For the two main features of this program, we go back to the great period of American cinema — 1925-26 — when comedies ruled on charm, wit and a little sentiment instead of sex, color and noise, and where spectacles were really spectacles, and not hole-in-the-corner productions enacted against process screens and phony background-drops. This is one of the strongest programs we've presented. Members who have seen either film before will, we feel, be happy to renew acquaintance. And those of you who haven't seen the films before have a real treat in store!


While "Cohen Saves the Flag" is good knockabout comedy in the old tradition, it has another aspect which — today — gives it especial added interest. Tom Ince and Mack Sennett were always very close friends, and (something that could never happen in today's cut-throat industry!) Sennett would often be invited by Ince to come over to his lot and take advantage of standing sets etc. for his own pictures. This film was made under those conditions. Ince was shooting "The Battle of Gettysburg", so Sennett brought along his stars and gag-men and shot a whole picture around the spectacle that Ince was creating. This, incidentally, was a very interesting period, when he was still a personal creator and very much of a pioneer. Later he formed cut work to direct in his employ, and became the first real production supervisor, a forerunner of Irving Thalberg and Dave Shippey. Apparently no prints of "The Battle of Gettysburg" have survived to date, and thus this Sennett comedy gives us a rare opportunity to see some of the really early Ince work. And there is nothing primitive about his spectacle; the exteriors are by the hands of the "Real" Ince, the battle scenes are extremely well staged, and there is often some extremely good camera placement and frame composition. Sennett's comedians fall on their faces in one corner of the screen, while behind them a whole city of the presence of vivid Civil War tunnels stretches across the Ince landscape. (Lumbers will probably spot landmarks from "The Return of Drew Flag", shown recently — and Ince's Pacific coastline property is readily visible in one scene). Otherwise, "Cohen Saves the Flag" is interesting in being one of several films made around 1913 that, curiously, satirized movie plots and situations that had scarcely had time to become cliches.

"ARE PARENTS PEOPLE" is a typical example of the light, charming, social comedy that has completely disappeared from the screen today. With a plot that is admittedly no more than pleasant trivialities, it speaks from first scene to last, waging an admonishing — yet friendly — finger at the audience throughout. Probably completely forgotten by the trade today (although it enjoyed considerable financial success on its release) it has nevertheless been completely taken to heart by lovers of the film, and one in constantly finding references to it in writings on film history. The February issue of "Films in Review", in an article tracing the career of its director, dealt with the film at some length. So does another article in the April issue of "Sight and Sound". The film marked Hal St. Clair's directorial debut at Paramount, following several years of directing Buster Keaton comedies, Rin Tin Tin and miscellaneous melodramas. It established, instantly, the 28 year old director as a fine comedy talent, and led to a wonderful series of frothy comedies including "The Grand Duchess and the Waiter", "A Social Celebrity", "The Showoff" and "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes". During the talkie period St. Clair remained active, but for the most part was given mediocre material to work with, including some inferior Laurel and Hardy subjects at Fox. But occasionally the old genius shone through: 1930's "Married Life Crime" as "One for the Road" and one of Hal's last films (he died in 1956) had much of the old comic invention and perspective. One of his greatest talents (and good examples of it are provided in "Are Parents People?".) was his ability to build minor incidents into ridiculous comedy sequences. The episode with Andre Beranger, as a satisfied Parnassus, is typical. Too, his intelligent cutting and pacing, and the sparse use of titles, help to tell the story visually, so that one hardly notices the rather static camerawork. (A nice little sequence shows Betty Bronson passing through several stages of determination and indecision merely by a close-up of her elbows in differing attitudes). Notwithstanding the smoothness of St. Clair's direction, the slick photography of Bert Glennon ("The Ten Commandments", "Magonamites", "Rio Grande") and the assured playing of wenjou, Florence Vidor and the rest of the cast, a good deal of the film's wholly engaging
appeal is due to the delightful performance of Betty Bronson. A unique product of the period, she was in her mid-teens when the film was made. Her seemingly perpetual gaiety attaches itself to every scene in which she appears, and yet with the slightest alteration of a facial expression she evokes effortlessly to a mood of abrupt pathos. Her best-known films of course were the two Parlo whistles, "Peter Pan" and "A Kiss for Cinderella", made by Herbert Bronson for Paramount.

With Bronson and Henjou, with St. Clair's slick yet sensitive style, and with a pleasingly nostalgic mid-twenties plot, "Are Parents People?" is a thorough delight in every department.

-90-

"E. U. H. U."
(1926)

Directed by Fred Niblo; 2nd unit Director - Reeves Eason.
Photographed by Karl Struss and René Guissart.
Scenario by June Mathis and Carey Wilson.

Starring EDMOND NOVARO, FRANCIS X. BURGHARDT and HAY MCAYO, with Betty Bronson & Carmel Myers.

As a book by Gen. Lew Wallace, as a play (William S. Hart and W. L. Hawn Farnham, in 1900, were two of many top stars to appear in it) and as a film, "Ben Hur" is of course world famous. An early one-reel version by Selznick created movie history by using the work without the consent of the Wallace Estate. (This little oversight was corrected in a turbulent law-suit, and spelled fines to the use of non-public domain literary works without payment to the author).

Little introduction is needed to Niblo's film of 1926, which is justly famed as one of the half-dozen biggest screen spectacles - and likewise one of the biggest moneymakers. It was made in the days when spectacles really were spectacles - no stock footage here, no process screens, no matte shots. The sets are enormous, the extras numbered in the thousands, and the two big action sequences - the battle at sea, and the chariot race - rightly listed among the spectacle classics of the screen. Whole units were sent overseas to stage the film, and then, in typical romantic fashion, much of the material was scrapped and re-shot in Hollywood.

King Vidor records in his book that he was originally slated to direct "Ben Hur", but declined. How much better a film it would have been had he accepted, is a matter for conjecture. Niblo is not a spectacular director, although he did stage everything with a lavish hand ("Three Musketeers", "The Outcasts", "Mark of Zorro") and there are moments in "Ben Hur" when he doesn't seem to know quite what to do with his vast grounds. Luckily these moments of indecision do not affect the afore-mentioned spectacle highlights, which were predominantly the work of 2nd Unit Director B. Reeves Eason. Eason was one of the best action and stunt directors in the business, and directed literally hundreds of westerns, serials and melodramas. He also supervised the action sequences for "Duel in the Sun". His battle scenes in "Ben Hur" are quite staggering - not since the fall of Babylon in "Intolerance" has blood flowed so freely from bodies impaled upon swords!

As a spectacle with religious undertones, "Ben Hur" is streets ahead of "The Sign of the Cross" and "Quo Vadis", let alone insignificant items such as "Salome" and "The Robe". For the most part it stirs emotions plot and action, and doesn't concern itself unduly with biblical material. Its racial angles in dealt with in quite strong terms however, and it will be interesting to see whether or not MGM's forthcoming remake retains this aspect.

Karl Struss, one of the greatest cinematographers of then all ("Sunrise", "Limelight") co-photographed "Ben Hur" - and, following in the wake of so many others, is now employed primarily on "M" and "G" Westerns. One of his most recent chores was to photograph, in association with another top-liner, Gilbert Warrington, a grade "B" $19,000 quickie entitled "Tessa of Lost Women" - which if not the worst film ever made, is certainly in second place!

In the interests of accuracy, we should record that our print of "Ben Hur" is a slightly condensed one, and is also a duped print. Since the original used many different tones, and also color in certain sequences, the duping isn't as sharp as it might be. The two big spectacle episodes were always, luckily, in black-and-white and thus they reproduce well. However, we should also record that the original negative of "Ben Hur" has now deteriorated to a point where it can no longer be used, and there appears to be few - if any - 35mm prints remaining from the 1923 sound rushes. Thus it appears that the complete original version will never again be shown (especially in view of the proposed remake) and we are very fortunate in having even this shortened version around to refresh our memories of one of film history's mightiest spectacles.

Committee of the Film Society: Charles Turner (Chairman); Harren G. Weinberg; Robert C. Youngson; Warren Rothenberg; William K. Everson (Progress Notes & Enquiries).