SUTTER'S GOLD (Universal, 1936) Produced by Edmund Grainger; Screenplay by Jack Kirkland, Walter Woods and George O'Neill, from a story by Blaise Cendrars and Bruno Frank; Camera, George Robinzon; Special Effects, John Fulton; Music, Franz Waxman; 94 mins.

DER KAISER VON KALIFORNIEN (Luis Trenker—Tobis-Rota, Germany, 1926)
Written and Directed by Luis Trenker; Asst. Directors, Dr. Hans Brunow and George Burdaureck; Camera: Albert Benitz; Second cameraman, Heinz von Jaworsky; Art Director, Erich Grave; 95 mins. approx. (Untitled)
With: Luis Trenker, Viktoria von Baalssko, Werner Kunig, Karl Zwingmann, Elise Auilinger, Melanie Horeschovsky, Bernard Minetti, Luis Gerald, Paul Verhoeven, Reginald Pasch, August Elchorn, Rudolph Klein-Rogge. **

The casts of both films are quite monumental, and to reproduce them in full here would take virtually all our space! Full cast lists are posted at the back of the auditorium, and some spare copies are available.

Since this is a long program, and I want to take advantage of the presence of one of the cameramen on the Trenker film, Mr. Jaworsky, I want to start with an absolutely minimal introduction and save whatever time we have for the post-screening discussion. At that time Mr. Jaworsky will undoubtedly comment on the various locations used in the film.

Although the German film is unsubtitled, and tells a story of Sutter quite at variance with that of its American equivalent, seeing the American film first will provide all the basic information and motivations necessary. The Trenker film is extremely visual, and only the occasional odd detail needs explanation.

American history is full of dreamers, empire-builders and would-be emperors who have been given surprisingly scant attention by Hollywood. (Emperor Norton, for example, was relegated to a single one-reeler!) Despite his enormous importance to California, Sutter was honored only by the Universal film of 1936 in terms of a full-scale biography. Otherwise his character was used almost as a background figure in a couple of silents, as one of the leads in a 1924 serial (1) and subliminally in a "B" movie of 1939, "Mutiny on the Blackhawk" under a different name. The reason is probably that Sutter was essentially a loser, all of whose experiences seemed to betray the dream that first brought him to America. A pity; one would have loved to have seen an in-depth biography with John Huston at the helm, or possibly a noir-western with Anthony Mann directing and Alton photographing. It is curious that the only two biographies on film should have both been made in the same year, 1936. Universal's Universal claimed in their advertising that the film was a centennial celebration, but it didn't say of exactly what, and certainly 1836 was not a particularly momentous year in Sutter's own history.

Both films use fact to create a kind of legend (in the case of the German film) and fiction (in the case of Hollywood). Sutter himself didn't help matters; he was far from a likeable character, and his visions were not matched by his power to execute them. In fact he was both a wheeler-dealer and a con-man, leaving a trail of broken promises and cheated victims behind him. Switzerland incidentally does not seem to regard him as a native son who brought honor and prestige to his homeland.

The problems inherent in Sutter's story are emphasized by the way each film gets under way, the establishing sequence of each film pretty much setting the mood and style for the following nine reels. In actuality, Sutter was something of a roué who began a family life unwillingly when his girl friend became pregnant. As a husband he was a prolific father (with a bigger family than either film admits) and a poor provider. With a string of bad deals behind him, but with a genuine dream of America as a land of opportunity, he fled Switzerland to escape being thrown into debtors' prison. He had Paul Verhoeven as his potential first American film, some years earlier. (The He Paul Verhoeven films, which owes nothing to the script that Elia Kazan has worked on as his potential first American film, some years earlier.) He opts for standard melodrama. Likeable, jovial Sutter is framed on a murder charge by political schemers, and has to get out of town. Trenker latches on to Sutter's part-time career as a printer, and has him printing up political slogans (of an ambiguously anti-Nazi nature) as something of an idealist. In his flight from the police, he takes refuge in a cathedral—where a Gothic spirit reveals to him a vision of a man walking off the New World.

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From that point on, despite the size of the movie, "Sutter's Gold" treats his life almost as a "B" movie. He never dreams of going to California until he hears about it in New York, and regards it as a good place to make a fast buck. Sutter's actual incredible journey to California, spread over a long period of time, had him spending a long period with the mountain men, and eventually reaching his destination via Alaska. The fact that he brought some South Sea islanders with him as the nucleus of his "army" allows Universal to work up a totally fictitious sub-plot in which Sutter gets involved with slave traders, and frees their victims! Once settled in California, there is a slight modicum of truth to some of the events. The affair with the Russian countess does at least have a mild basis in fact ... the virtual abandonment of his family is totally true ... and the reconstruction of his fort at Sacramento is surprisingly correct; rather than the fact that it was (and is) in a flat area, sunburned by the hot riding hills from which (in the film) boar the Mexican army and Kit Carson's rescuing troop gallop down so dramatically. (In actual fact, no battles were ever fought there, the guns being fired only to salute visiting dignitaries.) And the closing reels of course are designed primarily as appropriate to an Edward Arnold special, resembling the same year's "Come and Get It" and the previous year's "Diamond Jim". Although it is relatively factual in illustrating Sutter's plight, it doesn't admit that the Government had been paying Sutter a pension, acknowledging his probable rights, but doing nothing about it. Incidentally, the traditional western friend role, played by Lee Tracy, is a composite of all the western stars, not too different from the "wily" material they had to work with, this "Sutter's Gold" is a trite and disappointing film, never raising itself to the potential its big budget promises. James Cruze, clearly trying to put himself back into the epic tradition of "The Covered Wagon", directs in a plodding fashion, and even uses subtitles on occasion. Judging from the names in the full cast who do not appear, the film was very much cut-down prior to release. Oddly enough, the 1939 B "Mutiny on the Blackhawk" which follows the same basic framework to tell a purely fictional story, uses the battle footage almost as if it were original, and was made by Kit Carson's cavalry. "Sutter's Gold" went over budget and Universal would have gone under as a result had it not been for the huge and unexpected profits from "Show Boat", the same year.

If "Der Kaiser von Kalifornien" is equally liberal with its facts, and has something of a Karl May flavor to it, then it is largely successful in conveying the European (and especially German) vision of the West, captured too in so many paintings of the early West, where German artists outnumbered the Americans! Luis Trenker, in a loose sense a German equivalent of John Ford and John Wayne rolled into one, was of course a specialist in mountain films — the national genre most closely resembling the American western. As a film-maker and actor, he has long been due for re-appraisal, and hopefully that is now a possibility. (Most of his older films are now available as part of this package, I understand. This is as far as we've seen them, and I can't imagine there being anything among them to make them worthwhile.) His filmography is a long one, and his "The Lost Son" is a case in point. He was enmeshed in the history of the West, and to some extent of the world, as he was able to work with so many of his films and develop a style and a vision of the world as he saw it. His "Theodor von Kalifornien" is a case in point. He was too popular a figure to ban from the screen, but after "The Kaiser of California" (which incidentally was a Venice Festival prize-winner) he was forbidden to write and direct his own films, and could only continue in films as a performer under someone else's direction and control. Trenker is now in his 90's, and has been invited to a tribute to his work at the upcoming Telluride Film Festival.

Program ends approx. 10.35., followed by discussion and questions with cameraman Heinz von Jaworsky whom we are happy and honored to have with us this evening.

----- Wm.K. Everson