February 22, 1972

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"THE BIG TRAIL" (Fox, 1930) Directed by Raoul Walsh

Scenario by Jack Pauley, Market Boyle and Florence Postal from a story by Hal E. F vazza, Candy, Leonard Gordon and Arthur Eames. 10 reels


For years, "The Big Trail" has rather unjustly been regarded as something of a joke (in terms of a debut for John Wayne) and as a stupendous boxoffice flop. Assigned for large scale censors, but apparently shown in that version, and like King Vidor's "Billy the Kid", which it preceded into release by about a month, was such an austere Western that it gained little popular support. Both of those very fine early sound Westerns thus had but limited exhibition outlets in their wide-screen versions, and were quickly dropped from distribution. Fox made a German-language version of "The Big Trail" simultaneously (Marion Lessing had the feminine lead, and El Brendel was the only major player to appear in both films) and interestingly enough, this was put into release distribution in Germany right after World War Two, when new product was sorely needed. It's odd that John Ford, who had made "The Iron Horse" and "Three Bad Men" wasn't selected to direct "The Big Trail": it probably wouldn't have been a better film under his direction, but it would probably have been a better-organised one, and a more saleable one. Presumably Walsh, hardly a Western specialist, was given the assignment because of the staggering success of his "In Old Arizona". In terms of production, the film was admittedly a fiasco: it ran incredibly over-schedule and over-budget, the unit hampered by the need to shoot much of it three times (wide-screen version and tinted version). But the incredible logistics of handling such a huge cast, crew, livestock etc., over so many locations. Advance organisation was apparently nil, although at a time when the whole industry was in a state of turmoil due to the changeover to sound, such chaos was understandable, especially on such a major film. Many of its flaws have been turned by time into assets; occasional production crudities now merely enhance the realism, while John Wayne's inexperience, not as marked as has often been claimed, seems actually to fit his screen character quite nicely. Although long and lavish on something as humourless all the time, and what the film lacks in showmanship it more than makes up for in documentary values. It is a much better film than "The Covered Wagon", and literally the definitive film of its type. Much of it is still quite breath-taking - especially the climb down the sheer cliffs with the roping of wagons and cattle and the staged sequences, done with wind machines and specially constructed mud holes, seem not one whit less realistic and convincing than the rest of it. It's a superb piece of Americana, backed up by some really colorful playing (Tyrone Power in particular), an effectively up-tempo performance from Margarette Churchill, and some surprising (for 1930) use of performance-parallel and other highlight scenes were sold for stock, and added production values to many Republic "B" westerns and serials. Tonight's print is the longest version extant, and to my knowledge is missing only one scene - a quick shot of Indians racing at top speed down the side of a rolling hill en route to attacking the wagon train.

"NORTH OF HUDSON BAY" (Fox, 1923) Directed by John Ford

Scenario: Jules Furthman; Camera, Dan Clark; 5 reels

With Tom Mix, Kathleen Key, Eugene Pallette, Frank Campeau, William Walling, Frank Leigh, Fred Kohler.

Coming midway between Ford's "Cameo Kirby" and "The Iron Horse", "North of Hudson Bay" is a handsome but unremarkable little actioner, a film that neither embarrassed further the careers of Ford and Mix - though Tom does seem a little restricted on snow-shoes, and the film is more serious than the majority of his frolics. There are some enjoyable comedy moments, but murder and the serious threat of death figure more prominently in the plot than was customary with Tom. Tonight's showing, alas, is somewhat academic: since the Tuesday screening clashes with my NYU class, I am unable to provide a score for the film, and the print - with Czech titles and some lip sync - is not always easy to watch. However, it was always an oddity to watch, and much less is actually missing than the interview-book with Bogdanovich, Ford himself doubles for Frank Campeau in the climactic canoe chase. Slow in starting, and with a measured mystery element, the film does take in some quite rugged action in its later half. The film is fairly simply plotted, but in view of the Czech titles we are issuing a separate synopsis which we recommend reading before the screening, as one plot element could be quite confusing.

Wm. K. Everson
"NORTH OF HUDSON BAY"

Brief guide synopsis

Tom Mix and Eugene Pallette are brothers; Pallette, the more adventurous one, has gone North and made a rich gold strike, while Tom has stayed at home to look after their mother. With news of the gold strike, Tom leaves home to join his brother. On the river boat, he meets Kathleen Key, niece of Frank Campeau, the villain. There is some amusing by-play as Tom uses a razor set to trade a hat away from an Indian squaw so that he can give it to Kathleen. (There is some interesting composition in this material, with an almost Bunuel-like use of two nuns with enormous collars, taking up the entire background).

Pallette meanwhile has been murdered by Campeau, via a tricky device in which the sun's rays, refracted through a bottle of liquid, set off the charge in a gun. Will Walling, a trapper, is with Pallette at the time, and is blamed for the murder. A curious (and hopefully unauthentic) kind of Northern justice sentences the apparent killer to death from exhaustion -- accompanied by a couple of Indian deputies, he is sent out into the wilds, and not allowed to eat, drink, or start a fire. (He is however, allowed to wear plenty of heavy furs, thus delaying the procedure somewhat). At one point, Walling gets ahead of his scouts and bursts into Mix's cabin looking for food. He is recaptured however, and sent out into the night once more - but the sympathetic Mix follows him and tries to help.

Later there is a second killing by the same method, and this time Mix is blamed. He and the still surviving Walling are sent out together, the Indian scouts exercising particular vigilance this time and carefully stamping out the small fire that Tom is able to start with his last match.

Tom and Walling are pursued by wolves, but Tom fights them off. Meanwhile, the girl has overheard evidence establishing his innocence. Campeau and his minion, Fred Kohler, take to the trail to finish off Mix themselves. The girl arrives simultaneously, and there is a fight. Her canoe drifts away towards the rapids, and the villains try to make their getaway, with Tom in pursuit. This last portion of the film is the worst affected by cuts and hoo, but one does get the impression that the villains are drowned and Tom rescues the girl.