Tuesday April 26 1936

**The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society**

**"THE VICTORIA CROSS"** (Vitagraph, 1912) Directed by Hal Reed With Wallace Reid (Lt. Cholmeleydeley); Tefft Johnson (The Colonel); Edith Storey (his daughter); Rose Tapley (Queen Victoria); Julia Swaye Gordon (Florence Nightingale). 1 reel.

This early "Charge of the Light Brigade" opus seems rather a chauvinist show compared with the genuine spectacle, sweep and huge numbers of horses and extras that Griffith used the same year in his one-reeler "The Battle." But in its day, the screenplay was at least ingenious — the entire charge is seen from a distance by Edith Storey, and her reactions serve to create some of the drama that the budget could not. So we see the battle from her vantage point, and through her binoculars, the number of men and horses, a fact that can be seen at one time are rather curtailed, but logically so! Like most Vitagraphs, it's an interesting little subject, and some attention seems to have been paid to details of costuming etc., this even extending to Queen Victoria's party, which clearly includes (though does not identify) Mr. Gladstone.


This really rugged little Ince western dispenses with bad guys and shoot-ups, and offers us t. b., suicide and bigamy instead. Like so many of the Ince films of this period, its starkness and tragedy seems rather contrived when one regards its output as a group, but on its own it's a good and decidedly off-best little film. The landrush (still relatively new as a screen thrill, depicted on the screen for the first time only the year before by Vitagraph) is excitingly done, though almost thrown away. But in its sparse and unusual realism, it looks almost like documentary footage and at that, it was much closer to the actual event than we are to this Ince film today. It's strange to realise that "The Woman" made in 1913, is set in Arizona — which if memory serves correctly (historians please double-check!) only became an official state of the Union in 1912. Incidentally, the 2-reel "The Woman" had a nine-day shooting schedule — far longer than was later allotted to six-reel sound westerns!


In the late 20's, there were two particularly fine series of program westerns on the market from major companies. MGM offered the Tim McCys, elaborately done dramas, initially by U. S. Van Dyke (though Poorjanski did one!) though often with more plot than action. First National had Ken Maynard, dedicated to action first and last, and to really top production values. A cult favorite was subsequently remade first in the John Wayne series in the early 30's and then with Dick Foran, and the big action footage was re-used very generously.

I do hope that the unavoidable description of "program western" hasn't kept too many at home this evening, for "Red Raiders" is superb western movie-making. Its plot may be "trivial" — indeed, there really isn't much plot — but the size, scale and pacing of its almost non-top action material is right up there with the best of Ford and Griffith. Certainly this is quite as "big" a film in a physical sense as Vidor's "The Texas Rangers" or Ford's "Stagecoach". The film is another collaboration between director Rogell, scenarist Jackson and cameraman Fisher who turned out several top westerns together, including Fred Thomson's "Thundering Hoofs" in 1924. The plot, such as it is, eschews white heavies, and is little more than a prolonged situation with the indians an as collective and mammoth as unifying villain. However, it is perhaps worth noting that they are presented sympathetically and as human beings, a rare note in the 20's, midway between Ince's Indian romances and Delmer Daves' "Broken Arrow". The titles incidentally are full of historical footnotes, a la Griffith, and of one them informs us that an indian player is the sole survivor of the Little Big Horn.

Ken Maynard was at his absolute peak when "Red Raiders" was made, and a first-rate action performer. His riding is superb, and the stunts, even when unnecessary, are something to see. He was less effective in talkies, due to dubious acting abilities from then on for liquor, a tendency to ad-lib his dialogue and, as his own producer a fondness for contractual stipulations that seemed like collaborations between Bumnel, Stromhoek and Zola. However, he did make some pretty good actioners in the early 30's, and stayed resolutely in harness until the 40's. "The Red Raiders" is a showcase for his riding skill, and for the application of the running insert or riding closeup. I can't think of any western — big or small — that has ever had so many dynamic and exciting (and well-varied) riding scenes as this one. The print is a toned original, and a pleasure to behold.

----------------------------- William K. Everson --