Barbara Ringer, 83; crafted updating of copyright law

By Matt Schudel
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WASHINGTON - Barbara A. Ringer had just graduated from Columbia Law School in 1949 when she joined the Copyright Office at the Library of Congress. Within a few years, she set about revising an archaic set of laws that had been in place since 1909 - before the invention of television or commercial radio, before copying machines and the modern recording industry, let alone cable television, home computers, and the Internet.

Ms. Ringer believed that copyrights should protect the creative people in American life - the authors, songwriters, and performers whose work was too often printed, plagiarized, or broadcast without permission. By 1955, she was writing papers and commissioning studies on how the nation's copyright laws should be revised. For years, Ms. Ringer devoted much of her time to drafting a new, comprehensive copyright act and educating members of Congress about why it was needed. Foreseeing the rise of the Internet, she inserted provisions into the law to protect authors from the unauthorized reproduction of their work, even by means not yet devised.

"The basic human rights of individual authors throughout the world," she warned in a 1975 speech, "are being sacrificed more and more on the altar of . . . the technological revolution."

Ms. Ringer spent 21 years drafting the legislation and lobbying Congress before the Copyright Act of 1976 was finally passed. She wrote most of the bill herself.

"It brought an essentially 19th-century law up to date with the late 20th century and 21st century," said Arthur Levine, a copyright lawyer who worked with Ms. Ringer at the Library of Congress. "I don't believe there would have been a Copyright Act if there hadn't been a Barbara Ringer."

The act established the principle of "fair use," whereby scholars and reviewers could quote briefly from copyrighted works without having to pay fees. But it is better known for allowing authors to retain greater control over their work.

Under the previous 1909 law, an author owned the copyright for 28 years from...
the date of publication. Unless the copyright was renewed, the work entered the public domain, and the author lost any right to royalties. With the 1976 act, which Ms. Ringer conceived, the author owned the copyright for his or her lifetime, plus 50 years.

"That was a monumental change," said Marybeth Peters, the Library of Congress's current register of copyrights and one of Ms. Ringer's proteges. "Barbara was an absolutely spectacular leader and thinker in copyright law. She was responsible for the first major change in copyright law in 70 years."

Barbara Alice Ringer was born in Lafayette, Ind., and was a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of George Washington University in 1945. She received a master's degree at George Washington in 1947, then went to Columbia as one of the few women in her law school class.

Ms. Ringer - who was 83 when she died April 9 of complications from dementia at a Lexington, Va., nursing home - loved opera, literature, and film and never wavered in her belief that artists should be properly rewarded for their work.

In 1971, after 22 years at the Library of Congress, Ms. Ringer was passed over for the job of register of copyrights, the nation's top copyright position. She had stellar performance reviews and had held the office's number two position for five years, but the post went to a man. Ms. Ringer filed a job discrimination suit, then moved to Paris for two years to work for the United Nations.

A federal hearing examiner found "a consistent pattern of discrimination" and concluded that Ms. Ringer had been wrongfully denied the position because she was a woman and because she was a vocal proponent of promoting African-Americans at the library. In 1973, a federal judge ordered that Ms. Ringer be installed as the register of copyrights. She was the first woman to hold the job.

She received the President's Award for Distinguished Federal Civilian Service, the highest honor for a federal worker, in 1977. She retired on her 55th birthday in 1980 and moved to rural Bath County, Va., where she lived alone on 100 wooded acres. She never married.

Ms. Ringer remained active in copyright law for years, attending international conferences and filing briefs with the Supreme Court. She returned to the Library of Congress in 1993 and 1994 as acting register of copyrights.

Mostly, though, she was content to stay in Bath County, where she catalogued the books at the local public library and established its audiovisual department - all for free.

Ms. Ringer amassed a collection of 20,000 movies and 1,500 books on film, all of which she donated to the Library of Congress.

"Her contributions were monumental," said Peters, the current register of copyrights. "She blazed trails. She was a heroine."
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