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STAGE AND SCREEN

How Cinerama Won The West

By **THERESA LOEB CONE**
Tribune Drama Critic

From the opening of the Erie Canal to aerial views of L.A.'s frantic freeway and San Francisco's serene Golden Gate bridge, M-G-M's second story in Cinerama, "How the West Was Won" has considerable scope, drive, excitement and visual beauty.

Essentially a highly romanticized account of 50 important years in American history—the pioneering era between 1839 and 1889—this impressively photographed saga opened last night at the Orpheum Theater for what is expected to be a long run.

Hoopla and kleig lights dominated events last night enlivening Market Street in typical premiere fashion, and boasting one of the picture's stars, Jimmy Stewart, and his wife, on hand for the celebration.

NEARLY LICKED

Although the difficulty of matching seams and avoiding distortions as well as noticable color difference in the three panels of the Cinerama process has not been conquered as yet, the jiggling and fading has been reduced considerably. Official figures have it that the problem is 80% licked, in fact.

Three directors were responsible for the film which runs about three hours including intermission.

There were audience chuckles when John Ford was credited with "directing the Civil War," but that was meant to apply, of course, only to those movie sequences connected with the conflict. George Marshall and Henry Hathaway were the other two directors and word has it that Hathaway was the strongest guiding hand of the three, being responsible for the opening sequences and part of the ending as well.

SHORT ON HUMOR

While the James R. Webb script is short on humor and leans toward the dull side upon occasion, most of the dialogue is good. The glaring exception is an exchange between John Wayne as General Sherman and Henry Morgan as General Grant which can be labeled stilted and totally unconvincing.

History in the spectacle film is depicted via narration off-screen in the voice of Spencer Tracy and by the far-flung activities of a pioneer family whose members we watch through four generations.

The story undoubtedly elicits audience involvement in what might otherwise seem like a cross-country travelogue.

No doubt the roster of 24 stars such as Stewart, Debbie Reynolds, Gregory Peck, Hen-

ry Fonda, Lee J. Cobb, Carroll Baker, Robert Preston and Richard Widmark, to mention a few, will bring many a moviegoer to the wicket when he might have skipped previous non-starred Cineramas.

SMALL ROLES

However, many of the performers have relatively small assignments: Walter Brennan as a cave-dwelling, whiskey-selling crook; Fonda as a buffalo hunter; Cobb as a U.S. marshall; Carolyn Jones as a frontier wife and Karl Malden as a farmer looking for more fertile fields.

Malden's wife is well-played by Agnes Moorehead; their two daughters by Miss Reynolds and Miss Baker. They comprise the family starting off at the Erie Canal and slowly spreading across to California.

Debbie Reynolds, pert and amusing as a city-loving girl who sings and dances her way from the river journey clear to a Nob Hill mansion as the wife of gambler-railroad owner Gregory Peck, is the only character seen both at the start and the finale of the picture.

Miss Baker, not as successful as Miss Reynolds in the aging process via makeup, is nevertheless lovely at the beginning of the film during which she meets and weds Stewart who is excellent as a marriage-shy fur trapper.

George Peppard giving the film's best performance is

well cast as Miss Baker's son, a veteran of the Civil War who turns to a lifetime career as a lawman. Richard Widmark is also good as a tough-minded railroad engineer and Preston as a wagon train leader with a yen for Miss Reynolds turns in a creditable job. Peck merely walks through his role, as does Raymond Massey in the inevitable Lincoln bit. Eli Wallach humorously plays a bandit with a macabre sense of comedy.

RAFT ON RAPIDS

The film's high spots in terms of excitement and "audience participation" are, of course, such moments as when a raft swirls at dizzy pace down river rapids; when a thunderous buffalo stampede is set in motion by Indians eager to fight back at the Iron Horse and again in a harrowing, brutal train robbery attempt which results in tremendous chaos on the rails.

This latter scene really takes one back to early days of moviemaking and can't be touched for sheer movement.