

Copyright Lore

■ Judith Nierman

The Copyright Card Catalog housed in LM-459 is the world's biggest card catalog. It comprises 45 million cards in 25,675 drawers. Placed top to bottom, the individual cards would stretch from San Francisco to Detroit and beyond.

Why are these cards important? An index to copyright registrations, renewals, and recordations in the United States from 1870 through 1977, they are an archive that is a remarkable record not only of copyright ownership but also of America's cultural and historical heritage. A large part of the literary, musical, artistic, and scientific production of the United States and of many foreign countries is recorded in these indexes. The Copyright Card Catalog is an indispensable supplement to the Library of Congress's catalog as a research tool.

The records contained in the Copyright Card Catalog begin in 1870 because in that year the copyright function was centralized in the Library of Congress. For over 100 years, the card catalog grew apace. First Register of Copyrights Thorvald Solberg said in 1901, "The copyright entries since July 10, 1870, to May 31, 1901, number 1,217,075. The index to these entries consists of more than 600,000 cards, many of which contain a number of entries." Sixty-eight years later, the Copyright Card Catalog had grown to 25,000,000 cards. Beginning in 1978 when the cards numbered 45,000,000, copyright registrations, renewals, and recordations went online, and the number of cards ceased to grow.

The oldest portion of the card catalog is the General Index, 1870–1897. This index was known for many years as "Old High" because it occupied the drawers above the center shelf of a fairly tall cabinet, while later indexes were housed in the lower drawers. Portions of the Copyright Card Catalog assumed their own character based on the law in effect at the time

they were created, the use of classes to identify material submitted for copyright, and the format of the application for registration. When Eleanor Jones joined the staff of the Copyright Office in 1937, she found 148 separate indexes of which 128 were active. On her recommendation, a program of consolidation began and was mainly completed in 1943.

In 1980, the Copyright Card Catalog for the first time was uniformly and comprehensively labeled, and the different sections of the catalog were color-coded on the front of each drawer. Former Visual Information Specialist Elaina Evans developed the colors as part of a larger sign system in the Copyright Card Catalog. Prior to the color coding, Evans is reported to have found a member of the public wandering through the aisles of the catalog. When she asked if she could help, he said he had finished his research but had one question: "How do you get out of here?"

Search newer records online on the Copyright Office website. Or come to LM-459 to see the world's biggest card catalog. ©



Copyright Office staffers, then called "reference searchers," use the Copyright Card Catalog, which, at the time this photo was taken in the early 1940s, was located in the Adams Building.