

Copyright Lore

■ Frank Evina

Mark Twain—Samuel Langhorne Clemens—is considered the greatest humorist of 19th century American literature. Readers of all ages are still captivated by his writings, especially about life on the Mississippi River. Detailed registration records for literary masterpieces, including *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* that were created during his most productive years, have been painstakingly handwritten onto 4-by-6 inch catalog cards and preserved in the General Index, the oldest segment of the historic Copyright Card Catalog. The General Index covers the period from 1870 through 1897.

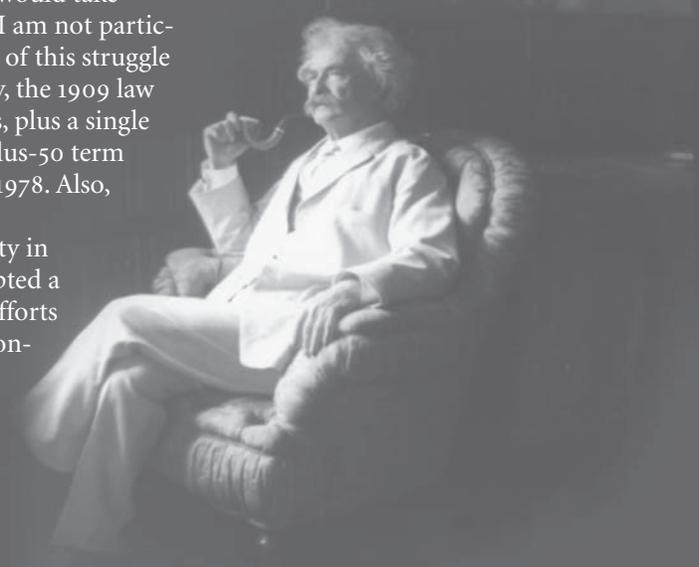
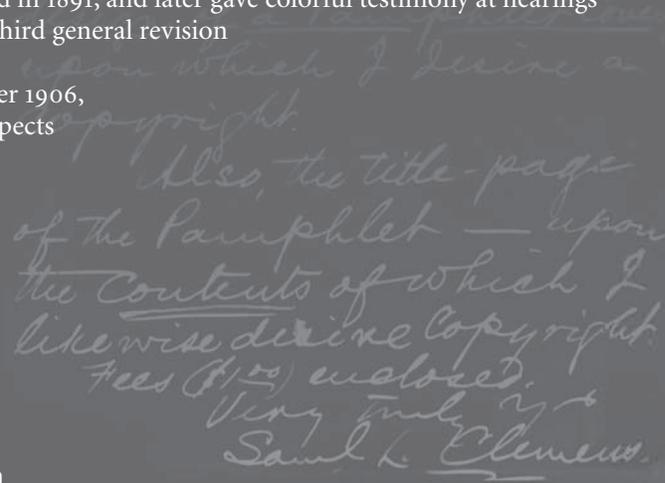
It is not commonly known to modern readers that Twain, famous for his razor-sharp wit and white suits, was also a stalwart defender of authors' rights. He lobbied hard for international copyright protection, which was finally enacted in 1891, and later gave colorful testimony at hearings before the U.S. Congress that led to the third general revision of the copyright law in 1909.

At a congressional hearing in December 1906, Twain professed ignorance of technical aspects of the copyright bill as presented, but was in favor of perpetual copyright. He stated he would compromise for a copyright term of life of the author and 50 years thereafter. He said:

"I like that bill, and I like that extension from the present limit of copyright life of 42 years to the author's life and 50 years after. I think that will satisfy any reasonable author, because it will take care of his children. Let the grandchildren take care of themselves. 'Sufficient unto the day.'

That would satisfy me very well. That would take care of my daughters, and after that I am not particular. I shall then long have been out of this struggle and independent of it." Interestingly, the 1909 law provided for a term of only 28 years, plus a single renewal term of 28 years. The life-plus-50 term was not established in U.S. law until 1978. Also, Mark Twain had no grandchildren.

At its annual meeting in New York City in 1957, the American Bar Association adopted a special resolution that "recognized the efforts of Mark Twain, who was so greatly responsible for the laws relating to copyrights which have meant so much to all free peoples throughout the world." ©



Samuel Clemens' monogram (left)—featuring his initials and those of Mark Twain—appears on this 1874 handwritten letter (right) to Librarian of Congress Spofford requesting copyright protection for a pamphlet and its cover design.