D.W. GRIFFITH and the American Revolution

Music arranged and played by STUART ODEMAN

1776 or The Russian Renegades

(American Biograph, 1909)

Directed by D.W. Griffith;
photographed by G.W. Bitzer;
12 mins.

With Mary Pickford, Frank Powell, Owen Moore, Arthur Johnson, Kate Bruce, Bobby Harron, Mack Sennett.

Although "1776" is scarcely as important a blueprint to "America" as "The Battle" was to "The Birth of a Nation", it nevertheless has a basically similar pattern, winding up with a minisoule call to arms by a Paul Revere parallel, and a routing of the Hessians by a band of American patriots. And - a typically Griffithian addition to such climaxes - the saving of a young maiden's honor assumes almost as much importance as saving the vital dispatches that Washington needs so urgently. Even for 1909, the year he gave us "The Lonely Villa" and "A Corner in What", this is in Griffith's style, but the story of a little girl who had been directing for only a year or so, the handling of this story, really lacking only a better sense of cross-cutting and the occasional closeup to heighten a dramatic point or to make more use of Mary Pickford's pert attractiveness. The interior sets, though cramped, are good historical reconstructions, though the New Jersey exteriors, including some landscaping and cement walks, offer a few not too disturbing anachronisms. If the interior dramatics sometimes seem a bit unlikely — for example, the card playing Hessians not noticing the father of the house skulking on the floor behind them — it's because these are night scenes that would originally have been tinted blue, and the lessened visibility would have restored credibility. At this time, the Old West and the Civil War interested Griffith far more, and it was Edison that was to turn around, and in considerable numbers, stories of the American Revolution.

AMERICA (1924)


Just as "The Birth of a Nation" had been of the Civil War, so was "America" an accurate but controversial treatment of the Revolutionary War. The complaints this time accused Griffith of distortion, but for writing of complaints. Most of the historians were from aristocratic Eastern families, and they saw the war as one that was fought almost solely along the Eastern seaboard. To Griffith however, and many military tacticians agreed, the real struggle was in the interior, and was waged over the all-important grain region to the North, John Ford's "Drums Along the Mohawk" took a similar viewpoint.

In general, "America" follows the same pattern as "The Birth of a Nation". Taking contrasting "high born" and "low born" characters, Griffith weaves them into history. The buildup is slow and deliberate; political intrigue, plot and counterplot, until the machinery of war is set in motion, then a cavalcade of spectacular action until the first climax, and the end of the first half of the film is reached. In part two, the process starts all over again, but at a much higher pitch, building to a mighty and typical climax of two battles intercut, and an exciting race to the rescue.

The best of "America" is Griffith's best, but the film as a whole does fall below the standards of "The Birth of a Nation", and is generally second-echelon Griffith. For the first time, Griffith was working from some kind of a screenplay, if not a script, and it may well have hampered him. He admired and respected writer Robert Chambers, and was possibly reluctant to discard too much of what he had written. Also he borrowos to some extent from his own earlier work. Example: the superbly framed shot of Morgan's Raiders riding off into action is an expanded version of an identical shot in his 1911 "Fighting Marines", and the scene in the corridor whereby Hamilton hesitates (shall he rescue his sweetheart from rape and torture by Butler?) is a direct lift of the scene of an impending massacre? is taken bodily from one of Griffith's unpublished plays, "War". Its chief weakness however is the rather protracted love story. There is not necessarily too much of it, but it is often badly placed. The "Romme and Juliet" balcony scene is a charming interlude, but on tends to be impatient with it since it occurs just as D.W. has gotten us all excited in expectations of Paul Revere's ride. However, it should be remembered that this print, the only surviving one, is of the British version. Not only was the film edited substantially before its ultimate American release — and Griffith had a tendency to edit on impulse — but it was edited yet again for the British market. Not only did Griffith not wish to offend the British for obvious commercial

Note: Resa Royce, Mrs. Jesse Von Sternberg, appears as one of the ladies at Walter Butler's hunting lodge, and Major (later General) Wainwright, a hero of Gettysburg, can be seen debasing for Neil Hamilton as he leads the charge at the climax.

Running time: Approx. 2 hours and 20 mins., depending on variable projection speeds.
reasons, but he was also deeply appreciative of the respect they had shown him when he was there to make "Hearts of the World" during the war. Accordingly, for the British release he eliminated the surrender of Cornwallis, and in the re-written version of the film, the newspaper titles to pay tribute to the British government, were actually both sides behaved rather badly in certain areas. Be refer to it an anachronist rather than a defeat, and so on! So probably some of the disjointed editing may result from these cuts. However, there is no excuse for the bad grammar and even inaccurate spelling of some of the titles, which look like first drafts badly in need of polishing. Incidentally one sequence expected and not cut (because it was never filmed) is of Washington crossing the Delaware. Griffith planned such a sequence, but Hearst, making his own Revolutionary War film "Janice Meredith," wanted to use a night shot of his film. So a deal was struck — Griffith didn't film the sequence, and in return the Hearst papers got behind the lines of some of the glamorous props and weaponry from the war, and the number of troops involved in each battle are duplicated to a man. For a more detailed coverage of this aspect of "America," we refer you again to an excellent article by George Mitchell in the October issue of "American Cinematographer." (We hope some of you obtained it in advance, as we urged a few programs back).

The print, by the way, was made some thirty five years ago, probably the very last one struck from the original negative. We'll say a little about this, and its shortcomings, in the introductory comments.

And too, some of the...