Our next program - the Danish "Laile" (1937) and "Suicide Fleet" (1932) with William Boyd and Ginger Rogers - is scheduled, as per our current Bulletin, for September 16. All being well, I intend to put this show back one week to avoid conflict with "Night Flight" at the NMA. However, at this stage, I can't confirm the date change with the school. There will be a free Fall-Schedule mailing around September 10, so if you are on the mailing list you will be advised of the new date. If you are not on the mailing list, check with friends who are.

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

July 22 1974


Taken from a collection of short stories of the South Seas, written by John Russell, and published in 1926 (the film provided the basis for Rex Ingram's "Where the Pavement Ends"). "The Sea God main hero had to hand to a former actor and stage director like George Abbott to direct. However, there is such diversity of subject matter in his early films that it looks as though he was deliberately trying to prove that he was not limited to theatrical properties. Like a lot of early sound era adventure films, it's slow getting off the mark, and never delivers an excess of action - but its restraint gives it a kind of conviction, and certainly in those days - without the fast pacing we're used to which contemporary audiences have been conditioned by the James Bond films and television, there were no complaints about the pace of fare. One could, reasonably, have asked for the villain's cause to be a little more unpleasant and specific in its details. Villains were villains in these days, and most jungle or South Seas adventures (particularly the Tarzan films) dispatched them to their doom in a really spectacular fashion. However, the islanders are as menacing as always. There was always something REALLY frightening about the natives in the early thirties: their warpaint and feathers were bizarre, they seemed devoted exclusively to the pursuit of flesh and then some, and one spoke of English decent. They were not reasoning with them. As the thirties were on - and more because films were being toned down, not because of guilt pangs from the overt racism of the earlier films - their makeup was less frightful, their clothing frequently included items of white apparel, and most devastating of all, they spoke some English and thus were on the road to being civilized. However, here the natives are very much the old school, as is the film itself, grand early thirties Saturday afternoon fare. The titular gimmick seems to have inspired one of Keaton's basic gags in "The Navigator", and having seen it played for laughs, it is a little difficult to take it quite as seriously today.


From the other end of the 30's, another typical Saturday Afternoon delight - at least as far as the Americans were concerned. It never got an American release, and in fact tonight's showing is its US premiere. We've commented in earlier Will Hay program notes about his overlapping into both W.C. Fields territory (for his characterization) and into Keaton (for gags and props) and tonight's film bears this out to a degree, though not as much as in his best films, "Oh Mr. Porter", "Ask a Policeman" and "Good Morning Boys". "Old Bones of the River" (there were a couple of Edgar Wallace novels, which kicked the spirit of his own "Sander's" stories) is sorely an average film, though far from his weaker work. 1938 George Pal's "Spider-Man" took his earlier successes and audience popularity. It's significant that 1938 was the only year in which Hay made three films (the others, "Hey Hey USA" and "Convict 99") and the strain shows. Its major flaw - always a weakness with Hay, but especially apparent here - is his unwillingness to forget his music hall and radio background. Some verbal skits written specially for him were hilarious, the equivalent of Abbott & Costello's "Who's on first?" routine, but here there's too much constant bickering and - back-chat just for its own sake. Some of it is funny, but too much of it is laborious and often detracts from the overall effect. But at least it moves - constantly - and in quite creditably created English "jungle" exteriors. Its racism however - or perhaps one could rephrase that as its "colonial racism" - is quite extraordinary. Britain always prided itself in the 30's in having none of America's racial problems (after all, it had a minimal black population then) but obviously negative racial attitudes existed or a film like this with its casual racism could never have been made or accepted. I'll leave you to discover the often quite outstanding offers of those "white man's burden" attitudes - some funny, some disturbing. But I say that Commissioner Sanders starts it all off in the first scene by complaining that there's always trouble when educated nates come back to Africa! (In fairness to the establishment though, the greatest insult to one of the native Africans is delivered by his own brother, suggesting that even among racial slurs a kind of class distinction prevails!)