

## Copyright Records Document “Lost” Silent-Era Films

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Last October, the Library of Congress gratefully accepted digital copies of 10 U.S. silent films previously thought to have been lost. The gift came from the Boris Yeltsin Presidential Library of Russia. “These are important films by significant directors and actors,” said Patrick Loughney, chief of the Library’s Packard Campus for Audio-Visual Conservation. “They are great discoveries.”

As many as 80 percent of U.S. movies from the silent era no longer exist in the United States, mainly because their producers destroyed or neglected them after they were screened. Most that do survive are in foreign archives as a result of having been distributed overseas. “Producers saw no corporate value in the films after they went out of distribution,” Loughney said. “Their attitude was, ‘If you liked the last Fred Astaire movie, wait until the next one; you’ll like that even better.’”

Loughney said the Library knew of the existence of the 10 silent films years ago from information exchanges facilitated by the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAP). The federation brings together institutions worldwide in the field of moving picture heritage, including Gosfilmofond, the Russian state film archive. Gosfilmofond told its FIAP counterparts about the U.S. films in its possession and has committed to donating digital copies of other “lost films” to the Library.

Beyond international contacts, copyright records are another “highly useful” source of information about silent films, Loughney said. Each of the films given to the Library by Russia was copyrighted. Indeed, copyright records are



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*The 1922 silent film Kick In is among the digitized motion pictures the Library received from Russia last fall.*

the only way archivists know that some films ever existed.

Loughney said that foreign archives formerly collected printed volumes of U.S. motion picture registrations to inform their own cataloging and preservation efforts. Doing so helped them identify U.S. films in their possession—a potentially complicated task, because many film titles were transliterated or changed for foreign distribution. Now that the registration volumes are out of print, Loughney said he eagerly awaits digitization of pre-1978 copyright records.

The next step for the 10 silent films recently donated to the Library involves finding the original scripts for them. The films received from Gosfilmofond have Russian-language intertitles—the cards that appear in silent films to explain dialogue or a scene. Simple transliteration will not necessarily do, Loughney said. “Elements such as humor, for example, are often lost in translation, which makes restoring intertitles difficult.”

For more details about the silent films, see [www.loc.gov/today/pr/2010/10-239.html](http://www.loc.gov/today/pr/2010/10-239.html). ©