What's
the story
of the
card catalog?

Humans have a basic drive to organize. We organize ideas because we need to retrieve them. So as the development of written language spread, it is not surprise that humans were compelled to organize these newly created information artifacts.

One of the oldest known lists of books appears on a Sumerian tablet found at Nippur from about 2000 B.C.E. Sixty-two titles are recorded on this clay tablet of which twenty-four are identified as literary works.

In the eighth century, the earliest listing of a medieval library was written on the final flyleaf of a book in the collection. By the fourteenth century, college libraries were producing inventories in book form.

Following the French Revolution in 1791, libraries were directed to make card catalogs, because of wartime shortages. Confiscated playing cards were used—aces and deuces were reserved for the longer titles. The cards were strung together by running a needle and thread through the lower left corners to keep them in order.

Library of Congress (LC) cards, made available for sale in 1901, popularized the use of card catalogs across the United States.

The first online catalogs began appearing in the late 1970s, which marked the beginning of the end of the physical card catalog system.

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