"THE BIG HOUSE" ( MGM, 1930) Directed by George Hill
Scenario: Frances Marion, Joe Farnham and Martin Flavin, from an original story by Frances Marion; General Harold Moulstrom; editor: Blanche Sewell; Art Director, Cedric Gibbons;
Premiere: Century Theatre Minneapolis, June 7 1930; release, June 21 1930; 8 reels.


Although now largely forgotten, George Hill was a major MGM director of the late silent/early sound period. His special forte was the big-scale, ultra-masculine action film - ranging from Lon Chaney's "Tell it to the Marines" and John Gilbert's "The Cossacks" through to "The Secret Six" (one of the best of the gangster cycle) and "Hell Divers" (one of the best of the aviation cycle). Although he had broken into movies as an assistant to D.W. Griffith in the old Biograph days, he seems (unlike his MGM contemporary V.S. Van Dyke) not to have absorbed much of Griffith's technique into his own working methods. If there is a common denominator to all of his films, it is their restraint: despite the "bigness" of his various action shows, he seems to be pulling his punches much of the time, his apparent reluctance to exploit the full potential of his melodrama involving paying off in the unrestrained vigor of his long withheld spectacular climaxes - as in the gaco-break sequence here, surely one of the biggest and noisiest ever filmed!

The generally sober quality of "The Big House" enables it to retain much of its power and freshness even today, despite decades of increasingly standardised big-house movies, ranging from such low-budget works as "Mutiny in the Big House" to the more elaborate Capone vehicles at Warner Brothers - "Each Dawn I Die", "Angels With Dirty Faces" et al. "The Last Mile" and "The Criminal Code", the major prison movies that followed "The Big House", have already dated far more; it, and Don Siegel's (1954) "Riot in Cell Block 11" remain the best and definitive examples of the genre. One of the major assets of "The Big House" is the comparably lack of cliché characters; some types are inevitable and unavoidable, but most are three-dimensional and unpredictable. A real departure from formula is the character played by Robert Montgomery; incidentally an excellent performance from an actor whose well-varied work in this period remains valid and undated and whose remarkable versatility has never been sufficiently appreciated. Beery and Stone are towers of strength as usual, and it's good to see Chester Morris again from a period where he was a new, fresh and major young star, too soon to be shunted into routine "B" action - although his recent theatrical work shows that he has lost none of his old steam.

At a time when two and sometimes three different versions were being made on really important early talkies, in order to retain the key foreign markets, "The Big House" was considered of sufficient stature to warrant no less than four different versions - all employing the same sets and basic script, but probably utilising quite different directorial techniques. The German version, titled "Menschen hinter Gittern" ("Men Behind Bars") was directed by Paul Pejos, and starred Heinrich George in the Beery role, with Gustav Diessel, Hans von Twardkowski, Dita Parlo and Hermann Bing. Paul Pejos also directed the French version (in which Charles Boyer appeared) and an Italian version was directed by Emile de Beast. Incidentally, when George Hill and his cast and crew moved out at night, Hal Roach and Laurel and Hardy moved in, to utilise the sets to give added production values to their own prison spoof, "Perdon Us", their first starring feature. Some of the big action scenes from "The Big House" were also, very briefly, incorporated into their film!

Proceeding "The Big House" will be "Hoosigow", Laurel & Hardy's 1929 two-reeler produced for MGM by Hal Roach, directed by James Parrott and written by Leo McCarey, with James Finlayson, Tiny Sandford, Leo Willis and Dick Sutherland. While an uneven work, with the boys re-using routines that had been put to better advantage earlier, and with the editing and pacing clearly uncomfortable in the new medium of sound, it's still a most enjoyable frolic and particularly appropriate to tonight's program. —— W.K. Evereisen ——