It's quite coincidental that we also showed a James Cruze-directed film last week ("Sutter's Gold") and unfortunate that neither of them present Cruze at his best. After the unexpected success of "The Covered Wagon", Cruze eventually became one of the most commercially successful directors of the silent period. Since he wasn't a particularly inspired director, his success is a little hard to understand, although reaching his peak at the right time may have been part of this. New, more sophisticated techniques were coming in from Europe in the 20's and of course many Hollywood directors welcomed and absorbed them. But a lot of the reviewers were critical of them, and resented their alleged superiority over Hollywood; the simple, straightforward narrative style of Cruze (allied to stories of America like "Ruggles of Red Gap" and the upcoming "The Pony Express") may have seemed to audiences of the day, a determined refusal to be stamped into artiness. Oddly enough, Cruze made some of his very best movies in the early 30's - "Washington Merry-go-Round", "I Cover the Waterfront" - matching the pace of that period to a more sophisticated style of direction. After "The Covered Wagon", Cruze relaxed to turn out in quick succession a number of comedies of manners, of which "The Fighting Coward" is typical. It's the same Booth Tarkington story that was remade as an early talkie, "River of Romance", with Buddy Rogers in the lead, and later, considerably reshaped (and improved) as "Mississippi", with Bing Crosby and W.C. Fields. It's a great comedy, but it's the best, and it's the only one that lends it added excitement. The earlier portions, making greater use of Southern landscapes and the riverboat - and having also more dramatic background incident - are much better than the climax, which bogs down to being a climactic interior act. With dialogue, of course, it would pay off much better; as a silent, and with the not very colorful Cullen Landis in the lead, it is decidedly anti-climactic. But as a reminder of a typical Tarkington play, and as a showcase for a number of players (though Frank Kohler outshone Noah Beery in the villainy he brought to the Fields version), this version is still interesting. It's also an excellent original toned print, showing Karl Brown's always fine photography to advantage.

--- Ten Minute Intermission ---

LUCRETIA LOMBARD (Warner Brothers, 1923) Directed by Jack Conway; scenario by Bertran Millhauser and Sada Cowan from a story by Kathleen Norris. 75 mins. With Irene Rich (Lucretia Lombard); Monte Blue (Stephen Winship); Norma Shearer (Mimi); Marc MacDermott (Sir Allen Lombard); Alec B. Francis (Judge Winship); John Roche (Fred Winship); Lucy Beaumont (Mrs Winship); Otto Hoffman (Sandy, the servant).

Far too many of the unknowing categorise all silent movies as florid, overwritten and unsubtle. Nothing can be generalised to that extent of course, and most silent films, even the poor ones, didn't fit that description. But, of course, a few did — and "Lucretia Lombard" is one of them, a perfect example of what silent films were supposed to be, barebones and primitive in the early years and wanted to exploit it accordingly, it was issued with the alternate title of "Plaining Passions". Jack Conway, who directed, was at that time essentially a no-nonsense action director, and although that always remained his forte, he was later able to add sophistication and, in such minor masterpieces as "Too Hot to Handle", a delightful tongue-in-cheek approach. Here however, he's serious and straightforward about it all, falling to build characters or scenes that need a little more meat on their bones. One character, for example only exists to get Lucretia out of the way for a key misunderstanding scene, and that function fulfilled, he disappeared. And it's never quite explained how Norma Shearer, at close range and right outside their country home, could mistake father-in-law Alec B. Francis for a wild animal and shoot him. (Dear, gentle old Alec B. of all people, who always looked like he does, and never once resembled a moose!) However, since all of this culminating up to the big forest fire and flood climax, music didn't really matter a great deal — and again, thanks to a lovely original toned print, it's good to look at. Irene Rich is excellent as always, and Shearer (before her nose was adjusted) is rather good too. Marc MacDermott, bless his hard heart, has the same role he always had, and plays it to perfection. Initially there were some critical complaints about over-length, and the film was too substantially shortened in its early stages, an opening title or two explaining the deletions. Reviews at the time were not very enthusiastic, even though it was obviously a good audience film. On the other hand, "The Fighting Coward" got the kind of reviews, stressing its hilarity and wit, that suggested that it might have been an early collaboration between Lubitsch and Sturges!

— William K. Everson

Program finishes at 10.05 app., followed by discussion session.