Next Tuesday, Oct 12: Two enjoyable programmers from the early 30's: "SHOPWORN" (1932) Barbara Stanwyck rises from waitress to star, with illicit love and prison in between; "HELLO EVERYBODY" (1933), an alleged adaptation of Fannie Hurst; songs and sentiment, with Kate Smith, Randolph Scott.

October 5, 1965
The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"THE LASH" (First National, 1930) Directed by Frank Lloyd
Scenario and dialogue by Bradley King, based on "Adios" by Lanier Bartlett and Virginia Stivers Bartlett; camera: Ernest Haller;
Edited by Harold Young; Art Director, John J. Hughes; Musical
Director, Erno Rapee. 8 reels.
With Richard Barthelmess, Mary Astor, Fred Kohler, Marion Nixon, James Rennie, Robert Edeson, Erville Alderson, Barbara Bedford, Arthur Stone, Chris Pin Martin, Mathilde Comont, Francis McDonald.

Frank Lloyd is a director whose best films ("Cavalcade", "Mutiny on the Bounty") have always seemed to have been made "for" him by good scripts or fine actors. Remembering how tedious and stately was his other early Barthelmess talkie, "Son of the Gods", we frankly weren't expecting too much of "The Lash", but it turns out to be a surprisingly good film of its not very ambitious type.

Two unexpected assets, not necessarily under Lloyd's control, give it a big lift right away. First of all, it has a fine musical score arranged by Erno Rapee -- unobtrusive perhaps in that it resembles the orchestrations for silents, rich in romantic "moods" and furious agitato themes -- but of tremendous help in avoiding those long static passages where you can literally "hear" the silence. Furthermore, the music is well mixed, never drowning out the dialogue as so often happened in those early talkies. I can't think of any other early sound film off-hand that used musical scoring so extensively; until scoring became an art in itself, around 1932 ("The Most Dangerous Game", etc.) most early talkies just avoided scoring a) because of the mechanical problems of mixing, and b) because it was considered "unrealistic". The score here certainly helps tremendously on two levels, in establishing mood, and in overcoming occasionally slow-paced direction. Another, though less spectacular, asset is that the film was one of that short-lived cycle of Wide-Screen efforts, and thus visually at least, it is less stately than it might have been. Sets and action are composed for wide-screen effect, and while this doesn't result in any remarkable visuals (there seems to be no real reason for having made it in wide-screen), at least there is a tendency to break up the talk scenes into a variety of angles, and to inject a maximum of movement into everything.

As with so many Lloyd movies, there is a certain amount of unrealised potential (Even the mutiny in "Mutiny on the Bounty" isn't free of this criticism). More than once there are elaborate build-ups to scenes that are then shunted aside casually, or played off-screen. The climax, to put it mildly, anti-climactic with the really big scene of the movie coming at the half-way mark. With two such lovely ladies as Mary Astor and Marion Nixon on hand, the romantic element of the story isn't developed as much as one might hope either. But it has flavor (helped by many silent-vintage titles) and, once it gets going, pace -- plus the usual sterling performances from Barthelmess and that most evil of all villains, dear old Fred Kohler. Production values are good, with bigger crowd scenes at times than the story really warrants. The highlight, which must have been most impressive on the wide-screen, is of a herd of cattle wrecking a small western town; this is excitingly done stuff, although there are nowhere near the "three thousand maddened steers" described in one of the titles. Some of this stampede footage is quite familiar, since it has turned up for years in Universal westerns and serials (Buck Jones' "The Phantom Rider" for example) and because of Universal's exclusive use of it, I
always erroneously assumed it to have originated with a Universal silent. But because of the wide-screen shooting, and the matching footage of Barthelmess etc., it is quite apparent that this is the source.

The print shows signs of negative hypo throughout, and obviously was made up just in time. Not that it's a major film, or that its loss is as serious as the loss of "The Man from Blankleys" or "The Mystery of the Wax Museum", but it's an interesting little film, and a good one to have still with us.

--- Intermission ---

"CABIN IN THE COTTON" (First National, 1932) Directed by Michael Curtiz
Scenario by Paul Green from the novel by Henry Harrison Kroll; camera: Barney McGill; Asst. Director, William Keighley; Art Director, Esdras Hartley; editor: George Amy. 7 reels.

Quite one of the best of the early Warner talkies that mixed social comment with all-out melodrama, and also in many ways one of Michael Curtiz's best films "Cabin in the Cotton" is quite undated today, and in terms of acting, camerawork, and just about everything else, holds up superbly well. Not an expensive film, the economy shows through occasionally. The impressive scenes behind the main titles are lifted from Universal ("Show Boat" and "Uncle Tom's Cabin") and the occasional use of studio plus back projection for cotton field scenes is a little obvious today, although the skill with which such scenes are done are well above average 1932 standards. But the very economy and lack of pretension gives it the raw, gutsy look it needs.

Some of the camerawork is truly beautiful, and the lighting is at least one early scene is brilliantly successful in evoking a feeling of blazing heat and dry dust. Like all Warner-First National films of the period, it is a machine-made product, with contract cameramen, players etc., but productions of this merit are in themselves a justification for such a machine. Russell Simpson, David Landau, Tully Marshall et al. may be type-cast contract players, but how efficiently are they utilised, and how we miss the existence of similar stock companies today. And many of these comparatively unimportant players are far more versatile than one realises: I can't recall many performances by John Marston, but it's interesting to contrast his very effective acting here as the lawyer associate of Barthelmess, with the brief untitled bit he did the same year in "Blessed Event", as the uncouth radio announcer. Henry B. Walthall is nothing short of superb in his one big scene, and Barthelmess, in a kind of mature extension of "Tol'able David", is quite fine too. Bette Davis' Nellie is a standout too, for she imbues it with all the animal sensuality that her Mildred in "Of Human Bondage" should have had, and didn't. Admittedly, Mildred was a more difficult and certainly less appealing role, but by any standards her performance here, of two years earlier is infinitely superior. Barthelmess has many problems in "Cabin in the Cotton" but it's a little difficult to see why he makes such a problem of having to choose between Davis and Jordan -- or settling for both. Problems like that we'd all like to have!