June 8 1970

Selig and Essanay

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"EFFICIENCY EDGAR'S COURTSHIP" (Essanay, 1917) Directed by L.C. Windom
Scenario by Charles J. McQuirk from the Saturday Evening Post story by
Clarence Buddington Kelland; 5 reels
With Taylor Holmes, Virginia Vaill, Rod 'Lu Roques, Ernest Naujalis.

Surviving Essanay features are quite rare, and this is one of the more
sophisticated ones, with a mood somewhat matching that of the contemporary (if
more acrobatic) Fairbanks comedies, and a story-line vaguely in the style of
"Skimmer's Dress Suit". Not much happens in it, and one's enjoyment of it
probably depends on personal whim, yet it's quite a remarkably brisk and
breezy little film, its pacing rapid and helped along by the happy antics and
tall acting of having the hero talk directly to the audience. Taylor
Holmes (father of actor) is a likeable and rugged Phillips Holmes, and perhaps better
known as a character actor in much 40's films as "Boomerang" is very causing as the
hero. There are several pleasing street and rural exteriors, all shot presumably
in the Chicago environs, and the photography is extremely good, with well lit
interiors and some exceptionally smooth double-exposure effects.

"THR CRISIS" (Selig, 1916) Directed by Colin Campbell
Based on the novel by Winston Churchill; original length, 12 reels; this
reissue version, 7 reels.
With Victor Sersapi, Marshall Nillan, Bessie Eyton, Matt Snyder, George Fawcett,
Frank Reed, Eugenie Besserer, T.S. Saylor, Will Roebik, Mathew Betz.

Selig's own answer to "The Birth of a Nation" was considered quite a remarkable
film in its day, but was seen by so few of the standard historians, and has been
missing for some time, that no one ever really expected to see it again. Thus no
legend was ever created for it, and interest in it has always remained largely
academic which is perhaps all to the good, so that its rediscovery today allows it
to be viewed in its proper perspective as a valuable piece of neglected film
history which is a film that fits right in the gap where obviously for Selig it was a big and major production; Colin Campbell ("Chip of the
Flying U", "The Spoilers") was its best director, and most of their bigger
stars are there too. It's curious that Tom Mix wasn't assigned a supporting role,
though he may well have been involved in the staging of some of the horse action
scenes. Although clearly influenced by the "Birth of a Nation" in its
structure, the use of the two families etc., it is far less of a "steal" from it and
a threat to it than was Universal's "Hearts of Humanity" in relation to
Dwright's "Hearts of the World". In any case, its story only goes as far as the
assassination of Lincoln, and is as much related to Uncle Tom's Cabin as to the
Thomas Dixon stories that formed the basis for "The Birth of a Nation"
Our print is of the later reissue version when - without much skill - it was
edited down from 12 to 7 reels. Moreover, the American Film Institute very
kindly (or cunningly?) rushed us the print, immediately it came out of the lab,
without assembling it first. It was a total jigsaw, in which the information on
the beginning of each reel never matched the information on the end of that same
reel (the head would be identified as Beginning of reel 12, the tail as End of
reel 11, to name just one example of the manifestly wrongly
published credits). We have put it into the correct sequence (at the usual Huffman
last-minute) but even so, and allowing for the poor job of retake editing, there would
appear to be a sequence missing in the middle (the end of the party, the
decomposition of the Southern colonel) which must be
attributed to decomposing or other forms of loss. The loss of transition
sequences throughout is less apparent today, when (unfortunately) we've become
accustomed to the sloppy editing styles of new movies; but it is difficult to keep
track of all the characters and their motivations. The nominal villain now seems
a very sketchy character, and his Walter Long-Leather coming to the fore only in
the closing reel, and George Fawcett (in this version at least) seems to match
Cesar Gravina in "Hurry Go Round" as a character perennially on the point of
death, yet forever rallying - and lapsing again! Although staged largely in
tableau form, it is a big and impressive production, and the battle scenes truly
elaborate, and filled with Griffithian incident, though they lack his attention to
detail and the cut in close-up to focus attention not only on men's thoughts but
on their physical activities (eating the parched corn, the loading of weapons).
Still, it's a most credible attempt for Selig and certainly well staged with fine lighting and composition. The literary quality of the
titles is somewhat below Churchillian standards perhaps - but one doesn't feel
inclined to make positive critical statements about ANY film from which so much is
missing and which would have been missing a great deal more had it not been
preserved before the decomposition spread from its present vantage point at the end of
the final reel.

D.W. Griffith: a 1930 interview. In order to get this rare piece of film its
widest exposure, we are repeating it on our June 29 program when our two-page
notes will allow us to give it the space it deserves. It is of course being shown
tonight as scheduled.