THE DEPRESSION: TWO FILMS BY WILLIAM WELLMAN

"WILD BOYS OF THE ROAD" (First National, 1933) Director: Wm. Wellman
Scenario by Earl Baldwin from a story by Daniel Ahearn
Camera: Arthur Todd
With Frankie Darro, Dorothy Coonan, Edwin Phillips, Rochelle Hudson, Ann Hovey, Arthur Hohl, Grant Mitchell, Claire McDowell, Sterling Holloway, Robert Barrat, Charles Grapewin, Ward Bond, Adrien Morris, Shirley Dunstan, Minna Gombell, Willard Robertson, Harry Woods, Sidney Miller, George Cooper, George Offerman, Jr., Faron, Lee Shumway, Lee Phelps, Edwin Stanley, Jean Carmen, and in the movie theatre sequence, James Cagney and Guy Kibbee in a scene from "Footlight Parade".

Inspired primarily by the Russian "The Road to Life", but also in part by an actual case history, and in addition something of a follow-up to Wellman's own "Beggars of Life", "Wild Boys of the Road" is a curious film indeed. As a film it stands up well; undated, well-paced, quite surprisingly well acted by the youthful players, and graced by photography that is both grimly realistic and strangely beautiful. It is a moving, restless stark kind of photography that captures the feeling of hobos life on the freight trains for more effectively than the rather studied camerawork of "Beggars of Life". Initially, in the scenes involving Darro's parents, the film really convinces. Thereafter things happen too patly and too quickly; the episode in the clearly established bordello is deliciously funny and a needed moment of relief, but it makes it difficult to take the film too seriously thereafter. Just as the Russian "The Road to Life" got too heavy-handed and self-conscious at times, so this film seems to be aware that it is a fast '30s film, and a social comment second. Actually Wellman's films have rarely had points of view of their own (unlike Ford's "Grapes of Wrath"); any statements that he makes are usually those supplied by the writers. (He really added nothing of his own to "The Ox-Bow Incident"). The ending is too neat, the NRA plug far from subtle, and the Warners' long love-affair with FDR stressed in the Robert Barrat character, who, via the glasses, seems deliberately intended to provoke a Roosevelt association. But if it's a trifling naively socially and politically, it still has more than a little historical/documentary value, and is good movie-making to boot. Reputedly Alan Hale Jr. (who has since been through movie and tv careers) was supposed to have been one of the boys, but Wellman never used him. However, it's Hale's picture that turns up in the last reel as Robert Barrat's son!

"HEROES FOR SALE" (First National, 1933) Director: William Wellman
Written by Robert Lord and Wilson Mizner; Camera, James Van Trees

"Heroes for Sale", like "Wild Boys of the Road", has been unseen theatrically for some 25 years, and while it doesn't quite live up to a reputation fostered by powerful stills (and no text) in various film histories, it's a powerful and off-beat work. Unfortunately, though this is not a fault of the film, it is weakened today by two key sequences which are now better known to us through duplication, in lighter key, in other films. Most notable is the episode where the hero accidentally finds himself at the head of a mob, and is arrested as a Communist agitator - something that Chaplin did so quickly and humorously in "Modern Times". And the mood lighting and rhythmic quality of the derelicts shuffling across the screen automatically calls to mind the "Forgotten Man" number in "Gold Diggers of 1933". Production of the two films overlapped, and it is a debatable point as to whether Wellman borrowed from LeRoy and Berkeley, or vice-versa! Further, despite sincerity, honesty, and some outspoken denunciations of police brutality and Red-baiting, there's an overpowering and melodramatic flavor to much of "Heroes for Sale". The first third is grim, powerful, honest stuff - but thereafter there is too much bethos and too many sub-plots. The balance of logic is upset in the ending (and not for commercial reasons) so that it shifts gears from "I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang" level to that of "Stella Dallas". Nevertheless, much of it has the flavor of those alternate "documentary" chapters in Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath" and filmed or not, it is a major filmic reflection of the depression.

William K. Everson