Tuesday next, March 4th: A Pappy Arbuckle Program: The unreleased "FRAP YEAR" (1921) directed by James Cruze; plus Sennett's "Water's Ball" (1916) and the best of Arbuckle's Brooklyn-made sound two-reelers, "Buzzing Around". The new schedules covering March-June will be available at next Tuesday's meeting, and will be in the mail immediately thereafter.

February 25 1969

A Program of Americana

"THE BISCUIT EATER" (Paramount, 1940) Directed by Stuart Heisler
Produced by Jack Moss; screenplay by Stuart Anthony and Lillie Hayward from an original story by James Street; Camera: Leo Tower; 8 reels
With Billy Lee, Cordell Hickman, Helen Millard, Richard Lane, Lester Mathews, Snowflake, William Russell, Earl Johnson.

Hollywood has always regarded the boy-dog (or boy-deer) story as a sure-fire staple, and as a result for years we were regaled with endless identical "B"s of the "Rocky", "Pal" and "Sheep Comes Home" calibre, and the occasional prestige production a la "The Yearling" which, despite the impact it made at the time, today seems impossibly treacly and studio bound with its many artifical exterior sets. What a pleasure therefore to find that "The Biscuit Eater" - which in 1940 seemed quite exceptional, but which did have the advantage of preceding so many of the standardised boy-dog programmers of the 40's - is as fresh and moving as ever. Although perhaps not for quite the reasons we might have supposed. Stuart Heisler, who rarely rose above the Frank Tuttle plateau of imitation Lang and Walsh in his later years, does turn in one of his best directorial jobs it's true. But where the film succeeds mostly is in its simplicity, its refusal to be pretentious, its honest sentiment (which always stops short of bathos), its pleasing use of appropriate but not overpowering locations, but first and foremost, in the tremendously natural and moving performances of the two boys, Alan Dinehart and single-handed, they make the film as moving as it is. In the face of the cunning of Rooney and Cooper, and the appalling blubbering of Bob Watson, one took Billy Lee too much for granted - even though, even in films like Gene Autry's "In Old Monterey", he turned in first-rate performances. Today it seems hard indeed to understand why far more wasn't made of his talents at the time. Incidentally, an historic footnote as D.W. would put it: the film was, so far as I remember, the first to break the British tabu of using the word "God" in the title. The American title being sentenced over there, it was renamed "God Cares His A Dog" even though a censorship tabu on the word had earlier forced the changing of the titles of such films as "The Man Who Played God" and "Susan and God". Presumably it was the personalisation of the word that the British censors objected to, since the phrase "God's Country" in westerns and outdoor titles had always been acceptable.

---- intermission ----

"THE COUNTRY DOCTOR" (20th Century Fox, 1936) Directed by Henry King
Produced by Darryl F. Zanuck; screenplay by Sonya Levien from a story by Charles E. Blake; Camera: John Seitz, Daniel B. Clark; 9 reels

20th Century Fox, which already had Shirley Temple and Jane Withers under contract - to say nothing of Jane Darwell and the Jones Family - scored something of a goody coup in the mid-30's by making a deal for the services of the headline phenomena of the day, the Dionne Quintuplets. "The Country Doctor" ignored its official stars and even director King in its advertising, to boost itself as "the first five-star pictures" and sell the Dionnes. The results must have been disconcerting, since sentimental femininity must have felt rather put upon at having to wait till the end of the film for the Dionnes even to be referred to, while audiences who might have enjoyed typical Henry King Americana may well have been put off by the advertising. (Later Dionne pictures delivered the goods rather more as advertised, but they were strictly formula - "Five of a Kind" etc. - and very repetitious). "The Country Doctor" looks like an old unused "B" script, hurriedly dusted off and blown-up for the occasion, but King does rise to that occasion rather well. Action, sentiment, a feeling of truth and realism are well done - and occasional moments, as in the death of a child with the mother looking out at the window - have real poignancy. Both Dr. Daffoe and the quintuplets' rather aggressive parents have been rather whitewashed and sentimentalised in this treatment - but on the other hand, if Fox had come up with a script like "Ace in the Hole" and a director like Wilder, they probably wouldn't have gotten the Dionnes on a contract either! It's an interesting filmic comment on a 30's 7-days-wonder, and too a good - sometimes very good - Henry King. ---- W.K.Everson ----