

Wild Boys of the Road

By Gwendolyn Audrey Foster

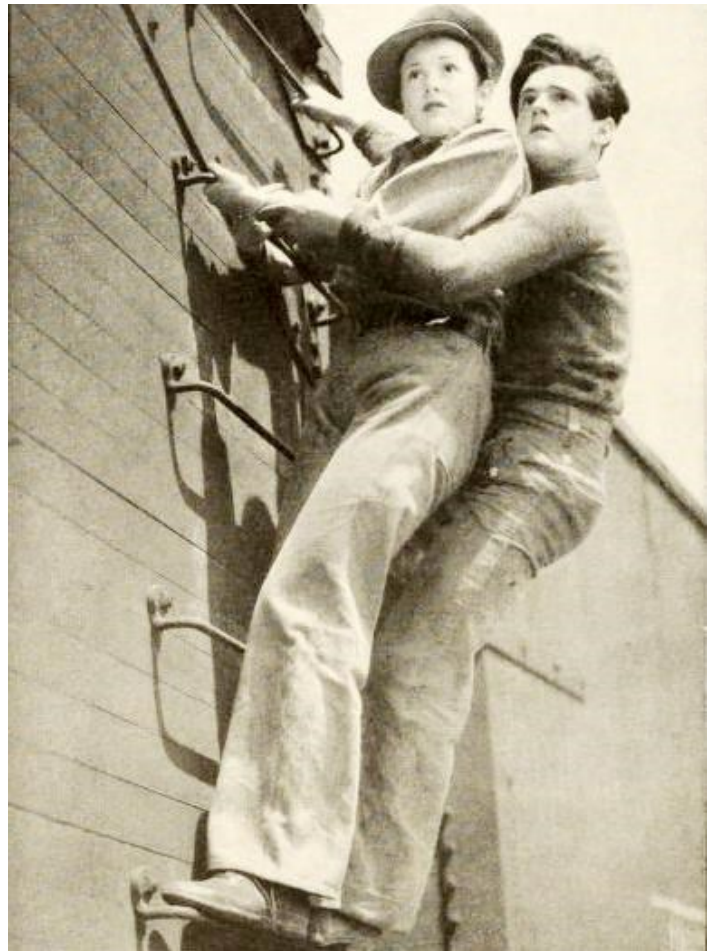
One of the most unrelenting and bleakly desperate of American films made in the 1930s, William Wellman's "Wild Boys of the Road" chronicles the hard-luck life of the road of literally hundreds of thousands of teenagers – boys and girls alike – who were forced out into the world at large when their family life at home collapsed. Literally torn from the headlines, "Wild Boys of the Road" was based on a story by Daniel Ahern, "Desperate Youth," which unflinchingly documented this unparalleled phenomenon, as written for the screen by Earl Baldwin.

The dreams of middle class life seemed to vanish into thin air, as fathers lost their jobs in the depths of the Depression, marriages crumbled, banks foreclosed on overdue mortgages, and all hope of stable family life was lost. Director Wellman, himself a very tough character, who legendarily carried a loaded gun on the set, and occasionally used it to threaten a recalcitrant actor if he felt they weren't giving their best possible performance, was instinctively drawn to the material, and shot the film with brutal efficiency, using actors for the leading parts, and real-life transient teenagers as extras in the film.

Frankie Darro, then a popular teen star of the era, stars as Eddie Smith, whose father (Grant Mitchell) loses his job as a result of Depression, and because of his age is unable to find any sort of work at all. Eddie does everything he can to help out the family, even selling his hot-rod for a pittance and giving the money to his father to help out with the bills, but to no avail.

With his pal Tommy Gordon (Edwin Phillips), Eddie hits the road as a hobo, and is soon caught up in a never-ending cycle of simply fighting to survive, as railroad police, or "bulls," brutally attack anyone trying to ride the rails from one town to the next. Eddie soon meets Sally (Dorothy Coonan, later to become Wellman's wife in 1934, married to the director until his death in 1975), another teenage runaway who dresses like a boy to avoid being sexually harassed.

Sally, Eddie and Tommy form a bond, and head for Chicago, where Sally assures them that her aunt Carrie (Minna Gombell) will welcome them all with open arms. Carrie is happy to see Sally, and takes the three transients in, but it soon turns out that Carrie is running a bordello out of her apartment, and within minutes of their arrival, the apartment is raid-



This photo of Dorothy Coonan as Sally and Frankie Darro as Eddie appeared in the February 1934 edition of Photoplay Magazine. Courtesy [Media History Digital Library](#).

ed. Narrowly escaping arrest, the three are forced out on the road again, and join up with a group of other homeless teens, hoping to find safety and perhaps a job in Cleveland.

They jump another freight train, but before they can arrive at their destination, one of the young women in the group is raped by a railway worker (Ward Bond). The gang retaliates, pushing the brakeman off the train to his death. As the train approaches Cleveland, all the teenagers jump off, but Tommy doesn't move quickly enough, and smashes his head into a sign, momentarily knocking him unconscious. Tommy tries to drag himself to safety, but a passing train runs over one of his legs, severing it almost completely. A compassionate doctor (Arthur Hohl) comes to the hobo camp where they gang are staying, and amputates Tommy's leg, but can do no more to help.

Moving from one hobo camp to the next, constantly battling the local authorities who simply want them to

keep moving, the trio finally winds up in the New York City dump, where they survive by panhandling and committing petty thefts. Against all odds, Eddie manages to get a legitimate job, but needs money to pay for a uniform. Desperate to secure the job, Eddie is soon innocently involved in a stick-up at a local movie theater as the fall guy for two hardened criminals, and is summarily bought into court. There, Eddie finally snaps, and tells the judge (Robert Barrat) to “give me the works,” because there’s no hope for any of them, and they might as well all end up in jail.

But in the only upbeat note in this otherwise harrowing film, the judge tells Eddie that he will help him get a job, that a place of honest work can be found for Sally, and that even Tommy will soon find employment, despite his improvised prosthetic leg. With an NRA (National Recovery Administration) poster hanging in the background of the courtroom, Judge White delivers an upbeat sermon of coming prosperity, essentially outlining President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal policy, and dismisses all the charges against Eddie. The film ends with Eddie turning a cartwheel in the street from sheer joy after his release, only to momentarily stop and stare at Tommy, who, without a leg, can’t do the same. “Wild Boys of the Road” ends on this somewhat optimistic note, which closes out the film’s brief, 67 minute running time.

Of all the films made during the Depression, “Wild Boys of the Road” is perhaps the most realistic and unsparing, due in no small part to Wellman’s penchant for unvarnished realism. Much of the film looks like a newsreel, and the scenes of local police breaking up the hobo encampments (“don’t you think I have kids of my own?” one cop says to another when asked how he feels about doing this), as well as the footage of riding the rails – often presented with an air of romance in escapist films of the period, but here shown to be exactly what it was – desperate, dangerous, and violent – combine to create a film of such astonishing honesty that it’s surprising that any studio, even Warner Bros., then Hollywood’s most “socially conscious” production company, would even go near the project.

Wellman was always a stickler for realism – on his 1931 film “Public Enemy,” he famously used a marksman with a real, loaded machine gun to photograph a scene in which gangster Tom Powers (James Cagney, in his breakout role) is almost cut down by gunfire from a rival gang – and his no-nonsense, unvarnished approach to the project brings “Wild Boys of the Road” to the screen with a vitality and energy which still shocks audiences even today.

The Depression was a time in which families were torn apart, men and women were forced to make choices they never imagined simply to survive, but few films chronicled the plight of Depression era teenagers, who in more normal times would be attending high school, going to dances, and learning bit by bit about life in the world of adults. In “Wild Boys of the Road,” these same teenagers are forced out into a world without a secure future, or even the hope of one- as it would take more than a decade and a half – and the military build up of World War II – to revitalize the American economy.

“Wild Boys of the Road” offers us an authentic vision of the past, when nothing was sure, and nothing could be counted upon. It stands as a warning that the social fabric of society is delicate indeed, and that when tough times come, no one is really ready for them. Wellman here is almost a sociologist, documenting a pressing issue of the Depression. In short, “Wild Boys of the Road” is absolutely essential viewing both then, and now – perhaps even more so today, lest we forget the lessons it can teach us.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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