1922

DOWN TO SEA IN SHIPS

Starring
RAYMOND MCKEE

DIRECTOR: ELMER CLIFTON

Produced by The Whaling Film Corporation
Scenario by John L.H. Pell; photographed by A.G. Penrod, with Paul H. Allen
as assistant on the whaling sequences; released in 1923 by Hodkinson;
production staff included P. Major, Leigh R. Smith, Phelps Decker, Paul F.
Maschke, Harry Thompson, Elizabeth Nusgrave, George H. Sistare.

Cast: Thomas Dexter (Raymond McKee); Patience Morgan (Marguerite Courtot);
Charles Morgan (William Valcott); "Dot" Morgan (Clara Bow); Henry Morgan
(William Cavanaugh); "Scuff" Smith (Leigh R. Smith); Patience as a
child (Elizabeth Foley); Thomas Dexter as a child (Thomas White);
Judy Peggs (Juliette Courtot); Nahoma (Clarice Vance); Town
Grier (Curtis Pierce); "Henry" Clark (Ada Laycock);
Jimmy (James Tufler); Jake Finner (Patrick
Hartigan) Captain of the Charles Morgan
(Capt. Jas. A. Tilton); Samuel Siggs
(J. Thornton Baston)

Also

PASS THE GRAY
Starring
MAX DAVIDSON
MARTHA SLEEPER

and

MOVIE NIGHT
Starring
CHARLIE CHASE
"PASS THE GRAVY" (MGM, 1927; released 1928; 2 reels) Written and produced by Hal Roach; directed by Fred Guiol; supervised by Leo McCarey; photographed by George Stevens. Starring Max Davidson, with Martha Sleeper and Spec O'Donnell.

For many years, Max Davidson has been discreetly forgotten, doubtless because his stock-in-trade was the exuberant projection of a Jewish stereotype. Racial gags ran rampant in the comedies of the 20's (as did gags kidding religion, sex, politics, disease, insanity and other topics which became taboo for comedy treatment after 1933), and because there was no concentration of fire on any one group, no one was offended. Davidson himself wasn't particularly funny, but he did manage to appear in some very funny comedies -- his own starring series for Roach for example, as well as full length comedies in which he made "guest" appearances for individual gags. (Typical of the latter is Alan Hale's "Risky Business" for DeWille, which had a wonderful Harold Lloyd type finish. Davidson did a thriving business in the street, renting chairs to spectators who were breathlessly expecting the building-climbing players to fall to their deaths!) "Pass the Gravy" admittedly milks its single gag situation a little too dry - but the individual gags along the line are often quite wonderful.


Like "Pass the Gravy", "Movie Night" is a Hal Roach comedy that hasn't seen the light of day in some 25 years. It's quite a find -- and of course of particular appeal to the brand of movie maniacs (the term is used with affection) who comprise the Huff Society. Charlie is seen as a movie fan who runs into difficulties taking his family to see a double-bill consisting of Garbo's "A Woman of Affairs" and Keaton's "The Cameraman". Regrettably, no excerpts from either are included in the short. Having unsuccessfully tried to palm his adolescent son off as an eight-year-old, Chase runs into more trouble inside the theatre. It's a most enjoyable little comedy, and considerably funnier than Benchley's similar "A Night at the Movies", also for MGM.

A word or two of warning concerning these two prints. Both have recently been printed up from the original negatives, and thus are in perfect condition -- except that they only have flash titles (i.e., two frames of each title). Due to the fact that titles tend to deteriorate first, they are usually removed from the negatives when these are placed into storage. Two frames are retained for possible restoration later. It is possible to read flash titles - but it gets to be a bit of an eye-strain, and in the case of these two films the titles really aren't that important.

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INTERMISSION
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"DOWN TO THE SEA IN SHIPS"

For many years, "Down to the Sea in Ships" was one of those "lost" films that historians acclaimed and sighed over nostalgically. Too often, when these lost classics are rediscovered, there turns out to be a very good reason for their having been lost, and invariably they disappoint. Not so "Down to the Sea in Ships", which is every bit as remarkable a film as one has been led to expect. Apart from being a tremendous boxoffice success of the early 20's, it was also
the film that helped to make a star of Clara Bow. More importantly, it is the film that should have made a top-flight director of Elmer Clifton. Why it failed to do so is a real mystery, for it is a beautifully - and professionally - made film, and quite superior to all three versions of "Noby Dick". Clifton had started out as an actor under Griffith (with romantic leads in both "The Birth of a Nation" and "Intolerance") and also as an assistant director to Griffith - most actively on "The Idol Dancer" and "The Lowe Flower", both made just prior to "Down to the Sea in Ships". Certainly this film provided a real testing ground for any director, made on a limited budget (though never showing it for an instant) and minus studio facilities. Clifton came through with flying colors, and yet, strangely, fell back into programmers again almost immediately. In the sound period he restricted himself almost entirely to westerns and serials, the quality of which often varied astonishingly. When he wanted to, Clifton could turn out the best action material in the business (e.g., his 1938 serial "Secret of Treasure Island") -- and yet his westerns could be devoid of any pace and excitement (as was his "California Frontier", a Buck Jones oater of the late 30's). Clifton remained in harness until the end however, and died only a year or two ago.

Clifton's apprenticeship to Griffith is most apparent throughout all of the film. The lovely New England landscapes, often beautifully framed, recall "Way Down East" time and time again. And the general editing pattern, and especially the tense cross-cutting of the climax, is essentially Griffith. Admittedly, there are moments that lack directorial finesse, and it is too much to claim that Clifton was a "great" director on the strength of this film; but it is not too much to claim that the promise was there, and it is both a puzzle and a tragedy that it never developed further.

"Down to the Sea in Ships" is the sort of Americana that has totally vanished from the screen today. Like "Way Down East" and "Tol'able David", it is a wonderfully accurate reconstruction of a period, a way of life, and of people. The faces are real New England faces. The manners and mores are those of New England in the 19th century. It is a gentle and loving portrait - the puritanism is noted, but never condemned. And of course, the film has tremendous documentary value. Shot entirely in and around New Bedford, the film utilises all the original landmarks. Interiors of homes are just that, and not studio duplicates. Most of the citizens of New Bedford were "conned" into working in the film by Clifton, and even to putting money into it. The whaling footage, all supervised by people to whom whaling had been a way of life, is devoid of any kind of fakery and still packs a tremendous thrill. There was a great deal of publicity at the time about players and cameramen risking their lives to secure these thrilling scenes -- and for once, it is possible to believe every word of it.

The pictorial beauty, the thrills and the documentary values are of far more importance than the rather old-hat melodramatic story-line, which incidentally brings in a surprisingly blatant race angle. The villain seems to be a villain almost solely because he is concealing his Oriental origin, and there are frequent titles referring to "....the sinister yellow strain...." and such like. Nevertheless, the story is good rousing stuff, with some grand fights and other excitements on tap every reel or so.

Our print runs for nine reels, but is a dupe made from an original 35mm release print, and little appears to be missing. The original copyright length of 12 reels doesn't mean too much, since measurements by "reels" is purely relative. A reel can be 200 feet or 1100 feet. Quite often in the twenties, distributors would keep their reels to about 800' each, building up an extra reel or two, so that on paper they had a "super-special" instead of just a
"special". This may well have been the case here --- especially since the film was made, and even premiered (at the Schubert-Majestic Theatre, Providence, R.I.) without any distribution agreement having been reached. Obviously there are odd scenes missing here and there, but not enough to make up the difference between our nine reels and the copyrighted 12 reels.

Incidentally, this print also serves to confound those film fanatics who insist on a 16 frame-per-second speed for ALL silent film. This is a ticklish question, and one too big to be tackled in these notes. Obviously each silent film has to be handled individually, and projected at the speed that seems best. But here, printed right on to the film, are 1923 instructions to projectionists to show the film at the rate of "1000 feet per eleven minutes" --- which is 24 frames per second, or sound speed. This of course is not an earth-shaking discovery, for this is or should be ancient history to all who run old film. But it is proof positive, we feel, for the doubters.

The ship Charles W. Morgan, used in the film, was, in 1922, the oldest whaling vessel afloat. Her skipper, James A. Tilton, had hunted whales for 40 years, and went along as technical adviser — as well as playing himself in the film. A.C. Penrod, Clifton's cameraman, has written a harrowing account of the filming of the whale hunt (shot in San Bay in the Caribbean, just South of Haiti) which is unfortunately far too long to reproduce here (and, edited, it would have no flavor) but which we'll have on display at the showing.

Clifton has written: "The Rev. Thumber of the Seamen's Bethel, who, for over thirty years, with his choir has wheeled his little organ down to the wharf in a barrow to chant his blessing for those sturdy men who go "down to the sea in ships" repeated this benedictive process for our benefit. From the time that prayer was given, I never doubted for a moment the ultimate success of the picture. There was too great a sincerity in the minds of the people to permit failure".

Clifton, incidentally, almost outdid Griffith in his use of literary and other quotes in his titles; "Moby Dick" of course being one of the most oft-quoted sources.

Reviews of the film were unanimous raves. Typical are these excerpts from the "Moving Picture World", now the Motion Picture Herald:

"Clifton's new production is a masterpiece .... when the ten best of the current season are sorted out, it shouldn't be overlooked ... one of the most marvelously amazing attractions ever offered. In its class, it stands alone — an unquestionable masterpiece. A picture with real heart it is at the same time a great education and a remarkable entertainment vehicle. Its value goes beyond that of the theatre, for it will create talk and discussion that will live for a long long time. It is big in everything. For sensation, "Down....." is the best yet."

The review concludes with a comparison to "Way Down East", and considers the film a real bonanza for whatever distributor snagged it. (Presumably the Whaling Film Corporation made an exceptionally good deal with Hodkinson; otherwise it is hard to understand why some bigger distributor didn't snap it up immediately).

Finally, we'll pass on an amazing — but completely true — anecdote told by James Card some two years ago. For years, Eastman House had wanted this picture — and there were rumors that Fox (who had made a feable and quite disimilar remake in the 40's) had a print. Eastman House put in a request for it. Back came the word. Of course ... delighted ... the print is on route. Unfortunately, when it came it proved to be the sound picture with Lionel Barrymore. Back wrote Mr. Card thanking Fox for their generosity, but pointing out that it was the silent version he required. Fox it seemed, did not have Clifton's film — but they had
a logical solution. "Keep the 1949 version," they advised, "and play it with the sound turned off!"

Next Program: **Monday December 23**, in room 10-B

**LEWIS MILESTONE**'s

"THE GARDEN OF EDEN" (1928)

with Corinne Griffith
Lowell Sherman
Charles Ray

**D.W. GRIFFITH**'s

"THE PRIMAL CALL" with Claire McDowall

**THOMAS H. INCHE**'s

"THE SWITCH TOWER" with Frank Borzage

Program notes and enquiries: **Wm. K. Everson**, Manhattan Towers Hotel, 2156 Broadway, NYC 24

Committee:

Dorothy Lovell (Art Work); Edward Gorey; Charles Shibuk

ERRATUM: In our initial notes for "Down to the Sea in Ships", we erroneously referred to Marguerite Courtot as Madeleine. And in our enthusiasm for the film itself, we rather unjustly neglected her very fine performance. Certainly her performance is by far the best in the film - quiet, authoritative, often quite sensitive. Too, her fine features - handsome rather than beautiful - are a tremendous asset. Seymour Stern has remarked on her startling resemblance to another New Englander, the wife of Edgar Allan Poe.