Feb. 22, 1971

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"THE BATTLE OF ELDERSBUSH GULCH" (Biograph, 1913; rel. 1914)
Directed by D.W. Griffith; photographed by D.W. Bitzer; 2 reels
With Lillian Gish, Mae Marsh, Alfred Paget, Robert Harron, Charles Mailes, Henry B. Wethall, Kate Bruce, Christie Miller, Elmo Lincoln

One of the last Griffith Biographs, "The Battle of Eldersbush Gulch" is also one of the biggest and best, something of an unofficial dry run for the climax of "The Birth of a Nation" with the same construction, the same intercutting between action in closeup and long panarama, and even some of the same individual shots (the gun barrel threatening the helpless heroine just instants before the rescue). It is thrillingly impressive all the same despite a little to be desired however, and since it was apparently shot at around 12 frames a second, the standard silent projection speed of 16 frames makes it still seem a little frenzied in spots. The titles are from the 20's reissue by Ayvon Pictures, but seem less "expanded" than most of Ayvon's tamperings with the original Biograph titles. Many prints of this film, including those put out by Blackhawk Films, list Lionel Barrymore as one of the stars - but presumably some bright "historian" confused him with Alfred Paget, since Barrymore is not in the film. Linda Griffith, in "When the Movies Were Young", talks about the film and gives it a detailed synopsis - but unfortunately memory was not her strongpoint, and she actually cites the storyline of "The Last Drop of Water". In his recent useful but unsatisfactory "D.W. Griffith, The Years at Biograph", author Robert M. Henderson - who apparently found it unnecessary to see the films he was writing about - repeats Mrs. Griffith's description - and error - verbatim; he also refers to the film only under its alternate and lesser known title of "The Battle of Eldersbary Gulch".

"BEGGARS OF LIFE" (Paramount, 1928) Produced and directed by William Wellman; 9 reels
Scenario by Benjamin Glazer from the story by Jim Tully; Camera, Henry Gerrard; With Louise Brooks, Wallace Beery, Richard Arlen, Roscoe Karnes, Edgar Washington, Robert Perry, Guinn Williams.

(These notes are abridged from those issued when we first showed the film some five years ago; normally there is a longer time gap between repeats, but there have been many requests for us to show this one again.)

"Beggars of Life" has a virtue which is also its greatest liability. Its opening sequence is not only dynamic story-telling, but is also wholly visual. Almost no film could hope to maintain the level of interest and filmic literacy created by those few minutes (as witness also "Deluge" and "The Mystery of the Wax Museum"). Also, like so many Paramount films of the 20's, "Beggars of Life" is basically an empty film. Jim Tully's original may well have been a raw and trenchant commentary on hobo life; expanded to nine reels, it hovers midway between being a social comment and an epic vehicle for Wallace Beery, ending up as neither. Since it tells us very little about the hoboes, and assumes we know why they are what they are (possibly a reasonable assumption to make in 1928) we've never placed in the position of feeling ingignant and angry that such conditions can exist - as we did with "The Grapes of Wrath". We're rooting for the boy and the girl, but only because they're a nice couple, unjustly persecuted, and don't belong in such an environment. Of course, the point should be that nobody belongs to such a life, but because the youngsters are such outsiders, we are never really made to feel that. So it is less successful as a social comment than Wellman's later "Wild Boys of the Road". It has to be approached more as melodrama, and here it works rather better. Due to some early sound interpolations, including a song for Wallace Beery (not in the only surviving silent prints), the pacing is sometimes a little disjointed, and the movement too slow in the middle portions. But the final third picks up steam quite spectacularly, and is both exciting and poignant. Quite by the way, Miss Brooks once mentioned that Chaplin could well have played the Beery role. Apart from the fact that Chaplin couldn't probably do it, he never really reached the mind to be as successful as a social comment resolution of the Beery character shown. Even in this last third though, there are inconsistencies: Edgar Washington is such an interesting character (and such a nice guy) that it's a pity to find standard negro stereotype material being written into his role at the very end. And - no fault of the film this - the final chase scenes with the train seem a trifle less convincing now only because we have since seen that particular location used so extensively in such comedies as Monty Banks' "Play Safe". The print is a dupe of fair quality (though superior to our last print) and it hardly does justice to its incredible accuracy, but the film is a rarity that we should be thankful to see at all. Incidentally, nobody is starred, but Beery gets top billing, even though it's Louise Brooks' film all the way, both in performance and in footage.

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