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'How the West Was Won'

A Massive Cinerama Epic

By STANLEY EICHELBAUM

The latest Cinerama offering, "How the West Was Won," is MGM's attempt at the definitive western epic, and scarcely any pains or extravagance were spared.

No one who saw the three-hour movie in last night's premiere at the Orpheum Theater could deny that it is a grandiose monument to the horse opera, containing nearly every element native to the American western, from a shrieking Indian attack on a wagon train and a ferocious buffalo stampede to a reduction of human emotions to the simplest, most basic terms.

This second of the giant, tri-panelled movies to introduce a story line is, admittedly, somewhat superior to the childlike "Wonderful World of the Brothers Grimm." But, except for its splurges of massive visual excitement (the major asset of Cinerama), it is hardly an impressive work.

CAN'T COMPARE

The film cannot compare to any of our really great westerns, including those by John Ford, who, surprisingly enough, is responsible for a third of this film's direction, his colleagues being Henry Hathaway and George Marshall.

James R. Webb's screenplay, which achieves nothing but dullness and utter conventionality, deals with 50 years in this country's western migration. With Spencer Tracy as an off-screen narrator, it begins in 1839, when the first adventurers left the East by the Erie Canal for the wilderness of the Ohio River; and it ends during the lawless 1880's in the Arizona Territory.

Two dozen stars are involved, some of them, like Raymond Massey who again plays Lincoln and John Wayne as General Sherman, appearing for only a couple of minutes.

A CAVALCADE

The bulk of the movie is fictional—a meandering cavalcade about the Prescott family, the pioneer parents portrayed by Karl Malden and Agnes Moorehead, and their daughters by Debbie Reynolds and Carroll Baker, who travel west and marry, respectively, a gambler (Gregory Peck) and a mountaineer fur trapper (James Stewart).

The next Prescott genera-



THE PRESCOTT FAMILY NAVIGATES THE OHIO RIVER

Agnes Moorehead (left), Debbie Reynolds, Karl Malden, Kimm Charney, Carroll Baker

tion is represented by George Peppard, who is seen as Miss Baker's son—a farm lad who endures the Civil War, stopping an attempted assassination of General Grant (Harry Morgan); who crosses the Great Plains with a railroad construction crew; and settles in the Far West as a lawman during the gold-mining era.

Miss Reynolds' assignment is also sweepingly panoramic, since her role takes her from the Erie Canal (when she is just a slip of a girl), through an ordeal by bullet and arrow in a California wagon train; a career as a music-hall entertainer (there are songs for our diversion); a life of wealth in old San Francisco; and, finally, bankruptcy and widowhood.

HAS TO AGE

Debbie is ultimately required to look at least 70 years old, a phenomenon difficult to achieve on the extra-mammoth screen, which is still peculiarly un-

"HOW THE WEST WAS WON," a Cinerama-MGM film; produced by Bernard Smith; directed by Henry Hathaway, John Ford and George Marshall; written by James R. Webb. With Debbie Reynolds, Gregory Peck, James Stewart, Carroll Baker, George Peppard, Karl Malden, Agnes Moorehead, Robert Preston, Henry Fonda, John Wayne, etc., etc. At the Orpheum.

suited to the intimacies of convincing drama.

But when it boils down to pure physical grandeur, the film provides some truly breath-taking moments, such as the sight of a wagon train against an endless, purple-edged horizon and a terrific sequence in which a raft carrying the Prescott family is caught in turbulent rapids. Then there is a marvelously gripping episode of a train robbery, coupled with a train wreck, that's almost worth the price of admission.

But between these peaks of excitement and scenic splendor is the flatness of a trite, rambling drama, in which pioneers speak the kind of dialect that makes everything "mighty purty" and in which he-man rancher Robert Preston declares to

a sneering Debbie Reynolds, "I like spirit in a woman."

The performances throughout are rudimentary, the stars playing the most familiar roles, like Henry Fonda's taciturn buffalo hunter, Thelma Ritter's buz-zardy covered-wagon matron, Andy Devine's frontier postman, Lee J. Cobb's worried marshal, Walter Brennan's slimy river bandit, Richard Widmark's stony railroad empire builder and Eli Wallach's trigger happy outlaw.