

Thorvald Solberg, Register 1897-1930

Thorvald Solberg took office as the first Register of Copyrights on July 22, 1897, shortly before the Library of Congress was moved from the Capitol to the new building that had been constructed for it. Mr. Solberg was appointed by John Russell Young, the Librarian of Congress, after taking him to the White House, where he had been interviewed by President McKinley.

The business connected with copyright had been an additional function of the Librarian of Congress ever since copyright registration was centralized in the Library in 1870. *The Library Journal* said of the appointment: "There can be but one opinion as to the choice for the new office of Register of Copyrights of the one man, Mr. Solberg, best fitted for the post."

Thorvald Solberg was born on April 22, 1852, in Manitowoc, Wisc., of immigrant Norwegian parents. He was the eldest of six children. After graduation from the public schools of Manitowoc, he worked for booksellers there and in Boston, Detroit, Knoxville, and Omaha. He then became a member of the Library of Congress law department staff from 1876 to 1889, although he was not a lawyer. In the latter year he left the Library of Congress for employment with the Boston Book Company, where his work required that he spend much of his time abroad. He collected complete sets of European literary and scientific publications for American libraries. He did not return to the Library until appointed Register.

The Copyright Office grew during his 33 years as Register from an operation performed by a few clerks to one requiring an expert force of over 100 persons. Mr. Solberg was closely connected with the Act of 1909, which remained the basic copyright law of the United States until 1978; and indeed the Act of 1909 still dictates, in certain respects, the copyright status of works copyrighted while it was in force.

Mr. Solberg attended most of the important conferences on international copyright that took place in this time, and was one of the foremost authorities on the subject. He attended the international copyright conferences in Barcelona (1893), Antwerp (1894), Paris (1900), Berlin (1908), Luxembourg (1910), Paris (1925), and Rome (1928), the last five as an official U.S. delegate. He was always a champion of the rights of authors and an ardent advocate of U.S. adherence to the Berne Convention, the principal multilateral treaty calling for a high level of copyright protection as a condition of membership, which the United States joined on March 1, 1989.

Mr. Solberg, with his wife, the former Mary Adelaide Nourse of Lynn, Mass., was a frequent traveler in both America and Europe, and he had a wide circle of friends and acquaintances. Among them were R.R. Bowker, Melvil Dewey, Frances Hodgson Burnett, George Bernard Shaw, and the Archduke Ludwig Salvator of Austria. He and his wife had a particular affection for the Balearic Islands, where they sojourned for a considerable time in the 1890s. He was a regular contributor of articles on literature and literary property to *The Nation* and other periodicals, and the author of what is believed to be the first American bibliography on copyright issued in 1886. Moreover, he wrote on a wide variety of subjects, including an article entitled "Suggestions for a Street-car Terminal in Washington" (1913). Like a number of Library of Congress officials in the early years, he lived on Capitol Hill, residing at 198 F Street, S.E., from 1898 until he moved to Glen Echo Heights, Md., about 1914.

In 1930, at the time of his retirement on his 78th birthday, *Publisher's Weekly* said: "There has been but one Register of Copyrights and he is a unique personality uniquely fitted for the place." And Mr. Solberg was still a notable figure in the copyright world when he died at home on July 15, 1949, at the age of 97.



