Tonight's John Ford compilation is in no sense an attempt to cover his major works, or even any particular aspect of his work. Rather, in view of the Museum of Modern Art's current Ford cycle, is it a reminder of some of the many interesting films not included in that cycle.

As it happens, although it was not designed that way intentionally, our selections do tend to illustrate themes that have predominated in his work: Man vs. Injustice ("The Prisoner of Shark Island"); Man vs. Nature ("The Wagon Master", "Air Mail") and Man vs. Man (The war stories: "Drums Along the Mohawk", "They Were Expendable"). Of course, those categories are pretty general, and with a little imagination six films out of every ten could probably fit into one classification or another; but Ford's films as a whole do seem to slip quite snugly into those groupings far more than, say, the films of Milestone, or King, or Wellman.

Program, in order of screening:

"THE WAGONMASTER" (Argosy-Bko Radio, 1950) EXCERPT

One of the least-appreciated of all Fords, "The Wagonmaster" rather got lost in the shuffle between his three big John Wayne cavalry epics, "Fort Apache", "She Wore a Yellow Ribbon" and "Rico Grande". "The Wagonmaster" is a quiet, simple, austere little western — the sort of western Bill Hart would have approved of, even though a little of Ford's romanticism might have irritated him. It's short on action and long on mood; the images are lovely, the ballads of the sound track thoroughly pleasing, and the villainy (a gentle plagiarism from Ford's own "My Darling Clementine") rightly never allowed to appear more formidable than the difficulties presented by nature. One feels that Ford made "The Wagonmaster" only because he wanted to, as a sort of relaxation between the rigors of turning out the "money" westerns.

"THEY WERE EXPENDABLE" (MGM, 1945) EXCERPT

The war films of the 40's, on the whole, date very badly. Those that seemed weak then are quite unbearable today. Even some that seemed good at the time now seem cliche-ridden and dull. "They Were Expendable" is a happy exception: at the time it seemed like one of the very best war films, and it holds up beautifully today. Restrained and surprisingly unsentimental (for Ford), it is beautifully photographed (one of the last jobs of that fine old Bill Hart cameraman, Joe August) and well acted. It was not too popular at the time, perhaps because of its slowness and relative lack of action, although to have included more action would have falsified it. The few combat scenes are slammed over with a tremendous punch, however, and the only criticism one can make of them is that occasionally the images, with the too-perfectly placed shell-bursts, veer a little too much to the "heroic" paintings of wartime artists. However, they are so effective that one is hardly inclined to quibble. The cast is full of grand old-timers — including Robert Barrat as General MacArthur.
"THE PRISONER OF SHARK ISLAND" (20th Century Fox, 1936) EXCERPT

The story of Samuel Mudd, the doctor who was wrongfully convicted as a conspirator in the assassination of Lincoln, "The Prisoner of Shark Island" was one of Ford's half-a-dozen best pictures. Quite apart from the fact that it represented one of Hollywood's best essays in reconstructed history (the episodes of Lincoln's assassination and the trial and execution of the conspirators were beautifully done), it was also a fine dramatic adventure yarn. (When I first saw this as a child of seven, I knew nothing of its period of history, but it seemed to me one of the most exciting things I'd ever seen. And the same excitement stands up just as well today).


Although interesting in its perhaps too methodical description of a way of life, "Drums Along the Mohawk" presents a somewhat phoney and distorted picture of the Revolutionary War, and seems to suggest that Irish-Catholicism was the backbone of the nation. Somewhat maudlin, and with far too many pauses for Arthur Shields to sound off from the pulpit, it makes a sorry comparison with Griffith's epic of the same aspect of the war, "America". Nevertheless, as a film from Ford's peak period (1939-1940) it has considerable interest, and the photography is often superb. A lot of the beauty of this camerawork was lost when the film was reissued to theatres in black and white, but our print fortunately is in color. Incidentally, it's interesting to note that "The President's Lady", a Fox film of the early 50's, dealing with Andrew Jackson, patterned a lot of its key sequences, in detail, after equivalent sequences here.

- INTERMISSION -


After Lindberg's flight to Paris the movies not surprisingly went in for a spate of aerial films. "Photoplay" indeed predicted that the aerial hero would completely replace the cowboy star, and make the western obsolete. Basically the aerial films fell into two camps, the lesser of which (in terms of output) was the World War One melodrama. And admittedly, this cycle — "The Dawn Patrol" etc. — was still a hangover from the enthusiasm generated by "Wings" and "Hell's Angels" as much as it was a direct derivation from the excitement generated by Lindberg. But, the other and more prolific camp was something else again: this dealt with the birth and growth of civil aviation, and the armed forces' experiments with new types of planes, new bombing tactics, and
so forth. While this cycle was only at its height until about 1933, it nevertheless continued right through the thirties via films like "Ceiling Zero," "China Clipper" (one of the best) "Men With Wings" and "I Wanted Wings," until given new impetus by World War Two.

Columbia and Metro seemed to turn out the most (and best) of the aerial epics in the 1929-1933 years, and they all seemed to be written by one man — Lieut. Commander Frank Wead. "The Flying Fleet" was his; so was "Hell Divers" and "Dirigible." And of course, "Air Mail." (Wead also worked on "They Were Expendable," and was himself the subject of a recent Ford biopic, "The Wings of Eagles"). While "Air Mail" isn't quite as elaborate as the MGM entries, it's still a mighty rugged and well done film, well up the kind of adventure yarn one expects from Ford and Wead, and immeasurably better than the similar but pedestrian "Blaze of Noon," made by Paramount in the 40's. Unlike the Paramount opus, which spent most of the time on the ground -- talking -- "Air Mail" keeps most of its action aloft. Like so many films built around early days of aviation, it has its airport surrounded by mountains and high-tension wires, and constantly menaced by hurricane and snow. If it seems that more planes crash than get through, one must put it all down to dramatic license! In any case, all the air films of the early thirties (even the later ones like "Wings of the Navy") now seem so incredibly dated in a technological sense, that one unconsciously places them in an era far more distant than they actually belong, and thus the mortality rate among planes is easier to accept.

"Air Mail" certainly has some excellent aerial thrills and stunts, well staged crashes, and other excitements -- including a couple of stock shots from "SOS Iceberg"! The back projection is much above average for 1932, the miniature work is often first-class, and in any event much of the thrill material is the real thing. Presumably the stunt flying was done by Paul Mantz; look closely when Pat O'Brien looks into some pilots' lockers in the last reel, and you'll notice Mantz's name on the last one he inspects.

The film may be formula stuff, but it's put over with a real punch. However, it is less recognisably a Ford film than most of his service pictures. This was a strange, transient period for Ford, and he was making some very odd and untypical pictures. Wallace Beery's "Flesh" was another off-beat one of the same period. Just how Ford came to be assigned to "Air Mail" is a bit of a mystery too, since he hadn't been with Universal in years -- not since the old Harry Carey westerns -- and he hasn't made a film for Universal since, either. One wonders why the property didn't go to William Wyler, who was then a Universal contract director. There is comparatively little background music (though it's used most effectively in Russell Hopton's death scene), but in the photography (there are some beautiful compositions) and in the use of familiar supporting players (Francis Ford, Jack Pennick), Ford's handiwork is more apparent. Wead, by the way, got a solo credit for dialogue, even though the scenario credit is shared with Dale Van Every; on the strength of this film at least, Wead appears to have been quite a pungent writer. There are some very snappy lines here and there, and an occasional borderline wisecrack which has that nice raw flavor of the early thirties.

Although our print has been well-used and has a few scratches and splices, it is on the whole in good shape, and is quite complete -- from the fine opening titles (with sound effects of the pony express and the locomotive finally merging into the roar of a plane) to the cast listing at the end. One or two scenes have usually been excised from this film's 16mm prints in the past -- the pilot's death in the blazing plane for example, or on the theory that it might be too rough for home or school use -- but happily all such scenes are intact here. And finally -- what a pleasure it is to see again the two young ladies from "The Old Dark House" -- Gloria Stuart and Lilian Bond. Certainly not a major Ford work, "Air Mail" is one of his least-known films, and on that score alone, well worthy of revival today.