"Monkey Business" (Hal Roach-Pathe, 1926) Director: Robert McGowan; 1 reel
With Our Gang.

Somehow, the Our Gang comedies — always excepting such occasional standouts as "Sundown Limited" — have always seemed over-rated as comedies, though it’s easy to understand their popularity with the small fry. Similarly, "cute" comedies with monkeys, bears, dogs or other performing animals have usually never been more than tolerable novelties. Here however, is the inevitable exception to the rule; the kids have better gags than usual, and for once the chimp seems to have both personality and a good idea of what it’s doing instead of having his comedy business constituted for him via careful editing of reels of fairly tame material. All in all, this is one of the better Our Gang comedies.

"Movie Milestones" (Paramount, 1933) One reel

A rather unimaginative but thankfully respectful reminder of four Paramount silents — "The Ten Commandments", "Behind the Front", Jannings "Way Of All Flesh", and Grueze’s long and dull "Old Ironsides", which looks rather better from these excerpts than it actually was. One of those way-over-budget spectacles, it gave Paramount as much concern in 1926 as that recent $40 million Rody McDonald picture caused Musara, Skouras, Zanuck et al. The excerpts offer some pleasing glimpses of Catalina doubling as Tripoli. Films included in Paramount’s "Movie Milestones" series appear hence been selected almost solely on the basis of boxoffice performance; hence the inclusion here of "Behind the Front", and in another issue of "Blood and Sand", and the exclusion of "Baggers of Life", "A Kiss for Cinderella", "That Royle Girl" etc.

"Between the Wars" (National Film Board of Canada, 1950) 3 reels
Written and produced by William Weintraub.

This is the first of 3 Canadian documentaries covering the years 1919-1939, and undoubtedly the one of prime interest to a film society audience because of the period it covers: 1919-1927. However, the two sequels are just as good in their own way, and we plan to schedule them for a future program. After several years of "20th Century", "Project 20" and sundry other American TV documentaries (many of them of considerable merit), it is both a pleasure and a surprise to see a completely fresh coverage of years that, if anything, have been over-covered by the documentary boys. Almost all of the footage is fresh, and so is the point of view. Regardless of individual merits, all of the American entries, from the fine Youngson shorts to the hour-length compilations, have been afflicted with a kind of "hard-sell" technique. Points have to be made; conclusions drawn; the footage often deliberately fitted into a pre-arranged pattern with meat balance and climaxes. This is good showmanship and often good dramatic cinema, but it’s nice, for once, to find such a compilation where the events themselves form the shape of the film. "Between the Wars" presents from editorializing, and instead holds a mirror to the passing years. As a result it is leisurely, sometimes undramatic, but always wholly absorbing. Some of the new (to American audiences) footage is really fascinating, and this pleasant sense of cinematic discovery is maintained through all three films. (Number two covers 1928-1934, and the final one brings it up to 1939). The narration is pleasingly simple and unportentious, how many American writers for example could have seen that shot of early political figures, with Churchill among them, and passed up the chance to make some coy or clever remark about him. Canadian Weintraub assumes that his audience is intelligent enough to spot Churchill, so doesn’t even bother to identify him, let alone comment on him. One 1928 Valentine shot is used as being a 1931 shot, but this is standard chicanery when one can’t get just the shot one wants; otherwise the film has very much the ring of truth and unemotionalized reporting. It also sports a very pleasant sense of humour, and it’s rather fun to see a battalion or more of young Canadian ladies done up with tridents and shields to symbolize Britannia, while the commentator remarks respectfully of course — on the absurdity of some Shriners from Buffalo! The footage also includes a tantalizing hint from an old Canadian tailor that looks like an outright steal from "Way Down East"; Warner Richmond is one of the players involved, and if this is one of the many Canadian silents held by either the NFB or the CFI, I hope we can get to see it one day. (Perhaps a Canadian series at the NFF?) There’s also a lovely little bit, presumably (though not identified as such) from a courtesy-campaign film, which rather recalls Edison’s old "Streetcar Chivalry". William Weintraub, who produced, most recently made "Anniversary", a two-reel history of the Canadian film industry which, with luck, we may be able to show later on. — Intermission —
"MANTRAP" (Paramount, 1926) Directed by Victor Fleming; ass't. director, Henry Hathaway; photographed by James Howe; screenplay by Adelaide Heilbrun and Ethel Doherty from the novel by Sinclair Lewis; titles by George Marion Jr. 7 reels.

With Clara Bow, Ernest Torrence, Percy Marmont, Eugene Pallette, Tom Kennedy, Josephine Crowell, William Orlamond, Charlie Stevens, Miss Du Pont, Lon Foff, Chief Big Tree.

I haven't read the Sinclair Lewis novel from which this film was made, but presumably the resemblances are largely superficial. When "Mantrap" was remade in 1940 as "Untamed" (Rox Miland-Patricia Morrison-Alim Tamiroff) the whole emphasis was changed from light sex to heavy-breathing sex, from comedy to all-out melodrama.

"Mantrap" is a lively film all the way. The performances are all just right, the exterior photography by James Howe (HGA hadn't yet added the "Wong" to his billing) is top-flight, and the direction fast-paced. 90% of the film takes place out-of-doors, and what a pleasure it is to see a location-made film done without any studio match-ups or back projection.

But with that, one has really said all that needs to be said in any critical or descriptive sense. The film is primarily a showcase for Clara Bow, and as such it is easily the best Bow vehicle I've seen. Her beauty, her tremendous vivacity and her sense of humour all come through beautifully; the script calls for her to flirt from first scene to last -- to be beautiful and far from dumb, sexy yet chaste -- and she wraps the whole show up effortlessly. It seems fresh and delightful still because she is still such an attractive little dynamo. Ernest Torrence has some great scenes -- especially his first scenes in a store and kitchen -- but even he, with all his scene-scaling tricks, fails to take a single scene away from Clara once she breezes on to the scene. Were more of her films available for viewing today, I'm quite sure that there would be Bow cults just as there have been for Garbo, Brooks and Dietrich.

Incidentally, historians of unimportant but interesting trivia might care to note that the dress and hat worn by Clara in the closing sequence are the same as those worn by Betty Bronson in the last third of "Are Parents People?".

Now, some purely technical notes. This print has just been re-assembled from Paramount's original 35mm negative -- which, like so many negatives, was arranged for tints, and was thus completely out of sequence. It has been put back into the right order, and despite many splices, nothing is missing. It is interesting to note that although arranged on seven reels, they are all fairly short reels, and the total footage doesn't amount more than that of a very solid five-reeler -- a further confirmation that the publicised length of a film in reels can give a very unreliable impression of its length. If an exhibition contract called for a Clara Bow 7-reel special, 7 reels would be delivered -- even if only 5000 feet of film were involved.

Another, more unfortunate, aspect. Only Flash titles (two or three frames apiece) have been retained in the negative, in the interests of better preservation, since it is always the titles that decompose first. The full titles are kept separately, and we had hoped to find this title-negative to have them made up and inserted in this print, but, unfortunately, it was found to have been destroyed. However, I can think of no other film which needs titles less -- "everything is perfectly explicit," and there is never any doubt about what is going on. The shorter titles you will just about be able to read; longer ones we will read out, as and when they seem necessary. But for the most part, the titles offer bantering (and mild) wisecracks and exposition which is quite superfluous. Some that are worth recording at the beginning, when Percy Marmont is fingering a shot-gun, Eugene Pallette offers him a drink with the words: "A shot in the glass is worth two in the abdomen." A little later, when Torrence is bemoaning his bored life in the backwoods, he tells Tom Kennedy: "I haven't had a real thrill since I saw a man buckle in Minnesot" and Kennedy retorts: "Why not go back; they're showing far more than their ankles now!" During a comic seduction scene, Clara rolls her eyes and murmurs "I'm hotter than the box sitting on the burning deck!" and later, when she's vamping an airman, she calls him "Major" and he replies "I'm only a Captain - and I'm a happily married man!" The titles otherwise are very small potatoes compared to Clara's visual impact, but, as noted earlier, we will read those that seem absolutely essential.

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