Tuesday next, January 30th: Clarence Brown's THE GOOSE WOMAN (1925) with Constance Bennett, Louise Dresser, Jack Pickford, and Jacques Feyder's "CRANQUEHILIE" (1923) with Maurice de Peraudy, Françoise Rosay.

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January 23 1968

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

ACROSS THE GREAT DIVIDE (Edison, 1915) Director & Scenarist: Edward C. Taylor From the story "With Clear Rights" by Charles Tyler; 1 reel With George Wright, Bessie Learm, Frank Molynx.

Although no gem by the advanced standards of 1915, this little western drama is still a cut above the average Edison reel of the time. The camera placement and editing is often extremely good, and more care than usual seems to have been taken in finding New Jersey locations to double for the West. Due to substandard preservation material, the film is rather soft and lacking in sharp focus.

BROKE IN CHINA (Mack Sennett-Fathe, 1927) Director: Hampton Del Ruth 2 reels With Ben Turpin, Ruth Taylor, Louise Carver, Alma Bennett, Andy Clyde.

This semi-black comedy from Sennett is a curiosity indeed, almost totally devoid of his traditional slapstick, and indeed not terribly funny by any standards, but oddly fascinating. Obviously the major reason for its production was so that one of the big DeMille sets from "The Yankee Clipper" could be put to a little more use before it was torn down, and presumably one or two of the serials of the period used it too. Most of the film takes place in this handsome set, with a few simple cutbacks as Ben Turpin tells the sad story of his earlier life. The whole thing has a kind of sleazy "Broken Blossoms" flavor, probably not accidental in view of the pun-title's similarity to Griffith's title. All but a handful of the film's original titles are missing from this print, but after the recent Museum series that should accommodate nobody; in any case, its pantomime makes everything quite clear, and the titles that are present are key ones.

--- intermission ---

"SHOULDERING FIRES" (A Universal Jewel, 1924) Produced and directed by CLARENCE BROWN; Story by Sada Cowan, Howard Higgin and Melville Brown; asst. director, Charles Dorian; Camera: Jackson Rose; Editor: Edward Schroeder; titles by Dwinnelle Benthall; art director, E.B. Sheley; 8 reels With Pauline Frederick, Laura Le Plante, Malcolm MacGregor, Tully Marshall, Wanda Hawley, George Cooper, Helen Lynch; and as extras, Bert Roach, Arthur Lake, George Lewis.

"Whether we win it to hold it; or win it to lose it; or never win it at all; the greatest thing in all the world is -- LOVE!"

From this little piece of prose -- a catchline in Universal's ads -- it is quite apparent that "Shouldering Fires" is what is loosely termed "a woman's picture". We haven't shown too many of them in the past, and this is one of the best. The Pauline Frederick vehicles of the 20's were the counterparts of the vehicles for Kay Francis (mid-thirties) and Bette Davis (late thirties, early forties) although perhaps they paralleled most exactly the Ruth Chatterton films of the early thirties.

For years (especially during the 40's) most people (myself included) tended to rather look down on Clarence Brown as a slick purveyor of commercial sentimentality. Possibly there was some slight justification for that attitude then, when his films didn't by any means represent what he did best -- and when we were too far away from the then largely unavailable earlier films. Looking back today on his films of the earlier 20's, both those made on his own and in collaboration with Tourneur, one is instantly struck by the style which is not hidden in the camouflag of the over-produced MGM and (later) Fox films. And having gone that far, one is forced to admit that that style is often very much present in the later films too, over-burdened though they are by star-vehicle responsibilities and often absurd scripts. One of Brown's very finest films -- "The Trail of '98" -- is unfortunately unavailable for general reappraisal due to some legal hangups. Fortunately it has been preserved, and possibly in some utopian filmic future, it may be on view again. In the meantime, a lot of the films of the 30's and 40's that we dismissed so readily at the time -- "The Rains Came" for example -- are turning out to be far more durable than other contemporary films that, at the time, seemed much better.
The plot of "Soullering Fires" is basically familiar — and fairly predictable — but what a wealth of style Brown puts into it. Simplicity is one of its greatest virtues. Aware that triangle situations have a limited range of plot ramifications, and invariably seem trite, Brown resolutely rejects all of the expected mechanics of plotting. There are none of those endless complications and misunderstandings that usually plague this kind of fare. As a result, if only by the avoidance of cliché, the film does offer some genuine surprises and more important, maintains a certain kind of honesty. For his extremely effective fadeout, Brown uses only a simple three-shot, itself a variation on another three-shot that he employed earlier at a similar critical moment. The result is that in one single shot Brown wraps the film up neatly (also easing the audience's thought processes into action as well!) where another and lesser director could and probably would have taken another two reels of intrigue and novelish complications to get to the same climax.

Visually the film is handsome and thoughtful without ever being showy. The camerawork is tasteful and imaginative; the camera moves frequently, but always for a purpose. The few exteriors (especially some Yosemite locations) are particularly well shot, and the sets elegant and lavish (what a pleasure to see real height again in this wide-screen era). And despite the soap-opera background, the sets are convincing too; despite a comparative lack of detail, the factory looks like a factory.

Pauline Frederick gives a fine performance that doesn’t date at all; Laura Le Plante is as fresh and lovely as ever (and for that matter, still looks quite stunning today) while Malcolm MacGregor, who never quite made it, is somewhat overshadowed by these two. Bert Roach, strangely given equal supporting billing with Full a Marshall on the ads, is actually little more than an extra, and has far less to do than the unblilled but easily recognisable and incredibly youthful Arthur Lake.

"Soullering Fires" came out late in 1924 when too much was going on for it to attract the attention is deserved, "Isn’t Life Wonderful?" was doing great business on Broadway, and "Peter Pan" was eagerly awaited. There was talk that Griffith would sign with Universal and make "Show Boat" since he had experience with films of the South (!). Universal was selling its Broadway offices by advertising "The place where Lemp’s Luck was won is for rent!" Jazzy comedies — Evelyn Brent in "Silk Stocking Sal" — were everywhere. But if "Soullering Fires" wasn’t a sensation, it attracted a lot of attention. On Dec. 7, "Film Daily" reviewed it as "...an unusually fine picture, exceptionally well handled and splendidly directed... one of the most entertaining pictures Universal ever released." Justled next to it were reviews for "Greed" (restrained enthusiasm!) "Romola" (their discerning critic agreed with the Buff program notes!) and sundry delights with Fred Thomson et al. On the next page, a big ad for Colleen Moore’s "So Big". As the mercenary soldier said of Brett Astor: "Remember the days!" Universal thought highly of the film that it was the spearhead of their "21 White Pictures" group (we don’t know what the heading actually means, but it included some delightful titles with Virginia Valli, Norman Kerry, Hoot Gibson, Alma Rubens, House Peters, Jack Hoxie and Reginald Denny). A few days after the review, a letter to Universal from an exhibition group was reprinted in the Film Daily as an ad... Of course, one can never too much stock in this type of letter, too often neither spontaneous nor genuine, but this one is interesting enough to reprint in part. Addressed of course to Mr. Lemaile, it said:

"I want to thank you for giving to the industry a picture of modern life without cigarette-smoking women, cocktail-drinking flappers, hip-flasks, rolled hose and other "props" so noticeable in current attractions... this picture, in addition to being a wonderful drama, cleverly produced, is certainly a relief... from a standpoint of drama and entertainment, one of the most entertaining pictures in many moons... the cast is excellent, the story clean, interesting and gripping. A word of praise for director Brown... he had plenty of opportunity to resort to questionable scenes, but he availed himself of none of them - he kept the pictures clean and wholesome; in lieu of wild parties and indecent exposure, he gave us scenes to make the most confirmed grouch laugh. This is the first time I have written you a testimonial letter; I believed it my duty to lend my moral support to the class of film you have produced here. The industry needs more of this kind, less of the other kind, if we are to survive. "

-- S.W. Chambers of the Consolidated Amusement Company, Wichita.

For members who do not go for "clean, wholesome pictures" (although these days there is NO dearth of the other kind), a promise that more rolled stockings and hip flasks are on the way. In the meantime, this print is 100% complete (unlike the recently seen French version) even to the credit announcing its advertisement in the Saturday Evening Post. With that to back up Mr. Chambers’ endorsement, we know you’ll want to see it!

--- William K. Everson ---