

HOLLYWOOD'S ADOLESCENCE

Thirty years ago moving pictures were still self-conscious, but they were beginning to develop smartness

By Richard G. Hubler

LOS ANGELES and its environs were crowded with new motion picture companies. The American Film Company, the Vitagraph Company, the Universal Company, Christie Comedies, and Selig found competitors springing up like weeds after rain: the demand for "flickers" was enjoying its first boom.



THE 2000 theaters that showed motion pictures charged nickels and dimes. Most of them were reconverted grocery stores. Musical accompaniment was supplied by a lone pianist. Dialogue was offered in subtitles or in monologues by the theater manager. Insurance was hard to come by because of the inflammable film and the rickety theaters.



TWO-REELERS about the Civil and Spanish-American Wars, commenced to be the fashion. To save time and wear and tear on the meager wardrobe stocks, the big battle scenes were shot all-Union one day and all-Confederate the next. The scenes were intercut with each other. In the Civil War, to preserve the market in both the South and North, the retreats

and advances of both sides were mathematically divided.



CENSORSHIP raised its ugly head for the first time. In Chicago, the police demanded that the guns in the hands of the villain's henchmen on the billboards be deleted. The problem was solved by pasting flowers over the six-shooters. Instead of holding up the stage-driver, the grim masked men extended bouquets to him.



NATURALISM was in demand. In one Western a live rattlesnake was used. The director picked it up to look at it; the snake sank its fangs into his bulbous nose. Nobody was sure whether the poison sacs of the reptile had been removed. So the director got roaring drunk. The next day he had a formidable hangover. The snake died.



ONE large film company had only one really convincing false beard. Moreover, they had only one actor who looked genuine in it. In their war features they used him for both General Robert E. Lee and General Ulysses S. Grant. At Appomattox, the surrender was shot in alternate scenes with the same actor in different hats. This was the first crude instance of an actor doubling in motion pictures.



KERRIGAN, a durable Universal hero, once fled a horseback from a squad of the enemy. He fired back at them. No one fell. "Bad," admonished the director. He reminded the actors of the extra dollar they paid stunt men. On the next take, Kerrigan fired and all eight pursuers toppled. One of them was Hal Roach, later producer of the famous Roach comedies.



GOOD sets were expensive and hard to get. One company hired a magnificent Los Angeles country residence to use for the facade of a Southern plantation. In the midst of the scene on schedule, the cavalry arrived in rescue. Fifty strong, they trampled over the meticulous lawn and prize flower beds. Carried away by their work, they rode up the steps and into the front hall. For a while that ended the hiring of private residences.



ESTABLISHMENT of locale was easy. The director would simply post a sign: "One Mile to Manila" and follow a man in a straw hat and an ice-cream suit down the road.



COMPLAINTS came in on one picture called *The Blue and the Gray*. It seemed that neither the North nor the South wanted to be

portrayed as the villains of the piece. The solution was easy. Somebody discovered the fact that there had been guerillas during the Civil War. It was the greatest discovery since Edison: thenceforward, all nasty men were guerillas.



ANYBODY near the scene was pressed into service as an extra. One director needed a woman to say good-by to a soldier. His mother was visiting the set. The director pushed her behind a tree, got her to change into a gingham dress, and shot the farewell. Months later, his father—a traveling man—dropped into a theater in Wyoming. In the middle of the “epic” he saw his wife kissing a strange man good-by. He leaped up, raging at the screen, and was hauled to the police station. He was released after explanations, but he wrote his director-son an angry letter accusing him of leading his mother astray.



SUBJECTS of the motion pictures began to become ponderous. D. W. Griffith and Allan Dwan, the two foremost directors of the time, together with one only a little less known, Cecil B. DeMille, put “spectacles” on the screen. Dwan did *Moonlight Sonata*, in which the Beethoven composition was played flawlessly but not a note

heard. He also did a drama about Richelieu, the French cardinal. During the latter, a property man, a big gruff fellow, kept annoying Dwan. He popped up at odd times with horrible false teeth and beards and eyelashes—obviously a disappointed actor. Dwan finally told him: "Go on, rig yourself up and get in there." The fellow appeared in the most bizarre get-up the director had ever seen. His name was Lon Chaney.



MOTION picture making was assuming its own peculiar nouveau riche dignity. More reels were shot on interior stages with the new mercury arc banks of lights. No scene was shot without an orchestra playing, "to get the actors in the mood." But space at such studios as Universal was so cramped that sets were built less than six inches apart. A director doing a tear-jerker drama might be playing *Hearts and Flowers*, while on one side of him Al Christie would be doing a comedy and playing ragtime, and on the other Robert Z. Leonard (now of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer) would be having his orchestra play a schottische for a foreign portrayal. It was bedlam confounded, but the results were effective on the screen.



EVEN cameramen had temperament. Their stock excuse for quit-

ting was: "The light is getting yellow." Only cameramen could detect this quality in the sunlight so it always worked. Yellow light invariably spoiled negatives, but more than one director noticed that it set in just in time for his cameraman to get to the races.



SINCE a rival company had just completed a three-reel picture, Universal decided to do the stupendous thing. They issued orders to make a *four-reeler*, but on the safe subject of the Spanish-American War. The director shot it in eight days—a long schedule. Universal, then in financial straits, tucked away the negative which represented its financial rehabilitation.

That night the studio was razed by a huge fire—and the negative was burned. The director summoned his cast and cameraman and shot the whole affair in a single day—from eight in the morning to five at night.



A NOT uncommon bonus for meritorious actions was a white enamel Simplex car, capable of 120 miles an hour. It was the custom to surround this monster with a solid bumper of railroad iron. A pastime acceptable to the motion picture colony, but looked

upon with disfavor by the police and citizenry, was driving this creation into streetcars.



THE motion picture writer began to come into his own—as the “titler.” Griffith invented his famous *Came The Dawn*. Ralph Spence was possibly the most famous of these terse word artists. He was able to change the whole meaning of a picture, insert comedy or tragedy, simply by adroit one-line titles.



IN 1915, D. W. Griffith issued his epochal *The Birth of a Nation*. It marked the end of motion picture puberty. It introduced the screen as an art. It demonstrated that long pictures were feasible, high box-office prices obtainable, and that the camera was a medium that owed nothing to any other source.

In a word, “class” had come to Hollywood. The motion picture industry was never to be the care-free jerry-producing business it had been.