"LEATHERNECK" (Pathe, 1929) A Ralph Block production, directed by Howard Higgin; original story and scenario by Elliott Clawson; photographed by John Mescall; titles by John Kraft; edited by Doane Harrison

Starring WILLIAM BOYD, with Alan Hale, Robert Armstrong, Fred Kohler, Diane Ellis, James Aldine, Paul Weigel, Mitchell Lewis, Wade Boteler, Jules Cowles, Michael Visaroff, Philo Cullough, Joseph Gifford, Lloyd Whitlock.

"Leatherneck" is a fine and unusual action melodrama, by far the best of the several films made by the Block-Higgin-Boyd combination for Pathe in the late 20's. But like many good programmers in that confused period of the changeover to sound, it was somehow lost in the shuffle and never heard of again. It was one of sixteen films reviewed by the Film Daily on April 7th, 1929. It, and three other films, were part-talkies. (Reginald Denny's "Clear the Decks" was one of the others). The remainder consisted of five completely silent films (mainly independents and westerns), four synchronised films (Garbo's "Wild Orchids" being the most interesting) and three all-talkies. These latter included Clara Bow's "The Wild Party", touted by the trade reviewer as being so wild in spots that it was not the sort of film that "nice boys and girls" would want to see.

"Leatherneck" was released in part-talkies, synchronised, and entirely silent versions. Our print is completely silent. Unlike so many films in its category, it gives no impression at all of being merely a silent print of a part-talkie. The pace never slows down for talk. The camera is constantly mobile. The plot is told in images and movement rather than in dialogue. (However, it is true that this print is shorter than the original release print, and thus long talkie sequences may and probably have been deleted).

The Film Daily called it "A surefire money-maker .... the best Marine picture yet filmed .... has color, guts and action". The reviewer also commented on Boyd's fine speaking voice, and added that the heroine hummed pleasantly. Photoplay however, remarked that her voice was quite poor; a pity, as she (Diane Ellis) was a lovely girl and too accomplished a player to be discarded.

In many ways, "Leatherneck" is a really off-beat picture, and quite full of surprises. It starts off dramatically with a format obviously suggested by "Beau Geste". Three Marines - one dead, one barely alive, one insane - are discovered in the desert and taken into their fort. The big mystery of what really happened is then told in flashback. At one point in the film, it looks as though a rollicking Flagg and Quirt style may develop, but this mood is soon dispelled, and the plot reverts to really strong meat again. Its melodrama - International criminal Fred Kohler covets the White Russian heroine, and plots to abduct her as well as stealing her father's potash mine in Manchuria - is supplemented by good revolution scenes, and some touching romantic interludes. The sets are solid and elaborate, the photography strong and dramatic (particularly in a mass-execution sequence), and throughout there are constant reminders of scenes in established classics - "Greed" and "The Love of Jeanne Ney" in particular. This is no lazy borrowing, but rather the careful application of real style to a film that otherwise might have been just another programmer.

"Leatherneck" is certainly not a great film -- but it's much better movie-making than many of the big prestige films of the 20's -- and much more entertaining to boot. The print, a toned original, is in fine shape.
"CALIFORNIA STRAIGHT AHEAD" (A Universal Jewel, 1925) 7\(\frac{1}{2}\) reels; A Harry Pollard production; story by Harry Pollard and Byron Morgan; directed by Pollard; Scenario by Raymond L. Shrock and Beatrice Van; edited by Edward L. Shroeder and Daniel Mandell; art director - E.E. Sheely; photographed by Virgil Miller and Gilbert Warrenton.

Starring REGINALD DENNY with Gertrude Olmstead, Frederick Esmelton, Charles Gerrard, Tom Wilson, Frances Raymond, Lucille Ward, John Stepling, Hayden Stevenson, and Arthur Lake as an extra.

During the 20's, Reginald Denny made comedy after comedy for Universal - the best single one probably being "Skinner's Dress Suit" with Laura La Plante, which this society ran some years ago, and which we hope to run again soon. For the most part they were directed either by William A. Seiter or Harry Pollard, and they made a small fortune for Universal. Often quite elaborately done, and far from being quickies; they were nevertheless produced fairly cheaply, and were tremendously popular for a decade. Strange that today they should not only be neglected, but almost forgotten.

Denny's character was something of a composite of the earlier Douglas Fairbanks (of the pre-1920 period) and Wallace Reid, with perhaps a dash of Danny Kaye at times. (There were obvious similarities between Denny's "Oh Doctor" and Kaye's "Up in Arms"). Like Fairbanks, Denny was breezy, optimistic and usually of an unstrained but obviously wealthy background that permitted him to devote his existence to the pursuit of pleasure and adventure. If he had to prove himself, it was usually only to his girl, and not to himself -- there was none of the small-town-boy-makes-good quality in Denny's films. There of course, he differed with Wallace Reid, but his basic plot-lines were quite similar. For example, "California Straight Ahead" has much in common with Reid's "Excuse my Dust" -- except that the Denny film is MUCH better than that very dull opus.

There really isn't too much plot to "California Straight Ahead". It's good natured, charming and often quite crazy, with sequences of fine slapstick, and a persistent jazz-age exuberance. The title derives from the popular 20's custom of driving across the Continent by automobile -- but there's much more to it than that. There's an amusing disrupted wedding at the beginning, following a well-done runaway trailer sequence. There are wonderful shots of convoys of old cars coasting across the desert. There's a fine slapstick sequence when a circus of wild animals breaks loose in an auto camp. And there's a typical Universal bang-up finish of an automobile race. Universal really gave customers their money's worth in the 20's -- reputedly they were stingy on star salaries, but they jammed so much into their films, and never minded spending an extra dollar on sets, that movie patrons never had cause for complaint.

"California Straight Ahead" was a huge success in 1925, although some critics thought it a trifle overlong. Actually, at 8 reels (or 7239 feet) it is a trifle protracted, and would be funnier if there were a little less of everything. But that's a minor quibble. It's certainly a vastly enjoyable film, with some really funny moments (for once a movie chimp gets some real laughs instead of just eating up footage), and the photography is often quite fine. There are some good process shots too, and some good trick stuff in the camera when the chimp appears to be smoking. (Trick stuff is perhaps the wrong term, since it is so well done that one hardly notices it).

The titles are pleasantly - and deliberately - corny, and Reginald Denny's playing is as assured as ever. (Denny is currently doing "My Fair Lady"; his last films included "Fort Vengeance" and "World For Ransom").