One common Database System for 150 Small Social History Museums

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1. History:

How the registration standard for museum artifacts and historical photos was established in the late nineteen-seventies.

The slogan of the efforts towards automating the collection information in Norwegian museums in the seventies, was Get a bucket under the data stream - formulated by Jostein Hauge, then the director of Norwegian Computing Centre for the Humanities (Hereafter NCCH). In Cooperation with the national organization of the art and social history museum, NCCH developed a standard registration form (on paper) for museum artifacts. Having no personal computers at that time, the form was intended to be filled in by typewriting OCR-letters at the museums and to have them read at the central computer at the University of Bergen. Several museums tried this service, but found the procedures slow and heavy in use.

On arrival of the personal computer, the museum organization achieved research funding for making a database program to cover collection cataloging. The resulting database emerged in 1985, and took care of registration of museum artifacts and historical photos. It was a simple flat-file system written in DataFlex. Through the following 7 years 110 joined the bandwagon, though many of them complaining and crying for a more flexible system. The main complaints were the fixed field format,

bad word processing facilities in text fields and a maximum of 4 names per item. In addition the reporting facilities, although flexible, were not very intuitive.

From the beginning our system came most quickly in use by some smaller museums, which had no programming competence. Later on several larger museums joined in, but after a few years, when the system grew old-fashioned, these museums started doing their own customization. The explanation is that larger museums tend to have more specialized needs, and are wealthy enough to hire their own programmers. In the next phase this accounts for the fact that the largest museums were not ready to adopt the new version of the system (now called Regimus): They had invested too much in their dedicated systems.

2. 100 users: A solid base for further development

Experiences from the development of the Dos, Macintosh and Windows versions. In 1991 funding was achieved for modernizing the old system. With so many users waiting for a better product, we set out with a high motivation to fulfill their demands. However, they did not all demand the same functions and changes. According to our experience it is far more difficult to develop a system for many user's needs, than for one single user. Instead of giving one user a ID field that suites his conventions, for instance, you will have to take in consideration ten different ways of doing the same thing. You can't ask everyone about every detail, and it is hard to know whom you should ask. The obvious thing to do is to cooperate with a group of experienced people from the museum community, and so we did. But most of these persons (appointed by the museum organization) turned out to come from larger institutions, which did not use our system at all!

So the communication with the user community did not work too well during the development of the DOS version, which we did first. For the Windows and Macintosh versions we thus decided to cooperate directly with one museum at a time (obtaining at least one confident user from the beginning!). This have worked well so far. We started shipping the Windows version on the 1st of February this year (approx. 20 installations by June -95), while the Macintosh version has been installed in a few institutions since August -94.

3. A general data format definition

The data format definition was made with no references to any special development tool.

As an important part of the modernizing task, 2 manmonths was taken to establish a general data format definition independent of any database development tool. The fact that we succeeded in making this format definition in only 2 manmonths, is due to the exertion of the experienced museum automation professional Jon Birger stby, who have been involved in most of NCCH's museum projects since 1980. He is now the leader of the governmental museum developement office.

This field standard for art and social history museum cathalogs has been a most useful thing both in developing the new database program for the old users, and in making the large museums conform to our standard data field definitions when making their own more dedicated systems.

The WinRegimus registration form for artifacts (short version).WinRegimus registration form for photographs (short version).

4. Why so many users of a simple system?

A description of the Norwegian museum community (Lots of small museums with strong financial restrictions) and some crucial system characteristics (Machine demands and system support).

The Norwegian museum community have lots of small museums with strong financial restrictions. (0.7 man-year on average per museum) Hence a database system have to be cheap and simple to operate. The price/performance progress has worked to fulfill this requirement: The initial costs have fallen from appr. 10.000 $ in 1985 (including a PC with printer, word processor and database system) to appr. 3.500 $ in 1995. Most museums with permanent personnel can afford this, especially since system support is included for lifetime at no further costs.

As all the large museums using the DataFlex version, dropped out when we moved to Advanced Revaltion and Regimus, it seems that a certain amount of poverty is necessary to make museums use the same type of standard cataloging system. But, as mentioned already, all the large museums conform to our standard data field definitions when making their own systems.

5. Future needs and plans

What needs and possibilities do we see for collection information systems in the near future?

The Regimus system covers p.t. registration, updating, searching and printing functions for historical photographs and museum artifacts, as well as for applied art. On the ground of feedback from the users, we maintain a nice little backlog on future developments:

- New registers

  for accessions
  for lendings

- Registration forms

  for in-house libraries
  for newspaper articles relevant to local history
  for archival material
  for sound recordings

The problem we faces in trying to convert these plans into reality, is, however, that more and more of the time allocated to the museum sector is going to system support and user guidance - often one at a time, phoning in their frustrations with simple DOS commands or other things not really connected to Regimus. We are arguing that the museum community should take care of simple user obstacles themselves, so that more of our capacity could be devoted to advanced problems and developmental work.

Some people may behind this problem see a museum community not very fond of allocating their restricted resources to tasks of common interest. I am afraid they are quite right.

6. Towards a national database

Testing a national database for delivering historical photographs on-line and further plans and perspectives. As a result of the fact that most Norwegian Social history museum have identical cataloging database structure, it will be rather simple to gather this information in one large national database. The hard task is to find someone willing to pay for and host such a database. Everyone is looking forward to the possibility of looking into a national database of catalogs, but none in the museum community have been willing to pay for it so far.

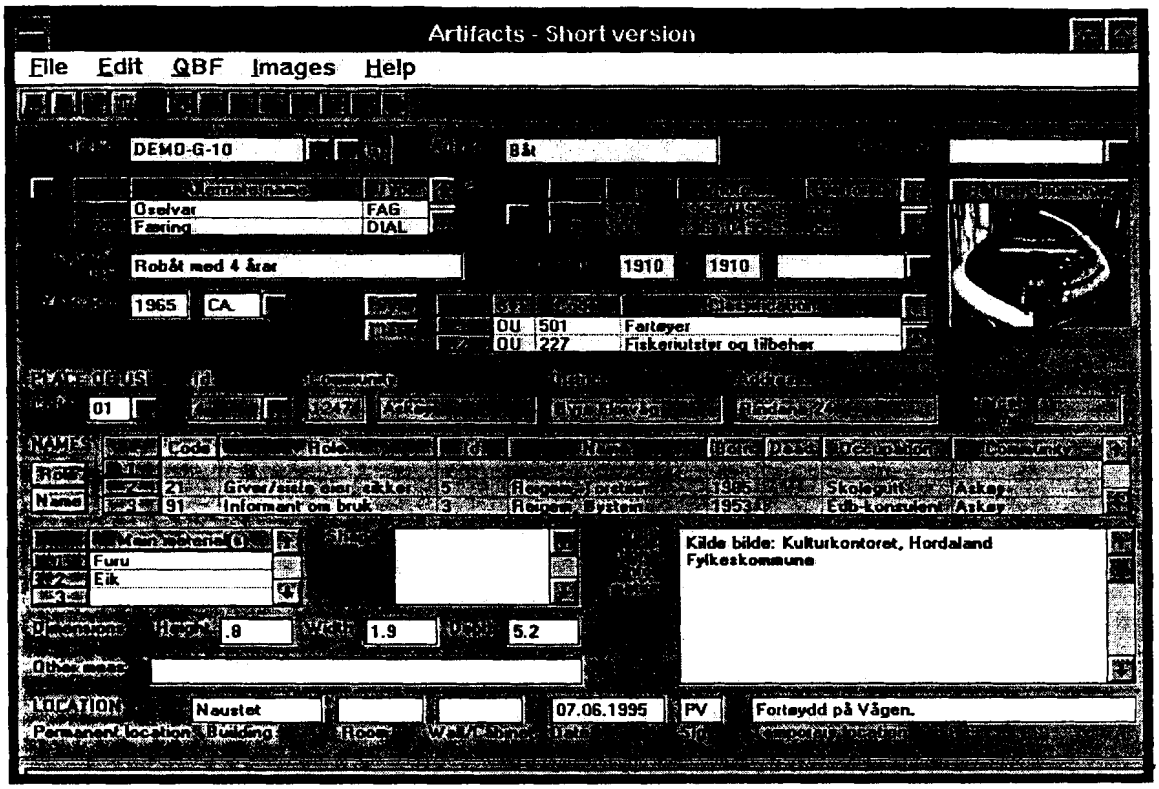
A. Photographs

However, one of the institutions that have invested in parts of this concept, is the relatively new National Library in Norway. In cooperation with the Norwegian Technical University and the National Archives they have put into operation a test database for historical photographs and connected it to the Internet. We hope to be able to give a demonstration of this database through World Wide Web at this conference.

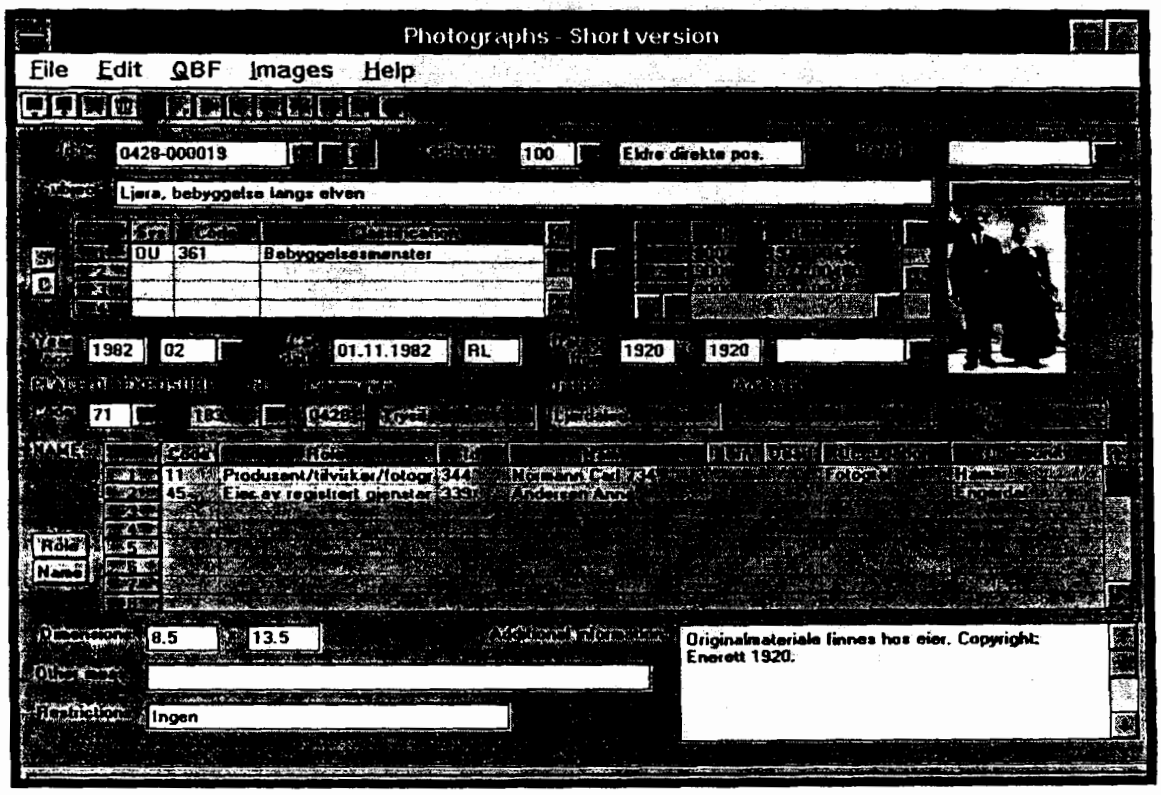
As the National Archives also have devoted quite a lot of resources to a media lab - doing reproduction work and providing climate-controlled archiving for films and photographs - we hope that this test installation will lead onwards to a permanent on-line database in the future.

B. Museum artifacts

When it comes to object catalogs, the National Library will not be the typical institution for taking care of such a database. At this point we are looking towards the greater university museums and their National Documentation Project. Here the Norwegian universities have undertaken the task of converting most of the manual archives representing the huge university collections of everything from dialect words through coins and anthropological artifacts to biological and zoological objects. Although they will need a few thousand man-year to fulfill such a task (mostly using unemployed people), there will be milestones along the road, where individual collections are ready to go on-line. For relevant collections the museum community outside the universities should be ready to cooperate for joint benefits.



WinRegimus registration form for artifacts (short version).



WinRegimus registration form for photographs (short version).

Notes