Tuesday next: Korda's "The Drum" (1938, Technicolor) with Roger Livesey, Sabu, Raymond Massey & Valerie Hobson; and "The Swashbucklers", a compilation with Errol Flynn, Douglas Fairbanks, etc.

December 29, 1964

A Program of Americana: 1915-1917

"TOM SAWYER" (Paramount, 1917) Directed by William Desmond Taylor

Script by Julia Crawford Ivers, from the book by Mark Twain. 5 rls

The Cast: Tom Sawyer (Jack Pickford); Sid (George Hackathorne); Huck Finn (Robert Gordon); May (Alice Marvin); Aunt Polly (Edythe Chapman); Becky Thatcher (Clara Horton); Widow Douglas (Helen Gillmore); Joe Harper (Antrim Short); Alfred Temple (Carl Goetz)

This engaging adaptation of the Mark Twain classic is an authentic slice of Americana, but a rather puzzling one. Twain's original story, already far less interesting than its more powerful counterpart "Huckleberry Finn", was at least ful of dramatic and abundantly cinematic highlights. But most of these highlights, and specifically the grim graveyard scenes and the flight from Injun Joe through the caves, have been carefully pruned from this script. Instead it concentrates on humor, atmosphere, and the familiar lesser highlights -- the whitewashing of the fence, the fiasco with the Bible-prize tickets, and the hue and cry when Tom and his pals are believed drowned. Filmed almost wholly in Hannibal, Missouri, the film sketches in quite effortlessly the atmosphere of a sleepy Southern town, and captures the right spirit of Twain's creation. Indeed, in atmosphere alone it is one of the most successful of all movie adaptations of Twain, although in terms of story-telling and excitement it falls quite short of many later tries, despite a faithful reliance on titles taken directly from Twain's text.

Jack Pickford, well-established in this type of fare via such films as "Seventeen" and "Freckles", is obviously a good boxoffice choice for Tom -- and equally obviously, he was just a shade too old, and had made rather too careful a study of sister Mary's most successful mannerisms. Clara Horton -- who grew up astonishingly quickly in the few years separating this from her tot roles for Ince -- is most appealing as Becky Thatcher, although giving her eye makeup and lipstick doesn't exactly enhance her small-town innocence. Director William Desmond Taylor and Jack Pickford had made a successful team on several films prior to this, and it is a pity that Taylor, a fine craftsman, is remembered almost solely because of the sensational nature of his death; a still unsolved murder. Few of Taylor's films appear to have survived, and "Tom Sawyer" represents an average Taylor film, and far from his best work. Our print is a good one, and complete save for a few obvious fragments. It was always a short film, with an abrupt ending. However, it should be stressed that since much of the action takes place at night, extensive use of blue tints was made originally. In this black-and-white print, the night scenes of course appear as day scenes, but more important, the added light gives the unwarranted impression of careless direction. Tom letting the easily retrievable raft drift away, and sneaking into a room without being seen even though the whole family is there, are scenes that would be far more logical and convincing with that blue tint to simulate darkness. Strangely, none of the reviews or even the original press-book credit the cameraman for the film. Even more strangely, Paramount put out a carefully compiled music cue-sheet (arranged by Louis F. Gottschalk) which went to extreme pains to avoid any kind of traditional Americana music. Their score offered not a note of Stephen Foster -- but a wide selection of European composers, among them Bizet, Tchaikovsky, Poldini, Friml and Mendelssohn!