January 17, 1972

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"WINNERS OF THE WILDERNESS" (MGM, 1926; released 1927) Dir: W.S. Van Dyke
Scenario: Josephine Chippio; Sets, David Townend; Camera, Clyde de Vinna (with, originally, the final sequence in Technicolor); 7 reels
With Tim McCoy, Joan Crawford, Roy D'Arcoy, Edward Connelly, Tom O'Brien, Louise Lorraine, Edward Haern, Will R. Walling, Frank Currier, Lionel Belmore, Chief Big Tree, Chief Xowlachie.

MGM's silent Tim McCoy actioners were among the most elaborate "B" films ever made, if indeed they could really be called "B" films - although some of them ran a bare 5 reels in length. Bunt around episodes in American history, they were not even consistently Westerns; one dealt with the Boxer Rebellion, while "Winners of the Wilderness" is a "Last of the Mohicans" affair, with a good deal of authentic history interpolated. W.S. Van Dyke directed the bulk of them, and had only a couple more to go before his unintended taking-over of "White Shadows in the South Seas" from Plaherty established him immediately as a major director. The Russian Tourjansky also directed one of the MGM McCoys. Despite their spectacular action, the stories were never serious competition for the loss, ambitious Tom Kix films. They did slow down occasionally for romantic or historic complications, and the youngsters probably found themselves getting a little restless here and there. "Winners of the Wilderness" however seems to be a good cross-section of the series as a whole; it starts out with a bang, has a big battle sequence in the middle and winds up with good suspense and a bang-up stunt-action climax with McCoy's double putting in some really exciting and well-photographed acrobatics. McCoy cuts a really handsome figure in his various uniforms and plays with dash, even burlesqueing O'Brien as in one memorable Count Mirko scene. Particular highspot perhaps being a post-battle sequence in which he glides around the battle field, thrusting his sword experimentally into dying soldiers while at the same time inhaling doses of amn for superb monochomelsh! The pictorial quality of the film suffers a little from the not-too-well timed print; some of the closeups of Miss Crawford, wherein she wears a white wig, are a bit washed out as are battle scenes where white gunsman predominates; then too, a couple of backdrops seem much more obvious here than they would have been the original minor where, as might seem, they would have been toned blue. As a Van Dyke film, it illustrates both his allegiance to Griffith (many of the scenes seem copied from similar compositions in "America") and his skill at making the most of his budgets. Standing sets are used to advantage, and key action scenes (horse falls etc.) are often shot from different angles, to be repeated later in the film. One element definitely not designed for the kiddies is the "male nudity in bondage" - a motif that crept into a surprising number of MGM films of the late 20's ("Ben Hur" etc.), suggesting that at least one MGM front-office man had his little peculiarieties!

"BORN RECKLESS" (Fox, 1930) Directed by John Ford
8 reels
Associate Producer, James McGuinness; "Staged" by Andrew Bennison; Screenplay by Dudley Nichols from the novel "Louis Beretti" by Donald Henderson Clarke; Asst. Director, Edward O'Pears (Ford's brother); Camera, George Scheniderman, With Edmund Lowe, Catherine Dale Owen, Leo Trayne, Marjorie Churchill, Hyer, William Harrigan, Frank Albertson, Randolph Scott, Paul Page, Ferike Borso, Paul Porcasi, and Bronison, Paul Garson, Mike Donlin Ben Bard, Paul Page, Pat Somers, Roy Stewart, Yola D'Avril, Jack Pennick, Ward Bond, Robert Homans, Joseph Girard, Bill Elliott, Stanley Blystone.

Ford himself (afflicted at the time with production supervisors who were never convinced that the old-guard directors didn't understand the new men around never liked this film, made it as a routine assignment, and only really had fun with it in the sequences that he added during shooting - the baseball game, and the baseball scenes. Unfortunately it is a lesser Ford film, but it is still above the average 1930 Fox production, as witness such films as the already shown "Wild Company" and the upcoming "Such Men Are Dangerous". Its one basic flaw is inconsistency, Love, never given much to variety of characterisation, is surrounded by an authentic-sounding Italian family but plays Beretti with the same Brooklyn accent that he brought to Sqt. Quirt and Chandu the Magician. The plot itself - involving World War action and gangsterism, and the cameraderie of both - looks and plays much more like a Knoul Walsh film than a Ford, and might even have been shot (and written) for Walsh. The plot tends to extend by key elements of the plot too; the wildly notorious Donald Henderson Clarke stories always ran into censorship problems, and the ending here is typical of the gutless ending of so many crime films of that period ("The Mouthpiece" etc.), implying the hero's death (the synopsis actually is quite explicit in saying that he dies) but playing it so ambiguously that the audience can interpret it as a happy ending if they wish. Nevertheless, but for none of the utilized dialogue exchanges (probably the work of Mr. Bennison), it's still quite a fast and absorbing picture.

W.H. Everard