THE CRADLE OF COURAGE (William S. Hart Company for Paramount-Artcraft, 1920) Written and Directed by Lambert Hillyer, from a story by Frederick Bradbury; With: William S. Hart ("Square" Kelly); Ann Little (Rose Tierney); Thomas Santschi (Tierney); Gertrude Claire (Mother Kelly); Francis Thorwald (Jim Kelly); George Williams (Lieut. Riley)

Both William S. Hart and Tom Mix made occasional non-westerns (Hart more often and more successfully) as did such other Western stars as Buck Jones, Tim McCoy, and Bill Elliott. With Hart it was largely a matter of transferring his reformed good badman from the West to the City, letting nature take its course, and coming up with pretty much the same plot problems. By 1920, Hart was ageing, slowing down a little, decreasing the rugged action in his films and increasing the sentiment. However, 1920 was still a good year for him, and his five releases that year included two of his best, "The Toll Gate" and especially "The Cradle of Courage," stiff in this one, not too convincing as an Irishman, and rather prone to troop out old mantis a move but he's got a pleasure to watch, his personal convictions about what constitute a "real man" come through constantly, there's a whale of a fight scene with Tom Santschi, and the San Francisco locations are interesting. Gertrude Claire as his tough old mother, ashamed of his reformation, contributes an interestingly Runyonesque touch, and Ann Little, a compatriot of Hart's from the Thomas Ince days only recently concluded, is a well above-average heroine. Hart's constant associates, Lambert Hillyer as writer-director and Joe August as cameraman, although technically with the star. (Hillyer made a successful transition to directing talks after his 40 Westerns. Among his ground credits as a top cinematographer included Ford's "The Informer" and "They Were Expendable"). The print is a flawless one from the original negative; how we wish all silents looked as good as this one!

-- TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION --

DICK TURPIN (Fox 1924, released 1925) Directed by John G. Blystone; Scenario by Charles Kenyon and Don Lee from a story by Charles Darnton; Camera, Dan Clark; 80 mins./app.

With: Tom Mix (Dick Turpin); Alan Hale (Tom King); Kathleen Meyers (Alice Brookfield); Philo McCullough (Lord Churiton); James Marcus (Squire Crabtree); Lucille Hutton (Sally); Bull Montana (Bully Boy); Fay Holdeness (Barmad); Jack Herrick (Bristol Bully); Fred Kohler (Teylor); Lon Poff (gaoler).

Although one of the longest and biggest Tom Mix vehicles, and also one of the best received by the critics who thought it grand stuff and sure-fire entertainment, "Dick Turpin" proved disappointing at the boxoffice, its returns not commensurate with its added cost, and Mix fans clearly not happy with the removal of their favorite from the West. At the time the near doubling of the normal length literally meant cutting the customary speed in half, and in direct comparison with the regular Mix westerns it may have seemed just a trifle ponderous, much as Fairbanks' "Robin Hood" suffers by direct comparison with "When the Clouds Roll By". Today however, "Dick Turpin" comes over as a vastly entertaining semi-western swashbuckler, carefully made and with the action sequences done in the typical tongue-in-cheek Mix manner. However, since the Turpin story is so well known, and even allowing for the fact that history has given him as thorough a whitewashing job as it has given Jesse James, the totally false happy ending strikes as discordant and the happy ending to Vidor's "Billy the Kid". Moreover, having given the film such an ending, Fox should have gone the whole hog. Killing off fellow highwayman Alan Hale may be a nod to history, but as presented it is unsettling, arbitrary and unnecessary, quite upsetting the rollicking pace of the story. It's a pity that Fox didn't disregard Mix's fans to the extent of winding up with Turpin's death, even if they had to romanticise it. Although the film shows its upped budget, it's still an economical production. Size in Mix's westerns was provided by the National Parks as backgrounds (stunningly photographed always by Dan Clark). Here however, the English landscapes are serviceable, but both they and the occasional glass shots and other bits of technical trickery clearly didn't cost too much, Fox recognising that the audience attention would be directed to Mix's riding and stuntung skills. Attention to other details, historic and geographic, is minimal. The bee-stung lips are right out of the 20's, the Bow Street Runners were (as their name indicates) foot police, not the sheriff's posse that they become here, and instructions to mix things up in London are "... in Epping Forest" are as vague and impractical as Charlie Chan's "Phantom Agent" to meet him "... in Regent Street". Mix doesn't seem too happy as a swordsman, but he is obviously at home with Philo McCullough as the villain, and the sustained climax of the ride to York is well done. John Blystone (brother of villain Stanley Blystone, and also the director of Laurel & Hardy's "Blockheads") keeps it all well on the move, and one's only regret is that the print, though the best available, isn't as good as it could or should have been, especially when compared with the Hart print. Incidentally, McGlenny's 1933 British "Dick Turpin" was a good version that could well stand reissuing. --Wm.K.Everson