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'Gone With The Wind'—21 Plus

By Benjamin S. Hartigan

To commemorate the Civil War Centennial April 12, Metro is reissuing David O. Selznick's \$3,957,000 (three-hour, 42 minutes) 10 Academy Awards winning production of Margaret Mitchell's 9,900,000 circulation (70th printing-1,037 pages) story of the Old South, "Gone With The Wind." Film, which opens tomorrow at the Hollywood Paramount, had its third "world premiere" in Atlanta last March 10, marking picture's fifth release. It preemed there originally on Friday, Dec. 15, 1939, and a year later had a world-anniversary celebration.

"GWTW" held first place as top domestic grosser (\$33,500,000) until late last year when it was edged out by Paramount's "Ten Commandments" (\$34,200,000). "Birth Of A Nation" would probably be the top money-maker (\$50,000,000), but its financial record was lost. "Wind" worldwide is still in first position (\$115,000,000). Quite an auspicious record for a story that had a rather unpretentious beginning.

Book 9 Years In The Writing

In 1926 while recovering from a sprained ankle, former Atlanta Journal reporter Margaret Mitchell Marsh was coaxed by her husband to write a novel about the Civil War. She worked on it nine years. The last chapter was written first. When Macmillan purchased her manuscript she did not have a title. During six months of rewriting, she found it in Ernest Dowson's "Non Sum Qualis Eram" ("Cynara"):

"I have forgot much, Cynara! gone with the wind, flung roses, roses riotously with the throng."

Published in June, 1936, by Christmas "GWTW" had sold 1,000,000 copies, creating publishing history, especially in that depression year.

At the time major film studios considered Civil War stories boxoffice poison. Paramount's "So Red The Rose," with Margaret Sullavan and Randolph Scott, the year before had come a cropper. David O. Selznick bought screen rights less than a month after publication when the asking price had dropped from \$100,000 to \$50,000, but with some misgiving. Darryl Zanuck earlier had offered \$35,000 but was turned down by Miss Mitchell's literary agent.

Gable Popular Choice For Rhett

The fantastic book sales fanned interest in casting the film. Clark Gable was the public's ideal choice for Rhett Butler and Selznick went along with it, but to get him it meant working out a half-financing and releasing arrangement with the star's studio, Metro. Warners was willing to finance were Bette Davis cast as Scarlett and Errol Flynn as Rhett, but Selznick was set on producing the picture independently.

It was decided an unknown should play Scarlett and an intensified "search" was conducted, replete with all the publicity facets.

"GWTW" went into production Dec. 10, 1938, with the scene depicting the burning of Atlanta, at Selznick-International Studios in Culver City, formerly Pathe, presently Desilu-Culver. Standing on the backlot site for the proposed construction of Tara and Atlanta were 12-year-old sets from Cecil B. DeMille's "King of Kings." Production-designer William Cameron Menzies suggested doctoring the old buildings to resemble the Atlanta area and in burning them the lot would be cleared at the same time the scene was shot. During this holocaust agent Myron Selznick brought the comparatively unknown Vivien Leigh to the studio and introduced her to his brother as "Scarlett O'Hara."

Director George Cukor, due to differences of approach with Selznick was replaced after three weeks by Victor Fleming. Ten weeks later Fleming had to drop out due to illness and Sam Wood finished the picture. Sidney Howard was credited with screenplay, but Ben Hecht claims in his autobiog, "A Child Of The Century," to have re-written the Howard treatment. He confesses he had never read the book.

Didn't Lose A Scene In Editing

Pic was brought in after 22 weeks of shooting. Of 449,512 feet of film exposed, only 160,000 feet were printed. "GWTW" ran four hours and 20 minutes when first previewed. Selznick edited it down to current running time without losing a single scene. Max Steiner contributed a symphonic tone poem of a score that beautifully captured the elegance, sentimentality, pathos and gallantry of the period.

Including the leads, Gable, Miss Leigh, Leslie Howard and Olivia de Havilland, there are 58 principal speaking parts plus thousands of bit players.

"GWTW," both as novel and film, is still — and seemingly always will be — stimulating attention and curiosity. Last year an Atlanta organization purchased the original Tara set and incorporated it into a Georgia tourist attraction.

Retiring Margaret Mitchell, prior to her tragic death in 1949, was offered \$100,000 by a studio to film a sequel. She refused. Publishers have offered as high as \$250,000 for rights to continue tale from where Miss Mitchell ended it, but her brother, who holds the rights, will not allow it.

. . . and so "Gone With The Wind" proved a fascinating title, but not a prophetic one.