December 5, 1967

Two films from 1923

1923 was quite a year for both artistic milestones and boxoffice blockbusters; Hollywood that year gave us "The Hunchback of Notre Dame", "The Covered Wagon", "The Ten Commandments", "Greed", "The White Sister" and "Safety Last". It also gave us "His Last Race", very much of a quickie, and "Scars of Jealousy", a typical (though above-average) Ince programmer, the two films that form tonight's program.

"HIS LAST RACE" (Phil Goldstone Productions, 1923) Director: B. Reeves Eason Photography: Cy Jackson Rose; Art Direction: Gustav Ertl. 5 reels

With: Smokey Baker, Gladys Brockwell, Robert McKim, Noah Beery, Pauline Starke, Tully Marshall, Alec B. Francis, William Scott, Harry Dopp, Dick Sutherland, and Boomerang, the horse.

"His Last Race" is a pleasing example of the unpretentious little quickies (far better for the most part than their PRC or Monogram sound counterparts, and certainly superior to the talkie quickies made by the same Phil Goldstone) that helped to bring home the bacon for small town theatres in the twenties. Quite literally, nothing is packed into it - romance, humor, action, sentiment, animal and child appeal, and the traditional and all-important final race on which everything depends. None of it is exactly subtle, nor does it try to be. Certainly the jovial villainy of Noah Beery doesn't take itself too seriously. The final reel and a half is all action, with the wonder horse certainly living up to that description: old and ready for retirement, kept on the gallop seemingly for hours, tearing back across rough country to the track, and still winning that race on which so many destinies depend.

"His Last Race", somewhat in the vein of the Diok Talmanse actioners of the period, was directed by B. Reeves Eason, sometimes also referred to as Breezy Eason. (For the record, Breezy was Beery's son and a child actor who, tragically, was killed in an auto accident. In later years, Bevers also adopted the name Breezy at times.) Eason was an expert director of small westerns, serials ("The Galloping Ghost" being an especially lively example) and anything with action. He was also a top-notch 2nd unit director, staging action sequences for much bigger pictures - e.g., "The Charge of the Light Brigade", the chariot race for the silent "Ben Hur", the Battle of San Juanito in "Man of Conquest" and the gunfighting of the ranchers in "Duel in the Sun". His talent for straight dramatic material was weak, and the non-action scenes of "His Last Race" do lag a trifle. But once Eason gets back to his chases and fights, the pace soon quickens up.

Although it is a cheap production, the film does have a certain polish. The photography is exceptionally good, the locations non-standard and well-chosen, and the sets substantial enough - although none an open door does provide a glimpse of propemps. The acting is strong, and such old reliables as Tully Marshall (who made such a big hit in "The Covered Wagon" that same year) and Alec B. Francis have very little to do. Producers of chepies (and this applied equally well to the early 30's) would hire these "prestige" names for one day's work only, shoot their scenes quickly at a minimum salary, and then distribute them carefully through the film so that there was always some well-known name on view in the official cast list, the film's hero - Rex (Smokey) Baker, an Australian athlete - is actually in several places, as is Goldstone the producer, apparently fancied himself as a minor league Griffith. Note the Griffithian titles - especially an opening eulogy to the glory of womanhood - and the natty little PG monograms on each title, the two initials interweaving themselves just as the D & G did on the Griffith titles.

IMPORTANT NOTE: it is exactly eleven years and one month since we last ran this film. In that intervening decade, the film (not our property) has apparently been very carelessly played, and allowed to absorb heat and dust out of a can. We got our hands on the print again just two days before the screening, and found it buckled almost beyond relief and practically unseeable. We immediately gave it the standard emergency treatment -- a hot steam-bath, allowing it to absorb moisture, and then an ultra-tight winding. Examination on Monday night showed it to be much improved and at least projectable, and the surgery has been repeated. But doubtless a good deal of buckling (in and out of focus effect) will remain for the Tuesday show, and there's just nothing unfortunately that can be done. It is at its worst in the first reel, rows 1 & 3 improve somewhat; and the last couple of reels appear to have been cured completely. It's bound to be a bit irritating in the first 30 minutes and room permitting, we suggest that you sit as far back as possible. The further back you are, the less obvious is the buckling - and the less likely you are to go blind.

New Jersey-filmed two-reeler, CROOKED.
"SCARS OF JEALOUSY" (Thomas Ince-First National, 1923) Direction and scenario by Lambert Hillyer; story by Anthony Rudd; Camera: J.O.Taylor; 6 rls With Lloyd Hughes, Marguerite de la Motte, Frank Keenan, Edward Burns, James Mason, Max Davidson, Bob Kortman, Nelson McDowell.

"Scars of Jealousy" is a lovely print in fine physical condition, with a wide range of color tones. Experience has shown that prints in this excellent state of preservation (indicating a minimum of use) rarely turn out to be great pictures and this is no exception -- but it is certainly an extremely well-made and ambitious programmer, and omens in just about everything to keep the customers happy. Starting out in the French Revolution with Grieffithian titles, it soon switches to Alabama in the 20's -- and runs the gamut of mountain feuds, Southern honor, a son's regeneration, romance imperilled by social differences, two rugged fist fights, a runaway horse, an attempted lynching, a race to the rescue and a forest fire. It's hoke all the way, with Frank Keenan doing his old "The Coward" performance all over again. But somehow the performances and the production mountings make it all seem more important than it really is. It's exceptionally well-photographed, and Lambert Hillyer, Bill Hart's old director, keeps things moving at a good clip.

As usual with Ince, the economy shows a little at times. His studio front (better known today as the trademark for Selznick) seems service yet again (as it also did in "Barbara Frietchie") as a Southern mansion. And one of his many expert glass shots is exactly the same as one in 1922's "Lorna Doone"; evidently the basic set was a standing one, and Ince had seen it so that the painted glass for the camera had been carefully filed away. All he had to do was set it up again with a group of differently costumed extras; indeed he may even have shot the scene while "Lorna Doone" was in work and held it in abeyance pending a "French spectacle". Incidentally, in later years a lot of Ince material was sold for stock footage, and many of the fire and gaul scenes at the end turned up in a mid-40's Universal serial, "The Mystery of the River Boat"!

When the film was originally reviewed by the trade press, it ran 6246 feet. Although this is short by current standards (and even by the standards of 1923), most critics thought the film far too long. "Film Daily" commented: "There is only one drawback to the feature's attractiveness -- excess footage, a regrettable fault of far too many pictures of the present time". After going on to explain why and where it was too long, it recommended a little cutting, and especially suggested that it was the climax that was too protracted. Our print runs for an equivalent of 5600 35mm feet -- or some six minutes shorter than the original length. And oddly, the climax has some very abrupt cutting in it. This print itself hasn't been out (that is, splices for the most part are negative splices) so it may well be that Ince took the criticisms to heart and trimmed the film before release. However, the fire stuff is so good that it's strange he didn't make his cuts elsewhere ... although forest fires (and burning dams) were a bit over-used and old-hat by 1923!

Anyway, important or not, "Scars of Jealousy" represents very vigorous filmmaking. Just look at the multitude of cutaways and alternate angles for almost every sequence, and it'll be apparent what a tremendous amount of leeway (and protection) an editor had in those days -- and why an editor filled a far more creative role then than now. (This is borne out by the tremendous number of editors of the 20's and 30's who graduated into directing, whereas few if any of today's new directors come from the editing field).

Wm. K. Everson

A rule of thumb for the next few shows: where there is half-an-hour or more between the end of the MMA-Cinematheque shows and the start of the HUFF, we'll carry on on schedule at 7:30. If a Museum show runs too late for comfort, then we'll delay our start in order to provide a 30-minute gap between the two shows. HUFFites arriving on time won't have to twiddle their thumbs -- we'll slip in an extra short or something to delay matters.