A Program of "gentle" comedy from the thirties -- Charlie Ruggles -- George Stevens -- Leo McCarey -- Laurel & Hardy -- W.C. Fields -- Charlie Chase

VAMP TILL READY (Hal Roach-MGM, 1936) 2 reels; directed by Charles Parrott (Chase) and Harold Law, with Charlie Chase, Wilma Cox, Zeffie Tilbury, Brooks Benedict.

Tonight's program was put together rather hurriedly, due to my being out of town for a week. "Vamp Till Ready" was selected because I remembered it as being a darned good Chase -- and it is. But when I screened it just prior to writing these notes, the night before the show, it seemed to strike a little too familiar a note. Without having taken time to check up, it seems possible that we may already have shown this at the Huff, or the Film Group, within the past two years. If so, an apology for such a slip; but it's an extremely good Chase, with his likeable and debonair personality coming through so well that it's really no chore to see it a second time, if indeed we have shown it before. Wilma Cox incidentally, makes an especially appealing heroine, and it's surprising that we've seen no little of her.

MEN O'WAR (Hal Roach-MGM, 1929) 2 reels; director, Lewis Foster; story by Leo McCarey; with Laurel & Hardy, James Finlayson, Charlie Hall.

One of Laurel & Hardy's earliest talkies, "Men O'War" is also one of their least familiar comedies. Its last unveiling at the Huff Society was some six years ago. Somewhat uneven in its pacing, a little untidy in its slapstick, over-emphatic in its prolonged dialogue gags, it's certainly not one of their best, but it remains a lot of fun and offers a great deal of typical L&H material -- ranging from Hardy's courteous gallantry to the inevitable destructive exchanges.

FLIRTING IN THE PARK (RKO, 1933) Producer: Lou Brock; director: George Stevens; story by George Stevens and Fred Guiol; photographed by Len Powers and Jack Mackenzie; with Eddie Nugent, June Brewster, Carol Tevis, Grady Sutton, Brooks Benedict, Charlie Hall, Dave O'Brien. 2 reels.

Stevens' "middle" and "late" periods are well known to us today, as is his early period as a cameraman on Hal Roach comedies and westerns. Less familiar is his transition period, when he was just getting established as a director, and thus his two-reeler has considerable curiosity value and historical interest. It's certainly no masterpiece of a comedy, but it does have an interesting blend of style. Not dissimilar to "Men O'War" in its story and even in individual gags, it certainly shows that Stevens still had a great deal of affection for the old Roach gags, and he even retains the nucleus of a Roach crew to put them over -- even to using Charlie Hall as the traditional fall guy. Yet there's little real slapstick, and it ends at exactly the point where "Men O'War" starts to build up to its climax. In its leisurely pace, its overall gloss and its often very pleasing pictorial compositions -- the canoes gliding along beneath the trees -- it seems to suggest the quieter, more sophisticated Stevens films that were to follow. In any event, it's certainly an oddity worth seeing.

COMMERCIALS: An amusing collection of 1961 tv commercials that went wrong -- Warren Hull fluffing lines, foolproof equipment that fails to function, immaculately groomed young salesladies who become tongue-tied by their impossibly complex sales-pitches; former western star Bob Allen lousing up an auto commercial with an expletive that would soon disillusion any youthful admirers of his old horse operas now on tv.
SIX OF A KIND (Paramount, 1934) Dir: Leo McCarey; story by Keene Thompson and Douglas MacLean; photographed by Henry Sharp; with Charlie Ruggles, Mary Boland, W.C. Fields, Alison Skipworth, George Burns, Gracie Allen, Bradley Page, Lew Kelly, Irving Bacon, Ed Gargan, Walter Long, Robert McKenzie, Grace Bradley, Phil Tad, William J. Kelly, Tammany Young. 7 reels.

Once again we learn the lack of wisdom in booking a film without screening it first; usually such a procedure results in the non-arrival of the print, and a hasty search for a substitution. In this case, the result is only disappointment. Those who saw the film back in the 30's remember it with affection as being hilarious. The names in front of the camera— and behind it—suggest a rare comedy treat. Unfortunately the film does not live up to those expectations. The disappointment is, however, only academic; it is still a good enough comedy so that we would have played it anyway. Fields' pool-table skit alone makes the film a treat. But we suggest you keep your anticipation in check, as the film is just a programmer, and a fairly unambitious one that seldom realizes its full potential. Of course, it is no crime for a programmer to look like a programmer; in the thirties, all of the major companies were turning out product on a conveyor-belt basis, utilizing all their contract talent (directors, writers, players) to the fullest. Top names then were never a guarantee of top product, something we tend to forget in these later years when "B" pictures were obviously that, and put together with "B" names.

Certainly SIX OF A KIND has its moments—many of them. Charlie Ruggles and Mary Boland play together delightfully, as always. Fields, though wasted and restricted to the latter half of the film, has two great routines that bring the film to vigorous life right away, and even in his less distinguished footage, still throws away lines with wonderful abandon. But Burns and Allen, cast as nuisances, are literally just that. Gracie Allen's two or three really amusing lines certainly don't compensate for the rest of the dated medium that they generate.

But—it's short, snappy. It has Fields and Ruggles. That already puts it four strikes ahead of almost anything playing on Broadway today.

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Wm. K. Everson

FILM GROUP There is a meeting at the Adelphi Hall, this Friday, 7:00 p.m. Program as yet not final, but the usual pot-luck compilation of silent and sound material. Also, as some of you know, I spent the last week in Kentucky participating in a D.W. Griffith memorial celebration in Oldham County, where he was born, spent much of his life, and is buried. Apart from a lot of Griffith activity on tv, radio, newspapers, screenings etc., it was (for me) a most moving encounter with some fine people who knew Griffith, grew up with him, and worked with him. Since a lot of people seem to be interested in hearing about this, Julius Postal suggested I report on the function to the Group—which of course I'll be glad to do, backed up by film and stills photographed down there. However, this should occupy only a small portion of the evening; we still plan to make the showing of film the primarily function.