

Employees Singing in the Hall? Not Here!

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Two memos recently discovered in the Copyright Office enlighten us as to a 1901 staff issue. It was not workload, position descriptions, cubicles, Siebel, or any question related to copyright law. It was singing.

A group of “lady clerks” was accused by a guard of singing in the South Corridor on January 21, 1901. The ladies, not content to let the accusation stand, wrote to Register of Copyrights Thorvald Solberg on January 23, 1901:

We approached the guard and asked him if this were true, to which he replied, “Yes.” We thereupon informed him that he was mistaken in his statement as there had been no singing by us at the time named or had we ever conducted ourselves in a loud and boisterous manner as set forth by him.

In reply to this, the guard reiterated his charge against us most emphatically, saying that while in his presence we were quiet but that upon turning the corner out of his sight into the South Corridor we had broken into loud singing. In answer as to how he could know who it was, he replied that he knew our voices. We asked if he knew our names as well and he replied in the affirmative.

In consequence of the above, we...protest against this unmerited and unwarranted charge. To confirm our own statements as to the absolute untruth of the charge, we call to your attention that on our return from luncheon we met in the corridor Mrs. C.R. Foster who is willing to attest

to the fact that at that time she saw and heard nothing out of the way in our conduct.

In addition we call to your attention the fact that at the same time [as] we were returning to the Copyright Department, a party of young girls was walking up the South Corridor...These young girls were singing. They were heard by others than ourselves....

Names not legible

The next day the Register responded to the chief clerk:

Following your telephone message of yesterday transmitting the complaint of the captain of the watch that some of the lady clerks of the Copyright Office, who were not named, had been unduly noisy from time to time in the corridor and had made a practice of congregating on the staircase at the southwest corner of the Library building and had caused annoyance by loud laughing and singing...I sent to the Copyright Office force a general note of admonition and caution as regards the practices complained of....

The explanation made by the three ladies seems to me an entirely reasonable one and such as would account for the mistake made by the watchman in supposing the three ladies charged were really implicated. It does not seem, however, from this statement that he had sufficient evidence to justify the charge.

Thorvald Solberg
Register of Copyrights



The muse Erato in “Lyric Poetry” by artist H. O. Walker observed the events in the South Corridor.