



FILM REVIEW: I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang (1932) Who's Mad as Hell and Won't Take it Anymore

Description

Written and reviewed by Larry Gleeson during the annual TCM 31 Days of Oscar



[I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang \(1932\)](#), a Pre-code production from Warner Brothers's Vitaphone, is based on the true story of Robert Elliot Burns, wrongly convicted of robbery and sentenced to ten years on a brutal and inhumane chain gang. The film received three Oscar nominations for Best Picture, Best Actor and Best Sound. Mervyn LeRoy directed with Paul Muni starring as the lead character, James Allen. Allen has returned home from The World War a changed man. Allen served with the Engineer Corps. and had other ideas than returning to his position at the Parker Shoe Manufacturing Co., Home of Kumfort Shoes. He desires to get away from routine of office work and

Army life. Rather, he dreams of accomplishing things building and constructing bridges. When Mother (Louise Carter) Allen expresses concern, Allen's minister brother (Hale Hamilton), interjects a lofty incantation of Allen getting a good night's sleep, going to the factory, and Allen becoming a soldier of peace instead of a soldier of war. Allen reacts vehemently of being a soldier of any kind.



Nevertheless, Allen takes the advice and returns to his old position at the factory. As he is preparing to file bills of laden, explosions and jack hammers fill the air drawing his interest. A new bridge is being constructed. Allen hangs around the site returning late from lunch everyday disappointing Mr. Parker. Mother Allen encourages her son to pursue what is in his heart. Allen gleefully sets off for New England. He works in a quarry but is laid off quickly. From New England, Allen heads to New Orleans arriving a week late. All the positions are filled. This continues until Allen bounces into the St. Louis/East St. Louis area. Here, Allen meets up with a dubious character, Pete (Preston Foster), at a boarding house. Pete entices Allen to go out for hamburger. Unfortunately, Pete pulls a handgun and robs the hamburger joint and is killed by police in a shootout. As Allen tries to get away, the police nab him and find the robbery money in his pocket.



Allen gets sentenced to ten years in prison for being a part of the robbery. The judge had no mercy, and Allen gets a hard labor sentence for trying to run away from the robbery scene. Allen is in the wrong place at the wrong time. What transpires next is the first visual, filmic insight into the sordid chain gang system depicting the harsh realities of the chain gang system, a brutal and inhumane manner of cutting costs predominantly in Georgia, Texas, and Florida. Inmates who have not put in a good day's work are whipped with a razor's belt. The worst part is the systematic binding with chains. The binding changes the gait of men who have challenges walking without the chains upon their releases.



Technically, the film very well put together achieving the suspension of disbelief with continuity editing. In addition, the use of dissolves with frames of calendar pages, pay slips, and newspaper headlines establish settings, show the passage of time, and informs the audience. The mise-en-scen and cinematography work extremely well together, too, revealing mood and story line with depth and clarity. The actors are credible. Hair, makeup, and costuming match the characters on the chain gangs and in society. Muni, one of the top actors of his time and one of the biggest stars at Warner Brothers, embodies the character, James Allen, with strength and power, albeit with a gullibility that thwarts his life following his first escape. Truthfully, both escape scenes contain a plethora of highly engaging and visually appealing action shots with blood hounds, shotguns, rifles, speeding dump trucks, and explosives. Furthermore, the narrative moves along with veracity and contains moments of sharply witted dialogue.



I found the chain gang system incredulous as depicted in *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*. With a bastion of corruption from the state governors, through the prison board commissioners and down to the wardens, the film raises important issues about the penal system and the impact of incarceration on individuals and on society. Interestingly, the film's exhibition created such an uproar that it prompted reforms within the prison system. *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* is an early example of socially conscious film making that worked. With a runtime of one hour and thirty-two minutes, *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*, is an exceptionally well-constructed film that engages and pokes the audience toward discernment. Highly recommended.



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