And in these days of marathon length movies (comedies included) what joy to see again a film that zips and crackles along with no let-up in the pace. Occasionally it fades you; romantic music, a long shot of March and Lombard sailing, a misleadingly conventional line, and you feel that the unavoidable lapse into cliche romantica is at hand. But no -- March returns Lombard's straight line with a bitting little speech about the dangers of elderly waitresses, and we're off again!

(“Nothing Sacred” later saw service as a Broadway musical, "Hazel Flagg", which in its turn was transformed into a vehicle for Jerry Lewis). 

THE BANK DICK

1940 (Sound) Universal
Director: Edward Cline; screenplay:Mahatma Kane Jeeves (Fields); cameras; Milton Krasner; 8 reels.

To those of us who had been enjoying comedies all through the thirties, the fortes seemed (at the time -- though no more, alas!) singularly barren. The best individual comedies seemed to be remakes -- Hawks' "His Girl Friday", Wellman's "Roxie Hart". Laurel and Hardy were on the way out; the Marx Brothers were still amusing, but the magic was waning. Abbott and Costello were only spasmodically acceptable substitutes. And for the rest, there was a string of polite, sophisticated comedies ("My Favorite Wife", "My Two Husbands") all of which seemed to star Cary Grant or Melvyn Douglas, depending on whether they were made by RKO or Columbia.

Paramount and Universal offered the only real cases, cert inly the only ones with belly laughs along with the polite chuckles -- Paramount with the Preston Sturges films, and Universal with the four W. C. Fields vehicles -- "You Can't Cheat an Honest Man", "My Little Chickadee", "Never Give a Sucker an Even Break" and the "The Bank Dick". "The Bank Dick" is far and away the best of these, and the only one to make no concessions whatsoever for another star, songs, or romantic sub-plots, it's sheer unadulterated Fields all the way; offered neat without a chaser, and yet for all that with a certain discipline that the others lacked. One wonders at a comparatively small and dollar-conscious studio like Universal extending to Fields the freedom that they had once extended to Von Stroheim. Even without Austrian armes and bordello sets, a man with his imagination and dislike of authority could well have wrecked their economy. Just how this miracle came to be we may never know; we can only be thankful that it did.

With fine self-assurance, Fields and Cline have here turned out a superbly organised piece of chaos; an apparently ad-lib film that is far too neatly put together to be as casual as it seems. There is little plot; a preposterous plethora of characters, most of them chisellers or shrews or half-wits. The only cohesion is Fields himself, systematically bumbling through the film with and invisible list in his hand, delivering himself of all his pet hates and foibles, ranging from children to bank clerks, and roaming in and out of impossible (and near surrealistic) conversations with a logic that makes you feel that perhaps you missed a point somewhere, because he almost makes sense. There's a fine slapstick chase at the end -- less mechanically elaborate than the chase in "Never Give a Sucker an Even Break", but full of great old sight gags nonetheless, many of them of direct Sennett derivation. But even after the wildest bit of knockabout, Fields managed to produce a topper with a weak grin and some irrelevant comment. But -- why talk about "The Bank Dick" at all? Most of you are undoubtedly seeing it for the tenth time, and will probably know the film too well to want to risk reading these notes and being angered by finding it under-rated. And if, after twenty one years, you're finally seeing this film for the first time tonight then your filmic education is so woefully wanting that a mere page of notes is not likely to be of much benefit.

WILLIAM K. EVERSON
1937 (Sound) United Artists
Producer: David O. Selznick; director: William Wellman;
screenplay by Ben Hecht from a story by James A. Street;
photographed by W. Howard Greene; edited by Hal Kern.
(Photographed in Technicolor; this print in Cinemascope)
8 reels.
Cast: Carole Lombard, Fredric March, Walter Connolly,
Charles Winninger, Frank Fay, Sig Ruman, Mae Clarke,
Rosemary de Camp, Allen Fingle, Margaret Hamilton, Troy
Brown, Redd Hopper, John Qualen, Olin Howland,
Art Lakey, George Chandler, Leonid Kinskey, Vera
Levis, Monty Woolley.

Over the past twenty years there has been a tendency to lump together
all the great comedies of the thirties under the collective heading of
"crazy, screwball farce". Actually, with certain honorable exceptions, the
craziness seldom strayed much further than the nearest Marx Brothers set.
The great comedies of 1932 through 1937 -- from "Trouble in Paradise",
"Blessed Event", "Twentieth Century" and "Bombshell" through to "My Man
Godfrey" and "Nothing Sacred" had far more important common denominators
than mere lunacy. Firstly, they were all satires, and contemporary
satires to boot; and secondly, whether their approach was gentle or
savage, it was an approach without any inhibitions whatsoever. The movies,
not quite so free as they had been in the twenties, were still free enough not to care who they offended, or what sacred cows they
ridiculed.

Today's adult (quote) mature (quote) movies fall over themselves to
prove how grownup (and how unentertaining) they can be by thrusting
words like "rape" and "pregnant" and "hell" at us. But not one of them
dares use a word or a line or a situation that might offend a minority
group -- or for that matter, a majority group either. Between the
NAACP and the Legion of Decency, it's a marvel that our current
comedies have any bite at all -- and of course, most of them don't.
I'm not suggesting that "Nothing Sacred" is a great comedy because
Fredric March at one point refers to a Negro janitor as "Old Black
Joe", any more than "20th Century" depended on its humor on
Barrymore's repeated references to "Uncle Remus". But it's difficult
to be honestly offended when the same film offers lines or situations
intended to deflate the President, the Governor of New York, the
Communists, Girl Scouts, Wrestlers, German doctors, Newspapermen in
general, Swedes and God -- not necessarily in that order. The
movies in the 20's and 30's had a wonderful capacity to laugh not
only at themselves, but at everybody and everything, whether the
issue at hand be politics, religion, race, sex or what have you.
The movies -- and their audiences -- are the sadder for the lack of
that same capacity today.

"Nothing Sacred" is still one of the best films of its genre on all
counts. Ben Hecht's often deliberate pretentiousness is admirably
suited to the story, and few of his scripts have had more bite.
There are few traditional wisecracks; unlike Marx Brothers gags,
there are no lines that would still seem funny repeated out of
context. The best lines are almost straight, made hilariously funny
by their context and their delivery. The cast could hardly be bettered --
especially Fredric March in the earlier sequences, employing for comic
effect the phoney sincerity that Glen Ford now uses as his serious
stock in trade, Frank Fay, capturing perfectly the nauseous yet somehow
engaging sham of the bleeding-heart performer, and Walter Connolly,
such a tower of strength in so many comedies of the 30's. Carole
Lombard, as the pivot around which the comedy revolves, has surprisingly
little opportunity to be funny herself, but throws away some choice
lines with magnificent abandon.

Copyright 1961 by The New Yorker Film Society Inc. No part of these notes
may be reproduced without the written consent of the New Yorker Film Society.