CROOKED (Davis Distributing Corp., 1925) Directed by F. Herrick Herrick; Camera, William Miller; from the "ragments of Life" series; 20 mins. With: Eleanor King, Reginald Simpson, William Calhoun, Harry Stone.

Although hardly a dynamic piece of melodrama, "Crooked" is included because it fits rather nicely into the mood of the program, though it is a short that we've wanted to play for other reasons. It's fascinating as a reminder of the sporadic and far-flung independent production that still existed on the East Coast during the twenties. Made in and around Morristown, New Jersey, with excellent and almost Griffith-like use of the landscape in the final chase sequence, it will have especial interest to anyone who knows that not-radically-changed area today. The film is also one of a series that purported to tell its tales entirely visually and without subtitles - something that a number of film-makers were experimenting with in the 20's ranging from Murnau and "The Last Laugh" to Charles Ray's "The Old Swimmin' Hole". It must be admitted however, that "Crooked" takes the lazy way out by giving you as much information as possible before the film starts, via a lengthy scrolling "Thundering Hoof not exactly falls back on inserts of letters and other documents to convey information. When there's no way of doing this, they just leave you hanging - and the climax is decidedly unclear in the details of who did what and why! As with most unimportant and not-very-good independent films, the negative was hardly used - and the print made from it is a beauty. One wishes that all the great films, where the negatives were worked to death, and then replaced or repaired, looked half as good today!

THUNDERING HOOFs (Monogram-ZPO, 1924) Directed by Albert Rogell; story by Marion Jackson; Camera, Ross Fisher; 53 minutes


Fred Thompson was the very antithesis of William S. Hart, and was in fact the closest rival to Tom Mix in making showy, slick, streamlined westerns full of action for the sake of action, and presenting the customary glamorised picture of the West. Thomson's clothing too, had a dude-like appearance to it - especially a white gun-belt and boots, which looked like the cheap merchandise sold at city rodeos for the youngsters. Thomson himself was far from a horse whisperer; he had a pleasant personality and was a fine athlete - and with experience in dramatic roles prior to his westerns, wasn't a bad actor either. Most of his tricky stunts he performed without a double - though one suspects the omnipresence of Yakima Canutt in the stagecoach stunt, since that was very much a specialty of his. Thomson was tremendously popular, and his religious background (he had trained for the ministry) and thoroughly moral code of living earned him the support not only of youngsters, but also of pressure groups, at a time when Hollywood was having its trouble with scandal. From these PBO films (and this is apparently the only one to survive in this country) he went on to a number of specials at Paramount ("Jesse James" reputedly the best) and died at the end of the silent era from a sudden illness. (There is a typical Hollywood mystery surrounding his death, his ghost having reportedly appeared shortly afterwards).

PBO (Film Booking Offices), an outgrowth of the Robertson-Cole company, and forerunner of RKO, was run by Joseph P. Kennedy, and specialised in fine little actioners and westerns with Fred, Tom Tyler, Bob Steele, Richard Talmadge and briefly, Tom Mix. They were fast, audience-pleasing, and full of production values. Virtually all of them have disappeared over here, but a number survive in European prints, and they hold up well. "Thundering Hoofs" was never considered one of Thomson's best, but it is still a tremendously entertaining western. The action is well staged, the sets solid and not the usual catch-penny independent shacks and false fronts, and the photography exceptional - crystal clear, often beautifully composed, and well represented in our toned original print.

Even for a deliberately tongue-in-cheek Fairbanksian western, "Thundering Hoofs" has some surprisingly hard-to-take moments -- especially the "last duty" of wonder horse Silver King, which is such a delight will leave you to discover it for yourself. However, one shouldn't apply a Bill Hart exclamation to a Fred Thomson film. It's fun throughout, and builds to a particularly rousing finish with the villain getting his revenge on Silver King by sending him into the bull-ring, and the hero rushing to the rescue over Mexican roof-tops.

-- Ten Minute Intermission --
TRACKED BY THE POLICE (Warner Brothers, 1927) Directed by Ray Enright
Story by Gregory Rogers; Camera, Edwin DuPraw; 65 minutes

Together with "The Night Cry", which we ran a season or two back, "Tracker By The Police" is one of Rinty's very best pictures - and is going to be quite a surprise to those who have never seen him before, and equate his pictures with the naive and ordinary little tv-half-hours which have perpetuated his name. (His descendants seemed to lose both histronic ability and personality with each succeeding generation, in that sense perhaps rivalling their non-canine counterparts, the Barrymores).

As "Satan - loyal and true - with the heart of a lion and the soul of a child" Rinty has what is virtually a showcase role, and the film is to him what "The Narrow Trail" was to Bill Hart - an opportunity to wrap everything up and demonstrate in one film all the things that he did best. A seasoned veteran by now, Rinty goes through his whole bag of tricks - dramatics, comedy, pathos, stunts. And when variations on those elements (Rinty's canine sagacity only occasionally helped out by a camera trick) seem exhausted, the writers dream up moral and ethical dilemmas too - shall he save his master's girl-friend, or his own mate, when circumstances place both in dire jeopardy at the same time? The human actors matter little, and in point of fact there are remarkably few of them - the huge dam project seems manned only by a crooked work-boss and a decidedly skeleton non-union crew. Hero Jason Robards spends most of the film depending on Rinty to help him out of his holes (sometimes literally) although wounded (shot, plus a broken bone or two) and decided ill-matched in a fistic battle with Tom Santschi, he does (presumably) win, although the knockout takes place off screen. As for Tom Santschi, veteran of the film, his villainy is of the uncomplicated old-fashioned variety - evil for its own sake, with no time taken to explain why he is so determined to (a) wreck the dam, (b) kill Rinty, and (c) seduce the heroine.

The film has good production values, even the Iverson's Ranch location - a darg area in Chatsworth - given gloss by camera angles carefully placed high up in the rocks, where the dusty scrubland doesn't show so clearly. The principal dam location utilizes some of the preparatory work sites for the Hoover Dam and its environs, officially launched in 1928, but being prepared-for much earlier.

Incidentally, the meaningless title may require a little explanation. In those days, films were block-booked in advance, often before the films were made. If the distributor didn't come up with the contracted-for title, the exhibitor had the right to cancel out and refuse a substitute. It's difficult to imagine any exhibitor quibbling over taking such an excellent Rin Tin Tin film as this, but Warners weren't about to provide any leverage for the cancellation of bookings. So after six reels with nary a policeman in sight, Warners added a single title saying that for his part in the enterprise, Rinty had been made an honorary policeman, and thus the record read "Tracker By The Police". This extraordinary title is accompanied by art work of Rinty clutching a police truncheon, and sporting a canine grin that suggests he knows full well how cunningly he has outfoxed the exhibitors!

By the way, we issued a warning - as it happened, unnecessarily - about the print condition of the two French films a couple of weeks back. They played well and without problems, but for the record, we'll repeat the warning relative to the print of "Tracker By The Police". Pictorially it is fine, printed from the original negative, and will look good on the screen. However, the print was once cut down to a 2-reel version (a work-print for a tv edition) and has since been laboriously restored, like a jigsaw puzzle, so that it is full of splices - literally hundreds of them. They come mainly at the end of scenes, and with no sound track pops to give them away, do not spoil the film, and the projector are unpredictable in their reactions to such a plethora of splices, and if there is the occasional jump or break, we ask you to bear with us. Only about a minute of the original film could not be restored. Last-minute trimming of the two-reel version meant that odd frames were removed throughout to gain a few seconds here and there, and these we are of course impossible to replace. No scenes are missing, but existing scenes may have run a little longer in some cases - so where the editing is a little abrupt, or the rhythm of editing seemingly accelerated, it is only because of these odd missing frames.

William E. Everson
Program finishes at 10.10 (Question and discussion period will follow)