Next Tuesday, June 22nd: Two "lost films" by notable directors: Rowland Brown's grim chain-gang expose, "HELL'S HIGHWAY" (1932) with Richard Dix and Tom Brown; and Gregora La Cava's raw and racy satire on press-agentry, "THE HALF-NAKED TRUTH" (1932) with Lee Tracy, Lupe Velez, Frank Morgan, Eugene Pallette.

Tuesday June 15, 1965

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"THEIR PURPLE MOMENT" (Hal Roach-MGM, 1928) Director: James Parrott
Supervised by Leo McCarey; photographed by George Stevens; 2 reels
With Laurel & Hardy, Anita Garvin, Fay Holderness, Leo Willis.

Since there are now only about half-a-dozen unseen silent Laurel & Hardy comedies, it's such a pleasure to cross a couple of new titles off the list tonight that it hardly matters that "Their Purple Moment" is rather second-drawer. The good things in it are really good, the production values (enhanced by use of an elaborate night-club set from some other current MGM film) are above average, and when certain gags don't work out as smoothly as they might, it's usually only because we have now seen practically all of their work, and can readily call to mind another of their comedies in which the same gags or situations are better exploited. "Their Purple Moment" is another entry in the Laurel & Hardy battle against the perennially petty and vindictive American Wife. Occasionally, the wives have been granted minor redeeming features -- Fay Holderness in "Hog Wild" for example was seen to have at least a hint of a sense of humor. Mae Busch in "Their First Mistake" wanted to see Cliffie "get on" in the business world, and Daphne Pollard's tyranny in "Thicker Than Water" was based on the business-like necessity of getting the rent paid. But the wives here have no humanising features at all, being domineering, shrewish sadists. One would like to feel that L & I disliked wives as much as W.C. Fields hated children, and used their films as an outlet for it -- or, in Cahier du Cinema terms, as a "personal statement". There seems no factual justification for this though, since despite the regular turnover in Laurel's wives, both seem to have had happy home lives, and thus this aspect of their films can be taken instead as a detached but often shrewdly accurate observation of one aspect of domestic American life. The opening sight gag with the portrait is particularly pleasing because, like Keaton's dive through the window into the woman's clothes in "Sherlock Jr.", it is a sight gag that is plausible as well as inventive, and is done without trickery. Pleasing too is the happy plagiarism from "Way Down East" -- Stevens' photography of the malicious gossip matching exactly the travel shots that Bitzer did in that Griffith film. Less successful is the climactic pie-and-goo-fight, which starts too late for it to build properly, and brings the film to a mere end rather than a climax. However, it does contain a marvellous shot of Laurel with thick, greasy soup coozing over his placidly receptive features which equals the best moments in all of their other exchanges of mutual mayhem.

"BACON GRABBERS" (Hal Roach-MGM, 1929) Directed by Lewis R. Foster
Story: Leo McCarey; camera: George Stevens; 2 reels
With Laurel & Hardy, Edgar Kennedy, Charles Hall, Jean Harlow.

Originally released with a musical score and special sound effects, recorded on disc by the Victor Talking Machine Company, "Bacon Grabbers" very occasionally seems a trifle off in its pacing because of this deliberate exploitation of sound that is of course absent in this print. On the whole however, it is quite one of their better films from the 28-29 period, and like "Big Business" which it resembles in structure, takes a single simple situation and manages to both milk every gag, and at the same time build comic tension steadily until it reaches near-frenzy. Jean Harlow's appearance is brief but pleasing, in the last few minutes of the film.

--- Intermission ---

for Norrone Productions; camera: George Schneevoigt; based on Knut Hamsun's book "Harkens Grøde";
Edited by Benjamin de Casseres; 6 reels.
With Ragna Wettergren as Inger, and Am. Nydland as Isak.

Knut Hamsun's 1917 novel "Growth of the Soil" - one of those rambling, ultra-detailed Scandinavian sagas covering family life over a period of years - is internationally famous, and presumably on the strength of its fame, this film received rather more widespread distribution than most silent films from Norway. Certainly it was released in France, Germany, Italy, and, very belatedly, in the U.S. Yet as a filmic entity, it seems to have made little stir: there is a passing reference to it in Forsyth Hardy's book "Scandinavian Film", but the film's director is not referred to, nor even listed for other works in the index. Since so little is known of the early films from Norway, let me excerpt these facts from Hardy's book:

"Norway must be one of the smallest countries in the world to undertake independent film production. The limiting factors which exist in Sweden and are accentuated in Denmark take their most acute form in Norway, with its population of just over three million people scattered along its deeply serrated coastline. It has been estimated that every fourth person in the country must see a Norwegian-made film before it can meet its production cost, modest though this is. There is no market outside Norway. Film-making and affluence are, therefore, strangers. Yet one hundred feature films had been made in Norway by 1950. Many of them were produced by Norsk Film, a production company established in 1932. The first real attempt to produce films in Norway was made at the end of the first World War by Christiana Film. Stimulated by the Swedish example, the producers attempted to make films which drew upon national tradition, and the natural beauties of the country. In 1920 a film version was made of Knut Hamsun's "Growth of the Soil". Other films were made on the lives of Norway's sailors and fishermen, but in general they were amateur in standard. It was not until the formation of Norsk Film that production became stabilised."

Obviously it is unfair to judge "Growth of the Soil" by the yardstick of 1920 accomplishments of Scandinavian and American cinema. Even so, for 1920 it is a fairly primitive film, and our revival is prompted far more by its academic and historical interest, and by its rarity, than for its merits as a film. However, it should be pointed out that our print -- while complete in terms of its original American release length -- may well be shortened from the original Norwegian version. There are many very abrupt jumps in continuity (not physical cuts in the print) which could be attributed to American distribution cuts, but with this particular film they could equally well be attributed to a general lack of filming experience, and a limited budget. With so little filmmaking behind them, a 1920 Norwegian film is, in a sense, a pioneering venture to be likened perhaps to the first American features of 1912 and 1913 wherein we find many of the same continuity flaws, and the same lack of filmic time transition devices.

Dramatically, the primitive quality doesn't seem to matter too much. Much of the film takes place out of doors. Most of the interiors of huts, stores, prison etc., seem to be the real thing rather than (comparatively) costly studio replicas, and the lighting and camera speeds in these authentic interiors sometimes get a trifle out of control. Most of the supporting players are merely local villagers plying their own trade, and these performances naturally tend to be a little self-conscious. But all of this lack of smooth technique adds up to a rather effective kind of primitive realism -- the same kind of realism that one finds in Mary Pickford's first "Tess of the Storm Country", and in the 2-reel westerns of Al Jennings. On the other hand, there is an awareness of technique too; the camera almost never moves, but when it does, it does so for a purpose. And the use of the iris throughout more than once suggests a more than passing acquaintance with the Griffith films. The editing too, with at least one cutback and (towards the end) cross-cutting, sometimes almost for its own sake, quite frequently has a Griffith "feel" to it.
It's understandable that the film made no impression when it was finally shown in the U.S. almost ten years after it was made. Presumably it was bought then not for merit or reputation, but because unreleased European silents could be had literally for peanuts, since their life expectancy, with sound already here, was so short. In 1929, production and distribution were really booming; the trade papers came out in large issues every day, weekends included, and there were always more film reviews per issue than one now finds in the weekly round-up by "Variety". "Growth of the Soil" was merely one of a dozen films reviewed by The Film Daily one Sunday in the Fall of 29. Most of the films under review were proudly touted as being all-talkies, and that day they included "Disraeli", "They Had To See Paris", "Rio Rita" and "Applause" -- not a bad selection for one day, and there was more of the same every day! "Growth of the Soil" was criticised for its ragged continuity and out-dated direction (no mention was made of its age) and the reviewer felt that its only appeal was to American-living Scandinavians. However, if its appeal seemed limited, two silent Russian imports reviewed that same day -- "Forest People of Siberia" and "The Weavers" -- generated even less critical enthusiasm.

"Growth of the Soil" is somewhat naive at times, though at least some of the blame for this must be attached to the American titling done in 29. Thus we are told that the heroine "is comely but has a hair-lip", and when she has a child (which happens with alarming regularity) a title informs us that "she gives birth in her own primitive way", a phenomenon which fortunately happens off-screen. Inger is nothing if not formidable, since child #4 seems to have been conceived at least within 36 hours of the birth of child #3, although this doesn't become apparent until later. Probably this is more indicative of inexperienced scripting rather than implausibly robust Norwegian womanhood. But despite such lapses, a staccato continuity and an apparent assumption that everyone has read the book, "Growth of the Soil" does manage to be interesting and moving as a film, as well as filling part of a wide open gap in film history. If it is never as "big" dramatically as it has the potential for, many scenes are nevertheless poignant and charming, and in fairness to a film that I seem to have criticised a good deal, perhaps I should be writing about them; but in the long run this would be a disservice to both the film and to you, for it is these scenes that give it that exciting sense of rediscovery. The print incidentally is in remarkably good condition, though there are signs of decomposition towards the end -- all in night scenes that originally would have been printed on blue stock. Presumably when the American negative was made in 1929, the 35mm original print from which it was copied had already begun to hypo, despite being only nine years old.

The resourceful Andy McKay did some checking on the backgrounds of the people involved, and reports that the director was of Danish descent, and was also an actor. Cameraman Schneevoigt was Finnish. Bagna Wettergren (Inger) was a Norwegian actress who specialised in Ibsen roles on the stage; born in 1866, she died in 1958. The only other cast name discovered was that of Almir Hansum (a relative of the author?) who was a carpenter, and in line with the film's method of having non-actors play, in a sense, themselves, he is a carpenter in the film.

A postscript to last week's notes on "Kiss Me Again". Quite apart from - and not unexpectedly - seeming far better and more enjoyable with a receptive audience, it stunned me with the dread reminder that one should NEVER preview films for program notes unless one is fully alert and awake. I saw it some weeks prior to our show, in the early hours of the morning, and actually I found my first impressions remained unchanged by the second viewing last week. BUT to criticise it for "rationing" its music, when few films surely have ever had such a non-stop welter of songs and dances is inexplicable if not psychotic, and I must blame 16mm combat fatigue for that quite erroneous and unjust remark! --- Wke ---