

General Spanky

US : 1936 : dir. Fred Newmeyer & Gordon Douglas : Hal Roach / M-G-M : 71 min
 prod: : scr: Richard Flournoy, Hal Yates & John Guedal : dir.ph.:
*Spanky McFarland; Carl "Alfalfa" Switzer; Billy "Buckwheat" Thomas; Rex Downing;
 Jerry Tucker*
 Phillips Holmes; Rosina Lawrence; Louise Beavers; Hobart Bosworth; Ralph Morgan;
 Irving Pichel

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω	8	€	M	☠	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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No expense spent - Carl "Alfalfa" Switzer (left) with the eponymous Spanky McFarland in their full military regalia. Source: The Moving Picture Boy

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide
 1996 review:

“Sluggish Civil War story, balancing kiddie antics against an adult romance, was intended to showcase three **"Our Gang"** stars in a feature film format; it's easy to see why there wasn't an encore. Buckwheat's role as a slave in search of a

master may displease contemporary audiences. ** ”

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

“A small boy is instrumental in a famous Civil War victory. Uneasy sentimental melodrama vehicle for one of the moppet

stars [*sic*] of "**Our Gang**". Scr: Richard Flournoy, Hal Yates & John Guedal."

"Desultory, overlong... built for the lesser family trade" – **Variety**

The M.G.M. Story review:

"**GENERAL SPANKY**" incongruously teamed the elegant Phillips Holmes with Spanky McFarland, the fat tot of "**Our Gang**", in a Civil War drama by Flournoy, Hal Yates and John Guedal. Ralph Morgan, Irving Pichel, Miss Lawrence, Hobart Bosworth and Louise Beavers also performed for directors Gordon Douglas and Fred Newmeyer."

Video Movie Guide 1993 review:

"A feature-length version of the "**Our Gang**" series, later popular on TV as "**The Little Rascals**". A good attempt to give new life to the characters, but it just proved that audiences can sit still just so long while kids get mischief out of their systems. **"

The Moving Picture Boy entry on McFarland:

"To the cereal-besotted image-makers of **OUR GANG** – "Farina" Hoskins already installed, "Buckwheat" Thomas to come – any chubby child on a bread advertisement must have seemed an offer not to be refused. An 18-month old baby called George Robert Phillips McFarland had been such a hit on a Dallas bakery's posters in 1929 that they proceeded to star him in a cinema commercial. That's how he was spotted by an **OUR GANG** scout, and it didn't take long for the Roach studio to acquire a slice of the action.

Spanky (the name taken from his mother's recurrent threat to the roaming toddler) was rotund, self-contained and intelligent. The Gang director Robert McGowan said of him "He's the first genius I've directed since Jackie Cooper". Certainly he had wonderful comic timing, and was as drily laid back as Stymie Beard. His "okey-dokey" was the essence of good-humoured equanimity.

From "**FREE EATS**" in 1932 to "**UNEXPECTED RICHES**" in 1942, Spanky was a top favourite in the Gang's shorts. He was in 94 altogether, plus his own star vehicle, the full-length feature "**GENERAL SPANKY**", in which he leads a Southern kids' militia against a Union army. The transplantation of the Gang into a historical setting with awkward overtones of real bloodshed didn't work, although Spanky, aided by "Alfalfa" Switzer, "Buckwheat" Thomas and other Gang stalwarts, is still a formidable little pudding.

He was sometimes featured with the studio's adult comics like Charlie Chase, or loaned out to other studios. (In "**O'SHAUGHNESSY'S BOY**" he played Jackie Cooper as a small child.) I've been unable to discover if a putative 1936 short called "**ALONE, ALAS**" really existed, but the title is too good to lose.

After 1944, no more acting work came his way. When he was old enough Spanky joined the Air Force for a while, then worked at a soft drink factory, briefly hosted a TV show that showed old Gang movies, sold hamburgers and wine (not together), promoted oil, and finally, after one or two other projects, rose to a solid position in the sales department of the Philco-Ford TV. However, he made at least one modest comeback, in "**MOON-RUNNERS**" (75).

Maltin and Bann, interviewing Spanky in 1977, liked him enormously: "a guy without any pretense... a man's man... plucky, talented, pleasantly grumpy."

[no listing in "Speelfilm Encyclopedie", "The Critics' Film Guide", "The Good Film and Video Guide", "Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89", "A Pictorial History of the Talkies", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television", "The Time Out Film Guide", "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995", "Variety Movie Guide 1993" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

No further information currently available. So [Spanky McFarland](#) joins a **very** select club of actors so famous they got their names incorporated into film titles – something Bette Davis, Olivier, Wayne, or Monroe could never claim. Among other child stars who *could* were Jackie Cooper (in “**JACKIE COOPER’S CHRISTMAS PARTY**”), Russian boy star Gogi Ratiani (in, would you believe, “**GOGI RATIANI**”), singing Dutch boy star Heintje (his name prefixed virtually all his screen titles) and Spanish boy star Joselito Jimenez (“**AVENTURAS DE JOSELITO EN AMERICA**”). Shirley Temple never quite accomplished this feat, even though she outshone the lot of them in popularity. But so much for the trivia angle.

Chubby young McFarland was 7, one of the barrage balloon babies Hal Roach seemed to think would amuse audiences (Fat Joe Cobb was another), anticipating by half a century the day when 50% of the US population would be clinically obese. Of all the US boy actors who might better have adorned the nickname “Spanky”, McFarland was an unprepossessing front-liner for the **Our Gang** team, neither wily nor feisty nor a wellspring of master-schemes. He was like a diminutive Oliver Hardy, but without Hardy’s unique blend of pomposity and genteel good nature. I believe he played Hardy momentarily in one of the L&H films.

The great crooner Carl Switzer was 9, Billy Thomas 5, Rex Downing 11, and Jerry Tucker 9.

See subject index under **COMEDY**, **SLAVERY**, [WAR](#), [WESTERNS](#) and (perhaps) **FOLLOW THE LEADER (Children's Gangs)**. See [OUR GANG - General Note](#) in the main archive for further information on those shorts.