Next program: Wednesday July 7th: King Vidor's GYMNAR (1932) with Ronald Coleman and Ray Francis, preceded by "THE IRON DUKE" (Victor Saville, '35) - George Arliss
June 28 1971
The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"CALL OF THE ROAD" (Bernard Davidson Productions, released through the House of Gramercy, Britain, 1920) Written and directed by A.E. Coleby

Cameraman: A.D. Cooper; Title and Teasers: Alfred Truscott (Victor McLaglen); Lady Rowena (Phyllis Staunton); Lord Delavol (Warwick Ward); Lady Ullensward (Adeline Hayden Coffin); Hammer John (Fred Drummond); Punch Murphy (A.E. Coleby); Silas (Ernest Douglas); Alfred's man (Tom Ronald); Master Ullensward (Eric Royce); Sir Martin Trevor (Philipp Williams).

Despite its stress on exteriors and frequent bursts of action, "Call of the Road" is a rather slow moving production of primarily academic interest. Very few examples of British production of 1920 are available to us, and the tremendously variable quality of British production then is very much in evidence. A comparison of this film with Cecil Hepworth's "Helmet of Four Gates" (which we showed last Friday), also a 1920 film, but much more polished and with a far greater pictorial beauty. "Call of the Road" was Victor McLaglen's first film, the beginning of an extraordinarily prolific career (some 20 films from 1920-24) before leaving for Hollywood. It is also an example of the once highly regarded and lengthy collaboration between two British pioneers, producer Bernard Davidson and director Coleby — also something of an actor who appeared in most of his own films, and here plays Punch Murphy. (It's unfair to comment on personal appearances, but he doesn't look like a sensitive director; considering his reputation, it's rather like finding out that Maurice Tourneur looked like Noah Young!) Coleby was a veteran British director from 1908 through 1929, and over here is probably known best for his 1911 "Tatters, A Tale of the Slums". The early 20's was his most prolific period, and he turned out approximately four fairly big films a year then. Later on he made some extremely interesting full length featurettes. The most disappointing aspect of "Call of the Road" is that it is set in the countryside and villages of rural England — locations that hadn't changed an iota since the period of the story, and yet there is no feeling for the land at all, certainly none to match Hepworth's use of landscape. When he plays a scene in a picturesque village, he has his players backed up against a brick wall; at one point we get a glimpse of a wonderful old blacksmith forge, apparently constructed from old wooden wheels, but again, Coleby moves in for medium and close shots so that we never get a chance to enjoy the details of these things, which are cut off at the left, are sometimes a little difficult to read and the print quality is harsh, but since it is clearly no masterpiece, no great damage is done. It's a rarity certainly, and a valuable curiosity.

"TRACKED BY THE POLICE" (Warner Brothers, 1927) Directed by Ray Enright
Story by Gregory Rogers; camera, Edwin DuParr; Art Directors, Edwara Hartley and Lewis Geib; electrical effects, P.N. Murphy; 6 reels

TRACKED BY THE POLICE, last shown by this society some ten years ago, is one of Rinty's best pictures. As "Satan - loyal and true - with the heart of a lion and the soul of a child" Rinty has one of his best roles, and the film is to him what "The Narrow Trail" was to Bill Hart. A seasoned veteran by now, Rinty goes through his whole bag of tricks — dramaties, comedy, pathos, stunts. And when variations on those elements (Rinty's canine sagacity only occasionally helped by a camera trick) seem exhausted, the writers dream up moral and ethereal ideas too — shall he save his master's girl-friend, or his own mate Nanette, when circumstances place both in dire jeopardy at the same time? The human actors matter little. Jason Robards spends most of the film ineptly depending on Rinty to help him out of his scrapes; wounded and ill-hatched, in a fistic battle with Tom Santschi, he does (presumably) win, but the knock-out punch takes place off-screen. For Tom, his villainy is of the good old-fashioned variety — evil for its own sake, with no time to explain why he is so determined to (through Rinty's help) seduce the heroine, aloth admitted this latter requirement was so real explanation. The film has top production values, even the occasionally-used Iverson's Ranch site - a drab location — given gloss by careful camera angles, usually up high where the rocky scrubland doesn't show so clearly. The principal dam location presumably utilizes some of the preparatory work sites for the Hoover Dam and its environs, officially launched in 1928, but being much talked-about and prepared for the year earlier. Incidentally, don't waste time trying to figure out the meaningless title. In those days, films were block-booked well in advance by a distributor didn't come up with a promised title, the exhibitor could legally cancel his booking, get the last minute title explanation here, that Rinty had been made an honorary cop for his exploits. I don't suppose an admission of a totally unrelated title. It's hard to understand any exhibitor quibbling however; "Tracked by the Police" is literally two reels of establishing four and four reels of climax. It has less plot than even some of today's movies, but a good deal more entertainment and solid craftsmanship. — Wm.K.Everson
Notice of unavoidable change in tonight's program

It's only very rarely that we have had to make last-minute switches in program at the Huff, usually due to non-arrival of a print. Tonight, the print of "Tracked By the Police" is on hand, but unfortunately in its present state cannot be shown.

It's the same print that we showed ten years ago. In the interim it was used as a work-print for the tv "Silents Please" version, edited down, and was supposed to have been reconstituted. When we got the print again, just this weekend, it turned out not to have been reconstituted after all. Thinking that there was still time to reassemble it, I started to work. Since every scene was shortened, many of them transposed to different places, it took literally seven hours to get it in chronological order again -- and this just taped together, not spliced. As I started splicing, in a state of mind resembling the last few reels of "Intolerance", I was forced to the conclusion that it just couldn't be done in time. At mid-day today (Monday) the splicing job was still only a fifth done -- after that the print would need cleaning, and screening to make sure that no odd shots had been put back in the wrong place. There obviously just wasn't time to do the job at all, let alone properly, so the only solution was to shelve it temporarily. The majority of the work has been done, so there is no problem in scheduling it for a future date.

The problem then became that of what to substitute for it. Since tonight's program will probably bring out a fairly small audience, I didn't want to bring forward a major silent -- and have most of our members miss it. The happiest solution (one I hope you'll agree with) is to play a film that I had not normally planned on showing at all -- "JUST IMAGINE". None of you will have seen it yet (not since its original release anyway) so it isn't likely to be a disappointing substitute for Win Tin Tin, and it may save you some sweat lining up at the upcoming Museum show. On the other hand, absentees tonight will have no cause for complaint since they can still catch it at the Museum.

The new schedule through October is completed, and will be mailed out on Wednesday of this week. I think it's one of our most exciting lists in a long while -- STREET ANGEL, THE DANCERS, THE BED DANCE, FAZIL, DICK TURPIN, WILD COMPANY, Crosland's THE GREAT IMPERSONATION, REDEMPTIONS and many others -- no repeats at all from previous years, with the exception of, of course, TRACKED BY THE POLICE, which has been re-scheduled for November 1 as part of an action program with THE LAST OUTLAW with Gary Cooper (no relation to the Harry Carey film).

Pressure of time unfortunately prevents any program notes on "JUST IMAGINE", other than the basic credits: Fox, 1930, dir: David Butler, with John Garrick, El Brendel, Maureen O'Sullivan, Frank Albertson, Kenneth Thompson, Marjorie White, Robert Bosworth, Ivan Linow, Mischa Auer, Joyzelle, Wilfrid Lucas. 96 reels. Songs and story by Brown, Desyline and Henderson, camera, Ernest Palmer.

Presumably detailed notes by Miles Kreuger will be available at the NKA showing. In the meantime, a word of caution. Years of familiarity with the stock footage from this film literally sprinkled through "Buck Rogers", and tantalising stills, have probably built up your expectations to a kind of musical "Things to Come". Be warned that very little use is made of the marvellous miniature of a futuristic New York, and that the rocket trip to Mars is handled very casually. Perhaps if Jillian Cameron Menzies had been associated with it, it might have been a different story -- but its appeal is not via spectacle or science-fiction gimmickry, but as a vaudeville-oriented Broadway musical comedy in the vein of "The Boys from Syracuse". If your expectations aren't too high, you'll probably enjoy it a great deal, for it is an exhilarating and zany little work.

Wm. K. Everson