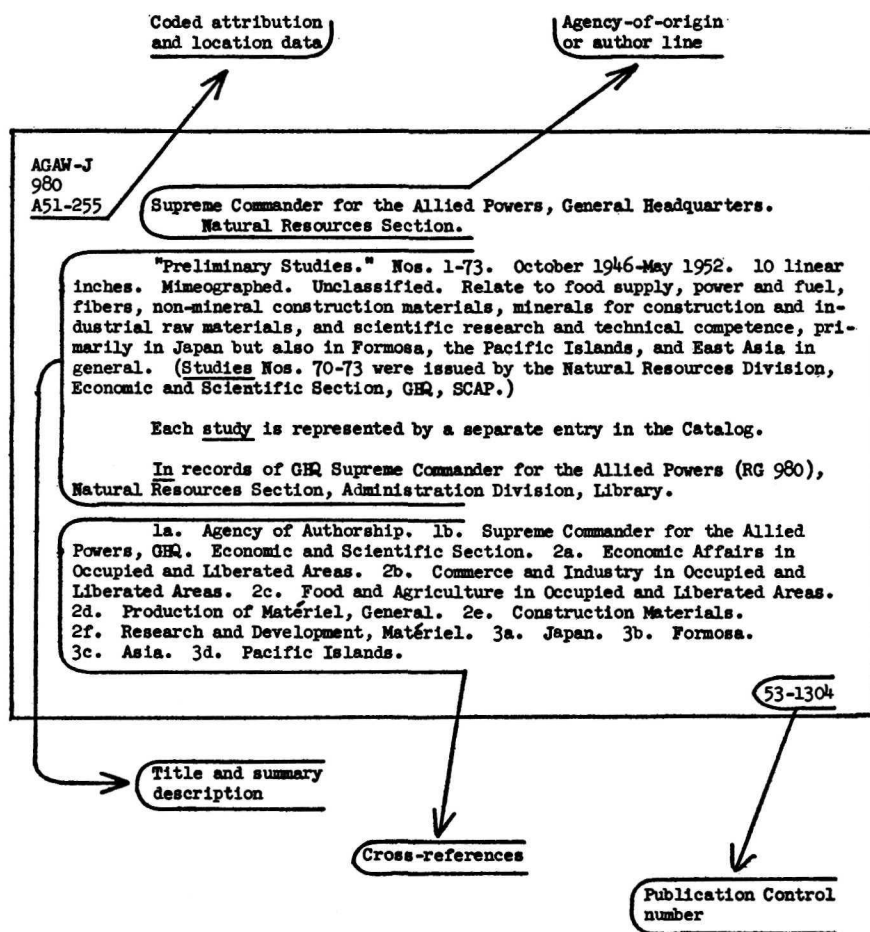
AGAW-G
Microfilm
Items — 1942-1946
Reel — 400

¹⁶ Appendix 8-B.

¹⁷ Appendix 8-C.

¹⁸ The 25 exhibits displayed in the "Rules" have been invaluable in the training of catalogers.

¹⁹ A collection, supplementing archival materials in custody, of printed items of



FORMAT OF CATALOG CARD

The second main division of the textual information presented on the card is known as the agency-of-origin or author line. Because this line determines the principal filing point of the entry in the catalog it is carefully and accurately expressed. Agencies of the Department of Defense are shown at their highest bureau levels. However, we may show the agency of authorship, or even an individual author, on this line, rather than the agency of origin (in the archival sense) whenever in the cataloger's opinion no useful major reference significance that are received through normal distribution or solicitation or that do not appear to belong to, or are discarded from, an established records series.

purpose would be served by filing the catalog entry by agency of origin.

The title and summary-description paragraph we regard properly as the most important division of the catalog entry, primarily because from this description a determination is made of the various subject headings under which the entry is to be filed. We have noted already that although "describable items" vary in volume, complexity, and form, they are susceptible of uniform treatment for cataloging purposes. The proof of this is nowhere more apparent than in the development of this part of the catalog entry, the indispensable elements of which include:²⁰

(1) The *title* of the series or other item, to include an indication of its physical form.

(2) Its significant *substantive characteristics*, if not implicit in the title.

(3) Its inclusive *dates*, if it is a series or a dossier; or its date, if it is a separate document.

(4) The manner in which it is *arranged*, if it is a series or subseries.

(5) An indication that it is *security classified*, if such is the case.

(6) Its *volume*, in linear measurement, in the case of a series, subseries, or dossier; or the *total number of pages* in the case of an individual document or publication.

(7) *Other essential information*, to include, as applicable:

(a) An indication of *agency-imposed restrictions* on the use of the item.

(b) *Identification of the series* of which the item is a part, and the file designation under which it may be found, if it does not itself constitute an entire series.

(c) *Imprint data* (place and date of publication, name of publisher, and method by which reproduced) in the case of a published item.

The description of records of many different types in conformity with this pattern presents, understandably, problems of as many kinds, particularly with respect to the order in which these indispensable elements are recorded in the entry. The "Rules" could, perhaps, be developed in such detail as to resolve all problems that conceivably might be encountered, but they ensure consistency at the moment through the provision of examples of summary descriptions of the more common types of "describable items."²¹

The next division of the catalog entry consists of a statement of the cross-references the cataloger desires. These we have discussed

²⁰ "Rules," 34-35.

²¹ "Rules," 35-39. These "more common types" are (1) the series, (2) the unorganized collection, (3) the dossier, (4) the individual document other than a publication, (5) the unpublished paper, (6) a set of a serial publication, (7) the published pamphlet, (8) microfilms, and (9) an article in a periodical.

already as the three categories (agency, functional, and special) of subject headings permitted. For the "functional" or "category 2" cross-references, the cataloger consults first, perhaps, the relative index of functional-heading definitions, which leads him directly to the definitions themselves; or he may instead reach a solution by the more logical (and therefore to-be-encouraged) method of consulting the schematic division of such headings and so be led inevitably to the very function or functions sought.

The last division of the catalog entry, the publication control number of the card at its lower right corner, is not of course shown on the draft of an entry but is added after the entry is edited for reproduction. The number is convenient in requesting copies of particular entries from the small stock of extra copies maintained.

Before passing from this discussion of card format, I should call attention to a type of entry that points only indirectly to actual "describable items." This brings under catalog control the results of completed searches undertaken by our reference service. Entries of this type directly correlate significant, completed *searches* with the item descriptions of records in the same subject area. In selecting the completed searches to be cataloged we are reassuringly discriminating, for of the hundreds of thousands of searches we have undertaken since the introduction of the cataloging system we have isolated only a few hundred as our "Permanent Servicing Requests," and only one or two more become "eligible" each week for the catalog. A "PSR" entry points to the record of a previous search, not to the "describable item" itself. Thus, even useful "negatives" may be cataloged.

SUMMARY

I can conclude these remarks on our "Rules" by mention again of our complete dependence upon them for intelligibility and practicability in applying our particular system of cataloging. As for our units of descriptive entry, if the unit is not in itself a series, we are careful to give it a series relation.

Our rules emphasize the importance of the mandatory cataloging of all series, and of cataloging with great discretion beyond that point. They ensure the greatest consistency and continuity in the overall organization and arrangement of the catalog, and in the format of the individual catalog entry.

We are happy to introduce these rules to American archivists, for they may possess a value beyond our own estimation. The technique they govern is still new and still, so far as we know, unique.