"Land of Liberty" is fascinating on a number of levels. First of all, it was made primarily for exhibition at the NY World's Fair in 1933 (and was shown too at the San Francisco fair which overlapped). It was designed to show the history of America and its people - partly from documentary footage, but largely via excerpts from hundreds of Hollywood films. Although the industry had pitched in before for periodic back-patting shorts to push the coming season's releases, this was the first time that all of the producers had collaborated for a basically non-commercial documentary project. (In later years the matter of legal rights, residuals and other factors would have made such a film a tremendously complicated project). Although many stars are involved and recognisable - John Barrymore, Claudette Colbert, Raymond Massey, Joel McCrea etc. - to its credit the film tries hard to downplay all of the backs on screen and let the supporting players (Clarence Kolb, John Ireland) tell the story of a cascade of history - rather than film history - is maintained, and only when unavoidable (Massey playing Lincoln for example) is the focus on the stars. Obviously people who really knew film were involved in the editing process; the San Houston/Texas adventure is neatly put together from that same year's "Man of Conquest" and an obscure Columbia "B", "Heroes of the Alamo". When a film is less well-known, there is a tendency to use more of it; thus Republic's praiseworthy little "Hearts in Bondage" (directed by Lew Ayres) produces not only some Monitor vs Merrimac scenes, but also a touching little dramatic sequence in which Henry B. Walthall shines. Some films are handled via fairly large chunks, others via brief flashes -- all identifiable except (for me at least) a mysterious long-shot clip of Edward G. Robinson as some kind of rabble-rouser that I just can't place.

The earlier sections tend to be a little school-roomy since there's a relative paucity of film on the American revolution, and the compilation fell back heavily on those propagandist shorts made by Warner Brothers from 1939 through 1941. It's interesting to see Fox allowing the use of lengthy clips from "Drums Along the Mohawk" before the film, one of their big 1939 films, was actually in release. So there's an obvious appeal to the film buff to spot all the excerpts used. On another level, it, as a result, functions as a propagandist film. Europe was not yet officially at war when the film was planned, but it soon would be -- and representatives of foreign nations would all have their exhibits at the fair. The film clearly adopts a "Hands Off" stance, re-establishes America's neutrality, but also pushes its military and economic strength as a further warming. deMille's own political stance is not underlined unduly, but it's certainly there, and some of the narration may raise a few eyebrows today. Indians get rather off-hand treatment as the commentary refers to "the white man pushing westward", and America's less admirable excursions - an invasion of Canada at one point, Mexico at another - are hurriedly covered up with a word or two. When the film opened at the fair, it was over two hours long at war when the film was planned, but for its own good as a film, and certainly too long for a fair that wanted rapid turnover so that people could get out and spend money! It initially had a long introductory prologue by a history professor, which was soon edited out, along with earlier, more academic clips, and big chunks from films like "San Francisco" and "In Old Chicago" which were felt to be familiar anyway, and also, being about disasters, perhaps not upbeat enough for the closing portion of the film. The much-edited version also had a limited theatrical release, portions of the income being devoted to charity and British war relief, but exhibitors on the whole were not unduly interested in the film at the time. Most Hollywood companies in 1939 felt it ought to be done to make patriotic documentaries of this type, and may have been of little interest to the Warners. It may have been a helpful way to solidify their almost bootlicking relationship with FDR. As a contrast, and immediately prior to "Land of Liberty", we'll be showing MGM's "You Yankee Doodle Go To Town", which does all in one reel, via a mixture of new footage, stylised tableaux and stock footage, all neatly put together by Jacques Tourneur, on the verge of being promoted from shorts to features.

--- Ten Minute Intermission ---

THE AMAZING MRS HOLIDAY (Universal, 1943) Directed by Jean Renoir and Bruce Manning; Produced by Manning; Associate Producer, Frank Shaw; Screenplay by Frank Ryan and John Jacoby from an original story by Sonja Levison; Camera, Elwood Bredell; Art Director, Jack Otterson; Editor, Ted Kent; 96 min. NY premiere: Rivoli Theatre
With Deanna Durbin (Ruth Kirke); Edmund O'Brien (Tom Holliday); Barry Fitzgerald (Timothy); Arthur Treacher (Henderson); Harry Davenport (Commodore Holliday); Grant Mitchell (Edgar); Frieda Inescort (Karen); Elizabeth Risdon (Louise); Jonathan Hale (Pawlina); Esther Dale (Incy); Gus Schilling (Jeff); Frank Hamilton (Dr. Kirke); and the children, Christopher Severn, Yvonne Severn, Vido Riek, Milo Rick, Teddy Inhurst, Linda Bishop, Diane Dubois, Bill Ward.

As a group, the post-Postermak (e.g. post-31) Durbin's at Universal are generally inferior to the earlier ones, and while we've shown a few of the later better ones, we've always steered clear of this first of the new series, because it is most certainly a lesser Durbin. However, today even lesser Durbin deserve a place on our schedule, and this one is of particular academic and historic interest because of the conditions under which it was made.

The war years, and Deanna's own new maturity, convinced Universal that a change in image was necessary. Joe Postermak and director Henry Koster, who had handled her career from 1936-31 so well, were both now at MGM, and there was no immediate successor at Universal. "The Amazing Mrs Holliday", with a war-oriented background and a slight tendenciness to the risque, was intended to create this new image. Placed in charge was the outstanding French director Jean Renoir, who had just finished "Swamp Water" at Fox, disliked the regimented discipline under which he had to work (although it resulted in a very good film), and wanted...
to work in his own, relaxed, French style. Universal went along with this method, which included sitting around on the grass at Universal, drinking wine, nibbling cheese, and discussing ideas with the cast and writers. Somehow what seemed spontaneous on the grass didn't work on film, and about two months into shooting, it was realised that something was badly wrong. Renoir, not behaving very professionally, withdrew from the film claiming illness (actually he was all set to start "This Land is Mine" at RKO), and producer Bruce Manning, himself a writer (back in the late 20's and early 30's he had teamed with his wife as a mystery writer, "The Ninth Guest" being one of their works to be filmed) took over as producer and writer. (A backup team consisting of Boris Ingster and Leo Townsend, a most unlikely combination for a Durbin vehicle, had also done one of the many screen treatments).

The full story of what happened has been fully documented by Miss Durbin in letters to me that were then transcribed (with her permission) into articles in FILMS IN REVIEW. The first one appeared in the August 1986 issue, and, after some interim correspondence, a second one in October of 1987. This material is all too fascinating for me to try to condense here, (although I'll call some of the key points in the introduction). For those who'd like to read the full story, back issues of "Films in Review" can be obtained by writing the magazine at PO Box 589, NYC 10021.

The gist of Miss Durbin's comments however, boil down to the fact that about two thirds of the film as it now stands was directed by Renoir. This doesn't of course make it a rediscovered masterpiece, but it does mean that there's approximately an hour of unacknowledged Renoir material for students to appraise!

Although the film as it stands is certainly lesser Renoir and lesser Durbin, it is relatively seamless and the salvage work by Manning (not a director himself) is incredible. He had been prepared to junk everything and start afresh had Renoir been willing, a remarkable sacrifice since Durbin was Universal's biggest star and had been off-screen for almost two years. There are scenes and attitudes that one can recognise as Renoir's, and one can also see attempts to change the Durbin image while at the same time not departing too much from the formula that the fans wanted. A lot of the material that would have been handed to Durbin as a younger performer is here, rather oddly, sidetracked to Barry Fitzgerald! And Renoir apparently had little interest in Durbin as a singer, probably putting off any song content until he felt like it. As it is, the songs have to be fitted into a virtually finished film; they're arbitrary and don't flow smoothly. But while all of these shortcomings undoubtedly hurt the film, they also make it a fascinating study piece. It's untidy and overlong, but it's tasteful, often funny, and always at least enjoyable.

Miss Durbin herself feels that she made about six films that should be forgotten, and that of those six, "The Amazing Mrs Holliday" gets the booby-prize. I wouldn't be nearly so harsh -- I'd say that there are at least four Darbys that are weaker. But it's an academic point ... and having spent so long pointing out its problems, chances are it'll play very well with our Durbin-disposed audience!

William K. Everson

Program ends approx.10.50.
(This will probably make it too late for a discussion session, but we'll play it by ear, and possibly allot a few minutes for questions right after the introduction)