The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"IN THE DAYS OF THE THUNDERING HERD" (Selig, 1914) Dir: Colin Campbell; 3 reels
With Tom Mix, Beulah Eyton, Wheeler Oakman

If there was ever a really good or important Selig feature, other than "The Spoilers", I have yet to see it — although admittedly it is foolhardy to pass such a sweeping judgement on the basis of the relatively few melodramas, jungle thrillers and westerns that remain from this quite prolific company. Their Tom Mix westerns started out as short folkly comedies in the Will Rogers vein, and gradually developed into the longer and more traditional westerns of which this is fairly typical. It is produced on quite a large scale, with plenty of extras and good locations, and good camerawork too — not well represented, perhaps, quite dumpy. The mostly amateurish cast, however, emphasises the much shorter and earlier westerns from Griffith and Ince. And it certainly never approaches the imagination and skill of such Griffith gems as "Fighting Blood". Despite the production fineness of running inserts in some riding scenes, it is a crude and primitive production. Titles seem to be inserted not to advance the plot, but to avoid jump cuts and continuity gaps, while the story itself, though full of action, is rambling and repetitious, like the much later Columbia serials. A rescue from a buffalo stampede is obviously and neatly edited in from an earlier film, and there isn't a single full closeup or Tom Mix in the entire film. Camera work was unfortunately precluded due to running the film at sound speed, so its trim plot-line will seem even thinner; nevertheless, it's an interesting oddity, and certainly a useful comparison with the much later Mix film that follows.

"THE LAST TRAIL" (Fox, 1925) Directed by Lewis Seiler; scenario by John Stone, based on the Zane Grey novel; Camera, Daniel Clark; 6 reels
With Tom Mix, Carmelita Geraghty, Robert Brower, William Davidson, Jerry Madden, Lee Shumway, Frank Hagney, Frank Beal.

For the record, neither this film (nor its totally different George O'Brien sound remake) have the slightest connection with the Zane Grey novel on which it is officially based. Ken Scott, one of our members who is a notable Zane Grey and Fenimore Cooper historian, provided some plot notes on the Grey story, pointing out that it was the third of his more than seventy novels, and like the preceding two, an imitation Fenimore Cooper tale of frontier life in the Ohio Valley of the 18th century — not even a western in fact! Although nearly all the story is by appeal to the sentimental, it's too much — it's not really a typical Mix western either in terms of story content. It's content to follow a fairly traditional story-line — the same basic plot in fact that Ken Maynard used later in "California Mail", an excellent first National western that we'll be seeing later in the year. Mix's comedy and tongue-in-cheek action is largely missing this time, and thus it fits more into the more conventional action mode of the Fred Thomsens. Not that we need complain — it's beautifully mounted, and although the action sequences slurred over with verse and gaudy stuntwork, the Print quality is rather flat and disappointing, considering the stunning beauty of the original 35mm print from which this copy was made, but even so the essence of Dan Clark's always fine camerawork certainly comes through. These rediscovered Mix westerns are proving well up to expected standards, and we plan on another Mix program in our next quarter — Fox's "Just Tony" coupled with one of his Universal talkies.

"OVERLAND STAGE RAIDERS" (Republic, 1938) Directed by George Sherman; Associate Producer, William Berke; Screenplay: Luci Ward, Bernard McConville, Edmond Kelso; Camera, William Nobles; 5 reels

"Overland Stage Raiders" wouldn't normally rate a Huffman exposure, but it has added interest for us in that Louise Brooks made her movie debut in it. If you are a fan of the silent era, Betty Bronson, Primrose de la Motte, Clara Kimball Young and even Mary Pickford who likewise made their final appearances in sound Westerns, Miss Brooks looks youthful and attractive, but with a Veronica Lake ha'irdo is virtually unrecognisable! For the rest it's a typically slick Republic, full of fast action, non-stop use of smooth running inserts, exciting agitato music and good stunts. Much of the staging of action would do credit to a much bigger production, and the train sequence was re-used several times. A modern locale, with aeroplanes, site rather unecessarily with traditional Western action, but that was ever a complaint with the Beguillter film which ranged in story-planes over a 100 year span and several different Wars! However, the rather choppy-condition print has a cut "lock" to it, it is complete, vague continuity in Louise Brooks films seems to be an inheritance from her Fabet days; her earlier Western with Buck Jones, "Empty Saddles", had a similarly incoherent (and much more outlandish!) plot-line. — WM.K.Everson