Four Reels of Primitives - 1899-1912

"Primitives" has always seemed an unfair and derogatory term for early films that achieved astonishing degrees of technical virtuosity, and apart from their sheer nostalgia, tonight's "primitives" offer quite remarkable illustrations of the imagination and sophistication that went into so many pre-1912 films. They really deserve far more descriptive comment than we have room to give them here, but for purposes of identification, here is a brief rundown in the order of showing:

A DESPERATE ENCOUNTER BETWEEN BURGLARS AND POLICE: Edison, 1905.
Apart from a painted stone wall that shakes rather violently, this simple and well-paced little chase film, shot on New York's East Side, holds up well. The street scenes are fascinating, and every time I see it I wonder what became of the little girl in the white dress, with a big bow in her hair, who is so obviously frightened by the staged arrest in the last scene, runs away, and yet lets her curiosity conquer her fear so that she is edging back into camera range again at the end.

BOER WAR: Biograph, 1899.
One of the many "staged" war newsreels prevalent at the turn of the century, this battle between Scotch Highlanders (one of whom grins amiably as he charges past the presumably "neutral" cameraman!) and the Dutch was filmed somewhere in New Jersey.

WINTER BATHING: Biograph, 1905.
An interesting and well-photographed coverage of Coney Island's Polar Bear Club.

WINTER STRAWRIDE: Edison, 1906.
Beautifully photographed, and perhaps the most happily - and at the same time, sadly - nostalgic item on the program -- a record of an earlier time, and simpler pleasures, that are both gone beyond recall.

HOW JONLS LOST HIS ROLL: Edison, 1905.
Amusingly animated titles add a lot to a pleasing little comedy.

POOR ALGY: Edison, 1905.
A simple comedy of chase and misunderstanding, nicely photographed in charmingly rural Bronx interiors.

THE WHOLE DAM FAMILY: Edison, 1905.
Built around a popular and mildly naughty song of the period - "The Whole Dam Family" - this is not only a good humor film, but one with some excellent closeups, more animated titles, and even superimposed titles.

Independently made by a lesser company, this was shot in Brooklyn. The villain, Bill Carter, subsequently made films at Kalem and then was forgotten.

AN UNAPPRECIATED JOKE and STREETCAR CHIVALRY: Edison, 1900.
Subtle and still quite timely in their humour, these comic vignettes are set in a replica of a New York streetcar (this was four years before the opening of the subway) and offer some interesting ads of the period -- including a plug by Edison for his own products!

TURNING THE TABLES: Edison, 1903.
Filmed in West Orange: boys vs. a cop at the swimming hole.
RECTORS TO CLAREMONT; Edison, 1899
A trip from Rector's Restaurant in Times Square to the Claremont Inn; a charming glimpse of the last stand of the horse and buggy days, with carriages still outnumbering streetcars and autos, and a lovely Central Park free of taxis, hot-dog paddlers, balloon stands and muggers.

THE WIDOWER; Gaumont (France), app. 1912; one reel.
The 1912 date for this lovely little French short is pure guess work, and if it is indeed earlier, then it is all the more remarkable. It has so much of the mood and pace of Griffith's Biograph that one cannot help but feel that its unfortunately anonymous director must have seen and studied Griffith's work. But the point is -- when? It more than suggests D.W.'s 1908 "The Adventure of Dollie", and if "The Widower" was made right afterwards, then it suggests a rare talent indeed. But regardless of influence or lack of it, it's a most impressive little film, intelligently and affectionately put together, with sensible story, nicely framed shots, good editing, and a neat use of some very cinematic landscapes. The ending is most decidedly off-beat too.

HIS DAY OUT; King-Bee, 1917, 2 reels. Directed by Billy West, starring Billy West, with Beatrice Joy, Oliver Hardy, Billy Quirk, Leo White
Of all the Charlie Chaplin imitators, Billy West was far and away the most successful -- and the most outrageous. It's really incredible to think of such an outright steal of costume, makeup and gag being legally permissible, and of course Chaplin did try to stop him. In terms of pure slapstick, West is very funny indeed, his timing and mimicry a masterly imitation of Charlie's. But of course he made no attempt to copy Chaplin's dramatic elements, and never ventured into pathos. Speed, slapstick and outrage were his stock in trade, and even in these he wasn't completely original; "His Day Out" for example seems to have been influenced not a little by Fatty Arbuckle's "Walter's Ball" of the same year. One wonders too, how much Oliver Hardy -- a stock villain in the series -- may have contributed in the way of ideas? Quite a few of the routines turn up later on in the Laurel & Hardy films. The King Bee series made excellent use of many of the up-and-coming comedians of the day -- Charlie Chase was in some of them -- and in this particular one, Billy Quirk goes through his famous swish routine -- so outrageous that one is laughing too much to be offended! Truly, nothing was sacred in comedies in those days, and how much funnier they were for it, despite admitted lapses in taste.

In certain areas, West's comedies even outdrew Chaplins, and his King Bee series (there were about 20 in all, many of them made in Florida) made a lot of money for all concerned. So much so that West wanted a new deal, couldn't get it, and forthwith set up a new company. The second batch of West comedies was inferior, and his stock fell, although presumably the Chaplin routine couldn't have lasted indefinitely anyway. West was last heard of in the late 1940's, when he was discovered running the commissary at the Monogram Studio in Hollywood.

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MARRIED? (Herman F. Jans Productions, 1925) Directed by George Terwilliger From a story by Marjorie Benton Cooke; Aset. Director - Ben Silvey Scenario; Jean Conover; titles by Harry Chandley; photographed by Louis H. Dunmyre and Walter Blakely. 5 reels.
The cast:
Marcia Livingston (Constance Bennett); Dennis Shaw (Owen Moore); Joe Pinto (Nick Thompson); Madame du Pont (Julia Hurley); Chuck English (Antrim Short); Harvey Williams (Frank Walsh); Judge Tracey (John Costello); Mary Jane Paul (Betty Hilburn); Clark Jessup (Gordon Standing); "7-11 Sadie" (Helen Burch); Maid (Rafaelo Ottiano)
"Married?" isn't a film that many people have heard of, and we're certainly not suggesting that our rediscovery of it heralds another lost masterpiece, but it is a fast-moving, enjoyable "fun" programmer from the 20's -- a sort of mating of Elinor Glyn and James Oliver Curwood, with a rousing Pearl White climax. And in its casual talk about marriage and divorce it could hardly be more typical of what was considered smart and sophisticated in the society of the period.

There's nothing quite as bad or as boring as a really cheap silent quickie -- those with no stories, no stars, no action, cheap sets and a plethora of lengthy titles to pad out the footage. And the independent companies turned them out by the dozen in the 20's. But Herman Jans was one producer who evolved a neat formula for making cheap pictures that didn't look like cheap pictures, and which in terms of surface production values could often hold their own with the major studios. "Married?" is an example -- and a good one -- of this kind of picture.

Jans was concerned only with audience and exhibitor appeal, not with prestige or the critics. He always used at least a couple of fairly big name stars -- usually on the way up or on the way down, never at their peak, but competent players, and popular ones. (Marguerite de la Motte, Johnnie Walker, Edmund Lowe, Bela Lugosi, Ann Pennington are further examples). And he always used excellent cameramen -- a picture that is good to look at visually can stand shortcomings elsewhere. And "Married?" is certainly a slick and handsome photographic job, using some excellent and rugged exteriors, including one location of cliffs and rapids that saw a lot of use in actioners in Eastern-filmed productions of the 20's. (Among others, it was used in the serial "Hurricane Hutch"). Most of the budget then went into elements that would show up on the screen -- photography and performers. Jans used competent, workmanlike directors like Terwilliger and George Archainbaud, never the expensive prestige names. And if his policy didn't result in any masterpieces, there weren't any duds either. Audiences were well satisfied with classy little bread-and-butter films like this, "The Mad Dancer", and "Madonnas and Men".

Curiously, in his corner cutting, Jans pre-dated some of the tricks that the New Wavers picked up and hailed as new "techniques". You'll notice that there are few real transitions in the film. Characters turn up hither and yon without notice; you never see them leaving or arriving, getting into cars or on to horses. There is quite a cunning depiction of a journey from New York to the Northwoods via train; all we get are a couple of titles, some moving shadows against a window, and Mr. Jans is spared a taxi to the station, the station itself, a locomotive, and the station at the other end. And we're not even too aware of it either, since in essential things the film doesn't cheat. The extras aren't skimpy. The action scenes are played for all they are worth, and the night scenes are shot at night, not done in the daytime with filters, common practice with most major features even today.

All in all, it's an enjoyable jazz-age romp, with an 18 year old Connie Bennett looking slim, cool and lovely. Owen Moore, alas, does rather sustain his reputation of being somewhat of a drinker; more than once we're glad there's no sound track to betray (as it did in "What a Widow" and "As You Desire Me") the rather obviously "fuzzy" condition he's in! It's remarkable how loyal his fans remained through a string of decidedly second-drawer films for which he had no one to blame but himself. Our print is from the original negative, but one of those jigsaw-puzzles that we had to fit together from 150 or more rolls. However, it corresponds with the original length and is all there, save (presumably) a title to introduce and identify the Indian girl who is the villain's daughter.

NEXT TUESDAY: a Norman Taurog-Americana program from the early 30's -- HUCKLEBERRY FINN with Jackie Coogan; MRS WIGGS OF THE CABBAGE PATCH -- Fields.