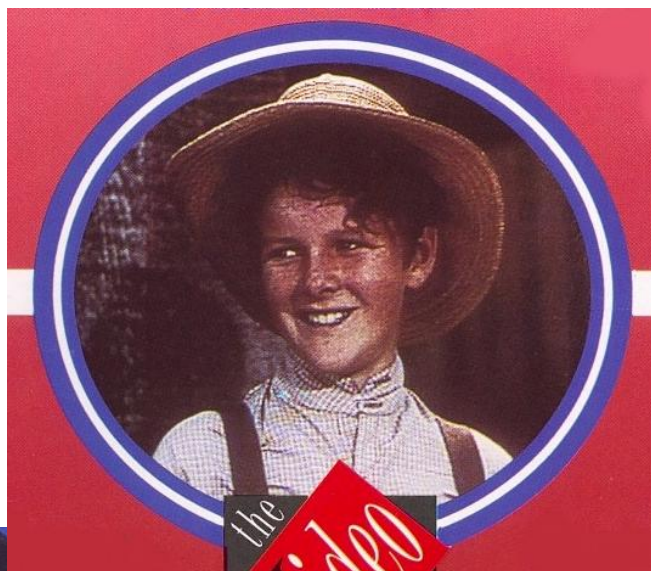


The Adventures of Tom Sawyer

US : 1938 : dir. Norman Taurog : David O Selznick / United Artists : 93 min[†]
 prod: William H Wright : scr: John V A Weaver : dir.ph.: James Wong Howe & Wilfrid Cline
Tommy Kelly [d]; *David Holt*; *Ann Gillis*; *Mickey Rentschler*; *Jackie Moran*; *George Billings*;
Cora Sue Collins; *Phillip Hurlic*
 May Robson; Walter Brennan; Victor Jory; Spring Byington; Margaret Hamilton; Victor Kilian;
 Olin Howlin; Donald Meek; Marcia Mae Jones; Nana Bryant; Charles Richman

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω 8 ∅ M ☼	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
2033b	10.5	20	17	4,005	3 7 3 7 7	Yes	Nov 2000

[†] subsequently cut down to 77 minutes





A scene absent from current prints – Joe Harper and Tom at Sunday School

Source: The Moving Picture Boy

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide
1996 review:

"Entertaining David O. Selznick production of the Mark Twain classic with more slapstick than Twain may have had in mind. The cave sequence with Injun Joe is unforgettable. Original running time 93 minutes. Previously filmed in 1930, and again in 1973 (twice that year) – all under the title **"TOM SAWYER"**. ***1/2 "

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review:

"Mark Twain's excellent children's story is excitingly filmed with the Injun Joe (Jory) segments as the high point. ***1/2 "

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

"Small-town Mississippi boy tracks down a murderer, Injun Joe¹. Set-bound but excellent version of the children's classic by Mark Twain.

¹ *He certainly doesn't do anything of the kind!*

Scr: John Weaver; score: Max Steiner; art dir: William Cameron Menzies *** "

"Another Selznick box office clean-up, an attraction destined for extended first runs, repeat bookings and heavy matinee take"
- **Variety**

"The familiar characters emerge in all their old amiability, the atmosphere is there and so is the excitement " - **NFT monthly Bulletin**

"Should make Mark Twain circulate in his grave like a trout in a creel" - **Otis Ferguson**

"Another Selznick International box office clean-up... that there exists a broad audience for films whose essential appeal is to the family trade has always been true. **"SNOW WHITE"** touched a source of almost unlimited audience draw; **"TOM SAWYER"** follows to the same customers" - **Variety**



Tom in southern gentleman guise. Becky simpers her approval.

Source: Those Endearing Young Charms

The Good Film and Video Guide review:

"As with **"THE ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN"**, Mark Twain's other boy hero was, unsurprisingly, at his screen best during Hollywood's most confident years, the late '30s (there were other versions of this particular tale in 1917, 1930, 1973, with music, and 1974). Tom (Tommy Kelly) and Huck (Jackie Moran) go adventuring in the graveyard and witness a murder by Injun Joe (Victor Jory). Seems that Muff (Walter Brennan) will hang for it, specially if Joe gets to Tom first. Aunt Polly (May Robson) has a lovely last line: "Reckon Tom kin be pres'dent some day, if they don't hang him first". With Margaret Hamilton, Spring Byington, Victor Kilian and a wonderfully evocative art direction by William Cameron Menzies. ** "

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89 review:

"This flawed David O Selznick production is probably the best Twain on screen - a crime that ought to be remedied. The early Technicolor is interesting, with James Wong Howe doing some fascinating lighting experiments in the cavern scenes. ***1/2 "

Those Endearing Young Charms caption to still above:

"Ann [Gillis] had the role of Becky Thatcher, Tom's girl friend, in the popular film version of the Mark Twain novel."

That Was Hollywood - the 1930s review:

"David O Selznick spent nearly \$1.5 million on a new version of the Mark Twain classic, last filmed in 1930, and found that this was more money than the market for a children's film could possibly return. The producer cast the unknown Tommy Kelly in the title role after a well-publicised talent hunt, and chose two little-knowns already in Hollywood - Jackie Moran (also appearing in **"MAD ABOUT MUSIC"**) for Huck Finn and Anne Gillis for Becky, the small girl who is lost in the caves with Tom at the scary climax. Under the direction of Norman Taurog (well experienced with handling children), they were acceptable but none of the three had much of a subsequent career.

May Robson, Walter Brennan and Victor Jory took the leading adult roles, and Jory made a striking villain. Technicolor became available for shooting the film at the last minute and most of the colour was invested in the costumes rather than the sets, which had been prepared for monochrome photography. This resulted in cameramen James Wong Howe and Wilfred M Cline providing a less vibrant, more subdued look. William Cameron Menzies did the production design. Selznick recruited George Cukor to do over some of the scenes after previews, before passing the film to United Artists for release."

The Time Out Film Guide review:

"Extraordinarily handsome to look at, with exquisite Technicolor camerawork by Wong Howe and some imaginative designs (especially the cave sequence) by William Cameron Menzies. Has its longueurs, but it does capture the sense of a lazy Mississippi summer and much of the spirit of the book, with Jory making a superbly villainous Injun Joe."

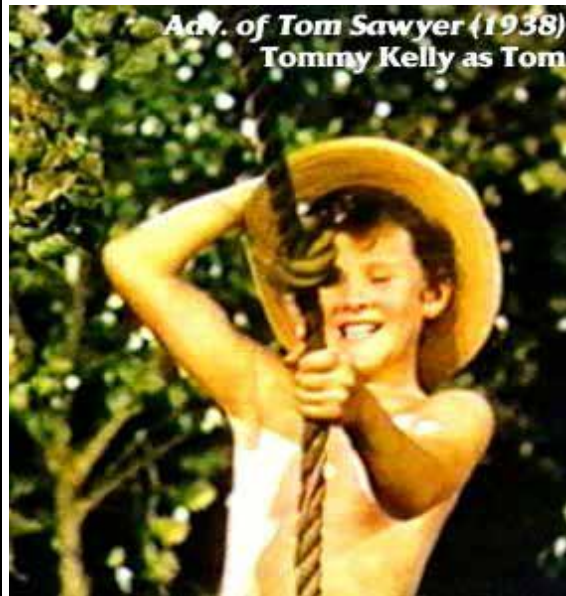
TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995 review:

"The original Selznick classic, with Tommy Kelly and Ann Gillis making sparky leads and Victor Jory frightening as the villainous Injun Joe. It moves fluently from one incident to another and is always most attractive to look at, thanks to the art direction of William Cameron Menzies (who two years earlier had directed "THINGS TO COME") and the photography of another Oscar-winner, James Wong Howe. Howe's colour camerawork brought a nightmare quality to the film's most exciting scenes - in a graveyard and a network of caverns. But little more was heard of young Tommy Kelly, who plays Tom, in subsequent years. ***"

The United Artists Story comment:

"David O Selznick's "THE ADVENTURES OF TOM SAWYER" was superior to the other versions of Mark Twain's children's classic which starred Jack Pickford (1917), Jackie Coogan (1930), and Johnny Whitaker (1973). In this Technicolor production, Tommy Kelly took the title role with Jackie Moran (Huckleberry Finn), Ann Gillis (Becky), May Robson (Aunt Polly), Walter Brennan (Muff

Potter), Victor Jory (Injun Joe), Spring Byington (Widow Douglas), David Holt (Sid Sawyer), Victor Kilian, Nana Bryant, Charles Richman, Donald Meek, Margaret Hamilton and Marcia Mae Jones making up a rich gallery of characters.



Source: indeterminate website

Despite some Hollywoodian sentimentality and slapstick, Norman Taurog's direction kept much of the spirit of the original intact. Most of the favourite episodes such as the whitewashing of the fence, runaways Tom and Huck watching their own funeral, and witnessing the graveyard murder, the courtroom scene when Tom accuses Injun Joe, and Tom and Becky lost in the caves (designed by no less than William Cameron Menzies), remained intact in John V A Weaver's screenplay, and audiences were delighted."



Tom and Huck see more than they bargained for in the graveyard Source: *United Artists Story*

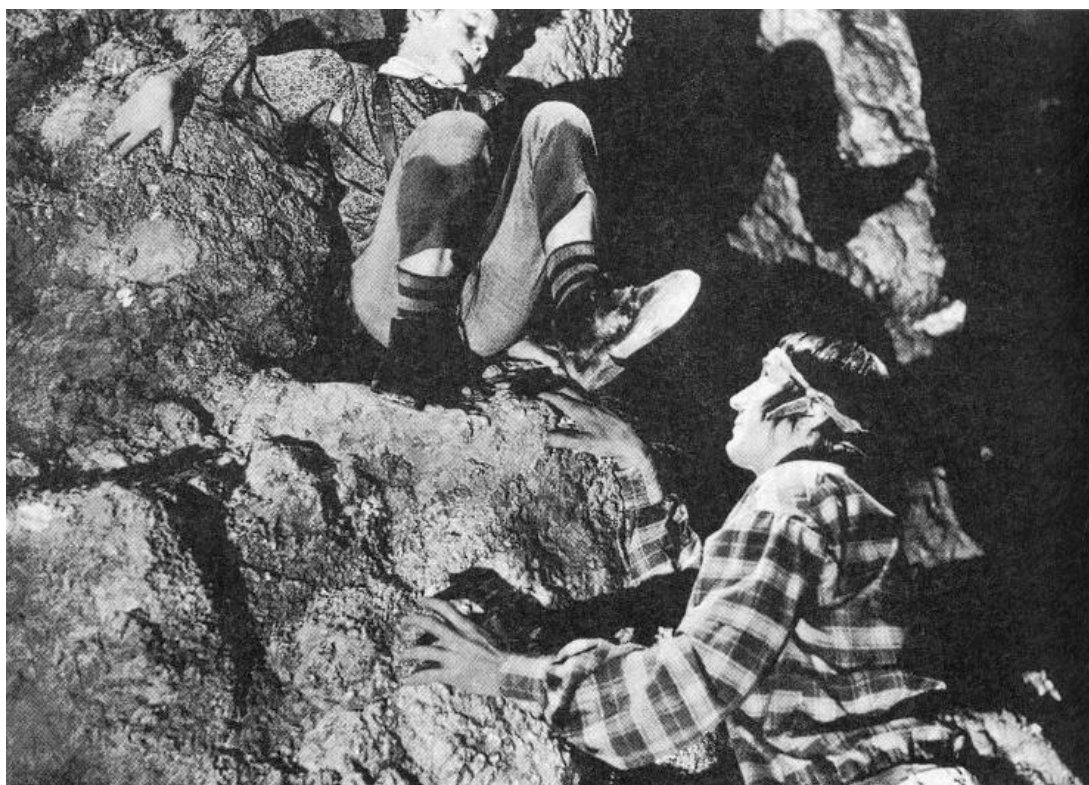


Those Endearing Young Charms caption to still (above):

“Norman Taurog directed this film of the popular children’s novel and cast David [Holt] in the role of Sid Sawyer, Tom’s insufferable younger brother.”

The Bad Guys – A Pictorial History of the Movie Villain caption to still (below):

“One of the meanest and most brutish villains the movies ever gave us was Victor Jory’s Injun Joe in 1938’s **"ADVENTURES OF TOM SAWYER"**, seen here with Tommy Kelly in the spine-chilling sequence of the chase through the caves.”



Above right – another scene absent from modern



prints, and not likely to be restored in these sad times
Source: A Pictorial History of the Talkies

Variety Movie Guide 1993 review:

“**"ADVENTURES OF TOM SAWYER"** is in Technicolor and contains visual beauty and appeal in addition to a faithful and nearly literal adaptation of the Mark Twain story. The story of the boy in an isolated Missouri community of the 1880s, who made fence-painting an enviable art, who attended his own funeral services, who was the cynosure of all eyes in the witness chair at an exciting murder trial, who teased and plagued his elders and melted in tears at the slightest kindness, is imperishable.

Casting of the picture was reported a laborious job, in the course of which hundreds of boys were tested before Tommy Kelly, from the Bronx, New York, was selected for the role of Tom. His early scenes show self-consciousness but in the final sequences when he is being pursued by Injun Joe, Kelly performs like a veteran. Walter Brennan is a standout among the adult players. He is the village drunkard, Muff Potter, accused of the graveyard murder. May Robson loses no opportunities as Aunt Polly, whose life by turns is celestial and hellish, depending upon the vagaries of Tom's vivid imagination. Injun Joe is played by Victor Jory with all the fiendish villainy in the part.”

Video Movie Guide 1993 review:

“One of the better screen adaptations of Mark Twain's works. Tommy Kelly is a perfect Tom Sawyer, but it's Victor Jory as the villainous

Injun Joe who steals the show. Good sets and beautiful cinematography make this one work. Fine family entertainment for young and old.
**** ”

The Virgin Film Guide review:

“Mark Twain's beloved **"TOM SAWYER"** comes to life in this excellent Selznick production, with Tommy Kelly portraying the brave, mischievous boy. He is caught between the manners of his very proper home, ruled by tough but loving Aunt Polly (May Robson) and the wild, roaming, trouble-seeking nature of his friend Huckleberry Finn, ably portrayed by Jackie Moran. The great Sawyer adventures are faithfully re-created - the conning of the two boys into whitewashing his aunt's fence, a wild ride down the Mississippi on a raft, the witnessing of Injun Joe's crimes and his pursuit of Tom and the terrified Becky Sharp² (Ann Gillis) into the giant cave. The incorrigible boys even witness their own funeral ceremony before informing the grieving townsfolk that they are still among the living. A lively production featuring a quick pace, a chilling climax, and a surprising amount of wit. ***1/2”

Halliwell's Filmgoer's Companion note:

“Mark Twain's boy hero has been played on film by Jack Pickford in 1917 (also in **"HUCK AND TOM"**, 1918), Jackie Coogan in 1920³, Tommy Kelly in 1938 (the Selznick production), also in 1938, by Billy Cook in **"TOM SAWYER, DETECTIVE"** and in 1972 by Johnny Whitaker.”

The Guild Home Video Collection - "Movie Greats" - videocassette sleeve notes (VHS VC 3139):

“No one needs an introduction to Mark Twain's unforgettable classic of the boyhood hero Tom Sawyer. His adventures are sure to please young and old alike. Tom, mischievous and impertinent brings to life a likeable and enjoyable character, his boyhood adventures are timeless, combining laughter, young romance and suspense into one memorable package. This version of **"THE ADVENTURES OF TOM SAWYER"** is the finest ever filmed.”

² *they mean Becky Thatcher...*

³ *he means 1930 (and a sequel in 1931)*

The Moving Picture Boy (untypically scant) entry on Kelly:

"The 1938 Tom Sawyer was one of thirteen children of a poor Irish family in the Bronx. He was chosen as Tom out of 25,000 interviewed. Freckled Tommy Kelly had three years of celebrity, but the parts grew less rewarding. After a few more films, such as "DOUBLE DATE" (41), "NICE GIRL" (41), "MUG TOWN" (43) and "THE MAGNIFICENT YANKEE" (50), he faded back into the crowd."

[no listing in "The Critics' Film Guide", "Rating the Movies (1990)" or "The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television"]

Radio Times reviews:

"Children's adventure based on Mark Twain's classic novel. Tom Sawyer falls in with the wild Huckleberry Finn who leads him into all sorts of adventures; from thrilling raft rides down the Mississippi⁴ to encounters with the villainous Injun Joe. **** "

"Despite the Disney studio's recent valiant attempt to retell this most beloved and arcane slice of Americana in 1993's "THE ADVENTURES OF HUCK FINN" ⁵, this superb David O Selznick production - the year before he gave the world "GONE WITH THE WIND" - remains the most entertaining, and most faithful, of all screen adaptations of Mark Twain's tale. **** "

TV Times note:

"Classic Mark Twain adventure of the backwoods boy Tom Sawyer, who, along with his pal Huck Finn goes in pursuit of a murderer. *** "

What's On TV review:

⁴ ...but there are **no** "thrilling raft rides" in this film

⁵ They're two quite separate books, guys!

"Tommy Kelly is the mischievous Mississippi kid who witnesses Injun Joe committing a murder in this colourful adaptation of Mark Twain's famous novel. *** "

"Based on Mark Twain's classic American novel, the story of the Mississippi boy who tracks down the murderer, Injun Joe."



Under attack from the front and rear – the trials of Mississippi boyhood Above: the schoolroom beating (source: the Movie and TV Spanking Page)

Below: Aunt Polly's patent mischief remedy



(source: *A Pictorial Guide to the Talkies*)

Cast:

Tom Sawyer.....Tommy Kelly
Sid Sawyer.....David Holt
Huck Finn.....Jackie Moran
Becky Thatcher.....Ann Gillis
Joe Harper.....Mickey Rentschler
Amy.....Cora Sue Collins
Jim (Aunt Polly's negro slave boy)
.....Philip Hurlic
Aunt Polly.....May Robson
Muff Potter.....Walter Brennan
Injun Joe.....Victor Jory
Schoolmaster.....Olin Howlin
Sunday School superintendent
.....Donald Meek
Sheriff.....Victor Kilian
Mrs Harper.....Margaret Hamilton
Mary Sawyer.....Marcia Mae Jones
Mrs Thatcher.....Nana Bryant
Judge Thatcher.....Charles Richman?

In a satisfying sense, if “**HUCKLEBERRY FINN**” was Twain’s “**OLIVER TWIST**” (a boy buffeted on the winds of adult affairs entirely beyond his control), then “**TOM SAWYER**” may be compared to “**DAVID COPPERFIELD**” (a boy who remains the pivot of his own story). The cinema has always favoured adaptations of “**HUCKLEBERRY FINN**” and “**OLIVER TWIST**” over the other two books, and not I would suggest for any inherent narrative superiority, but because they are more adult-centred stories. “**TOM SAWYER**” is pure boys’ adventure material, with a narrative and physical landscape on a smaller, boyish scale, whereas Huck Finn is escorted throughout his river meanderings by runaway slave Jim and the two “English” con-men. Huck is certainly more “pro-active” than any of Dickens’ boy characters, but still in a sense he is a passenger along for the ride. Tom is the lynchpin of his own adventure, and for that reason I find this the better of the two stories.

Twain aficionados can skip the tinted paragraphs, but for those unfamiliar with the plot:

Tom (±12), his younger half-brother Sid, and older sister Mary live with their crotchety spinster aunt Polly. Tom’s best friend Huck is viewed with suspicion by the neighbourhood since his brutish father was run out of town. The bane of Tom’s life is Sid, a snitch of the first order, a goody two-shoes who loses no opportunity to land his brother in hot water. Tom falls head over heels for the daughter of newly arrived Judge Thatcher, and at school saves her from a thrashing by owning up to her mischief himself. “How could you *be* so noble?” she scribbles to him on her writing slate, and they plight their troth to one another after school, with the usual tokens of brass doorknobs and live frogs.

A resourceful fellow, when Tom is put to whitewashing the yard fence by Aunt Polly for playing hooky, he succeeds in persuading the neighbourhood boys that this is more a treat than a chore, and they fall over one another to pay him for a turn at it. In a bid to impress Becky’s parents, he buys up Sunday School credits from other boys to win himself a presentation bible, but when Judge Thatcher tests him on the scriptures he has memorised –

“Who were the first two disciples?” – the best he can think of on the spur of the moment is “Adam and Eve?”.



The boy from the Bronx makes good – picked from 2500 candidates, Tommy Kelly looks raring to go – but he's nobody's idea of a Hollywood glamour-puss

Source: indeterminate website

One night Tom and Huck steal out to the graveyard with a dead cat in a sack – a surefire cure for warts – but what they witness there is a quarrel between three bodysnatchers. The desperado Injun Joe stabs one to death in the scuffle, then persuades the third, drunken Muff Potter, that he did it himself. Terrified, Tom and Huck swear a mortal oath not to breathe a word of what they've seen, but Tom is troubled by the business for days. Taking his subdued air for guilty concealment, Aunt Polly punishes him anyway, and Tom, insensed at the injustice, runs away with Huck and another friend, Joe Harper, to become pirates. But freedom from parental strictures soon starts to pall, and when they discover that the townsfolk believe them to have drowned, Tom creeps back with the intention of reassuring Aunt Polly he's still very much alive and in the pirating game. He overhears the family mourning his loss and discussing the funeral on Sunday, so he decides to postpone his return from the dead until the ceremony. The three boys duly attend, and are much moved by the funeral orations. But the rejoicing is short-lived when they march into the congregation, and Tom is welcomed home with a long-accustomed “switching”.

Soon afterwards Muff Potter is arrested and put on trial for the graveyard murder. Tom and Huck visit him in jail, and his gratitude tweaks Tom's conscience, so that the boy gives witness at the trial to what actually took place. Injun Joe, sitting in the court, hurls a knife at Tom's head at the critical moment, and makes a break for it. School is cancelled next day in honour of Tom's public spiritedness, and a picnic is held near a network of local caverns. Tom and Becky go exploring together and become trapped in the caverns by a rockfall. But they are not alone. Hiding out in the darkness is Injun Joe, with a score to settle...

I've not seen the other film versions, nor yet read the book, so have no point of comparison for this one. A major outbreak of freckles in the Mississippi, Tommy Kelly makes for a spirited lead, if a tad awkward and unconvincing at the mushy stuff. David Holt plays his meanie role with relish, and one can hear the audiences cheering at the final shot, when Aunt Polly finally delivers him a long overdue slap across the face. Ann Gillis is a simpering little mouse in petticoats, and one is prompted to wonder what Tom saw in her, while Jackie Moran is a subdued, even taciturn Huck, which perhaps explains why Selznick didn't follow up this production with the companion story. May Robson is perfectly cast as Aunt Polly, a soft-centred termagant with such lines as "Wait 'til I get my hands on that blatherscipe!" Pursuing the Dickensian analogy beyond all reason, she's a cross between David Copperfield's Aunt Betsy and Mr Murdstone.

The critics have universally singled out Victor Jory's performance as a highpoint of the film, but his Injun Joe is not even as baleful a presence as Huck's father in many film versions. He looks neither frightful nor cunning, and the courtroom scene where he lowers at Tom on the witness stand, toying meaningfully with his dirk, is like a sequence straight out of a silent melodrama. The film's climax, as Injun Joe scales the cavern wall in pursuit of Tom, recalls very strongly Israel Hands clambering up the mast after Jim Hawkins in "**TREASURE ISLAND**", or Bill Sykes cornered with Oliver Twist on the rooftops. The scene has become a film archetype.

But more importantly, Tom Sawyer is himself an archetype. He is the personification of one aspect of Boyhood, as Twain clearly intended. Boyhood is not some arbitrary point in the stream of life, but a distinct social construct with its own definable parameters. And one of the cardinal features of that (western) construct is that of the irrepressible mischief-maker, a creature governed by his own internal logic and codes of conduct, a lovable rogue who defies all attempts to discipline him, who is driven not by malice but an insatiable zest for life. He is Dennis the Menace, he is Just William, but he was Tom Sawyer first. He is the Lord of Misrule. For this reason if no other, the film is a keystone in the context of this archive.

I can't forbear a comment on the handling of corporal punishment in films of this vintage. Although we only witness one actual beating – in the famous classroom sequence – and even that is off camera, it's made very plain that these hidings are an almost daily occurrence in Tom's life, at home even more than school, and at the hands of a kindly old woman, not a power-crazed man. Yet Tom is not daunted or traumatised in the least by this kind of treatment, and indeed plainly loves his aunt notwithstanding. During their brief stint as men of fortune, both Tom and Joe Harper (who receives the same at his mother's hands) are seen to pine for the arbitrary discipline of home – "There's no fun going swimming when there's no-one to tell you not to". And of course, Tom is duly welcomed back with a tanning for his backside. All of this amounts to rank heresy in the prevailing wisdom that labels all such physical punishment (but especially by men) as "abuse". We do not hear very much from the pundits of the "child abuse" lobby about the systematic beating of boys by countless generations of women, as ably illustrated in boys' stories such as this. How the tabloids would rain their epithets of "evil" on poor Aunt Polly!

It's interesting to hear that certain scenes were reshot by George Cukor after preliminary audience testing. One would like to know which ones and how. Sixteen minutes have been shorn from the original cut, and it would be equally interesting to hear what those scenes were. Perhaps the references above to "thrilling Mississippi raft rides" is one clue. Certainly the skinny-dipping shot of Tommy Kelly overleaf does not exist in current prints. Restored versions of these classic films are a good selling point in the home video and DVD market, so one must assume the original footage is lost.

George Billings was 12. Philip Hurlic was 9. Tommy Kelly, by common acclaim the cinema's best incarnation of the Twain character, was 13 in this, his film debut. He went on, with happy inevitability, to become **"PECK'S BAD BOY WITH THE CIRCUS"** (38), had a small subdued role in **"THEY SHALL HAVE MUSIC"** (38, starring Gene Reynolds) and an all-but-invisible one in **"GONE WITH THE WIND"** the same year. Five films in 1940 included **"GALLANT SONS"** and **"MILITARY ACADEMY"**. Less than persuasive as a romantic courting Becky Thatcher, he was nigh well perfect as the scheming mischief-maker and braveheart Twain intended. It is rather sad that his career was effectively over with this one performance.

[Mickey Rentschler](#) (14) repeated his Tom Harper role the following year in **"THE ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN"** (oddly without Kelly) and seems to have had more sustained success with casting directors. Described by Holmstrom as "a strong, handsome, rather scornful-looking boy", he featured prominently the same year in a matinee serial, **"RADIO PATROL"**, and his other films included **"HIS PRIVATE SECRETARY"** (33), **"KID MILLIONS"** (34), **"BOYS' TOWN"** (38) and **"PECK'S BAD BOY WITH THE CIRCUS"** (38). Of David Holt, Holmstrom writes "He was more fun in unsympathetic roles. Like his great predecessor Jackie Searl, he played sneaky brother Sid in **'TOM SAWYER'**." Here 10, among David's thirty or so features were **"MARY STEVENS, M.D."** (33), **"THE LAST DAYS OF POMPEII"** (35), **"TROUBLE FOR TWO"** (36) and **"BEAU GESTE"** (39) - a very similar part, as tattling cousin "Gussie" in the boyhood sequence.

Other versions were made, generally as plain **"TOM SAWYER"**, in 1917 (Jack Pickford), 1930 (Jackie Coogan), 1936 (Soviet Union), 1938 (Billy Cook), 1968 (Mexico), 1972 (TV serial with Josh Albee), 1973 (Johnny Whitaker) and 1981 (Soviet Union). There will certainly be others.

See those, and subject index under **BOY MEETS GIRL**, [CORPORAL PUNISHMENT](#), **EYEWITNESSES TO MURDER / BOY WHO CRIED WOLF**, [HISTORY](#), **KIDS OUTWIT THE CROOKS**, [ORPHANS / ADOPTION](#), [RASCALS & SCALAWAGS](#), **RECOMMENDED TITLES**, **RUNAWAYS / STOWAWAYS**, [SCHOOL](#) and of course [MARK TWAIN](#).