

HERESY HUNT IN HOLLYWOOD

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the fight; Louis B. Mayer commanded the Hollywood sector. Up rose the despairing cry, "If Sinclair is elected, we shall be forced to move the entire film industry out of California," though (as Rosten records) the threat to leave California was followed by the construction of costly new sound stages—in California!

Even more sinister was a campaign fund of half-a-million dollars for Merriam which the Hollywood executives raised—partly by assessing their high-salaried employees for a contribution of one day's salary each! This was, of course, not put in the form of a crude demand. It was a "request"—but a request accompanied by delicacies of pressure and persuasion which made it plain that refusals would be inexpedient. Some stars and writers did stand out, but according to Rosten most of them paid one day's salary into the Republican campaign-chest.

BUT the main barrage in the anti-Sinclair, anti-New Deal campaign was provided by a series of "fabricated newsreels of appalling crudity and immense effectiveness." Motion-pictures were taken of a "horde of disreputable vagrants in the act of crossing the 'California border'" in order to dispossess the respectable and God-fearing citizens the moment Sinclair was elected. These movies were made on the streets of Los Angeles with cameras supplied by a major studio; the "anarchists" were actors on studio payrolls, dressed in false whiskers and dirty clothes and wearing sinister expressions. Other "newsreels," slightly more subtle, but equally effective, were noted by the *New York Times* as consisting of "interviews," in one of which a white-haired old woman in a rocking chair signified her intention of voting for Merriam lest she be dispossessed of "her little home, all she had left in this world"; while in the companion reel a "shaggy man with bristling Russian whiskers and a menacing look in his eye" went on record as intending to vote for "Seenclair, because his system vorked vell in Russia, so vy can't it vork here?"

These "newsreels" were distributed free to theatre-owners and splashed over the screens of every city in the state. (Incidentally, says Rosten, the same sort of thing happens whenever the question of daylight-saving for California becomes a political issue; the Californian movie houses show short "scare" films, because daylight-saving would give people more time in the evening for outdoor recreation, and would therefore reduce movie attendances!)

Simultaneously with the release of the anti-Sinclair films, the *Los Angeles Evening Herald and Express*, a Hearst newspaper, carried a large picture of a terrifying mob of young hoboes in front of a freight car apparently arriving in Los Angeles to launch the Upton Sinclair Revolution. Unfortunately, these members of the vanguard of the Red Terror were easily recognisable as Frankie Darrow, Dorothy Wilson, and other reasonably familiar

screen players. The picture itself was a still photograph from a film called *Wild Boys of the Road*.

[It is, perhaps, unnecessary to add that these tactics were successful; Upton Sinclair was defeated and Merriam was elected Governor of California. With complete shamelessness, the *Hollywood Reporter* gloated editorially: "Never before in the history of the picture business has the screen been used in direct support of a candidate. . . . Maybe our business will now be pampered a bit, instead of being pushed around as it has been ever since it became big business."

THE Sinclair-Merriam scandal is, perhaps, the most spectacular example available of Hollywood in the grip of political jitters, though the present witch-hunt shows signs of reaching a new low, and though there have from time to time been such lurid manifestations as the organisation (in 1935) of the Hollywood Hussars, and Victor McLaglen's predilection for fine horses, bright uniforms, and Fascist tactics, which came to head with his formation of a private regiment of Light Horse Cavalry. But Rosten and his research-workers, having examined the frequent attempts to smear Hollywood with the taint of "Communism" by the Dies Committee and other equally unsavoury organisations for "pure Americanism" and against radicalism, liberalism, and even trade unionism, have reached the conclusion that, while some Hollywood workers have occasionally been indiscreet and a few others have undoubtedly been Communists, the allegation of a Red Menace in the movie capital is to date entirely without foundation.

Similarly, charges that certain films have contained "Communist influences" have almost invariably cancelled themselves out. For example, the Warner Bros. film *Juarez*, which Mr. Dies asserted contained "very effective propaganda" for Communism, was attacked by the Communists for a variety of other reasons.

AMONG the recent films which (according to *News Review*) the industry's gossip-sheet, *Hollywood Reporter*, recently indicted for "fostering Communist propaganda" were *Margie*, a whimsical story of a school-girl in the 'twenties; *The Best Years of Our Lives*, which shows ex-soldiers in a more favourable light than stay-at-home civilians; and *The Pride of the Marines*, which tells of a famous blinded war hero of Guadalcanal. Since the last-named film was made in co-operation with the U.S. Marines, critics are saying that the Red tint must be pretty well camouflaged.

Perhaps, however, it is not so much, what is shown in these films that is the menace, as what is left out. That priceless suggestion was made the other day to the U.S. House of Representatives' Un-American Activities Committee by Sam Wood, the director. These dubious films, said Wood in evidence, "might keep out an important little bit showing the true American way of life, and you would not miss it." I wonder

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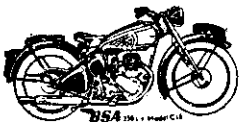


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