

ROBYN'S NEST



by Robyn-Denise Berryhill

Note: This column begins part one of a three-part series entitled "Where Was I on Saturday Afternoon: Stereotyped Images of Blacks on the Screen from Past to Present."

Part I: Identifying the Images

During my childhood, Saturday afternoon at the movies became enshrined as an all-American tradition along with baseball, apple pie and hot-dogs. Today however, though Saturday afternoons still come and go, movies aren't the same pastime they once were. During the time when they were the one weekend event I could count on, I was provided with a lot of enjoyment and also a lot of puzzlement. I would sometimes sit through the same movie over and over again and imagine myself in the part of the heroine. Still I wondered why the leading lady was never black and why blacks couldn't play the same roles as whites did. It occurred to me that whenever blacks were given a role in a movie they were given the same type of part over and over again. No one seemed to recognize any diversity in the

black lifestyle and the same themes always seemed to pop up.

Recently CBS aired a drama entitled "Minstrel Man." It dealt with the hardships and prejudices blacks had to contend with in order to be entertainers. Although it told the story of only a few, what was said was painfully true. During slavery, blacks were forced to sing and dance for the enjoyment of their masters. No doubt, there were some who probably longed to make it in show business, but they were given almost no opportunity to display their talents. With the end of slavery and — for the South — the beginning of poverty, many blacks indeed were forced to "sing for their supper." They would travel from town to town with this street-corner type of entertainment, and people passing by would throw money at them. Whites took notice of this and began to belittle and mock blacks by doing an imitation of them. They would smear black make-up on their faces and enlarge their lips with white paint. These were the beginnings of what came to be known as minstrel shows. When blacks started to get into the act,

they were not welcome unless they darkened their skins even more with the same coal-type make-up. Whether or not they consented to this, they still had to pattern themselves in a manner that belittled them. Unfortunately, this set the precedent for some stereotyped images of blacks that still continue somewhat today.

The art of making movies began early in this century. It was soon to outdistance minstrel shows and, later on, vaudeville because of the mass of people that could be reached and because the entertainment could be replayed instantly on the spot. Movies too were guilty of subjecting blacks to ridicule. Another vehicle had been found for amusement, and blacks became one of the favorite playthings. The roles designed for them in movies came in the form of five types of characters. **Donald Bogle** refers to them in his book of the same name as "Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks."

"Tom" first appeared in a twelve-minute version of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" in 1903.

The picture was made by a

mechanic turned movie director named Edwin S. Porter. This was the first black character to be viewed in movies although in actuality it was a chubby white actor in blackface. This "Tom" was only the first in a long line of acceptable Negro characters. Toms are always chased, insulted, harassed and even whipped, but throughout it all they remain docile, passive and fearlessly loyal to their masters. They are directly geared to white audiences and in the end emerge as heroes of sorts. Two other versions of Toms appeared in the pictures "Confederate Spy" (1910) and "For Massa's Sake" (1911). In "Confederate Spy," a character known as Uncle Daniel dies before a firing squad happy because he "did it for little massa and big massa." In "For Massa's Sake," a former slave is so distraught over his master's financial woes that he sells himself back into slavery.

In 1927, Universal Studios released still another version of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" and became the first producers to use a real black in the role. It starred the leading black actor of the time, **James B. Lowe**. The director of

the film **Harry Pollard** had himself played Tom in blackface in a version done twelve years earlier. Congratulating itself on liberalism for hiring Lowe to "fill the realistic demands of the times," Universal issued the following press release on its new colored star:

"James B. Lowe has made history, a history that reflects credit only to the Negro race, not only because he has given the "Uncle Tom" character a new slant but because of his exemplary conduct with the Universal company. They look upon Lowe at the Universal studio as a living black god . . . Of the directors who have seen James Lowe work at the studio there are none who would not say that he is the most suited of all men for the part of Tom. Those who are religious say that a heavenly power brought him to Universal and all predict a most marvelous future and worldwide reputation for James B. Lowe."

Although a "heavenly power" may have brought Lowe to Universal it did little to alter his interpretation of the Tom character. But so pleased were audiences and Universal with Lowe's work that they sent him on a European promotional tour for the picture. He became the first black actor ever to accomplish this, and the film contained a massive baptism scene which later became a Hollywood favorite, proof that all blacks had wicked souls and nothing short of baptism would save them. In 1958 this version of Uncle Tom's Cabin was reissued. Because it had originally been made as a silent film, a voice track featuring **Raymond Massey** was dubbed in. Because it arrived just when sit-ins were erupting in the South, many wondered if by reissuing this film Universal sought to remind blacks of the period when obeying masters every wish was a solution to black problems. But for whatever reason, the re-issuance was withdrawn.

The only other character type that was to give "Tom" any kind of serious competition was the coon. Coons are generally viewed as senseless, amusing, happy-go-lucky creations. They lack Tom's down-home wit and single-mindedness. Generally there was the pure coon and two variations of his type: the pickaninny and the Uncle Remus.

The pickaninny was the first type to make its debut on the screen. It gave the black child actor his place in films. Generally this type of coon was harmless. His eyes popped and his hair stood on end when he was frightened and his antics were always laughed at. **Thomas A. Edison** was the pioneer of pickaninny films when he produced "Ten Pickaninies" in 1904. This pilot proved to be a forerunner of the "Our Gang" television series minus the white children. In this movie, the children are referred to as snowballs, inky kids, chubby ebones and bad 'chillun.' In later times they would be replaced with names like Stymie, Farina and Buckwheat.

Another type of coon was featured in a series of movies revolved around a character named Rastus. The first of this series was a flick entitled "How Rastus Got His Turkey." Here Rastus tries to steal a turkey for his Thanksgiving dinner. After this came "Rastus in Zululand" about a darky who dreams of going to Zululand in Africa. Once he gets there he wins the affection of the chief's daughter. He is willing to flirt with and seduce the girl but when a marriage commitment is asked of him he refuses in "typical no-account nigger fashion" expressing a desire for death rather than matrimony. The savage African

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