Next program: Tuesday next, November 16th: THE THIRTEENTH JUROR (1927, directed by Edward Laemmle, with Walter Pidgeon); THE TWO FISTERS (1926, directed by William Wyler, with Edmund Cobb) and a two-reel condensation of THE MARRIAGE CLAUSE (1926, directed by Lois Weber, with Francis X. Bushman, Billie Dove and Warner Oland); all original toned prints.

November 9th 1965

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

THE HALF BACK OF NOIRE DAME (Pathes-Mack Sennett, 1924) Director: Del Lord
Supervising Director, F. Richard Jones; camera: Billy Williams
Special effects, Ernie Crockett. 2 reels.
With Harry Gribbon, Jack Cooper, Madeleine Hurlock, Louise Carver, Andy Clyde, Vernon Dent, Kempie Morgan.

Many 2-reelers of the 20's were titled as spoofs of established boxoffice hits, but only Stan Laurel was consistent in his satirising of the films themselves. This Sennett comedy has no more connection with the Lou Chaney film than our companion comedy, "Black Oxards", has to do with the Corinne Griffith film that inspired it, "Black Oxen". Moreover, "The Half Back of Notre Dame" isn't a particularly funny Sennett, but one that we feel is worth showing largely for its curiosity value. Few comedies, even from Sennett, have been more slipshod and disconnected. It literally gives the impression of being a series of out-takes from other comedies, all spliced together. Obviously it isn't, but it was probably an "economy" short, so constructed that it could be shot quickly on sets or locations designed for other comedies. Thus some scenes are clearly taken on the "Daredevil" location (a Ben Turpin subject); while the judge's stand prop - and gag - must have been shot after its more elaborate usage in "Lizzie of the Field".

The whole film is thus more interesting for its gusto and ingenuity than for its comedy content -- especially since much of the latter is of an extremely painful nature, with extended gags revolving around bee-stings and tooth extractions! Also of interest (this in "Black Oxards" too) is the extensive usage of Andy Clyde, who seems to have been to Sennett what Charlie Stevens was to Fairbanks. With minor changes in make-up (one with a beard, once in blackface) Clyde turns up in four different roles. The more one sees of the run-of-the-mill Sennetts, the more one becomes convinced that the best of Sennett can be found in Hal Roach, and that even the weakest Roach comedies usually had a comic sophistication than Sennett could claim only in the best comedies written or directed for him by his top men -- Capra, Lord, Harry Edwards.

"BLACK OXARDS" (Pathes-Mack Sennett, 1924) Director: Del Lord
With Sid Smith, Vernon Dent, Marceline Day, Anna Hernandez, Jack Richardson, Kalla Fasha, Andy Clyde. 2 reels.

Although not helped by Sid Smith, one of the least talented of the Sennett clowns (how much more Billy Bevan would have made of the identical material), "Black Oxards" is a very funny comedy that moves fast and illogically, and piles in so many gags - good, bad and indifferent - that most of them, if only by the law of averages, seem to pay off. One outrageous gag with a cow's udder is very funny indeed, and is a reminder of those days when healthy vulgarity was very much a part of screen comedy. Disney and Laurel & Hardy were great subscribers to that brand of humor at one time too, and some uninhibited film scholar might perform some useful and diverting research by listing for us the number and variety of "udder" gags!

Incidentally, if any of "Black Oxards" seems familiar it's because we once ran a dupey one-reel cutdown of it at the Film Group. This print is a fine toned original, and complete in every way.

- Intermission -
"SUNSHINE DAD" (Fine Arts-Triangle, 1916) Directed by Eddie Dillon
 Supervised by D.W. Griffith; story by Chester Withey and F. R. Pierson; 5 rls.
 With DeWolf Hopper, Fay Tincher, Eugene Pallette, Jewel Carmen, Max Davidson,
 DeWolf Hopper jr., Raymond Wells, Chester Withey, Tom Wilson, Howard Guye,
 Charles Stevens. Extras in ballroom scene include Wallace Reid & Lillian Gish.

Although certainly an entertaining frolic, "Sunshine Dad" is a film generally
more interesting for its various components than as a single entity. For
one thing, the Fairbanks films apart, there is a fantastic gap in our knowledge
of early feature film comedies between "Fillie's Punctured Romance" in 1914,
and the gradual emergence of star-vehicle feature comedies (Arbuckle, Fabel
Normand, Constance Talmadge) around 1917/18, still well before Chaplin, Lloyd
and Keaton moved into features.

Secondly, the film is an astonishing parallel to the Beatles' current "Help!".
Not only is the basic story identical, but even the overall approach is quite
similar - complete with titles that offer asides to the audience, and indicate
quite clearly that the whole thing should just be regarded as a lark.

Historically, the film is rich in incidental study material. The feminine
costuming is bizarre, fascinating, and sometimes startlingly up to date. The
Hollywood and Beverly Hills backgrounds include many shots of the lovely old
Hollywood Hotel, now no more. Much of the interior decor is beguiling, to say
the least - though sometimes claustrophobic might be a better adjective. And
the climax, with a magnificent (and seemingly quite friendly) lion running
around in a hotel causes one to ponder whether this film borrows from Sennett
(then one of the Triangle partners) or whether he later borrowed from it.

Finally, of course, the film is an interesting record of the work of DeWolf
Hopper (whose then current wife was the indestructible Hedda). As a stage
star of comedy, musical comedy and operetta - whose range extended from Mr.
Pickwick to Gilbert & Sullivan - Hopper was obviously at a disadvantage
without his rich voice, and despite energy and obvious willingness to give
his all, doesn't really come over as a movie comic. He was no longer young of
course, and showed it - plus which his wig and false eyebrows (he'd lost all
his hair, eyebrows included, during an earlier attack of typhoid) are not
treated too kindly by the merciless camera. However, Triangle certainly did
their best to sell him as a movie personality, and resolutely offered him in a
new film every couple of months. "Don Quixote" had been released on February 27,
1916; "Sunshine Dad" followed it on April 23, and "Mr. Good the Samaritan"
(again with Withey, Dillon and Tincher on the team) came out in June. "Casey at
the Bat" needless to say was one of his other Triangle-Fine Arts releases.
Triangle however, was a singularly unsophisticated company, and few of their
films were more than programmers. Hart, Fairbanks and Charlie Ray were the
only stars whose releases had real zip and style, and despite occasional
pleasing little films, the talents of Mae Marsh, Bebbie Love and the Oshes
were sorely wasted in machine-made output from a company whose trading slogan
was "Clean Pictures for Clean People".

The original publicity for "Sunshine Dad" refers to "Griffith touches and
photography", but this seems limited to rather too much cross-cutting, often
for its own sake, and probably done "because the old man likes it that way".
Griffith's personal supervision was probably limited to the pre-title plea
against censorship, indicating that he was still smarting over the problems
of "The Birth of a Nation". The print by the way, is full of splices, but
this does not indicate missing footage. When we acquired it, it was in about a
hundred small rolls, which had to be sorted and fitted together like a jigsaw.
All of it is there, and perhaps a little too much considering the slightness of
the material. But as long as you don't expect the insane invention and speed of
"Help!" I think you'll find it a diverting and certainly unusual rediscovery.

---Mr. K. Everson