Next program: February 23rd: SON OF INDIA (1931, dir: Jacques Feyder) with Ramon Novarro and Madge Evans; preceded by (see separate notice) either "The Merry Monarch" as announced, with Emil Jannings, or, if the print does not arrive on time, "The Swan" (1924, dir: Dmitri Buchowetski) with Adolphe Menjou, Ricardo Cortez and Frances Howard.

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February 9 1976

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

KRISTIANSTADT — FILMSTADEN

This 50-minute documentary, made by Svensk-Filmindustri, is a somewhat academic but nonetheless fascinating survey of Sweden’s pioneering film days. Unlike Denmark, Sweden had no noted directors to help it along at the very beginning, and its early films are primitive indeed. Kristianstad, a small town in the South of Sweden, could be considered that country’s Fort Lee, and it was the country’s film-making centre until 1911, when operations were moved to Stockholm. In 1912, Victor Sjostrom and Mauritz Stillé joined the company, and Swedish film began its rapid rise to both artistic and commercial success.

Kristianstad was an outgoing, lively little town, ideal for film-making. It had a dramatic society, a temperance society that also put on plays, a big Army barracks, and a population that was seemingly entranced by movies and, judging by this film, spent much of their spare time just staring at the newsreel cameras!

Film-making emerged under the guidance of Charles Magnusson and Julius Jaenzon; the latter an outstanding documentary and newsreel cameraman who travelled over the world (including the U.S.) shooting important events. Jaenzon later on became the key cameraman for Sjostrom and Stillé. Initially, film-making was only a secondary concern for their company - Svenska Biografteatern — and the shorts that they made for their theatres merely supplementary to those imported from abroad.

The first sections of the documentary cover Kristianstad as a community: most of this documentary footage, including some "war games" staged by the Army, local fairs, a fire — was shot by Jaenzon. The little rural comedy with the farmer and his cow was the first "story" film shot in Sweden — and was considered so poor that it was not released. This is hard to accept in one sense, since the quality, though low, isn’t so much lower than much cheaper American material considered acceptable, and one would have thought that the sheer novelty of native production would have made up for it. But apparently Magnusson’s standards, at least photographically, were quite high; once or twice later in the film we are shown other sequent sequences from films rejected for release. Successes in this very early period include "Man of Varmland", still a popular staple for periodic production on the Swedish stage, and an early comic-serious military "saga", somewhat in the tradition of the Conan Doyle "Brigadier Gerard" — although its comic content is heavy, indicating already the Swedish uneasiness with comedy material. Immigration from Sweden was a major problem in this period, and a number of strong, anti-immigration films were made — showing the farmers leaving their barren soil at home, only to be fleeced in England and rugged in Chicago, returning home to still barren soil, but at least to friends and neighbors who help make life worthwhile! One of these immigration films, with location work in both Gotenburg and London, and which looks quite elaborate, was also — we are told — considered inadequate for release which is very surprising, in view of the quality of the excerpts shown.

The film has only Swedish narration (much of it superfluous, with fairly elaborate synopsizing of plots) but I think the above information should carry you through, and I’ll add an occasional comment here and there as necessary.
Obviously the main interest is in the footage itself, and it's certainly the kind of footage that we've not seen before from Sweden. If nothing else, the primitive nature of this material reinforces more than ever the tremendous debt owed to Stiller and Sjöström for the incredible strides that Swedish cinema made once they joined the fold.

'49-'17 (Universal, 1917) A Butterfly Production, written and directed by Ruth Ann Baldwin, from the story "The Old West Per Contract" by William Wallace Cook in Argosy Magazine; Camera, S.S. Norton; 5 reels
With: Joseph Girard (Judge Brand); Leo Pierson (Tom Robbins); Mrs Witting (Ma Bobbett); George Pearce (Pa Bobbett); Donna Drew (Lady Ann Bobbett)
Jean Hersholt (Gentleman Jim Mayner).

We cannot claim this to be a very exciting rediscovery, but since there is a current interest in the work of earlier women directors, and nobody else is very likely to show it, '49-'17 certainly deserves at least this one showcase.
The Moving Picture World gave the film a surprisingly good review however, and added that it "represents the high-water mark" in the director's achievements at Universal. Just as a matter of curiosity, one would like to see some of her "low-tide" efforts for contrast, but it seems tolerably safe to assume that Miss Baldwin was not a major film-maker. This is a disjointed sort of work, seemingly reluctant even to be a Western, and never quite settling on a point of view. Its plot is not unrelated to the Douglas Fairbanks "Wild and Woolly" of the same year, but there's a world of difference between the two in terms of pep, editing, and filmic story-telling. Still, it's good to fill in gaps like this, and it's not often these days that we see a Joseph Girard starring film!

THE PASSIONATE INDUSTRY (Australian Commonwealth Film Unit, 1973) 5 rls
Written, researched and directed by Joan Long; produced by Frank Bagnall.

This is the second installment in a history of the Australian film, the first of which - going to 1920 - we ran a year or two ago. This one covers the 20's, and again is meticulously researched and is a model of how to do this kind of compilation. However, the Australians have always felt somewhat bitter about Hollywood intervention in its industry. The attitude is understandable, but on the other hand Australian films provide their own answer: Australia never could compete with Hollywood, and Australian audiences obviously wanted Hollywood films and stars. The national bitterness is however, rather forcefully retained in the film's narration, underlined by the fact that the film was made by a seemingly militant feminist film-maker. Because of its rather abrasive anti-American tone, the Australians are rather embarrassed by this entry, and are generally keeping it under wraps, so opportunities to see it will be rare. National prejudices aside, it's a fascinating job, and has some excellent footage of Norman Dawn's "For The Term of His Natural Life". There's also some extremely interesting data on Australia's women directors, including a team of three sisters. However, choosing an "Our Gang" equivalent to wrap it all up anti-climactically does suggest that what was always Australia's biggest filmic problem still is - namely, a lack of showmanship.

Wm. K. Everson