BUCK BENNY RIDES AGAIN (Paramount 1939, rel. 1940) Produced and directed by Mark Sandrich; Screenplay by William Morrow and Edmund Beloin, from an adaptation by ZIon Myers of an original story by Arthur Stringer; Camera, Charles Lang and Victor Milner; Musical Direction, Charles Anderson and Victor Young; songs by Frank Loesser and Jimmy McHugh; NY premiere: Paramount Theatre, April 14. With: Jack Benny (Jack Benny); Ellen Drew (Joan Cameron); Eddie Anderson (Rochester); Phil Harris (Phil Harris); Dennis Day (Dennis); Virginia Dale (Virginia); Lillian Cornell (Peggy); Theresa Harris (Josephine); Kay Lunaker (Brenda Tracy); Andy Devine (Andy); Ward Bond, Morris Ankrum (outlaws); Charles Lane (Charlie Graham); Billy Fletcher (porter); Eddie Chandler, Dick Rich (cowhands); Willie Fung (cook); Ed Gargan (cop); Eddie Acuff (truck driver); Jean de Brag (head waiter); Herge Deering (police officer); Leyland Hodgson (waiter); George Melford (steward); Ethel Roosevelt (engineer); Archie Twitchell (attendant); Don Wilson (Announcer); and the Maribel Abbott Dancers.

Jack Benny’s most elaborate vehicle to date, it was also his biggest movie success, racking up the theatre’s best-ever grosses in its first day. (Gene Krupa headed the stage show, and Benny also made an appearance.) Made in late 1939, it was one more attempt to climb aboard the Western bandwagon that had begun earlier that year with “Let Freedom Ring”, “Stagecoach”, “Dodge City” and “Man of Conquest”. At the time it disappointed a little; it didn’t seem as funny as Benny’s radio shows, and also as a Western satire or burlesque, it followed the usual pattern of putting the lead combo through his accustomed paces against a Western background, but without any real satire of the genre evolving. Today one tends to regard it rather differently, primarily as a sprightly, slick and glossy musical comedy. It has the added nostalgic (and historic) value of recreating the spirit, feel and (probably) look of Benny’s radio shows, this latter helped by the fact that the screenplay was written by Benny’s key radio writers. Finally, there’s the bonus of Rochester, given a great deal to do and doing it well, especially one virtually show-stopping number. It may not be top-notch Benny - but then the best Benny films (“To Be Or Not To Be” and, arguably, “George Washington Slept Here”) weren’t exactly typical Benny films. In any event, it’s fast, foolish and certainly a film one can enjoy on many levels.

TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION

FRONTIER GAL (Universal, 1945) Directed by Charles Lamont; Written and produced by Michael Fessier and Ernest Pagano; Camera (Technicolor): George Robinson, Charles F. Royle, with special effects by John Fulton; Music, Frank Skinner; 86 mins; NY premiere, Loew’s Criterion, December 13, 1945. With: Femme Adam, (Catherine DuMont); Rod Cameron (Johnny Hart); Andy Devine (Big Ben); Funny Kline (Phil); Sidney Blackmer (Lakota); Andrew Rosents (Judge Prescott); Beverly Simmons (Mary Lamp); Clara Shimard (Abigail); Frank Locklear (Cherokees); Dunn (Deputy); William Desmond (saloon onlooker); Dan Milby (Johnny’s fiancée); Jack O’Meara (henchman) and Claire Carleton, Harold Goodwin.

"Frontier Gal" was originally intended as a vehicle for Maria Montez, who had jumped from minor roles in Johnny Mack Brown westerns and other Universal “B’s” to become one of their biggest stars via the Arabian Nights Technicolor series. But she balked at returning to Westerns, even a big one, and refused to do it. Probably to her advantage and Universal’s, Universal neither pleaded nor gave in, but merely gave the role to Yvonne de Carlo! The film is also one of the better ones from the writer/producer team of Ernest Pagano and Michael Fessier, who had brought freshness and charm to "San Diego I Love You" just the year before. Unfortunately their success caused them to concentrate on novelty almost for its own sake, and to use repeat/running gags almost to a point of irritation. Regrettably their hayday was a short one. Especially at Universal since 1939, where "Destry Rides Again" had been a big hit, there had been a tendency towards more sex and broader comedy in the Western, while their 1940 "Trail of the Vigilantes" had combined satire, burlesque and action with ensemble comedy playing. "Frontier Gal" has elements of both films, and in addition is virtually a screwball comedy, a kind of "The Awful Truth" of the great outdoors. Ever since Joel McCrea had talked about "Topim A" in "The Palm Beach Story", comedies had contained more teasing, comical suspense sequences aimed at getting warring protagonists into bed before the fadeout. This wasn’t the delicate Production Code problem that it might have been, since in most cases boy and girl were already married. But in "Frontier Gal" the situation is taken to an almost tasteless extreme; the two sequences of cornball passion, though "legal", amount to rape. Not only is it supposed to be funny, but it presents as acceptable behaviour that which had been unthinkable for a Western hero since some of the gutter silents. It was this material that caused the film to be retitled "The Bride of "Willie" in England, perhaps to make more titillating and to justify the "Adult" rating slapped on it by the British censors, and partly to sell it as something other than a Western, of which there was something of a glut on the market at the time. But while the film invades Screwball territory, it is still essentially a Western, albeit a tongue in cheek one. (Easley Crowther in the NY Times either didn’t understand this or had no sense of humor; he gave it a terrible review!) It is full of action, all slammed over with a gusto one doesn’t normally find outside of the "M" Western. From which star Rod Cameron had just been promoted, is nicely photographed in Technicolor (slightly faded in this print, but with a consistencies that is still very pleasing) and has a bang-up literally cliff-hanging climax. Incidentally, the fight scenes are fast and Newmanic and include a lot of the "dirty" combat techniques imported from the war and private eye films of the same period. Youngsters must have had their eyebrows raised, and their illusions shaken, quite regularly during the course of "Frontier Gal".

---William K. Everson---

PROGRAM ENDS APP. 10:30. DISCUSSION FollowS.