ASPECTS OF THE DEPRESSION

GOLDEN HARVEST (Paramount, 1933) Directed by Ralph Murphy; Screenplay by Casey Robinson from a story by Nina Wilcox Putnam; Camera, Milton Krasner; 71 mins.


Like many films of the depression, "Golden Harvest" uses a romantic melodrama as a framework for a serious study of depression era problems, in this case, relationships between farmers and big business. Also like many such films, it is aware that it is an entertainment first and a "message" picture second, and takes a fairly long time to establish the former before attacking the second. In a fairly short film, this means that the solution, while dramatic, is a shade too sudden, a shade too facile, and in this particular case, decidedly optimistic (as was King Vidor's "Our Daily Bread", likewise dealing with farming problems). Nevertheless, it is commendable that it was made at all, and audiences doubtless felt grateful that their problems were being acknowledged, while big city audiences probably learned something from it. Richard Arlen and Chester Morris, later teamed in a series of action "B" pictures at Paramount in the 40's, are here teamed more seriously, though their screen personas are such that their roles do somewhat anticipate their relationship in such later films as "Wrecking Crew". The supporting cast is a strong one, and I apologize for not having the full character-name cast list.

I was out of town until just a few hours before these notes had to be written, and was surprised to find that the film had no NY first run, hence no cast printed in the NY Times, and there was no time to re-screen the print and note the various names. Up to Henry Kolker in the list of players above, the roles are relatively important. The others are unbillable bit and extra players, Frank LaRue playing a waiter, Morgan Wallace a stock market spokesman, and so forth. Typical Paramount ingredients include the zoom lens then forced on every Paramount cinematographer (though directors kept their use to a minimum) and the inevitable re-use of "Love Me Tonight" musical themes. Interestingly, we start this series as we finish it, with a little-known film directed by Ralph Murphy, and the rarely seen Julie Hayden in both of tonight's films.

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

THE CONQUERORS (Rko Radio, 1932; retitled "The Pioneer Builders" for TV to avoid confusion with the later John Wayne film); Directed by William Wellman; produced by David O. Selznick; Story and screenplay, Howard Estabrook and Robert Lord; montages by Slavko Vorkapich; Camera, Edward Cronjager; 84 mins. NY premiere, Mayfair Theatre, November 1932.

Music: Max Steiner

With: Richard Dix (Roger Standish); Ann Harding (Caroline Standish); Edna May Oliver (Matilda Blake); Guy Kibbee (Dr. Daniel Blake); Julie Hayden (Frances Standish); Donald Cook (Warren Lenoxx); Harry Holman (Stubby); Richard Gallagher (Enson); Walter Walker (Mr. Ogden); Elizabeth Patterson (Landady); Jed Prouty (auctioneer); Robert Grieg (Doubling); Henry Rocquemore (Drummond); Luis Alberni (agitator) J. Carroll Nash (agitator), Wally Albright, Marilyn Knowlton (Standish children)

Creating optimism for the health of the banking industry, and reassuring depositors of the integrity of bankers, became almost a Hollywood sub-genre in the depression. Of course, Hollywood needed the banks for its own financing, so its motives in creating films like this, "American Madness" and "One More Spring" were not altogether altruistic, though they did allow Will Rogers to get in a few anti-bank bars in "Our Day". The "Conquerors" uses the epic western framework as a way to tell of the positive influence of banks in the old West and to suggest that since banks overcame the big crash of 1892 they'll be able to do it again in 1932. Written by Howard Estabrook who also did the screenplay for "Chacron", the film inevitably invites comparison with that film, though it is a much cheaper one. Fairly slow-moving (after all, it is not an action western) it does come to life with bursts of savage action, including a grim lynching scene that is far stronger than the one in Wellman's later "The Ox Bow Incident". (One also suspects that Wellman dragged in the involvement of Will Rogers to "Lafayette Escadrille"! The performances tend to be either too stolid or too over-the-top (paricularly in using Kibbee and Oliver for comedy relief), and Dix gets less effective as he ages in the film. He winds up with makeup that makes him look like character actor Warner Richmond, and sound like Chic Sale. It's an uneven film, but one that is perhaps more interesting out of context, seen nearly 60 years later as a depression offshoot. Its highlights (apart from the rare sight of Edna May Oliver in a bathtub scene) are the five or six stunning montages by Slavko Vorkapich, usually depicting financial peaks or valleys. A sense of date and history is also nicely maintained by such supplementary scenes as a visit to an early movie theatre.

-----William K. Everson

Program ends 10:24; discussion/question session follows.