

SILENT WESTERNS: 1922-27 Piano accompaniment arranged & played by STUART ODERMAN

RIDERS OF THE LAW (Sunset Productions, 1922) Written and directed by Robert N. Bradbury; Produced by Anthony J. Xydias; Camera, Bert Longenecker; Asst. Dir: Jack Pierce; 60 mins With: Jack Hoxie (Jack Meadows); Marin Sais (Barbara); Tom Lingham (Sheriff Layne); Pat Harmon (Dan Sile); Jack Pierce (Pete).

Anthony J. Xydias specialised in six or seven reel westerns with epic sounding titles (With Sitting Bull at the Spirit Lake Massacre) which had some slightly above average star names for small westerns, good photography and locations, but which were essentially cheaters in that they usually managed to minimise (or keep off screen entirely!) the spectacle promised in the title. More satisfactory in the long run were the more traditional series westerns, of which this Jack Hoxie film is very typical. Its economy still shows: there are too many routine and unnecessary titles to eat up footage, ditto some very unfunny comedy relief sequences, and padding at the end via explanatory wrap-up material. The cast is minor, apart from Hoxie, and Marin Sais already looks a bit long in the tooth to be playing the heroine; she was far more effective in the 40's in character work. But it's an excellently photographed film, against often stunning scenic backgrounds, and this print from the original negative shows how good these little films could look. Jack Hoxie's entrance is delayed until reel two, but then he's kept in enough action to keep his fans happy. Following this series, he became a major Western star at Universal, so popular that these smaller Xydias westerns were reissued in the late 20's to-cash in on him. The sets are either genuine buildings or rather cheeseey mock-ups (especially the town jail), but details like that rarely bothered Hoxie fans. Director Robert Bradbury was western star Bob Steele's father, and had an extraordinary father fixation himself. Almost all of the Westerns he wrote dealt with the hero's search for his lost father, or his search for his father's killer. There's a father-fixation subplot in this one too, but a little different from the norm. Because these independent westerns got relatively little play, the negatives remained in excellent shape and most surviving prints from them are first class.

-- FIVE MINUTE INTERMISSION --

THE NIGHT HORSEMEN (Fox, 1921) Written and directed by Lynn Reynolds; Based on a novel by Max Brand; Camera, Ben Kline. 60 mins app. With Tom Mix (Whistling Dan); May Hopkins (Kate Cumberland); Harry Lonsdale (Old Joe Cumberland) Joseph Bennett (Dr. Byrne); Sid Jordan (Buck Daniels); Bert Sprotte (Mac Strann); Cap Anderson (Jerry Strann); Lon Poff (Haw Haw); Charles K. French (Marshal)

Based on a novel by Max Brand, The Night Horsemen is a sequel to Mix's 1920 movie The Untamed, itself based on a current Brand novel. The two films could fit together seamlessly as one, even more so than the two Zane Grey novel/movies Riders of the Purple Sage and The Rainbow Trail. Made early enough in Mix's career that he was still partially influenced by William S. Hart, this is a more serious and moody Mix than would soon be the norm. People get hurt, revenge is a common motive on both sides, and the sense of light fun is definitely played down. However, there is some fine rough riding and enough action to keep everybody quite happy. The print, though fully complete, is one of the new "preservation" copies, and tends to be rather soft and light; what a pity that we can't see the Mix films in the same pristine condition as the Hoxies!

-- FIVE MINUTE INTERMISSION --

NO MAN'S LAW (Hal Roach-Pathe, 1927) Directed by Fred Jackman; Scenario by Frank Butler from a story by F. Richard Jones; Camera, Floyd Jackman, George Stevens; Production Supervisor, F. Richard Jones; 60 mins app. (Produced under the title No Man's Land). With Rex The Horse; Barbara Kent (Toby Belcher); James Finlayson (Jack Belcher); Oliver Hardy (Sharkey Nye); Theodore von Eltz (Spider O'Day)

Until this film came along, Ken Maynard and to a lesser degree Jack Perrin stole most of the honors for bizarre plotting in smaller westerns, but this one has them both beaten to a frazzle. Rex's wild horse westerns for Hal Roach had been profitable and, in the case of The Devil Horse, both elaborate and superior. But he was a surly beast, hard to handle, and here he has little to do but run, look picturesque and be more of a menace than a friend to man. Presumably in order to cut costs and use contract players, Roach cast James Finlayson as the girl's father and Oliver Hardy as the rapist-murderer villain, but apparently did not tell them they were not in a comedy. Both perform as per usual, albeit Hardy with an eye patch and much stubble. When he should be terror-stricken, Finlayson can't resist his usual pep-eyed squint, and he even gets the closeup in the fadeout. Hardy, after watching pretty Barbara Kent in an unusually prolonged nude bathing scene, never stops being lecherous, murderous and violent, and never starts to be convincing - though as you will see, it is hardly his fault. Even the menace has the exaggerated violence of a Laurel & Hardy, as when Hardy carts Fin up into the mountains in a wheelbarrow to toss him to his death! One fight scene is surprisingly savage, and the rather abrupt climax leaves one wondering how the survivors can survive. The print is a good original, although the lab timing is a little off, and sometimes it's a shade on the dark side. However, you won't believe it even after you've seen it, so the print quality is hardly critical, although its inconsistency downplays some of George Stevens' excellent camerawork.

----- Wm. K. Everson --

Program should finish at approx. 10.50, depending on ultimate running times as we will be fluctuating projection speeds. There will be no time for a question/discussion session tonight, but I will try to anticipate questions in the introductory talk, and can also take any key questions (possibly about the Fall series) then. Have a good Summer!

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