WILLIAM S. HART

When we've played William S. Hart movies before - "Hell's Hinges", "Return of Draw Egan", "The Fugitive", "Tumbleweeds", "The Sheriff's Streak of Yellow" - we probably said all that needed saying about his largely unrecognised talents as a director, as well as his more generally appreciated talents as an actor. Since tonight's compilation says all these things for us again -- far more strikingly than we could in words -- and pin-points all the virtues, as well as the weaknesses, of Hart's portrait of a fighting yet sentimental westerner - we'll content ourselves with just covering the films themselves in these notes. Our program, incidentally, is a little shorter than usual - deliberately. Any compilation of Hart material is bound to seem a trifle repetitious after a while, and so we've kept our films to 2 1/2 hours. There'll be more Hart in the future - including the complete "On The Night Stage", represented in excerpt form tonight, and possibly (on one of our third programs) "Hell's Hinges" - which is one of Hart's best, and which we haven't shown for over four years.

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Program in order of screening:

"MR. SILENT HASKINS" (Triangle-Ince, 1914) Directed by Hart, with Rhea Mitchell. (Also known as "Dealing for Daisy", "The Gambler's Love", "His Royal Flush"). Although somewhat pedestrian, and more dependent on drama than action, this is a good and typical early Hart, with some nice camerawork (the long pan over the faces of the antagonists was a particularly typical Hart shot) and the usual lively crowd scenes. The pictorial quality is quite fine. The leading lady, Rhea Mitchell, came back into the news a couple of years ago when she was murdered by her Japanese house-boy.


Released in April of 1916, between "The Apostle of Vengeance" and "Hell's Hinges", "The Captive God" came out when Hart was really at the peak of his creativity. It was an off-beat picture for Hart (he played a Spanish orphan raised as an Aztec Indian) and Hart himself always disliked the picture intensely, considering it one of his worst. For some years I assumed that this might be because he hadn't directed it himself, but now it is quite apparent that his judgment wasn't faulty! I studied the entire original negative on a viewer, expecting originally to print up the whole subject, but it was frankly too dull and poor a subject to be worth the very considerable expense involved. So, we settled for the 5th and final reel -- which is probably the best reel of the film, but still shows the rather formless construction and haphazard direction of the whole. Actually, the whole simple story could have been told quite easily in two reels, and much of it is padding. Hart himself, though he makes a fine figure of a man as the Indian, seems uncomfortable in the role, and gets no opportunities in the way of good dramatic scenes. His closeups are few and far between too. However, it is an interesting little reel, especially as no footage from this film has been seen around in years. Swickard, who directed, seems to have been a washout all around; he was a singularly poor character actor too. However, at the time Triangle were astonishingly enthusiastic about the film, exceeding even their normally wild publicity to acclaim it one of the great masterpieces of all time, the "most stupendous
production ever", and with "thousands of players" in the battle scenes! Some of the sets are reasonably impressive - but only by Triangle standards. By the way, those of you interested in the eternal problem of projection speeds might care to note this direct quote from the original Triangle bulletin on the film:

"The two big battle scenes - one early in the picture and the other in the last reel - should be speeded up considerably. In the first battle scene, the warriors are seen descending from the roofs of their houses. Here the movements are particularly slow and to give the needed atmosphere of excitement and natural confusion, the machine should be speeded up considerably. Following the title "The Alarm", shoot it through fast. Interior scenes should be slowed up".

"BAD BUCK OF SANTA YNEZ" (Triangle, 1914) Directed by Hart; with Robert Kortman. 2 reels.

One could hardly find a more characteristic example of Hart as "the good badman" than this lively - and moving - little legend of an outlaw's better nature brought to the surface by the plight of a stricken child. The tragic climax is the kind of finale that most people (in later years) came to regard as the traditional Hart ending, although actually its use by Hart was quite sparing. Santa Ynez was the name of a canyon right outside Inceville; it bears the same name today, and its hills remain relatively unchanged, although Inceville itself has now been obliterated by a highway and sundry gas stations and hot-doggeries.

INTERMISSION

"THE SAGA OF WILLIAM S. HART" (Compiled by Blackhawk Films, 1959)

This fascinating survey of Hart's work covers most aspects of his films, and brings in tantalizing excerpts from 11 of his films, some familiar, others less so - ON THE NIGHT STAGE, THE ARYAN (with Bessie Love - how we'd like to see all of that one!), HELL'S HINGES, THE DESERT MAN, THE SQUARE DEAL MAN, THREE WORD BRAND, O'MALLEY OF THE MOUNTED, THE TESTING BLOCK, THE TOLL GATE, WOLF LOWRY and WILD BILL HICKOK. The material is arranged chronologically, and linked by very informative titles with which we have only one quarrel -- the use of the phrase "romantic west" in describing Bill's movies. Hart's West was austere and rugged, poetic in its way, but never romantic. But why quibble? With the limited collector's market for which this compilation was intended, Blackhawk could have taken far less trouble and sold just as many prints, and their sincere effort to present a comprehensive survey of Hart's career really rates a vote of thanks. Some of the original material was obviously in bad shape, with sections missing or decomposing, and thus key bits of action here and there are frustratingly absent, but by and large the sequences chosen are highlights of their respective pictures. There is room for improvement -- one or two sequences go on a little too long, and there is perhaps one fight scene too many -- but on the whole it's a fine job, representing the best of Bill Hart and his right-hand man and favorite director, Lambert Hillyer, and the best too in really virile subtitle-writing.

TUMBLEWEEDS (Hart-UA, 1926) Dir: King Baggott, Wm. S. Hart
We have covered this film quite extensively in previous notes, but as Hart's last western, it obviously has to be represented in this program. Our sequence is the wonderful landrush episode -- a superbly constructed piece of mass action, with overall excitement brilliantly welded to the individual vignette of sheer poetry -- as in the wonderful shot of Bill seeming to fly through the sky as he races his pony over the crest of a hill.

WILLIAM S. HART - 1939 Shot in 1939 as a foreword to the reissue of "Tumbleweeds" Hart's description of the film - and his farewell to his fans - is, as we stated on a previous occasion, probably the most moving 8 minutes on film.