An evening of early Westerns -- 1912-1917

"A Temporary Truce" (Biograph, 1912) Directed by D.W. Griffith; photographed by G.W. Bitzer; with Charles (Tex) Gorman (Jack Hardy); Blanche Sweet (Mrs Hardy); Charles Matthes (Mexican Jim); Claire McDowell (his wife); George Nichols (Posse leader); Christy Cabanne, Bobby Harron, Jack Pickford, Wilfred Lucas (as Indians); Alfred Paget (Indian; and member of the posse); Mae Marsh (girl attacked by the Indians). One reel.

After "The Massacre" and "Fighting Blood", "A Temporary Truce" is a rather minor league Griffith western, and a small-scale affair. Nevertheless, it has the usual fine camerawork, last-minute rescue, and a rather surprising way of punishing the villain. This is one of the few times that Charles Gorman ever had a lead at Biograph; a former cowboy, he was actually used very little in western roles, and was limited for the most part to minor supports in Biograph films. (Additional notes; see p.2)


Very few of the fantastically successful Broncho Billy westerns seem to have survived today -- and most of them that have seem to be the earlier one-reelers like "Why Broncho Billy Left Bear County" which are neither very exciting or impressive. Yet the good, later two-reelers, of which this one is a fine example, certainly show why Broncho Billy, as the first western star, was so enormously popular. "Shootin' Mad" is well written, well photographed, and well-directed throughout -- if it doesn't have the polish or complete conviction of the later Bill Harts, it is still miles ahead of most of the other horse operas of the period, and especially those being shot here in the East. Anderson himself -- beefy, amiable, a little clumsy -- may hardly seem the ideal western hero, but after all, in this period he wasn't following precedents -- he was setting them. He directed many of his westerns himself, wrote most of the stories, and supervised them generally; considering his few years in the film business, and his lack of any first-hand knowledge of the West, he did a really remarkable job. (Some of you may recall the filmed interview with Broncho Billy we shot a couple of years ago; if you also recall his manner of speaking in that film, and the phrases he used, you'll agree I think that he has unconsciously retained most of the mannerisms of his screen character.)


Made during Hart's 2nd year in pictures, this is probably the first time he used what was to become one of his favorite themes -- the honest Westerner who goes East, and, backed by all his simple virtues, outsmarts the city slickers who would take advantage of him and the heroine, Bill, as here, usually wound up with a title saying that he was heading back to a country he understood! Because of its city background, "The Ruse" lacks both the traditional Hart action (until the climax) and the rugged poetry he always brought to his horse operas -- but it's still a darned good little melodrama, and reminds one again what an extraordinarily accomplished director Hart was from the very beginning of his career.

--- INTERMISSION ---
"WILD AND WOOLLY" (Paramount-ARTCRAFT, 1917) Dir: John Emerson; scenario by Anita Loos from a story by Douglas Fairbanks; starring Douglas Fairbanks, with Eileen Percy, Sam de Grasse, Charlie Stevens, Tom Wilson, Monte Blue, Bull Montana. 5 reels.

While Bill Hart frequently toted his six-shooters to the East for a much-needed clean-up, Doug Fairbanks—up until "The Mollycoddle" at least—spent a good deal of his time as the brash city boy, with time and money on his hands, who went West and proved himself more than capable of handling the worst the West could dish out. Hart used good sense and integrity; Doug relied on enthusiasm, infectious good humor, and about four times as many dialogue and explanatory titles as two-gun Bill ever found necessary. But the end result was the same—a pleasing change of pace for both stars.

"Wild and Woolly" was Doug's 15th picture, but only the 2nd for his own production company, releasing through Artcraft. At the time it was probably his very best to date, although three of the Triangles—"His Picture in the Papers", "American Aristocracy" and "Manhattan Madness"—were close runners-up. And if it was eclipsed by the later "Till the Clouds Roll By", almost without question the best thing he ever did, it still remains one of his most delightful frolics, with a pace, zip and sense of fun that all but vanished with the coming of his swashbucklers.

Apart from a spectacular leap or two, "Wild and Woolly" has less acrobatics than most of Doug's earlier films—but its pace never lets up, and Doug's breezy personality has never been better. The scene of Doug, fully attired in western garb, galloping gaily through Central Park, sets the mood of the whole picture—a mood that extends to the villainy too. Sam de Grasse, playing it straight as the rascally Indian agent, just can't be taken seriously; he tells you what a louse he is right away by stubbing out his cigar on one of his hapless Indian serfs. And the fun and games get added punch from unexpected quarters—for all his pleasing qualities, Doug's hero gets to be a bit of a boorish cad at times, and one sympathises for his "friends". And to prevent his captive from getting away at one point, Doug calmly shoots the unarmed victim in the leg—an effective, no-nonsense method that today's TV code boys would hardly consider cricket.

To those of you who aren't confirmed addicts of the pre-D'Artagnan Doug, and who look for "art" in the silent cinema (one such approached us at the height of a Stroheim harangue in "The Lost Squadron" and wondered why we were playing that when we could show "A Nous la Liberte"!), we recommend a careful study of the film's cutting pattern. In the number of its images (if not in intellectual content), and in the brevity of certain shots, "Wild and Woolly" almost rivals Eisenstein in complexity. Indeed, I can think of few films which demand silent speed as much as this one. At sound speed it becomes a hysterical relay race which exhausts one even more than "Intolerance" run at the same speed. Needless to say, we're running it at 16 frames per second this evening—and even at that speed, it gets a little breathless at times!

-- Wm. K. Everson --

An after-thought on A TEMPORARY TRUCE. Since this print has only a couple of titles, it is necessary to explain that the villain was originally introduced as a habitual no-good, married to Claire McDowell, wanting Blanche Sweet. And Blanche's almost happy look as death approaches in the battle scene was explained by a title where she says that she isn't scared, because soon she'll be with her mother (who had recently died).