"MY PAL THE KING" (Universal, 1932) 6 Reels; directed by Kurt Neumann; story by Richard Schayer; photographed by Dan Clark. Starring TOM MIX with Mickey Rooney, Noel Francis, Paul Hurst, Loretta Young, Jack Kirkwood, Finis Barton, Stuart Holmes, Jim Thorpe, Christian Frank, Clarissa Selwyne, Ferdinand Schumann-Heink, Wallis Clark and "Tony".

Universal, which has always made some of the very best program westerns, was the only major company that maintained its horse opera schedule at full blast when sound came in. MGM abandoned "B" westerns completely; Rko did temporarily; Warners cut down on them; Paramount's Zane Grey westerns of the period were not really "B" epics in the usual sense.

At various times in the early days of sound, Universal had three really top-line western stars working for them, all with their own production units - Buck Jones, Ken Maynard and Tom Mix. Jones' westerns were unusually intelligent, and often (particularly in the case of films like "Stone of Silver Creek") recognisably patterned after Bill Hart. Maynard's were actionful and bizarre; he often wrote his own stories, and sometimes went quite haywire. His "Smoking Gun" is the sort of western one can imagine Erich von Stroheim turning out, if he were given his head! In addition, Ken had a strange (and amusing) habit of ad-libbing most of his dialogue. Mix's series for Universal was more elaborate by far than those of Maynard and Jones. His westerns were also fairly un-typical of westerns of the early thirties; they remained Mix westerns, which means that they were actionful, escapist and colorful, designed to be darned good shows -- designed, in fact, to be as much like Mix's silent westerns as possible.

And "My Pal the King", far more than the other half-dozen in this series, is a spectacular throwback to Mix's silent heyday at Fox. It's an extravaganza rather than a horse opera - "The Prisoner of Zenda" "Robin Hood" and "The Mark of Zorro" all rolled into one. As with most Mix films, nobody ever gets really hurt - he downs his enemies via nuances and colorful tricks rather than with a six-gun. And stunts are worked into the plot purely for their own sake. Mix was in his fifties when he made this film, and thus he is far from being as agile as he was in such great ones as "Sky High" and "The Great K & A Train Robbery". Nevertheless, it is still recognisably Tom and not a double that leaps from Tony to a stagecoach, and climbs up castle walls via a lasso. Mix looks in remarkably good shape for his years, and it is both sad and astonishing to realise how he aged in just a few years. His last film, "The Miracle Rider", made only three years later, was a sad disappointment, he looked old and tired, and did not even deliver his lines intelligently.

"My Pal the King" cunningly manages to look considerably more expensive than it was, through shrewd utilisation of standing interior and exterior sets. Universal's "European town" set, used in "All Quiet on the Western Front" and all the Frankenstein ecies, makes a particularly impressive back-round to much of the action. So do lavish interior sets. Most of the outdoor scenes seem to have been taken right on Universal's back-lot, so location expenses were nil. And with all the corner-cutting, it emerges as a really handsome and impressively turned out little picture. One of its prime assets is the fine photography of Dan Clark, Mix's favorite cameraman from the old Fox days, and one of the best cameramen in the business -- although since this print is a first-generation dupe, some of the sparkle that distinguished Clark's work has gone. But the vigor, composition, and frequently changing angles remain.

Mix's pleasing personality still comes through well, helped a little by dialogue which puts up his international popularity, and takes one out of the picture a little at times. Another strange little scene has Mix riding up to the camera, addressing the audience directly, and then whirling around on Tony and riding back into the action again.

I may be a trifle over-enthused about this film. I saw it first, as a child of four, some 26 years ago. Until last night, I had never seen it again, though I had remembered it vividly. Running it off last night, the quarter of a century seemed to dissolve away completely, and I was a little boy again ... and happy to find that the things that paid off for me then are still exciting today. It's grand kiddies' matinee stuff.

Next program Tues. next April 26th.
Jacques Feyder's CRAINQUARSELLE
Jack Nuttall, Mar Nayvo - THE MAD WHIRL.
While "My Pal the King" didn't entirely please me as a child - I preferred my westerns unmixed with Rutania - it impressed me sufficiently for me to remember it much more vividly than the more orthodox sorts of Hoot Gibson and Tim McCoy. But, alas, the scene that impressed itself most vividly on my mind is no longer there. In the film's climax, Mickey Rooney is rescued from a water-filled dungeon by Tom Mix. The arch-villain is brought in, and the hero's aides promptly consign him to this watery grave! He is toppled into the dungeon, and the camera lingers on the surface long enough (before the trap door is slammed shut again) for the tall-tale air bubbles to tell us that the scoundrel has breathed his last. It seemed a rather unportmanlike attitude for a cowboy hero to take towards a vanished foe, and I recall being much moved by the villain's plight. In fact, not until Jack Holt walked to the gallows at the end of "The End of the Trail", a few years later, did any western provoke any kind of emotional response in me. Also, tv today has decreed a more honorable code for the westerner, resulting in this strange little reshuffling. As the villain is brought in, new dialogue has now been dubbed in, indicating that no harm will come to him if his death has been eliminated. (None of the Mix Universal films have played New York tv yet, although they have played elsewhere on tv in the U.S.) Apart from that one scene, and a re-done main title giving Mickey Rooney added prominence, the print appears to be complete and intact, with that lovely old Universal trademark at the beginning.

Mickey Rooney as the boy king who learns about democracy is just fine, and James Kirkwood is obviously havin'- the time of his life as the scheming villain. Stuart Holmes as Black Michael in the old "The Prisoner of Zenda" is equally at home as a villainous Baron. And not the least of the film's delights are the energetic old musical agitators.

"My Pal the King" is slow in starting, but winds up with a rousing alambang Fairbanksian climax. A long way below the standard of Mix's silents, it is still a most enjoyable frolic. Mix never gave a hoot about authenticity or poetry or realism - that he left to Hart. He just wanted to put on a darned good show, and one that the kids would enjoy. He always did - right up to the last, in this film, I think. 

"MAD WEDNESDAY" (Howard Hughes, 1947) Written and directed by Preston Sturges; Technical director, Curtis Courant; starring HAROLD LLOYD with Frances Ramsden, Jimmy Conlin, Raymond Walburn, Edgar Kennedy, Jack Morton, Rudy Vallee, Arline Judge, Franklin Pangbourne, Lionel Stander, Margaret Hamilton, Al Bridge. 8 reels.

Lloyd's "comeback" picture, produced the same year as Chaplin's "Macabre" and 25 years longer in production than the Chaplin film, "Mad Wednesday", earlier known as "The Sin of Harold Diddlebukk", was freighted with typical Hugosian problems from the beginning, and finally went into release - briefly - in the early 50's, only to be withdrawn almost immediately. It is surprising how many people never saw it, and thus although it's the neatest revival we've ever had, we think it well worth a place on our program. It hasn't yet appeared on tv, and in all possibility won't. Harold Lloyd's success-phobia strangely parallels that of his screen character; anything that isn't assured of a 100% success he wants no part of. Hence the withdrawal of the unsuccessful reissue of "The Freshman", and of "Mad Wednesday". Hence too Lloyd's long delay in doing anything with his long completed feature compilation of excerpts from his silents. In the 50's - the early 50's that is - when "Mad Wednesday" was first released; it seemed funny but no more, screen comedy has gone downhill so fast that less than 10 years later it already seems quite wonderful, though the Sturges satire stands up better than some of the Lloyd slapstick. There are some real dillies in the Lloyd sequence - and Lloyd's abhorrence to complicated talent for pathos and serious acting results in some genuinely moving scenes with the heroine. As you probably know, the film opens with the last sequence of "The Freshman", and the matching-up (aided by Lloyd's unchanging appearance) is remarkably skillfully done.