Two Silents with Louise Brooks

Grateful thanks are extended to Paramount Pictures for permission to show these films.

**BEGGARS OF LIFE** (Paramount, 1926) Directed by William Wellman; supervised by Benjamin Glazer; Scenario by Benjamin Glazer and Jim Tully, from original material by Tully; Titles, Julian Johnson; camera, Henry Gerrard; 8 reels With: Wallace Beery (Oklahoma Red); Louise Brooks (Nancy); Richard Arlen (Jim); Edgar Washington Blue (Rope); H.A. Morgan (Skinny); Andy Clark (Skelly); Mike Donlin (Bill); Roscoe Arbuckle (Roper); Robert Perry (The Arkansas Snake); Johnny Morris (Rubin); George Arliss (Sal); Jacques Chaplin (Ukla); Robert Brower (Blind Sims); Frank Brownlee (Farmer).

Although one version did originally have sound effects, music, a song and odd lines of dialogue, "Beggars of Life" was essentially a silent film, and all that survives is the silent version. It was Wellman's last silent, and would be his last important film until he hit his stride here in 1931 with "The Public Enemy" after a handful of interesting but relatively minor talkies. He was so impressed with Louise Brooks' work in this film that he wanted her for "The Public Enemy" and her casting for that film was announced. However, at the last minute the role was switched to Jean Harlow. Brooks' name remains in many of the cast listings even today. "Beggars of Life" is somewhat of a forerunner to the grim social melodramas of the 30's, and Wellman's own "Wild Boys of the Road", in particular, but is slightly sentimentalised, much in the manner of the mid-20's character films that built themselves around a good badman figure (in this case, Beery) that itself derived from the old William S. Hart western character. The film starts out magnificently with a stark, surprising opening, illustrative of the best silent visual technique; the rest of it never quite matches the power of that opening, but it is consistently interesting and winds up with a lively action sequence shot on the spur-line that was much over-worked for railroad chase sequences in that period, most notably perhaps in the Monty Banks comedy "Play Safe". Even disguised as a boy, the Brooks face and personality are quite stunning, though not helped by a merely so-so print that has lost much of the original print made from that negative which was allegedly lost in Paris, and all that remained are a couple of dupe prints made, not too well, from that original. It's by the barest chance it survives at all, and luckily it is not the kind of film that needs pictorial beauty. On the other hand, any print that detracts from the impact of the Brooks face is something of a crime against humanity! Incidentally, Miss Brooks once expressed the view that the Beery role would have made an ideal one for Chaplin, had he been willing for his tramp to undergo a change of pace. Admittedly, Chaplin would have been hard-pressed to suggest the brute strength that the character (as written) needed, but it's an interesting idea to conjure with.

**TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION**

**IT'S THE OLD ARMY GAME** (Paramount, 1926) Directed by Edward Sutherland

Screenplay by Thomas J. Geraghty & J. Clarkson Miller from an original story by J.P. McEvoy; Titles, Ralph Spence; Camera, Alvin Wyckoff; 7 reels With W.C. Fields (Elmer Prettywillie); Louise Brooks (Wildred); Blanche King (Tessie Overhol); William Gaxton (George Parker); Mary Foy (Sara Pancost); Bessie Bennett (McKoy); Josephine Dunn, Jack Luden (socialites); George Currie (artist); Elise Cavaan (midnight customer).

The W.C. Fields silents, long thought lost, have been gradually re-surfacing over the last ten years and enough are available now for us to form fairly reliable opinions about the group as a whole. Generally they were not too popular at the time, either with the critics or the public. "The Potters" seems to have been the best (alas, that one has not yet reappeared) with tonight's film, roughly speaking, in second place. It was the rough-hewn quality of the Fields silents, shot here in the East, that probably accounted for their lukewarm reception at a time when Keaton, Lloyd, Langdon, Chaplin and the others were offering such slick and polished work from Hollywood. It is of course that same rough-hewn quality that makes the Fields films (talkies as well as silent) so enjoyable today. Most of the silents were re-done and improved on - as talkies; tonight's film remained in the sound era as "It's A Gift", quite possibly his masterpiece, though some of its gags also turn up in such other Fields talkies as "The Pharmacist". While, we automatically supply (mentally) the Fields voice to his silent pantomime, he really didn't need his voice to be an effective pantomist. The sleeping porch sequence did need sound to be totally effective, and its expansion - with full and subtle exploitation of sound - in "It's A Gift" is a comedy classic in itself. The Fields character is so unlike different in silent films, generally more abrasive and unsympathetic, that the natural reaction against the nobility of the other comedians of the day. Louise Brooks' role here is predictably corrosive, an asset, but undemanding. "Beggars of Life" perhaps offered her her only real acting role in Hollywood, and she herself was a little surprised at what she was able to achieve in Europe immediately afterwards with G.W. Pabst. Incidentally, she was married to the film's director, Edward Sutherland.

- W.J. Evans