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EVERYTHING IN ITS PLACE: DEFINING DATABASE FIELDS

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Collection management databases are full of fields for inputting data. No matter what system you are using, these fields are created to help both museum workers and outside researchers find collection items and details about them. Although we may know they are useful, sometimes it can be helpful to understand what each field is meant to accomplish so we utilize it appropriately. Below are some of the main fields for capturing data about three-dimensional objects in PastPerfect (the system we use in Local History Services). However, the titles of the fields may vary slightly across different databases, but the end goal is usually the same. Also, consider who will be using the field and for what: a researcher or a museum worker? It might change the way you approach that particular field.

American Fletcher National Bank, data center, circa 1970s. (Bass Photo Co Collection, Indiana Historical Society)

ACCESSION NUMBER
This is the number corresponding to the entire collection of items in that accession, whether the accession includes one thing or twenty. For most museums the accession number includes two numbers: first the four-digit year of the accession; and second the number assigned to the donor of that accession.

OBJECT ID
The object ID contains the accession number, but is a bit different. This number is unique to that

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individual item, and no other item in the museum's collection should have the same number. The object id number consists of three parts, the first two being the same as the accession number (year of accession and donor number), and the third number is the number of that item within the accession. So, the first item in the accession would be number one, the second, number two, and so on until every individual object in that accession has an individual number.

OBJECT NAME/TITLE
This field should classify the object using as few words as possible, one is ideal. The options for terms in this field are determined by museum lexicon (a lexicon is a set language for naming things in a particular field … like science, art or museums). There are two main lexicon systems that museums use: Nomenclature (geared primarily towards history, used by PastPerfect), and Getty Institute's Art and Architecture Thesaurus (geared primarily towards art collections). By using a lexicon system that spans the museum field, it is easier for both staff/volunteers and researchers to find the items they want because they know that searching for "dress" in any museum database will provide the same types of items as results.

The above three fields are generally required to create a new database record and cannot be left blank. If the museum puts in no other information about the item, at least these pieces should be provided.

Milton Allen, Owner-Operator of Computer Kids. (Indianapolis Recorder Collection, Indiana Historical Society)

DATE
The date field provides important information regarding the age of the item. By providing even the most basic information, such as "19th century," it will help others to narrow a search for items in the collection. Note that in PastPerfect there are two fields for date: Date and Year Range; both need to be filled in to properly run reports based on date.

DESCRIPTION
Providing a description of the object can take whatever form is most useful to the primary user of the field. If the collection database is mostly used in-house for museum workers to locate items in the collection and merely distinguish one item from another based on appearance, then the description could contain just the information to make this possible, such as "short orange dress with printed flowers and lace around the neckline." If, however, this field is meant to provide a visual to an internet researcher far from the object a lengthier description might be necessary, such as "Short, princess seam, sleeveless dress with large multi-colored printed flowers and a thin band of white floral lace around the high, round neckline." It can be far too easy to get caught up with the description field and either end up providing too much or too little information. Thinking about the main user of the field for your museum can help.

CATALOG DATE/CATALOGED BY

These two fields are used for tracking the individual associated with the museum who input the information to the record and when. If there are questions regarding the record's contents, this information can prove invaluable.

LOCATIONS
Providing a location, when known, is very important for tracking the location of objects in the collection. Most databases allow you to assign a "home location," meaning the location in which the item spends most of its time. This way when an object is temporarily moved to a new location, like an exhibit or offsite to a conservator, the museum has a record of both where the item currently is, but also where the item is permanently housed in the museum.

NOTES
This field can be helpful in capturing any information pertinent to the item that does not have another location in the collection record. This could be anything from a historical/contextual note, to a handling note. Because notes may be added throughout the items life at the museum it can be a good idea to follow each note with the name of the person who added it and the date it was added, as this will not always correspond to the cataloger name and date already captured.

PEOPLE/SUBJECTS/CLASSIFICATIONS
These three fields are separate in most databases. However, their function is ultimately the same. They are usually authority files (meaning a set list of options is provided … whether generated by the museum or the database) that allow the object to be connected across the database to other objects that have similar people (like previous owners), subjects (like textile production) or classifications (like domestic life). By filling in these fields it allows the museum and researchers to quickly find items in the collection that relate to one another.

Although there are many more fields provided in collection management databases, these are just a few to get you started in understanding why providing the information is so important. Always keep in mind how the information in any given field will be used and by whom when questions arise regarding how to utilize each field.