THE THEODORE HUFF MEMORIAL FILM SOCIETY

November 17, 1959

"THE FUN FACTORY" (1959; 3 reels)

While admittedly superficial, this quick survey of Mack Sennett's career covers quite a bit of territory, from the Biograph days onwards, and is generally amusing and informative. Ben Turpin, Chaplin, Mabel Normand, the Keystone Cops, Madeleine Hurlock, Phyllis Haver, Gloria Swanson and Ford Sterling are among the Sennetionaries represented -- plus Mack himself of course, and Fatty Arbuckle. A good deal of the material we have already shown in complete form, but there should still be a few sections that are new to you.

"THOSE EXCITING DAYS" (Warner Bros., 1954; one reel) Written and produced by Robert G. Youngson.

We've shown quite a few of Bob Youngson's shorts in the past - both the condensations of silent features, and the reconstructions, via newsreel material, of specific eras and events from the teens and twenties. Generally speaking this latter classification was by far the more satisfactory of the two, the others tending to be vastly over-written, and "Those Exciting Days" is one of the best shorts of its type. The material is extremely well chosen and edited, and the narration only occasionally over-sentimentalises.

"HIT 'IM AGAIN" (Warner's, 1943) With Larry Semon, Oliver Hardy, Dir: Semon

A one-reel condensation of a Vitagraph 2-reeler of 1923 ("Horse Shoes"), this is rather curiously edited, and one feels that some of the better elements may well have been scissored out. Nevertheless, there are some wonderful gags, and a really wild slapstick chase finish. For once, Semon is quite funny in himself instead of being merely the peg on which gags are hung. The narration seems somewhat infantile, but luckily, once it gets going, there isn't too much of it.

"TOWED IN A HOLE" (Hal Roach-MGM, 1933) Dir: George Marshall; with Laurel and Hardy, Billy Gilbert. 2 reels

Those who don't like Laurel and Hardy (and those unhappy creatures do exist, albeit in very small numbers) may find this little item a trifle tedious -- but the rest of us can rejoice in that it is pure, unadulterated Laurel and Hardy nonsense. Apart from Billy Gilbert, who has a couple of lines at the beginning, L & H are on screen alone the whole time, milking a bare minimum of gags, and a single situation, for all they are worth. The childish behaviour, the fits of temper, the retaliations, the looks of self-pity and horrified realisation from Hardy, and the dumb bemusement of Laurel ... all are here in full measure. There's plenty of straight slapstick too, and the usual dousings with mud and paint -- but "Towed in a Hole" is notable mainly for allowing L & H to relax with their fooling, to take their own sweet time and build their gags as they feel they should be built. It has the look of a "rough draft" which, when finished, seemed too good to spoil by smoothing off the rough edges, and so was mercifully left alone, with all its imperfections -- and its many delights.

* INTERMISSION *
"THE LITTLE CHURCH AROUND THE CORNER" (Warner Bros., 1923)
Directed by William Seiter; from a story by Olga Printzlau and a play by Marion Russell; photographed by Homer Scott and Edwin DuPar; with Claire Windsor, Kenneth Harlan, Hobart Bosworth, Pauline Starke, Walter Long, Alec B. Francis, Cyril Chadwick, Winter Hall, Margaret Seddon, George Cooper, Stanton Heck, Fred Stanton, Winston Miller, Mary Jane Irving.

"The Little Church Around the Corner" is frankly hokum -- sentimental, melodramatic hokum -- done with flair and style, the sort of picture that was an ever-reliable attraction, especially for the small towns, in the 20's. Well mounted, neatly directed, and with an especially strong cast of "reliables", it was extremely well received, and "Photoplay" went so far as to consider it the best thing of its kind since the Chaney-Meighan "The Miracle Man" of a year or two earlier.

For director William A. Seiter it immediately preceded his "The Mad Whirl", shown by this society earlier in the year, and it wasn't really his forte. Seiter was (and is) fine at slight comedy, small-town charm and light dramatics; he kept his pictures skimming along and often came up with deft little touches which were doubly surprising (and effective) in view of the lack of substance to his material. But "The Little Church Around the Corner" calls really for a director with more emotional depth -- a Borzage or a Brenon -- and as a result, it doesn't always move of grip the way it should. And the climax is in any event contrived, since it brings a "miracle" in from left field without any real justification.

However, one shouldn't perhaps judge a programmer, however good, by the standards one applies to a "Miracle Man" or a "Seventh Heaven". It should be enough that, within its self-imposed limits, it is a technically most proficient and dramatically very satisfying film, certainly well above the general run of pictures of its budgetary category. Photographically it is both imaginative and sumptuous, this being the work of two really top-grade cameramen, Homer Scott and Edwin DuPar, who often worked together. (Scott was especially in demand for "small-town" and rural stories). The mine disaster scenes are particularly well directed and photographed; the crowd scenes remind one not a little of the earlier similar scenes (the strike) in "Intolerance", and the much later ones in "How Green Was My Valley".

Kenneth Harlan (he never seemed to change, and here looks just as he did in our "Dick Tracy" material last month -- even though two decades lay in between) makes a likeable hero, and of course Hobart Bosworth is grand. The only disappointing aspect of the cast is the rather limited use made of Walter Long, who is thoroughly unpleasant as usual, ill-treats a little dog almost as soon as he is on the screen, and is generally a thorough rotter -- but who just disappears before the end of the picture. One wonders whether he mightn't, in his accustomed style, have tried to assault one of the two heroines somewhere near the end? This version is somewhat shorter than the original release prints, and such a sequence would be a "natural" for eliminating since a subject like this would find a ready market in schools and churches. However, this is pure conjecture on our part, and aside from always looking forward to seeing Walter Long lustfully chase the heroine, there is no positive basis for such a suspicion. But we can't help wondering ........

--- Wm. K. Everson ---

Next program - Fri. Nov. 27 - HOUDINI in THE GRIM GAME (1919) and great thrill scenes from the 20's.