Tuesday next: "SEVEN DAYS LEAVE" (1929) with Gary Cooper and Beryl Mercer, from a James Barrie story, a lovely minor classic; and "TERROR ABOARD" (1933), an unimportant but enjoyable bizarre mystery thriller, with John Halliday, Charlie Ruggles, Neil Hamilton and Jack La Rue.

July 6 1965

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Two westerns from 1925

"THE PRAIRIE PIRATE" (P.D.G. 1925) Directed by Edmund Mortimer; produced by Hunt Stromberg; from W.C. Tuttle's story "The Yellow Seal"; scenario by Robert Anthony Dillon; edited by Harry L. Decker; 5 reels
Starring Harry Carey, with Fred Kohler, Lloyd Whitlock, Jean Dumas, Trilby Clark, Robert Edeson.

One of the western stars most firmly in the Hart tradition was Harry Carey, although in point of fact Carey's taciturn characterisation predates Hart in that he was active in Biograph westerns for Griffith some four years before Hart made his first film. Perhaps partly because his obviously leathery and non-youthful appearance prevented it, Carey avoided the streamlined westerns that Mix, Thomson and Maynard made so popular in the 20's. Hart's were always westerns of the old school, sometimes a little slow on action, but always strong on plot. There was a definite sign of Hart in these plots too; Carey's "Satan Town" was a very creditable lesser "Hell's Hinges", and a respect for womanhood was a staple ingredient with both Hart and Carey. This extends, in "The Prairie Pirate", to another Hart motivation -- the death of the hero's sister, and the tracking down of the man responsible. There are signs that "The Prairie Pirate" was designed as more than just a program western; the mounting is quite elaborate, and it gets off to a really dramatic opening. Somehow after that it descends into formula; one gets the impression that the film was running over budget and had to be finished off in a hurry by cheapening certain sequences. (The waterfall episode is not built to a climax quite the way one expects). Nevertheless, it's a well above average horse opera, and a particularly fine print, with amber and blue tones throughout. Incidentally, Richard Talmadge can be seen doubling for Carey in the climactic reel. Fred Kohler, always one of the very best western heavies, is on top form here too!

INTERMISSION

"TUMBLEWEEDS" (Hart-United Artists, 1925); Directed by Hart and King Baggott; screenplay by C. Gardner Sullivan from the story by Hal G. Evarts; photographed by Joseph August; 8 reels.
The Cast: Don Carver (William S. Hart); Molly Lesiter (Barbara Bedford); Kentucky Rose (Lucien Littlefield); Noll Lesiter (J. Gordon Russell); Bill Freel (Richard Neill); Bart Lesiter (Jack Murphy); Mrs Riley (Lillian Leighton); Old Woman (Gertrude Claire); Old man (George Marion); Major of Cavalry (Capt. T.E. Duncan); Kinman of the Box K (James Gordon); Riley boy (Turner Savage); Hicks (Monte Collins); Hotel owner (Fred Gamble).

As a boxoffice attraction, Hart had been waning steadily in the early 20's. His refusal to compromise with new western trends which called for slick, streamlined actioners was of course praiseworthy and just what one would expect of Hart. However, in his determination not to sell out, he seemed to bend over backwards to repeat the type of material that was now considered out of date. His austerity of style was supplemented by a completely unrestrained sentimentality, and although very well along in years, he still persisted in playing the allegedly youthful hero who wins the girl. All this reached its ultimate in the ludicrous "Singer Jim McKe", unquestionably Hart's worst film, and one which even his most devoted admirers find a little hard to take. Hart and Zukor argued bitterly, and refusing to accede to Zukor's demands that he work under directors and writers who would exercise control over him, Hart retired from the screen.
"Tumbleweeds", almost two years later, was his comeback film. It was also his most expensive and most ambitious film, with a budget of $312,000. Those who expected Hart to have given in, to have made the sort of western that audiences apparently wanted, should have known better. In "Tumbleweed," Hart had reverted to type with a vengeance, although having apparently taken some of the earlier criticisms to heart, he had reduced the number of sentimental scenes involving himself. However, he had not reduced the intensity of those that he retained, and the climactic reunion scene is unfettered Hart emotion at its peak. It also leads into one of the most beautiful visual climaxes of any western. Replacing some of the lost sentiment is a curious experiment in comedy -- often rather coy and folky, in the Will Rogers tradition. It doesn't really work, but fortunately it is largely limited to one sequence.

In many ways, "Tumbleweeds" is one of the very best of the screen epics, and a vastly superior film to, for example, Cruze's "The Pony Express" of the same period. It is staged on a massive scale; the handling of mobs, and the near-documentary quality of the cattle drive scenes, plus the detail of the town scenes (pigs wallowing in mud in the main street) all help to make it seem so real that one can almost feel oneself choking on the dust with which everyone in a Hart western gets caked sooner or later. But again, Hart's refusal to introduce action for its own sake, his methodical pacing, a rather anti-climactic closing reel and his overall refusal to "streamline" presentation, did make it seem a trifle slow and old-fashioned. The giant landrush sequence notwithstanding its epic qualities were appreciated, and noted, to a far lesser degree than those of the generally inferior "The Covered Wagon". However, "Tumbleweeds" was a tremendous improvement over "Singer Jim McKee", and a much more popular film which both reviewers and the public. It opened to excellent reviews and top business at the Rivoli in New York. However, this promising start was not sustained. UA disliked the film, and wanted to cut it to 5 reels. Hart prevented this. UA retaliated by deliberately mishandling the film and booking it into minor situations where its potential could not be realised. Hart took the case to court, and won -- as he won every court case he was involved in, no matter who he took on! However, his victory was purely a technical one, for the damage had been done. He recouped his production costs, but estimated that he had lost half-a-million dollars in unrealised profits. Discouraged, he retired from films permanently, though still remaining on the fringe. He made a guest appearance in King Vidor's "Show People" (1928), coached Johnny Mack Brown and Robert Taylor for their respective Billy the Kid films, and sold his "O'Malley of the Mounted" to Fox for a remake. However, he was so distressed at the routine results that he refused to part with any more properties. Instead, he settled down to his Newhall Ranch and wrote -- an autobiography, western stories, poems -- all rugged, 100% western, sentimental, and authentic Hart through and through.

In "Tumbleweeds" Hart placed many of his old Ince cronies -- Richard Neill, Lillian Leighton and others. He used his favorite cameraman, Joseph August, and some of the photographic effects are still breath-taking, not least in some beautifully composed shots of the first coming of the homesteaders, with wagon-wheels in silhouette. The use of Littlerfield as a comic partner is an odd touch, and probably only an unconscious sign that Hart had noted the existence of this cliche in the newer westerns. A stickler for authenticity to the last, Hart hated faking of any kind, and thus there is fairly little stunt work in the landrush sequence. Yakima Canutt or Cliff Lyons would have had wagons crashing and horses tumbling right and left, but not Hart! The crashing of one wagon is his limit, and even this is rather crudely done. This is typical of Hart, and a directorial trait that can be observed in "O'Malley of the Mounted" and other Hart westerns: if he has to resort to stunt work to get an action effect, he'd rather avoid it -- or get around it as well as possible by editing. This is evident too in the scene where Hart escapes from the stockade. A double performs the very tricky vault over the barbed wire fence. But rather than have the same double mount the horse and then pick up Hart from a different angle.
Hart puts in a fantastically smooth jump cut, and in the same scene, takes over from the double to do his own riding. This may have been partially vanity too, for Hart disliked it to be known that he used occasional doubles, and in this way, aided by a shot where he looks full-face back at the camera, he creates the impression that he did perform the leap as well. But there is certainly no double in the marathon riding sequence that follows, no mean feat for a man nearing his sixties. The Landrush itself, though again lacking a certain slickness (one or two shots are even rather crude) is a grand-scale affair, superbly staged and with a real sense of filmic movement. It also contains one shot of sheer poetry — Hart galloping his horse over the crest of a hill, the camera angled just below ground level to give the impression of horse and rider literally flying. The whole landrush, in many ways superior to the one in Wesley Ruggles' "Cimarron," is a fine sequence, marred only by that unnecessary and illogical sequence of late-starter Hart taking time out to save a widow's wagon from crashing over a (glass-shot) cliff. Incidentally, it starts off with an extremely interestingly edited build-up sequence. Between the title "Ready for the signal for the maddest stampede in American history" and the actual start of the rush, there are 684 frames split up into 25 separate shots, the shortest of which is a mere 5 frames. This sequence is almost mathematically put together, the shots of the tense homesteaders running twice as long as those of the disinterested observers.

All told, "Tumbleweeds" is a fine if rather specialised westerns, and certainly one of the most unappreciated of the genuine epics. It's also thoroughly typical vintage Hart, complete even to the traditional sequence where the bad man is introduced in no uncertain terms by beating both a child and a dog.

At one point in "Tumbleweeds," Hart sadly removes his hat, looks at the oncoming trail herds, and says "Boys, it's the last of the West." For him it was a prophetic statement. However, the film was successfully reissued in 1939, to cash in on the new western cycle started off by "Stagecoach." It is this version we are playing today, uncut and unchanged, other than for the addition of a flawsomely musical score which today has added interest in being so nostalgically typical of the kind of scores first added to reissues of silent films. This print also includes the introduction that Hart shot for the film at his Newhall Ranch; here, in those rich Shakespearean tones, which suggest that he might well have filled a niche in sound films equal to Gary Cooper's had he been a little younger, he appears first as story-teller, outlining the background of the film we are to see, and then as a man bidding farewell to his fans, telling of the movies that he loved so well, and literally delivering his own obituary. It is about the most moving eight minutes that I have ever encountered in the cinema, theatrical and sentimentalised perhaps, but every word of it so obviously sincere and deeply felt.

William K. Everson

An advance announcement regarding LES MISERABLES, showing on July 20th.

We have now received and pre-screened this 1912 film, and it is really quite remarkable in many ways, far more advanced in its techniques than THE COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO, QUEEN ELIZABETH, CLEOPATRA and many of the other early full-length features. However, it is still a "primitive," and with its rather harsh print quality and French titles, it remains primarily of historic and academic interest. We're not trying to turn away attendees, but we do suggest that this film is primarily for those who like to study old films, and not for those who look for entertainment values alone. It's a rare and rewarding piece, but it will certainly not be everybody's cup of tea.