"SO RED THE ROSE" (Paramount, 1935) Directed by King Vidor
Produced by Douglas Maclean; screenplay by Lawrence Stallings;
Music by Nacio Herb Brown and Edwin Justus Mayer, from a story by
Stark Young; camera - Victor Milner; editors - Eda Warren
Running time: 82 mins.
With: Margaret Sullavan, Walter Connolly, Randolph Scott, Elizabeth Patterson,
Janet Beercher, Harry Lilerbe, Dickie Moore, Robert Cummings, Charles Starrett,
Johnny Downs, Daniel Haynes, Clarence Muse, James Burke, Allen Chase, Harry
Strang, Edward Gargan, Warner Richmond, Lloyd Ingram.

"So Red the Rose" was always considered a disappointing film, both as a film
and in terms of boxoffice performance. We had hoped that it would emerge as
one of those films that so frequently prove to have been unjustly pushed aside
at the time of its original release, and which seem infinitely better after an
interval of almost thirty years. Such is not entirely the case -- the
weaknesses of 1935 remain weaknesses today -- but in retrospect it does now
seem to be more recognisably a "personal" Vidor film than it did at the time.
This is probably more a matter of our now knowing more about Vidor's work than
we did then.

Despite three very good writers, the film's basic weakness is one of script, and
especially of character delineation. It's often difficult to figure out
relationships and motivations. Too, there is no focal character around which
one tends to develop story-line. If Margaret Sullavan was intended as such a character,
both she - and the writers - muff it badly. She is overshadowed by characters
who are themselves little more than shadows. Only the Walter Connolly
figure is of sufficient stature to demand serious and sustained interest, but
the film seems written "away" from him until his dramatic homecoming scene.

A further weakness is that, perhaps unfairly (and largely because Scott is a
virile star and Vidor a virile director) we are constantly expecting a big
action sequence which never materializes, and the absence of which is
especially felt because we are constantly skirting the fringes of action --
we see preparations for battle, and the aftermath, but no more. Battle
scenes are not a prerequisite of Civil War stories -- "Done With the Wind"
had none, but it did have the burning of Atlanta and a consistent bigness of
scope. Perhaps that is the main trouble with "So Red the Rose" -- it has the
right spirit to it all, and the emotions are big and unmuted -- but the
sheer production never matches up. It is a handsomely photographed film,
but one is aware that except for an occasional meadow or forest glade,
Vidor and his crew never left the Paramount back-lot.

But having accepted the fact that this is an epic in intention but not in
budget, one has to admit that within its limitations Vidor pulls it all off
rather well, and with tremendous style. He and his writers borrow right and
left, the troopers marching into battle remind one instantly of the slow
procession through the sniper-infested wood of "The Big Parade" -- and what
a pity that Vidor didn't borrow just a little more and really build this
sequence into something. Incidents towards the end seem patently lifted from
Glyde Pitch's old play "Barbara Frietchie". And well before the end, one
knows instinctively that the climax is going to be a repeat of "The Big Parade"
-- and it is; not as well done perhaps, but gloriously "big" and hokey,
beautifully photographed, and moving for all its obviousness. As in all
Vidor films -- even the worst of them -- there are moments of unexpected beauty,
poignancy, and real power. A real surprise in this, until that point,

traditional "Old South" story, is the suddenly surly and rebellious behaviour
of the newly-Treed Negro slaves; a plot element usually tactfully avoided
since the trouble it caused D.W. Griffith in "The Birth of a Nation".
Incidentally, it's nice to see Daniel Haynes -- the star of Vidor's 1929
"Hallelujah" -- in a prominent supporting role, and giving a very moving
performance too. His performance, and Walter Connolly's, stand out as the
best in a not too enterprising collection; most of the stars don't try hard
enough, and -- much worse -- too many of the supporting players, and
Robert Cummings especially, take it just too leggo. Incidentally, two of the best spirituals
encoded in their tactical positions in the specific scenes in which they are used,
Lynd's overall pictorial beauty, lack of excitement generated by potentially
exciting material, wasted style and miscast players, "So Red The Rose" is a
rather curious parallel to Vidor's later "War and Peace" -- where he did have
the money to make a genuine epic, and again muffed it through the same
shortcomings of script.

--- Intermission ---
"THE TEXAS RANGERS" (Paramount, 1936) Produced & directed by King Vidor
Written by King Vidor and Louis Stevens; camera; Edward Cronjager; art directors, Hans Dreier, Bernard Herzbrun; running time: 98 mins.

Vidor was more familiar with the West than the Civil War it seems, his horse opera output, not though pristigous, nevertheless taking in such widely varied westerns as "The Sky Pilot", "Billy the Kid", "North West Passage", "Duel in the Sun" and "Man Without a Star". "Billy the Kid" was undoubtedly the best of these, and together with the 1932 "Law and Order", one of the most convincing and deliberately austere of all sound westerns. However, in a different way, "The Texas Rangers" runs it a good second.

After a short-lived but interesting boom in super-westerns between 1929 and 1930 the epic and all but disappeared from the screen by the mid-1930's. There would not be a general renaissance of the species until 1939, with "Destry Rides Again", "Union Pacific", "Stagecoach", "The Oklahoma Kid", "Jesse James" et al, but in 1936 Paramount curiously made two big-scale epics --- DeMille's big but dull "The Plainsman" King Vidor's faster, better and certainly more actionful "The Texas Rangers". Paramount's "The westmen" in this sound era were always expert, but somehow their acting invariably misfired. Too little action, too much dialogue, the stars and the wrong directors resulted in pleasant and pedestrian westerns like "Hells Fargo", "The Eagle and the Hawk", "California", "Copper Canyon", et al. "The Texas Rangers" however was an exception to the rule, and together with DeMille's "Union Pacific" remains the best of a long but singularly uninspiring list of Paramount dogs.

While "So Red the Rose" suffered from too many good authors falling over each other trying to turn good books into something far more literary, "The Texas Rangers" has a script which suffers from not being ambitious enough. Vidor wrote the script himself, ostensibly basing it on Texas Rangers records, but actually it seems to consist of the utilization of a couple of well-known Ranger cases (referred to in a few lines in the publicity booklet put out by the now very showmanship-conscious T.R. bq in Amarillo) Allied with a very standardised "R" western plot, it's curious how many important and epic westerns, made by top directors (Walsh's "The Big Trail" and Ford's "The Iron Horse" are other key examples) likewise fall back on "R" plots that tend to pull down the epic qualities of the film to Tom Tyler or Bob Steele levels. To a degree, though, to a lesser degree than the two examples cited, "The Texas Rangers" has this drawback too, and the often trite and dime-novel brand of "western" art is not enough to help matters any. But Vidor fills his film with enough well-developed characters, enough incident and enough really rip-roaring action for these flaws not to matter too much. (Just how good a western "The Texas Rangers" really is, one can tell from the dull Technicolor remake of the 40's, "Streets of Laredo". The Indians were removed entirely, along with all the epic qualities, and overdoses of sex and brutality were added. The basic illustration in all of the ads was of a sadistic flagging -- an element not present in this original at all).

The film is full of pleasing heroic images, and a stirring score borrowed partially from "old Ironides". The staging of the action is splendid (the big indian scenes utilised enlarged Megascope screens originally), the horses falls and stunts lively, and the editing tense. (Curiously, there's no cut in the race to the rescue scene; possibly Vidor thought that too much of a cliché of the B western, so apparently Cruse did in "The Covered Wagon" too). The exteriors are splendid and for the most part unembellished pleasing yet. In black-and-white, not disturbingly "pretty". Vidor's photography is good, the film was shot out of doors, making the odd studio "scenelings" (the indian rolling rocks over a cliff for example) stick out like a sore thumb, but these scenes are few and far between, and largely done for matching-up or cutaway purposes. Incidentally, there are a few stock-shots from Cruse's "The Pony Express" -- But Vidor had the same thing done to him a few years later when whole chunks of this film turned up in "Corinna", which was not only ALL stock from old Paramount westerns, but a complete remake of "Lives of a Bengal Lancer" into the bargain.

As a child, I loved "The Texas Rangers" -- despite its lack of western stars. I remember being thrilled by the indian attack, scared by Fred Kohler's bulk, and appalled by Lloyd Nolan's callous murder scene near the end. It's nice to see that these three aspects are still the most memorable! Unimportant perhaps but exhilarating. "The Texas Rangers" is extremely enjoyable and unportentious juvenile level stuff -- but no less worthwhile for being unpretentious.