"Broncho Billy's Sentence" (1915) Directed by G.W. Anderson; 1 reel

Pay no attention to the phoney main title which gives 1909 as a date for this unusually good little Anderson western. Actually, for a 1914 film (released in January of 15) it is a trifle unsophisticated when one realises that Anderson had been making westerns for some six years, and now couldn't match the work of a man (William S. Hart) who had been in the game for only a few months. The rather sudden reformation of the badman reminds one a little of the equally sudden conversion of Eric Campbell at the end of Chaplin's "Easy Street". Nevertheless, "Broncho Billy's Sentence" is a rugged little film that moves quickly, and is quite moving in its simple but obviously sincere way.

"Lono Arden" (Biograph, 1911) Directed by D.W. Griffith; based on the poem by Tennyson; photographed by G.W. Bitzer; 2 reels
With Linda Arvidson, Wilfrid Lucas, Frank Grandin, Jeannie McPherson, Bobby Harron, Craze Henderson, Alfred Faget, George Nicholls, Dell Henderson, Eddie Dillon

Griffith's first two-reeler -- resented by Biograph, and released by that very conservative company as two one-reelers -- stacks up with his other one-reelers of the period much as "Judith of Bethulia" compares with the shorts that preceded it. It is smoothly done, the land and sea scenes beautifully composed, and there is a maximum use of closeups and two-shots, but it doesn't have the tightness and invention of some of its shorter contemporaries. Quite obviously, Griffith would take a little while to get acclimatised to telling a story in twice as much footage as hitherto, and while there are no slow spots in "Lono Arden", there are indications that with less cutting back and forth between the marooned Lono and his home, Griffith could have told the story quite well in a shorter time; as in fact he did in the similar one-reel "Fisher Folk". However, it's an interesting milestone in his career, and follows the continuity and text of Tennyson's poem quite faithfully, deviating only in the shipwreck scene which the poet disposed of in a line or so, but which Griffith uses -- even though the budget keeps the wreck off screen -- to introduce both physical action and time and space cross-cutting. Now -- if we can find the later Lillian Gish-Wallace Reid version!

"Leave 'Em Laughing" (Hal Roach-MGM, 1927) Directed by Clyde Bruckman
Supervised by Leo McCarey; photographed by George Stevens; 2 reels
With Laurel & Hardy, Edgar Kennedy.

In one of their sickest comedies, Laurel & Hardy make sadistic capital out of everyone's fear of the dentist -- and don't let the audience down easily by softening the punch-gags, any more than Fields did in "The Dentist". It's not top Laurel & Hardy, partly because Clyde Bruckman -- an excellent director for Fields, Keaton and Lloyd -- never seemed completely in tune with the boys. Further, the two initial sequences are so funny on their own that the third and principal sequence -- the old laughing gas routine -- never quite has the time or the chance to build as it might. But if the pacing is a trifle awkward and the direction a shade too stiff, it's still an extremely funny comedy, and well above the average L&H standards of the late 20's, which should be good enough for all but the most carping critics -- and dedicated dentists.

- Intermission -
"THE ICE FLOOD" (Universal, 1926) Directed by George B. Seitz; scenario by Seitz and Gladys Lehman from a story by Johnston McCulley; Camera: Kerritt B. Gerstad. 6 reels

With Kenneth Harlan, Viola Dana, Frank Hagney, Dell Jennings, George Irving, Billy Kent Schaefer.

Universal established a nice formula with their actioner "Jewels" in the 20's; they were hardly as ambitious or as expensive as their "Super Jewels", but they were far out of the programmer class, and offered good directors, reliable name stars, top production values in terms of camerawork and special effects, and the requisite amount of action. In films like "The Storm" and "The Michigan Kid" Universal made sure that every dollar spent showed up on the screen, and that the customer got his money's worth. If this was formula film-making, then it was a pretty successful and well appreciated formula, and it's a pity that "formula" today invariably means just a paucity of imagination and the most corner-cutting budget possible. "The Ice Flood" doesn't quite measure up to "The Michigan Kid", but it's out of the same stable, and a comparable picture.

Much of the by-play is amusingly illustrative of the period. A hero who likes poetry (or who wears a wrist-watch) is automatically effeminate, and has to prove his manhood in a bruising fistic battle. There's a lot of loose talk about strikes and labor problems being caused by "Bolsheviks" -- in this respect things haven't changed quite so much. The photography is often stunning, and the locations unfamiliar and well chosen. If some of the comedy seems weak and unnecessary, well at least there's little of it, and one doesn't feel too inclined to be harsh with that old formula which mixes in a comic "ingredient" like a tablespoon of sugar.

Frank Hagney is a fine villain of the old plain and simple school, going out of his way to bully a crippled child just for the sheer joy of it. Little Billy Kent Schaefer went through exactly the same kind of thing in "Tin Tin's Hills of Kentucky" too, where he also had a sister adrift on a raging torrent for the climax!

It all moves along briskly in this fine original toned print, with beautifully florid some titles in the old tradition, rich, florid and melodramatic. In details, there are some curious discrepancies: for weather and temperature that can freeze a mighty river, everyone seems to be wearing distinctly summery clothes. And since the Ice-Flood is an annual occurrence, one wonders when all the stately pines that are bowled over like nine pins have time to grow to such tall maturity. But details don't seem to matter when the great "Way Down East" type climax gets under way. As in "The Michigan Kid", it's a marvel of ingenious miniature work, with the moving camera panning along with all the debris in the swollen river -- low angle shots, high angle, matte shots. None of it really convinces because it is all so palpably fake, but that's part of the fun of it. Better cinema would result if the miniatures were used more sparingly, and cut in with staged footage done to full scale -- as in "Old San Francisco" -- but that of course would cause a budget flood as well. With Seitz relying so exclusively on his special effects team, he really doesn't have much chance to build excitement himself in the climax, but all the toys and tricks work beautifully. What ecstasy it must have been to be the six year old son of a special effects man at Universal in the 20's -- and have Daddy bring home a few used cataracts, waterfalls and forest fires.

May/June looks like being a banner period for us. Apart from the Nervyn LeRoy and British films, we have also lined up JIMMY THE GLENT with Cagney and Davis, Elmer Clifton's LET 'ER GO GALLAGHER, Griffith's THE GREATEST QUESTION with Lillian Gish and Bobby Harron, DeMille's KANSLAUGHTER with Leatrice Joy, Lois Wilson and Thomas Meighan, and we're promised (as yet unseen) a reputedly first-generation print of EARTH. Details in our May/June mailing.