Next Tuesday: Two westerns from 1925: TUM BLEWEEDS, starring William S. Hart, with music and effects and Hart's incredibly moving introductory speech, and THE PRAIRIE PIRATE, a lovely duo-toned print with Harry Carey & Fred Kohler.

Note: Added to "Seven Days Leave" on July 13th is "Terror Aboard" (1933, directed by Paul Sloane) a minor but enjoyably bizarre mystery thriller, with John Halliday, Neil Hamilton, Charlie Ruggles, Veree Teasdale and Jack La Rue.

June 29, 1965

Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Two "Bread and Butter" Silent Films

Today's films are, respectively, a quickie and a programmer, offered rather more for their historic and academic values than for their artistic importance. We have coupled them on the theory that the audience for one is the audience for the other -- our small "hard core" band interested in all aspects of film history. In their own particular niches, these films need no apology and we offer none; this introductory preamble is primarily for the benefit of the "fringe" attendees who drop in occasionally, and who should not depart after a couple of hours with the impression that these films are held up as examples of peak achievements of the silent screen. Far from it. But as films unlikely to be shown elsewhere, they deserve at least this one exposure, and taken in the right spirit both should be both interesting and enjoyable.

"THE MIDNIGHT MESSAGE" (Goodwill Pictures, 1926) Directed by Paul Hurst
Story by H.H. Van Loan, 5 reels.
With Johnnie Fox Jr., Stuart Holmes, Creighton Hale, Wanda Hawley, Otis Harlan, Mathilde Brundage, Mary Carr.

Goodwill Pictures was a company typical of the independent quickie-mERCHANTS of the 20's when the double-bill was coming into its own, and there was an increasing market for 5-reel comedies, actioners and westerns. This breed of film-maker multiplied through the late 20's and early 30's, and began to die out almost entirely in the early 40's, when rising production costs were beginning to make the real quickie uneconomical, and when PRC, Monogram and Republic turned out "B" films on such a professional assembly-line basis that exhibitors really needed no other source of supply. Actually the genuine quickie had a more expensive look to it in talkies, since incidental music, songs and dialogue, if snappily handled, could always keep a film moving -- which was one of the greatest obstacles facing the silent quickies.

"The Midnight Message" is a good typical example of the achievements -- and limitations -- of the silent quickie. For big scenes, Goodwill (who also made westerns and serials, one of which -- Ben Wilson's "Officer 444" we ran some years ago) rented space at other studios, and they tried to stage as much action as possible out of doors. Also they tried to add prestige to their humble efforts by employing as many "name" stars as possible. Mostly these were big stars of a year or two earlier, now on the skids, but still with enough of a following for their names to mean something. Occasionally even current names of some standing were employed if their contractual obligations with other studios were sufficiently loose. Regardless, the modus-operandi was always the same -- to keep the cost down by hiring such stars for one day or perhaps just a morning, shooting their few scenes all at once, and then spreading them through the picture so that there was always a big star on view. This practice continued through the early 30's too, and many a quickie brought in for $12,000 had a list of stars that only a few years earlier, at the zenith of the silent screen, would have taxed the resources of a major studio. Quite apart from the manipulation of stars, "The Midnight Message" bears watching for its other signs of economy too -- not all of which work. At least a third of the film consists of a chase through Hollywood's suburban streets (streets which look just the same
today incidentally) and this kind of material is always interesting -- though marred to a degree here by being processed without the blue night tint which would have accompanied the original 35mm release prints. Shot in the daytime of course, midnight in Hollywood is here presented with a sunny amber tint, which doesn't altogether enhance the cause of realism. The plot is really only of 2-reeler substance, and this is padded by making the most of minor incident (making tea and boiling a kettle eats up the footage in a way that should make Antonioni quite envious), by extensive intercutting (a dramatic hold-up cuts away to a comedy bit, for example) so that time sequences are interrupted and prolonged and -- more annoyingly -- by having people make telephone calls and talking and talking -- via titles -- as though this were a sound movie! The post-climax wrap-up is also milked for more than it's worth, and the final economy is that despite the copyright notice in the titles, the film never was copyrighted! As you will gather, this is no masterpiece of the art, but it's an interesting study-curio, and despite its cheapness it has enough elements of popular appeal for one to understand its being quite well received in its own bracket. Johnnie Fox, ex-"The Covered Wagon", is the only player with a sustained role throughout, but Wanda Hawley is a pretty heroine somewhat surprisingly on the dumb side, given to exasperating remarks and actions that would have made her a fine foil for Keaton. The print is pictorially fine, but physically held together by prayers, clean living and sprocketed tape, so we ask your indulgence if there is an occasional stoppage -- although actually there shouldn't be any.

INTERMISSION

"THE HEART OF WETONA" (Norma Talmadge Film Corporation--Select Pictures, 1918)
Directed by Sidney Franklin; From the play by George Scarborough; 6 reels.
With Norma Talmadge, Thomas Meighan, Gladden James, Fred Huntley, Fred Turner, Charles Edler.

Made before Talmadge, Meighan or director Franklin had really come into their own as prestige names, "The Heart of Wetona" is nevertheless obviously a picture of far more commercial importance than "The Midnight Message". A 1918 programmer, but a good enough one, it seems a trifle primitive compared with the fine films being turned out by Griffith, Tourneur, Neiman, Hart, DeMille and other pre-20's directors and yet, by the same token, it is a good deal better than many features of the same period. Its basic disappointment is that, based on a play it remains a play, and uses the striking wild Northwoods exteriors only as backgrounds almost as static as the painted flats of the stage version. There are occasional shots of men riding, or striding through the woods -- scenes that could not have been done on stage -- but they are used only as cutaways, or to establish time-lapses, and never in the sense of creatively expanding a theatrical property -- something that Sidney Franklin was to do rather well, only five years later, with a very similar property -- "Tiger Rose". However, in its own rigid theatrical way, "The Heart of Wetona" is rather fun. Thomas Meighan suffers nobly as the "cursed white man" believed to be to blame for Wetona, the "tabu" virgin maid, no longer being in that classification, and of course he always manages to come out with the wrong title at the wrong time to further the belief that he is guilty. Talmadge, about as convincing an Indian as she was a Chinese in "The Forbidden City" has a fine time with such titles as "Love made Wetona a helpless papoose", and Gladden James is rather effective as a backwoods Lennox Sanderson. It's too bad though, that all we know of Miss Talmadge today is from her earliest efforts, and her two indifferent talkies. Her peak period in the 20's, when she appeared to be a kind of composite Davis-Greer Carson-Joan Crawford, remains a blank page to many of us. Mary Pickford has a print of Talmadge's "Secrets", and Eastman House has the 1928 "A Woman Disputed", but otherwise the record is almost as sparse as Theda Bara's.

William K. Everson