February 23, 1915
The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"VANITY FAIR" (Edison, 1915) Directed by Eugene Howland; 7 reels.

Theodore's "Vanity Fair" is a story with so many people doing so little that it's really not surprising that it is difficult to keep track of who is who. Nor is it surprising that so really good film was ever made from it. Bouten Nanculon came to the part, but she has some lively color compositions; and a modern, 20th Century version with Myrna Loy had its moments too. By and large however, it's a hopeless case: Becky Sharp is such a one-dimensional character that one cares little about her, and thus the story never has the classic sweep of a "Camille." Dumping it all into the Napoleonic War period doesn't give it the historical reference of a "Gone With The Wind" or a "The Birth of a Nation" either, and realizing this, directors have always done the battle or Waterloo sequence in the simplest fashion. Good showmanship might suggest that such a sequence would give the sagging story a lift -- but it would also make the rest of the film intolerably anti-climactic.

There was never much difference between an Edison of 1906 and one of 1916, and for 1915, this "Vanity Fair" is way behind the times. It doesn't hold a candle to the 1915 "David Harum," which we ran recently, or even to the 1911 Vitagraph "Vanity Fair" with Helen Gardner. However, Edison features are rare, and if we are to fill in some of the gaps in film history they have to be seen -- or at least, we have to make it possible for them to be seen by those that really care, therefore a difference! The film isn't badly photographed. Occasionally the camera moves, though some are moved in the wrong direction and has to be hurriedly swung around. The interior sets are decoratively pleasant, but they are not, the exteriors are well chosen and convincing. There is only one of those odd dialogue titles where the names of the characters are identified with the lines they speak -- why it couldn't have been broken up into two titles and made more cinematic is a mystery, since the device isn't used otherwise. What really makes it all seem so pedestrian is the stock-company brand of acting, all overdramatic and under-rehearsed. When an actor has an "angry" scene he rants and raves. All the audience lacks of sound; when he has to react to a complicated letter, he is too disturbing to start crying and then (mediately) expresses shock or indignation long before he could have read more than a word or two. Mrs Fiske, reputedly better served for posterity by her earlier film, "Tess of the D'Urbervilles" is patently too old for the part, and because of that is never photographed in close-up. Hence what occasionally look like interesting nuances of performance are quite lost in medium and long shots, and the film must be regarded as an unfair barometer of her abilities. No two "Becky Sharp" films are quite alike, and this one has plot incident that I haven't come across in the others. It also has Thaddeus' Rape (mediately) than when Sydney Greenstreet played him) opening the film, and finally closing his manuscript with an air of ill-deserved smug satisfaction.

"THE OUTLAW" (Kalem; 1911/12) Director: not stated; 1 reel
With Alice Joyce, Carlyle Blackwell, Paul Hurst.
An interesting little melodrama from a company little represented today; some of the photographic compositions are nicely thought out, and come through the base of a dumpy fade and accompanying 35mm print quite well.

"FIRES OF YOUTH" (Thanhouser, 1917) Directed by Rupert Julian; written by Agnes Johnson; released by Pathé as a "Gold Rooster" presentation.
With: Jeanne Eagels (Rose); Frederick B. Warde (Pemberton); Helen Badgley (Little Billy); Ernest Howard (Billy's father); Robert Vaughn (Jim).
A rather truncated and choppy (3 reels of an original 5) edition, this print is nevertheless of considerable interest in presenting a young, fresh and quite sensitive Jeanne Eagels, looking rather like a composite of Carol Dempster and Nap Marsh, but naturally not very demanding role. Rather typical of the period with its "social" themes and Cinderella solution, it still has the same kind of surface honesty as "Other Men's Wives" and similar Warner films of the 30's. Photographed in and around New Rochelle, N.Y. the factories and homes look real, and for the most part are. An interesting and off-beat film from a curious director ("Phantom of the Opera", etc.) -Mike.