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Consistent Squeeze

by Gary Geer (Collection Development Librarian, University of South Carolina)

"Do you have a consistent squeeze?" asked my boss, Alexander (Sandy) Gilchrist. I didn’t understand what he was asking me. My task, sometime back in the 1980s, was to figure out how many books we had in certain subject areas. In the days before you could ask and get an answer to this question from a computer, we had to have a method to quickly and accurately count the number of titles on a particular subject. Most card catalog users were familiar with the author, title, and subject sections of the card catalog. The part of the catalog they never saw was called the shelflist. The shelflist was the whole card catalog, but arranged in call number order. It was located in the technical services area of the Library, and not generally accessible to our users. Since the Library of Congress call number system is a subject classification system, books with call numbers in the range E 441 to E 665, for example, all deal with U.S. History, Slavery, and The Civil War. To get a reasonably accurate count of the number of titles in a subject area, we held the cards in that call number range straight in the catalog drawer, measured the width of that group of cards, and then would multiply by the number of cards per inch. To know how many cards there were per inch, you had to be able to squeeze the cards with a consistent amount of pressure while you measured. If you had a weak squeeze, the number of cards per inch might be 50, a strong squeeze and your average might be 75, so your squeeze could make a big difference in your count. It took some practice to get your squeeze consistent and to figure your cards per inch average. I don’t remember what my squeeze equaled in cards per inch. I suspect it’s a bit less today.

This is a skill they just don’t teach in library school these days.