Tuesday next, June 7th: Anthony Asquith's "COTTAGE TO LET" (1941) with Leslie Banks, John Mills, Alastair Sim; and Michael Curtiz' "BRITISH AGENT" (1934) with Kay Francis, Leslie Howard, Irving Pichel.

May 31, 1966

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

PATHE NEWS One reel

A coverage of the Ku Klux Klan from 1915 to date, which rather smugly seems to imply that the Klan is just about no more. Whatever one thinks of the Klan, its showmanship is akin to that utilised by Hitler at the 1934 rallies; what a pity that Leni Riefenstahl never took her thirty cameramen down to Alabama! The second story is of a 1920 blizzard here in New York; excellent footage and fascinating street scenes.

VITAPHONE PICTORIAL REVIEW (1936) One reel

During the 30's, most companies at one time or another had a "magazine" reel which supplemented the news reel by covering general "interest" items, sports, personalities, fashions etc., items that wouldn't date immediately and would give the shorter exhibition life than the regular news reel. Most of the items in these reels were too trivial to raise much excitement even in those curious days when "trivia" has become the new fad, but they do provide quite interesting sidelights on the things that were considered interesting to the general public in those happy days before television and other mass communication media were bombarding us with unwanted information on all sides. This reel is rather a pleasing example, and opens up with a delightfully naive screen-test sequence, in which poise and a pretty face seem to be the only requisites for screen stardom. When the attractive young thing asks the studio boss what happens when he needs a star who isn't just a beautiful girl, he tells her "Oh, well then we have to look around a bit!" Were this sequence to be shot today, we'd probably get a little nudity and maybe an attempted seduction -- which after all is just as much of a fairy-tale as the 1930's version. Other stories include a session with Diamond Jim's old chef, who takes a perfectly superb steak, broils it to perfection, and THEN proceeds to smother it in so many sauces and other trimmings that not only does one's stomach rebel, but the whole mess winds up looking like an Andy Warhol "happening"! Finally there's a display of beachwear fashions, notable only in that one of the bathing suit models is a very young and still unknown Susan Hayward.

CAVALCADE OF GIRLS (Warner Brothers, 1949) One reel

Produced and written by Robert G. Youngson

One of the best of the earlier Youngsons, this is a nostalgic roundup of American femininity from the turn of the century to date, covering fashions, suffragetting, personalities of the twenties and winding up - honestly if not very encouragingly - with muscle-bound roller skaters where you literally can't tell the men from the girls.

GIFT WRAPPED (Warner Brothers, 1951) One reel. Technicolor. Dir: I. Freling

One of the best of the Tweety-Sylvester cartoons, this is a kind of cartoon equivalent of Laurel & Hardy's "Big Business", with an astonishing array of steadily-building savagery and destruction taking place against a background of Christmas trees, yuletide décor and presents, and sweet voices singing carols.

- INTERMISSION -

When I first saw "Beggars of Life" at Eastman House some 14 years ago I was quite stunned by it, partly because it is a powerful picture and one that then was completely fresh to me, partly because it served as my re-introduction to Louise Brooks who had not then been rediscovered by the archivists, and whose fantastic impact could come direct from screen to viewer without one having to push aside all the cobwebs of Cinematique gush first. "Beggars of Life" is however, and no discredit to it, one of those pictures that seems to lose a little on subsequent viewings, rather like Chaplin's "Limelight" which is such a superb film that one wants to see it again and again, but which has weaknesses that become more apparent as the purely emotional responses wear off. Since the first impression is clearly the most important one - and certainly that initial response is what every film-maker aims at, with little thought for the second-time-around viewer - criticism of any film's lessening values after repeated viewings seems grossly unfair. If some films appear to have an advantage by making an exaggerated impact on the first viewing, then the balance is adjusted by those less fortunate films - Buñuel's "El" for example - which cannot hope to come through 100% the first time, and reveal the various layers of their structure only with subsequent viewings.

"Beggars of Life" has a virtue which is also its greatest liability. Its opening sequence is not only dynamic dramatic story-telling, but is told in a wholly visual and tremendously exciting manner. Almost no film could hope to maintain the level of interest and filmic literacy created by these few minutes -- just as Rko's old "Deluge" opens up with the spectacular destruction of the world, and then cannot really hold our interest as we follow the adventures of a handful of surviving New Yorkers. Also, like so many Paramount films of the 20's, "Beggars of Life" is basically a pretty empty film. Jim Tully's original may well have been a raw and trenchant commentary on hobo life in the depression years; expanded to nine reels, it hovers midway between being a half-hearted social comment and a vehicle for Wallace Beery. It ends up being neither; since it tells us very little about the hoboes, and assumes we know why they are what they are (possibly a reasonable assumption to make in 1928), we're never placed in the position of feeling either indignant or angry that such conditions can exist -- as indeed we did with "The Grapes of Wrath". We're rooting for the boy and the girl, but only because they're a nice couple, put upon by everybody, and unjustly hounded, and because they just don't belong in such an environment. Of course, the point should be that nobody "belongs" to such a life, but because the youngsters are such outsiders we are never really made to feel that.

So if it doesn't come across completely successfully as a social comment (and comparison with Wallman's "Wild Boys of the Road", showing on June 28th, will be interesting on that score) "Beggars of Life" has to be approached more as a kind of melodrama, and here it works rather better. After that dynamic opening, the pace does fail a little. Due to some early sound interpolations, including a song for Wallace Beery (this print is of the silent version) the pacing is sometimes a little disjointed, and the movement too slow in the middle portions. But the final third picks up steam quite spectacularly, and is both exciting and poignant. (Incidentally, Miss Brooks once mentioned that Chaplin could well have played the Beery role. Apart from the fact that Chaplin could probably play anything he set his mind to, it's a sound comment as the final resolution of the Beery character shows). Even in this last third though, there are inconsistencies. Edgar Washington is such a nice guy - and interesting character - throughout that it's a pity to find standard negro stereotype material (chicken-stealing etc.) being written into his role at the very end. And no fault of the film this - the final melodramatic chase scenes with the train today seem a trifle less convincing only because we have since seen that location, and that stretch of railroad, used so extensively in comedies (Monte Banks' "Play Safe" etc.). The print is a dupe of fair quality, which hardly does justice to that incredible Brooks face, but since it is the only print outside of Eastman House, we should be grateful to see it at all. By the way, nobody is starred, but Beery gets top billing, even though it's Louise Brooks' film all the way, both in performance and total footage. -- Wm. K. Everson