A PROGRAM OF EARLY AMERICAN FILMS

1920 - 1926

This unique collection of early American films provides a rare opportunity to observe part of the development of cinema in a period too spasmodically represented in today's archives and film society programs. It was a period of vigor and crudity, of invention and enterprise, and a period too, when the star system was beginning to come into its own. Our prints today are not only extremely rare, but they are also in wonderful condition. For the most part they have not been struck off from the original negatives, and the print of the W.S. Hart film in particular, is quite superb.

In furtherance of the interests of film history, we have mounted these films on three reels in chronological order, and will be running through with only two short intermissions.

1910 "THE RIVAL BROTHERS! PATRIOTISM" (one reel)

This early production by Pathé (director unknown) is quite certainly the most primitive of our films this evening, and by virtue of its flamboyant over-acting throughout, the most dated. Yet it has a sustained vigorous pace, and is of considerable interest. A Civil War story, photographed almost entirely out of doors, it stresses, in its very crudity, the tremendous void that lay between D.W. Griffith and other contemporary film-makers. D.W.'s "The Battle of a Year or Two Later" (still well before "The Birth of a Nation") can still put most of today's civil-war epic to shame. Not that we make any apology for "The Rival Brothers! Patriotism" - it has its place in an exciting period of film history, and holds the distinction of having beaten D.W. to the punch with a very typical Griffith civil war story.

1911 "VANITY FAIR" (Vitagraph, three reels) Released December 19, 1911. Produced by J. Stuart Blackton, directed by Charles Kent. Script by Eugene Walliam, from the novel by Thackeray. Starring HELEN GARDNER as Becky Sharp, with John Bunny as Joseph, and Alice B. Francis, Rose Tagley, Leo Belaney, Myra Johnson.

Vitagraph, in this period, concentrated primarily on comedy and costume dramas - the latter for the most part being based on classics of literature. The series had included an early (1906) Biblical story, "Daniel," the first American "Hans and Juliet" (1903), "Narcoxon and Josephina" (1906), "Elektra" (1906), "A Tale of Two Cities" (probably Maurice Costello's biggest success on the screen), and of course "Vanity Fair." All had been produced by J. Stuart Blackton, who continued to make movie history on into the early twenties with his all-color productions of "The Glorious Adventure" and "The Virgin Queen." Vitagraph released an average of five subjects per week in 1911, and "Vanity Fair" was chosen to spearhead the group for release during Christmas week. A surprisingly restrained blur in the trade press announced:

"This is the best possible and the Big Offering of the Season. It comes in just right for the holidays. The New Era feature film that will catch the holiday crowds."

The filmcompresses the long and involved story into three reels quite admirably. Save for a short sequence in a garden, the entire film is studio-made, including a quite creditable reconstruction of the aftermath of the Battle of Waterloo. Dramatically the film moves along quickly and holds attention throughout, due in no small measure to the performance of the beautiful Helen Gardner as Becky Sharp, Alice B. Francis gives a grand melodramatic performance of the old school in the closing reels, while John Bunny features quite prominently in the earlier sequences. (Only a featured player here, less than a year later Bunny went to England for Vitagraph to star in "Pickwick Papers"). Perhaps it is curious to pick out minor flaws in such a film, but it does rather seem as though Mr. Blackton confused Old England with the Deep South; his London accents are positively over-run with colloqued servants. Since this particular production, the film industry has given at least another four screen translations - by Edison in 1913, Goldwyn in 1915, an independent "modern" version with Gene Lee in the early thirties, and the famous technicolor "Becky Sharp" with Marion Davies in 1935. Currently two more remakes are on the "active planning" schedule - one by Paramount, and another by an enterprising British independent, Reuben.

(cont.)
1.2.2 "MY BABY" (American Biograph) Written and Directed by D.W. GRIFFITH (one reel) Photographed by G.W. BITTER

Starring MARY PICKFORD (the wife) and HENRY B. HAWKES (her husband)
(Ident. Burnnmore appears as a bearded extra in some scenes)

It would be a thankless task attempting to compress this period of Griffith's career into a few lines; fortunately it is also a task that is quite unnecessary, even on its own merits, "My Baby" is a charming and sensitive little film; tonight, seen in direct comparison with one and two reelers of the same period, and later, it emphasis once again Griffith's great leadership at that time. We won't belabor that point; made earlier in these notes; in any case, the film speaks for itself. Its story is simpler, its characters pleasing and tinged with Griffith's typical sentimentality. Mary Pickford has seldom been more appealing, and here appears in a mature romantic role in contrast to her usual "Cinderella" chores of those early years.

1.2.3 "UNUSUAL HOMESTAY" (Vitagraph: one reel) Starring Flora Finch and Charley Edwards. Directed by George B. Baker.

"Unusual Homecoming" is a fast, typical Flora Finch comedy, amusing in as much variety, change of locale and movement as would seem to be possible in a one-reeler. It concentrates more on situation comedy than on slapstick, and uses routines which, in much later years, came to be regarded as regular standing material — as for instance, the bits of business involving the changing of the natives with bagpipes. One or two shots are taken from a balloon, possibly the first time that this was done.

1.2.4 "LILLY'S DOCTOR" (Vitagraph: one reel) Starring Maurice Elvey, Hulda Costello and Clara Rice Young. Directed by Rollin Sturgeon.

Maurice Costello had been starring in Vitagraph one-reelers since 1906, playing light comedy and heavy drama in such subjects as "Doctor" and "Society and the Man," "Mama's Doctor," a film something in the tradition of "The New York Hat" with its mixture of comedy, drama and pathos, provides a good example of the sophisticated underplaying that made him such a popular star of his day. (We have been skipping very lightly over the interesting business of the "Better System" of this period; those of our members who are particularly interested in this aspect of these early films we would refer to the November issue of "Films in Review," which contains a fascinating and thoroughly authoritative article on the subject by Mr. Gerold McDonald)."


In 1915, Thomas H. Ince, formerly a Keystone director and now a partner with D.W. Griffith and Mack Sennett in Triangle Films, announced, concerning his expanded activities under Triangle Kay-Bee:

"The momentum of the thing is thrilling. We are in a most sweeping, creative period of photodrama and it would be surprising indeed if big things were not done.

Actually most of Ince's creative period was behind him. "The Wrath of the Gods" had been released in 1916, and 1916's "Civilization" — a massive, sincere, but unimportant epic — was merely supervised by Ince and directed by another. Ince remained active, certainly, until his death in the mid-thirties, but the "big things" of his particular group tended to come from William S. Hart himself.

It would be a mistake to consider Hart's early western features in the same light as today's minor "A" horse operas with Randolph Scott, let alone the Grade "C" westerns with Gene Autry et al. Hart, a former Shakespearean actor (and an ex-riding instructor), arrived in westerns via two-reelers around 1916. His first three features under Ince for Triangle — "The Disciple," "Hell's Hinges" and "The Aragon" — combined to build and establish his famous strong, silent, evangectic westerner — a type now often satisfied, and one that in less sure hands than Hart's has often seemed dated."

In 1916, Hart stood almost alone in the western field. Bronco Billy Anderson, who had never made features, had already retired; John Hays was on the ascent, but his films still tended to be built around folksy western humor in the Will Rogers style; as yet he was neither an actor nor an action star. The Range was his nearest rival; films like "The Spoilers" and "The Squawman" the nearest to "Grade A" westerns that the period offered.
Thus, although "THE RETURN OF DRAW EGAN" has a running time of only 60 minutes, it was one of the big box-office subjects of its day, sold on the same level as the films of D.W. Griffith and Douglas Fairbanks. It deserved, and received, exhibition and audience respect for greater than the average "A" western of the "Pony Express" caliber gets today.

For some time, Hart had been directing many of his own westerns, with the credit usually going to Ince. In the case of "The Return of Draw Egan", Hart is officially listed as director. However, Hart's wonderful placement of the camera, the real feeling of dust, space and the Old West with which he imbues the whole film, and the dramatic, measured pace, confirm beyond any shadow of a doubt that Hart had not suddenly jumped into a directorial spot, but had in fact been the guiding force behind his own westerns for some time. In vintage Hart all the way, both one of his best and one of his most typical films of that period. All the favorite Hart pace is there, all his classic situations. Photographically, it is often compared with Hart's great western "Fighting Eagle" (1917) which later became one of Ford's favorite camerawork ("Stagecoach", "The Iron Horse", "The Whole Town's Talking", "They Were Expendable!"). There are many strikingly dramatic compositions (Hart's toughing farewell to a dead comrade, Hart walking away from a group of cowpokes, framed into a panel effect by wooden buildings, the classic dual-in-the-street sequence in the final reel) and non space but intelligent use of the moving camera. In this latter category are some good panoramic action shots in the opening reel, interesting moving shots for dramatic close-up emphasis, and a particularly striking shot in the final reel as the camera breaks away in front of Bess as he emerges from the sheriff's office for the showdown with the villain.

Western devotees may be interested to note that a current "B" western, "Topaila" (starring Bill Elliott, the sole representative today of the Hart type of westerner) carries a plot-line quite identical to that of "The Return of Draw Egan". The formula has changed but little through the years ... only the quality has changed, and, alas, it hasn't changed for the better.

Hargary Wilson, Hart's leading lady in the film, is probably best known to film students as "Brown Eyes" of "Enchanted", while O. Gardner Sullivan (screenplay) was one of the industry's first real screenwomen. After a brief period with Edison in 1911, he became Ince's right-hand man, and wrote many of the Hart westerns. (One of his later writing credits - "The Fighting Eagle" - forms a part of our next program).

Following "The Return of Draw Egan", Hart went on to increasing success and box-office popularity. His roles often varied considerably, but the philosophy behind them - and the format of the pictures - never did. Following a break with Ince, Hart made a number of westerns in collaboration with director Lambert Hillyer at Paramount, among the best of them being "Travelling Caf" and "White Coal", both of 1922. By now westerns had undergone quite a change, and Hart's rather dowdly outlook was considered old-fashioned. Ben Segal and Hoot Gibson, with their more cheerful approach to western life, were about to usher in the more streamlined type of horse opera. Hart made a temporary withdrawal from the screen just as the western, spurred on by "The Covered Wagon", was entering its boom period. In 1923, the year of Grauman's "Peacock, 50 westerns were made. The following year the total was up to 125, a many of them of ambitious proportions. In late 1925, Hart essayed a comeback via "Chisholm Trail", released through UA and directed by King Vidor. His style hadn't changed, though the film was constructed on epic proportions and featured a gigantic land-crush sequence comparable with that in "Cimarron", it failed to restore Hart to a top box-office spot. Exhibitors and audiences similarly noted that Hart was showing his age, and Hart himself engaged in long legal battles with UA over alleged mishandling of the film. (In all probability, Hart's complaints were quite justified). In the late twenties the film was released by an independent distributor, with a new foreword added in which Hart appeared to speak a touching final farewell to his audience. (Three years prior to this, Hart's continued interest in westerns can be noted by the fact that he wrote the screenplay for a Georgia Oakley western, "Valley of the Mounted", of the dozen most glorifying personalities in movie history, he died in the early forties."

COMMITTEE OF THE FILM SOCIETY: Charles Turner (Chapman); Robert G. Youngson (Program Secretary); Herman H. Weinger; Bill Kelly (Hollywood Scores); Warren Rothenberger; William K. Everson (Program Notes).

AT OUR NEXT MEETING: WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 19th.

One of the most famous films of all time -
Sidney Olcott's "FROM THE MAXIERS TO THE CROSS" (1912)
And: A fine original toned print from a famous Cecil B. DeMille production -
"THE FIGHTING EAGLE", directed by Donald Crisp, with Fred LeRocque, Mayme Leather, Sally Rand, Son of Grauman. From the book by Conan Doyle.
Plus: A special presentation that we cannot reveal at this stage - a wonderful new short that we hope will delight our members, and which is being presented prior to its New York first-run.