Note: As those of you who were present last week will be aware, Ann Loring, co-star of tonight's film "Robin Hood of El Dorado", has kindly offered to come along and join in the post-screening discussion session. Since she will undoubtedly be talking about director William Wellman, I thought that this might be an opportune time to add to the program a filmed interview with Wellman (shot about a year ago in London) and this will immediately precede the showing of "Robin Hood of El Dorado". Obviously, and justifiably so, the program will run somewhat longer than usual, and in order to save time where we can, we are dispensing with the opening introduction to the films, and will start screening promptly at 8:00.

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THE LAST OUTLAW (Rko Radio, 1936) Directed by Christy Cabanne

Original story: John Ford and E. Murray Campbell; scenario, John Twist and Jack Townley; camera, Jack Mackenzie; producer, Robert Sisk; 8 m.s. With Harry Carey, Hoot Gibson, Tom Tyler, Henry B. Walthall, Margaret Calhoun, Ray Layher, Harry Jans, Russell Hopton, Fred Scott, Frank M'Tommas, Frank Jenks, Maxine Jennings, Ethel Wales, Harry Woods, Alan Curtis, Barbara Pepper, Jack Rice, Jack Culhane, Ralph Byrd, Dennis O'Keefe, Stanley Blystone, Jerry Frank

"The Last Outlaw" is one of several "lost" Rko Radio films of the 30's that have never been revived or put on tv because ownership has reverted to, or been sold to, other parties. Ostensibly a remake of a 1919 Universal 2-reeler written and directed by Ford - a "fact" blithely repeated in all the Ford indexes - it actually has no basic connection with it at all. Ford was interested in none of the story elements, and most of all the title, in a much altered new version. Presumably after "The Informer" it was considered too unimportant a property for him then and it was turned over to Christy Cabanne - one of the few D.W. Griffith proteges who seemed to learn nothing from the master, and remained a useful but uninspired hack director throughout a long and prolific career. Ford however kept at the back of his mind, bought the property back for a postwar remake (with Tyrone Power considered as the star) but again it never materialised. Because of its withdrawal from Rko, the original just vanished.

It's hardly a major rediscovery, and one wishes fervently that Ford had made it. The story is a good one and full of possibilities; the cast is marvellous, and full of Ford-Griffith nostalgia. But Cabanne takes all of this rich potential and ambles through it as though it were an assignment no different from a dozen others. The film lacks pace, and while it does have some exciting action sequences, they are never really exploited. But what it lacks most of all is the kind of warm, spontaneous, off-the-cuff inspiration that Ford would certainly have brought to it. An example: Harry Carey, as the ex-outlaw out of work, goes back to the former western town (now a thriving metropolis) and looks up his old saloon hangout, which is now a bright modern night-club. Ford apart, even a Lesley Selander or a David Howard would have done something with that scene, at the most obvious perhaps a sound-track throw-back to the piano and noise of the old saloon, merging into the brittle chatter and brassy jazz of the new nightclub. But Cabanne just sticks rigidly to the bare bones of the script and does nothing. The one sequence that does pay off rather nicely is where the old sheriff (Walthall) and the old outlaw (Carey) go to a movie and are flabbergasted by the nude chorus girls in the modern westerns (Fred Scott plays the movie cowboy, but the dig is obviously at Gene Autry). It's a little unlikely perhaps that Carey would be so totally unaware of talking pictures. Even the chain gang in "Sullivan's Travels" got to see a movie show once in a while, so presumably a big penitentiary would be even better equipped! But it's a nice and rather charming sequence - though with that premise, and Carey and Walthall delivering some good dialogue, it works automatically and can't be hurt by Cabanne's lack of inspiration. Despite the awkward pacing, "The Last Outlaw" has all - and deal of charm, while the climactic reels do deliver the expected action. Margaret Calhoun is an appealing (and unfamiliar) heroine and Tom Tyler, as always, makes a much better villain than he ever did a hero. Carey and Gibson, who teamed in similar roles in Ford's first feature, "Straight Shooting" 19 years earlier, work well together, though considering that they are of the same vintage, it's a little disconcerting to hear Carey referred to so often as an "old man" and Gibson as a "young fellow". At one point somebody also remarks that 25 years in prison haven't changed Carey at all - which is true enough. He seemed to age not one iota between his Griffith Biographs of 1912 and Vidor's "Juul in the Sun" more than 30 years later! Erroneously referred to in most reference books as a 62-minute film, "The Last Outlaw" is actually almost two reels longer than that, and by no means a "B". Our print is in fine shape, and the film itself - artless, unambitious yet somehow very satisfying - should prove a very pleasant surprise, the more so if your expectations are not too high.
TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION, followed by the filmed WILLIAM WELLMAN interview.

ROBIN HOOD OF EL DORADO (MGM, 1936) Directed by William Wellman; produced by John W. Considine; Camera, Chester Lyons; Screenplay by William Wellman, Joseph Calleia and Malvin Levy from the book by Walter Noble Burns; 8 reels.


With the exception of Paramount, who maintained a fairly regular supply of epic westerns from such directors as deMille, Vidor and Lloyd, the major companies tend to avoid big-scale westerns almost entirely during the middle-thirties. The comparative failure of so many early-talking westerns ("Law and Order", "The Big Trail", "Billy the Kid") seemed to stamp them as an archaic echo from the silents. Westerns thus became largely the domain of the B stars, until John Ford's "Stagecoach" in 1939 launched a whole new cycle of deluxe-scale westerns. "Robin Hood of El Dorado" is then rather an oddity, and it's good to find that it holds up so well. The Hollywood legend of whitewashing western outlaw heroism is not yet really taken hold with a vengeance. The film's tale - taken from the book by one of the better western historians, and adapted partially by Wellman himself - has a good deal more truth than most. True, Joaquin Murietta's sudden embarking on a life of crime and vengeance was understandable, and the film's depiction of the causes are factual. Thereafter however, it does tend to minimise his appalling savagery, and to romanticise his death in the "Good Bad Man" tradition of Bill Hart. (Murietta was betrayed, shot down, beheaded - and his head carted around to the mining camps as an exhibit. Here he expired, poetically, Wayne/Ford fashion, on the grave of his wife!)

Although the film has a certain studio "look" to it - the soft-focus photography so popular at MGM at that time, the occasional rather obvious back projection, the frequent recourse to montage sequences, albeit good ones - it is not a studio-bound look. The film spends most of its time outdoors, and the locations are well-chosen and impressively photographed. There's plenty of action, some lively stunt-work, an outsize shoot-up for the climax, and far more pace than one normally finds in a grade-A major studio western. Acclimated as we now are to long films that go nowhere and say nothing, it's quite surprising to find how much plot and incident is packed into the film's tight 86 minutes. Like all of Wellman's (not very frequent) westerns, it has a gutsiness and conviction to it; certainly we have seldom seen so many dirty, unshaven and probably smelly extras so convincingly deployed in the crowd scenes. Like the same year's parallel-period "Sutter's Gold" from Universal, it is quite surprisingly outspoken in condemning the pillaging that went on in California with governmental approval and non-intervention. It's perhaps not much of a compliment to say that this is the "definitive" Murietta film: the outlaw has had but scanty Hollywood attention, Bill Elliott and Buck Jones having played him in good "B" pictures, and Jeffrey Hunter essaying the role most recently and least-successfully of all. But despite its occasional comic-opera flavor - J. Carroll Naish as a sadistic killer is eventually used as mild comic relief, and dies heroically -- and the lack of a sustained mood throughout, it is one of the best of Hollywood's usually far more fictionalised forays into the careers of Billy the Kid, Jesse James et al. And Warner Baxter, with his Cisco Kid role for only a year or two behind him, does come up with a performance of real depth and subtlety. "Robin Hood of El Dorado" has never been a "lost" film - but it might as well have been, since it was bought but forgotten. It also reminds us what a versatile director Wellman was, since it was surrounded at the time by such other Wellman-films as "Call of the Wild", "Nothing Sacred", "A Star is Born" and "Men With Wings".

Miss Loring by the way appears early in the film, disappears for a while, and then reappears dramatically in a key role that is a curious composite of Dietrich in "Morocco" and Ann Dvorak in "Scarface"! Although the role is a colorful one, it's also - dramatically an unnecessary one, and looks as though it may have been added when somebody realized with horror that Baxter's wife was killed off early in the film, and there was nobody around to dress up the posters and stills! However, doubtless Miss Loring will have some comments to make on that, and I'd like to thank her here taking the time to join us this evening.

William K. Everson