"CONGOGILLA" (Horro Films-Fox, 1932) Produced by Martin and Osa Johnson
Camera: Richard Neagler and Martin Johnson; editors, Richard de Rochemont
and Sidney A. Mackenson: Film
Although the structure and narration of films like "Congogilla" tend to date
dayadays, due to years of intervening imitation and satirisation, the basic
footage remains impressive indeed, even transcending its partial familiarity
as stock footage in everything from Tarzan epics to "Mighty Joe Young", and
its re-use in documentary compilations. Some of it - the XXXXXX pygmy material
for example, with its condescendingly comic approach - tends to run too long,
while one could do with substantially more of the hippo sequence - but on the
whole it's a remarkable cavalcade of obviously authentic footage. Some of it
is rather like "The Glass", and some, notably, it was
amazingly tricked-up with fake back projection effects to provide phoney
thrills in their much later "I Married Adventure". Osa Johnson, who tended
in later years to be as irritating a posthumous silent partner as Irene
Castle, does get on one's nerves a bit, and one's sympathy goes out to poor
Martin, trapped in the wilds with this rather over-bearing mate. But the
footage itself dominates and is much more simply and effectively presented
than in the Frank Buck documentaries for Rko Radio, which were prone to
over-dramatisation and were not above carefully staging many of their "authentic" highlights.

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

"ESKIMO" (IGH, 1933) Produced and directed by W.S. Van Dyke; screenplay by
John Lee Mahin from the books "Der Eskimo" and "Die Flucht ins Weisse Land"
by Peter Freuchen; Camera, Clyde De Vinna, Josiah Roberts, George Nogle;
Editor, Conrad A. Nervig; 12 reels
With Mala and Lotus, and W.S. Van Dyke (The Inspector), Joe Sawyer, Edgar
Dearing (The Huntsman), Peter Freuchen (The Captain) Edward Hearn (his mate)

With the last film in our current series, we come full circle by returning to
W.S. Van Dyke, the director with whom we started this series, and a film
from his 1928-33 period ("White Shadows in the South Seas", "Trader Horn",
"Tarzan the Ape Man") in which he was still very much of a specialist in
the location-filmed semi-documentary film. Our notes for "Hannhattan
Melodrama" surveyed his subsequent prolific commercial successes and expertise
so we need not cover that ground again here. "Eskimo" is also an appropriate
companion film to "Congoilla" in reflecting the then tremendous movie and
audience interest in films of exploration and discovery, an interest sparked
not only by the Lindbergh and Byrd exploits (which created a new enthusiasm for
individual contemporary heroes) but also by the ability of the still new
talking film to bring to the screen the authentic sounds, languages and
music of far-off places and peoples. Universal's "Igloo" (a notable if
more melodramatic film, one that we hope to show a couple of seasons hence)
had preceded "Eskimo" into release by a year, but its production was
probably spurred by the interest surrounding Freuchen's book, and the
knowledge that the IGH film based on them would take some time to produce.

"Eskimo" is a remarkable film, though it has its flaws. The first half is
such a fascinating recital, in largely documentary fashion, of Eskimo life,
not only the rigorous struggle for existence and the constant hunting of
food, but also in its detailed commentary on Eskimo morality and codes of
honor, that the second half - in which plot takes over - inevitably seems a
let-down. There is a certain amount of racial comment and some biting
reference to white exploitation of the Eskimo, but this is used to bolster
plot motivation and does not become the end in itself, as in "White Shadows
in the South Seas". As always with Van Dyke, the authenticity is helped
along by Hollywood knowhow: there is nothing faked about the marvellous
caribou stampede sequence, but it is certainly enhanced by overhead and
pit camera positions. Today the intrusion of some back projected scenes
(especially into the walrus hunt) strikes a note of artifice - but in 1933,
back projection was not widely understood or recognised by audiences and
they would have been less jarring then. Too, the back projection scenes are
not inserted to create phoney thrills, but instead to build up and
punctuate already fiery-class sequences. Perhaps the only real criticism one
can make is of the musical score, and, again, the art of scoring for movies
was still a young one in 1933. The use of "Night on a Bald Mountain" at one
point rather takes one "out" of the picture, and the repetition of a
lyrical love theme, belonging far more to the "Rose Marie" genre, works
against the starkness of it all. Incidentally, it seems fairly obvious that
Nicholas Ray's "The Savage Innocents" was much influenced by this film.
The cast is largely Eskimo, with dialogue handled via subtitles, Mala and
Lotus, then total unknowns, soon became familiar faces. In similar roles,
Nala enjoyed limited stardom for some 20 years - aging not one whit in all
that time. Lotus added "Long" as a surname, and specialised in Oriental
villains. Director Van Dyke and author Freuchen are, if not subtle, at least
effective in their dual chores as actors. --- William K. Everson ---