



Dip Pens Recorded Many a Copyright

JUDITH NIERMAN

Some time ago while preparing to microfilm original Class D drama deposits in manuscript format from the Copyright Drama Collection (1901–1977), a Manuscript Division employee found an old pen inserted and forgotten between the pages. The pen was discovered in a manuscript for *What is Love?*, a play by George Scarborough registered in 1913. The writing instrument is the type used by Copyright Office clerks to record registrations in ledger books, which were used for record keeping from 1870 until 1940, and was probably the one used by a busy clerk to register Scarborough's copyright.

This pen is a dip pen, and it is important because it is the only extant example of a dip pen used to record registrations more than nine decades ago. Until the widespread use of fountain pens, dip pens were used to produce handwriting. They required the writer to dip the pen in ink at frequent intervals. The pen brought to light from Scarborough's deposit is 7½ inches in length and made of wood, cork, and metal. The shaft is wood, probably pine, and shows marks on the tip, perhaps from a little chewing. The section between the shaft and the writing tip is sheathed in cork. The writing tip, called the nib, is copper.

This style of dip pen is notable because it was the inspiration for the Copyright Office seal adopted for use on and after January 1, 1978, the date on which the 1976 Copyright Act became effective. The Act directed the Register of Copyrights to adopt a new seal to authenticate all certified documents issued under the new law.

The concept for the seal originated with a Government Printing Office (GPO) employee, George Winkler, who had designed seals for other government agencies. GPO staffers implemented Winkler's idea, which was to illustrate that a copyright exists from the time a work is fixed in a tangible medium of expression. The pen in the seal represented one just lifted from the paper at the moment a work is fixed.

With the passage of time, dip pens fell into disuse, and the symbolism in the seal for the 1976 Copyright Act was lost to many observers. The seal was replaced in 2004 with one designed by Visual Information Specialist **Charles Gibbons**. ©

This pen, discovered in a 1913 manuscript, is the kind used to record copyrights in the early 20th century. Also depicted is a glass ink well that is contemporary with the pen. Under the lid is a reservoir that contained ink.



PHOTOS BY CHARLES GIBBONS