Next program: February 13th: THE CIGAR KID (1930, dir: Irving Cummings), Sequel to "In Old Arizona", with Warner Baxter and Edmund Lowe; and WESTERN UNION (1941, dir: Fritz Lang) A stunningly beautiful Technicolor production of one of the best of the new 40's cycle of epic Westerns, with Randolph Scott, Robert Young, Dean Jagger, Virginia Gilmore, John Carradine, Barton MacLane.

Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society
January 30, 1976

THE SILVER STREAM (Rko Radio, 1934) Directed by Tommy Atkins
Screenplay by Roger Whitley and E.W. Hanemann from an original story by Ruth Harteau

"The Silver Stream" is almost an epistle of what the good "B" picture used to be; fast, slick, efficient; a lot of hokum and immensely entertaining. There's enough adventure-plot - but it's a "clue" story - that they've had to worry about logic, motivation and star names, and it wouldn't have been nearly as much fun - or, in its own way, as good a picture. As it is, it brings in a revolutionary new train (amazing how fast technology has moved since then), lots of old ones, romance, spies, footage from the Chicago World's Fair and Boulder Dam, references to another (then) modern marvel, the Iron Lung, lots of excellent actuality footage of the train speeding across country - and a neat kind of construction. While never slow, the film takes its time getting under way, allowing for the setting up of plot and character, then hits its stride. The train is "The General," once an express train, but now its an old reliable, and its all movement and chase. Some of the plot premises don't bear too much examination - such as the pin-pointing to the minute the length of time that a stricken victim can survive without an Iron Lung, nor does it seem entirely likely that there were no planes large enough to accommodate an Iron Lung. (It was only a year or so later that Gene Autry transferred Champion hither and yon by plane -- and there were always dirigibles, although landing one of those at Boulder Dam might have created a problem!) Anyway, odd picayune points aside, the plot holds up well and brings in as many delays, tactics, and potential disasters as possible to build suspense, although the train is not really that shaky. No other trains suggest that the pre-planning for the run was almost as disorganized as U.S. rail travel has become today. The cast is full of old friends, and there's a particular bonus in the really good and underplayed performance by William Farnum, an actor not known (in the 30's) for turning down an opportunity to make more than the most of any scene.

The NY Times seemed to like the film very well, though making the odd comment that it didn't have the guts of "The Iron Horse" because the new train was "high-speed." Let's hope that the woman's-lib film critics don't get ahold of that! Although an Rko release, it was actually made independently and later bought by Rko, who however, obviously were responsible for some of the post-production work - witness the use of the "King Kong" music over some of the Chicago Fair footage. Oddly, the slight extended towards planes seems to have escaped aviation-oriented production head Herman C. Cooper. Little is known about director Tommy Atkins (such a cliché name for a Britisher) but it sounds like a pseudo-name except the atmosphere of "hump-mountain" and this was his (very commendable) first film as a director. The only other films of his that I'm aware of are the independent "Mutiny Ahead" and Rko's "Hi Gang!" after that he either died, retired, or possibly having gained experience on cheaper, changed his name. More searching and sifting is clearly needed in his case.

THE PHANTOM OF GREEDSWOOD (Rko Radio, 1932) Directed by J. Walter Ruben
Story and screenplay, Bartlett Cormack and J. Walter Ruben; Camera, Henry Gerrard; Music, Max Steiner; 7 reels

Not too well received at the time, perhaps because of the plethora of murder mysteries at the time, this one actually holds up rather well. The story and "detective hero" are both off-beat sufficiently well to go well with some photographic effects and thriller moments of near-horror make it less fairily obvious the many red herrings and subplots keep interest alive. With a good original print rather than the soft 16mm that have survived, it may have been quite impressive visually too. Associate producer Cooper works his beloved planes into one scene, and some of the dialogue is actually quite unnecessarilly. WRM.

(Just received word - Sunday afternoon - of the death today of Tim McCoy. It's nice that he had the satisfaction of seeing his autobiography published, and reading the initial and extremely favorable reviews for it).