Two unusual Westerns from the beginning and end of the '30's

GUN SMOKE (Paramount, 1931) Directed by Edward Sleson; Story and screenplay by Grover Jones and William Slavenes McGuff; Camera, Archie Stout; 70 mins.


Hollywood frequently used - or distorted - both the traditions and the myths of the West to reflect on contemporary conditions, in so doing often enlarging upon accepted conceptions of the "real West" whatever that may be. The 31-34 Capitol show Hollywood relating the West to the gangsterism of the 30's, and using the Western epic as a propagandist tool in the face of war threats from Europe. "Gun Smoke" is a lively western from a period when most Hollywood westerns were rather slow and pedestrian - an witness "The Conquering Horde" made that same year by the same studio, same director and same star. Actually it is more related to that strange group of genre westerns which proliferated in the 1931-34 period ("This Day and Age", "The Star Witness", "Gabriel Over the White House") which literally advocated vigilante law when official law seemed powerless. It equates the individual destiny of the old-time cowboy with the mass responsibility of the public, quite clearly states that the only way to deal with killers is to kill them, and winds up in an orgy not so much of gun-fighting but of slaughter.

In that sense, it is also very much of a forerunner of such contemporary vigilante films as "Death Wish". But while its rough and actionful, it is also a little too far removed from reality to be really alarming - except as part of that disturbing early 30's cycle. Incidentally, the town in the story (a fictional town), seems, by sign-post information, to be an approximation of Ketchum, the small Idaho town that is on the fringes of Sun Valley (which didn't exist in 1931, being developed by the Union Pacific as a tourist centre in 1938). I ran the film there this Summer and Richard Arlen's roaring speech about the city's infiltration into the West and cowboys eventually having to swap their horses for trucks (the sorest point of all with Western ranchers who long to cling to their old way of life, and to whom the inevitable truck is the symbol for the new) received a rousing ovation from all the farmers and ranchers present. It's a surprisingly prophetic and accurate speech, and much of what it predicts happened right there, though not quite as devastatingly since the area was developed more for tourism than industry.

Ten Minute Interruption

MAN OF CONQUEST (Republic, 1939) Directed by George Nicholls Jr., Produced by Sol G. Siegel; Screenplay by Wills Root, B.B. Paremore Jr. and Jan Fontaine from a story by Wills Root; 2nd Unit Director, Yakima Canutt; Camera, Joseph August; 97 mins.


Although Ford's "Stagecoach" is rightly regarded as re-vitalising the Western in 1939, it can't take sole credit. Both "Man of Conquest" and "Dodge City" were released the month following "Stagecoach"'s release, and clearly were in production long before the public perception of the genre could be altered. It was the threatened (and almost certain) war in Europe which gave Hollywood the opportunity to use the big-scale Western to draw on national pride, call for national unity, draw parables between oppressed minorities in Europe and those in America's history, and to present the United States as a kind of international peace-maker. "Man of Conquest" is one of the most interesting (and one of the most forgotten) of these 1939/40 epics, and a credit to a small company like Republic, whose first really big movie it was. Expert at making slick "B" westerns they were, in later years, to prove less expert at making "A" westerns, too often substituting production values, costumes and sets for action and a fluid pace. But their first two (Hacuil Walsh's "The Dark Command" was the second) were exceptionally well made, and though the big mass action scenes in "Man of Conquest" (the fall of the Alamo and the Battle of San Jacinto) don't have the spectacle that Warners could have given them, they do have the action expertise of Yakima Canutt. Of all those involved in taking many of the best horse falls! Sam Houston (played at various times by Joel McCrea, William Farnum and others) is one of the most interesting of the Western empire-builders, and it is surprising that this is still the only really big film made from his life. It telescopes a great deal of time, and whittles what could be considered a major unleashing of American colonialism in the great conquest of land-grab, but even in this the whole is honest and successful. The final scene, with the Indians taking the town which is supposed to be for the exploited American Indian, the cast is a good one, and there's excellent camerawork from Joseph August, favorite cameraman of both Bill Hart and John Ford. It was also the biggest film of a little known director, George Nicholls jr. (son of the silent character actor) who died just a year or two later.

Wm. K. Everson

Program ends approx. 10.25.

A reminder - all programs start promptly at 7.30 without intro, until my return for the final program - Wm.