Next program: October 18th: KING OF THE CHAMPS ELYSEES (1934) A real rarity, the "lost" feature that Buster Keaton made in France; untitled, but a synopsis will be included in the notes, and in any case, the film is all sight gags and very easy to follow preceded by THE GLAMOUR WITHIN (1935, dir: Edmund Goulding) with Ann Harding, Herbert Marshall, Maureen O'Sullivan, Louis Hayward.

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society


The KKK has always been a cinematic hot potato, and of the mere handful of film exposes of the Klan, most actually dealt not with the Klan proper but with one of the numerous off-shoot groups. In this particular case, Columbia were not only exploiting the publicity surrounding Warners' "Black Legion", but they even managed to get their little quickie into the theatres a month ahead of it! Via sensational ads and a good trailer it did stir up quite a bit of excitement, though the reviews made its unambitious intentions quite clear. It's a slick little "B", and its shabby production values even seem to fit in with the small industrial town backgrounds. It also moves like lightning, and packs a lot of plot into its 62 minutes. Via films like this and "Postal Inspector", the U.S. postal service was polishing its own image somewhat in the thirties; such cinematic propagandizing seems to have stopped (at least since a good Alan Ladd entry some 25 years ago) now, possibly because the amount of mail lost by the post office, and the time taken to deliver the letters that do survive, would lend little credibility to the idea that the post office contains its own private FBI.

A NATION AFAME: (Treasure Pictures Corp., 1937) Directed by Victor Halperin; Produced by Victor and Edward Halperin; Screenplay by Oliver Drake, Rex Hale and William Lively from an original story by Thomas Dixon; Camera, Arthur Martinelli; 8 reels With Noel Madison, Lila Lee, Norma Trelgar, Douglas Walton, Harry Holman, Roger Williams, Arthur Singley, Snub Pollard, C. Montague Shaw, Earl Hodgins, St. Will, Lee Shumway, Allan Cavan, Dorothy Kildare, Elaine Dean, Lee Phelps, Carl Stockdale.

The Halperin Brothers never quite hit their stride in other independent fields as they had done with the horror film and "White Zombie"; nevertheless, most of their sporadic films were original, shrewd in getting the most out of their limited budgets, and generally quite grim and "black". "A Nation Afame" is clearly an exploitation film, and like most of its ilk, considerably stronger in plot and less prone to pull punches than similar films from major companies. On the other hand, most exploitation films delivered far less than they promised and usually tried to sneak in a little nudity for the less stringently-censored states. This film at least has a modicum of integrity, and has the potential for being a much stronger film, given a bigger budget and a better cast. Since the plot's basis is virtually an about-face from "The Birth of a Nation", one suspects that Dixon was paid merely for his name and perhaps a simple plot outline; nevertheless, there are obvious attempts to draw parallels with the Griffith film, especially in the gathering-of-the-Klan montage, some shots of which seem to be direct copies from D.W. The plot itself is quite strong, and its powerful ending quite topical in its acceptance of Governmental double-dealings if the end justifies the means. Its one major weakness, and a weakness of all such pictures, is that it never really gets to the roots of its racial intolerance theme. It suggests that once the race cargers who exploit bigotry are exposed, intolerance will vanish — yet the case (and scale) of such exploitation indicates that the bigotry exists on a frightening level; this is the problem, not the exposure and punishment of those who capitalise on it. However, the Halperins were not the Warner Brothers — they were out to make a buck too, and in an interesting and provocative manner. For all its cheapness, low comedy and interpolated stock footage (as in the political assassination), it's an interesting effort and a by no means dishonest one.