Best Practice Poster:
How to Build a Local Thesaurus

Robert H. Estep
Fondren Library, Rice University
United States
estep@rice.edu

Keywords: LCNAF; local headings; thesaurus construction.

1. First Steps

One of the first steps taken in preparing for participation in the Rice Historical Images Project was the assembling of a skeletal structure of terms specific to both Rice University and its earlier incarnation as the William M. Rice Institute.

The primary research tools used were archival maps and blueprints, newspaper accounts contemporaneous with the University's building schedule, campus telephone directories, and online entries (including Wikipedia). Alphabetical lists of building names, and names of University departments and schools, were cross-referenced for name changes effective during the University's history, and checked against the corporate LCNAF. The more complex internal inconsistencies were noted for future fiddling and/or resolution.

2. People, Places, and Things

It was clear from the start that an unusually large number of LOCAL headings would need to be constructed, the bulk of these in the form of corporate headings for departments and organizations, such as the Rice MOB (or Marching Owl Band), university buildings and structures, as well as headings related to the city of Houston. In some cases additional research was required, one example being that of the historic Rice Hotel in downtown Houston, for which construction and demolition dates were included in the heading.

Once the project commenced a large number of personal name headings were also required, for faculty, staff, students, members of the Houston business community, city and state politicians, and others. Additionally, in the case of University faculty with existing LCNAF entries, a second LOCAL heading was included with the parenthetical "(Faculty)" made explicit. Regional resources, often in the form of obituaries or published tributes and Festschrifts, were scoured for relevant dates, middle initials and names, and other information.

The smallest number of LOCAL headings were reserved for 'things': in other words, for events or activities which were unique to the history of Rice as an institution. The most prominent of these were the "May Fete" and the "Spring Rondolet" (both dance events), as well as the thematically adventurous "Archi-Arts Ball", not to mention the yearly "Beer Bike cycling event". In addition to events such as these, certain architectural features were given headings because of the frequency and prominence of their appearances in the images, for instance, the large central "Sallyport" which can be seen from Main Street and which ushers visitors and members of the Rice community alike into the large central "Quad", bounded on one end by Fondren Library.

3. The Desire for Consistency

The use of LOCAL headings gave us the latitude to delve deeply into the metadata description of each image, but every attempt was made to model these headings upon valid forms already in LC, whether the LOCAL heading was for a building name, a student organization, or a member of the faculty.

We quickly learned that bannering consistency, as one of the most important qualities of the thesaurus would demand patience and flexibility, as new image-types or additional archival information made our earlier entries obsolete or overly unique.

4. Looking Forward, Looking Back

Building a progressive thesaurus which is both a melding of valid LC headings and LOCAL headings requires the flexibility of being able to return from time to time, sometimes to tweak, other times to undo earlier work and start from scratch. But the pattern we have found is that each return is both easier and shorter, as we digest the lessons of embarking on a project which extends both into the past via the images themselves, and into the future as the life of the University, its teachers and its students, continues to be documented.

5. Illustrative Aspects

The poster will feature graphics in the form of sample images from the project collection itself, as well as screen shots of the existing Thesaurus.