



*The Gold Coast Film Unit at work*

## **Cameraman on the Gold Coast**

*George Noble, documentary cameraman, in an interview with the Editor, CINE-TECHNICIAN, talks about Film-making problems on the Gold Coast*

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**I** BECAME cameraman in the Gold Coast Unit in April, 1949. Sean Graham was the director, and there were three willing but inexperienced African assistants. Mostly, the films made by other units in the Colonies were small, single-reelers. Graham decided to make longer films, story films, films about the Africans themselves, played by themselves, in their own land, about their own people.

Films are shown out there by mobile cinema vans, which tour the villages giving shows, and the visit of the van is looked forward to by the Africans in the bush, as this is one of their few ways of knowing anything about what goes on in the world, or even in places a hundred or fifty miles

away. It is very rare that Africans go away from their villages, and if they do go away to study, very, very few go back to the villages.

The vans, run by African technicians, show a very mixed collection of films. Usually there is a newsreel—Churchill's election speech, silent, was a great hit—a Colonial Film Unit picture, something about African activities in other lands, and then a comedy. This is usually an old, a very, very old Chaplin, and the fact that Charlie may fall down, or knock somebody else down, or get a pail of water thrown in his face, makes them roar with laughter. It is all silent with an interpreter and a record player. I have never seen people go so hysterical with laughter. This is what they like, and this is what we have to compete with. It may seem strange to people at home, but one film that went down well with Africans was "Sanders of the River"!

The work of the unit? When we started, our equipment consisted of one Newman Sinclair, a Vinten Gyro tripod, and enough 16-mm. film to equip a unit three times the size, and three 16-mm. cameras. However, that is all over now, and I don't want to dwell on the 16-mm. side. We have added to our equipment since and we made a fairly good dolly, on which we have got some very steady tracking shots. This, in itself, I think, is a great thing as I personally know many units which would never have attempted to make one in England, let alone in Africa.

Trying to get Africans to act in a film can be heartbreaking. We go to a village which we have picked for location. There we have a conference with the chiefs and elders—all very polite and charming, but inclined to be a bit suspicious. When we had got over this, we would begin to pick our cast for the picture, and all of them would agree, at the bidding of the chief, to turn up the following morning, and we would depart, thinking that all was well.

The next morning came—not a soul would turn up. And failure to be there would be accounted for by one of the following reasons: someone had died; or they had all gone off to market, usually about ten miles away and would not be back till next day; or the idea of being photographed was either unlucky or not done by the best people; or the part allotted to one of them was not in keeping with his social position; or that the husband of one of the women had objected.

Another argument that held us up a lot was the accusation that we were a commercial unit, going to make a lot of money from the picture while they got nothing. A scale of pay had to be devised then, with more money for those who did the bigger parts; then, of course, there would be a complete stoppage if, say, one of the minor chiefs who just had a walking-on part found he was getting less than, say, a petty trader who perhaps had a whole sequence built round him. After a lot of talk, and a re-arranging of pay rolls, we would be ready to start.

Then one or two of the people, who had moved around and seen films about Africans, might raise an argument. The films they had seen or heard about usually showed African women stripped to the waist, and this, they would tell the rest of the people, was showing the African as a savage. A first-rate example of a little learning being dangerous.

The result was that everyone would go to the opposite extreme, insisting that the women wore three times the clothing they usually did. The fact that all about us, women working alongside the location were naked to the waist, made not the slightest difference.



*The boy Kumasenu*

This was carried to a ridiculous degree even in the case of tiny tots about five or six. These kiddies, with their lovely glistening skins and their tiny strings of beads look beautiful, and are so natural that they form an integral part of the daily life. As soon as we appeared they were put into stupid and often dirty pairs of knickers that made them look, and feel, entirely unnatural. When we objected, an African attached to our unit, who spoke good English, did not agree with us; he went on to say that if it was his child he would object to her being photographed as she really was. All these things proved very disheartening, and will affect the natural beauty of the finished film. However, perhaps in time our friends will understand, and realise that insisting on things like this is just as bad as doing what they think we want them to do. In other words, just as they think the outside world will get a wrong impression of unclothed Africans, they will get an equally wrong idea when they see children with these ridiculous western ideas thrust upon them. However, I am glad to say that after a three-week stay in one village the people began to wonder whether their "wiser members" were right after all.

It was necessary for us Europeans to live in Rest Houses, which were sometimes a matter of 15 to 20 miles from the actual location. The roads are the worst in the world. In the wet weather they are completely impassable and sometimes completely closed, whilst in the dry weather they are bone-cracking, or rather I should say "spring-cracking". A well-known maker of African films once made the remark that vehicles are more important than cameras. With this I could not agree more.

Then again we had the wonderment of the African to put up with when we started to lay a fifteen yard track for the dolly. Taking a film was one thing, but putting down the rails for the camera to travel on was quite another thing.

Incidentally, the laying of a track in the jungle, which in one case we came across meant levelling some twenty square yards, is something I should like to see the high-priced help from some of the bigger studios trying to do.

The African is strange when it comes to pictures. If you want a posed picture of him doing something, then he is all against it, but you try and snatch some stuff in a crowded market and every one stops and either looks in the camera or keeps bothering you to take his picture.

Again, we had in this film three women and a man as the leads, and as the time went on they got better and better. One girl was referred to as "One-take Janet". This girl would never do anything right at rehearsal, but as soon as the camera started she went through the actions perfectly. They were not easy things either. To get a native girl to imagine that her child was dead and to show her grief, is not an easy thing to do in any country, but this girl was amazing. There is a big close-up in the film of the tears running down her face. Another scene called for a child of six to lie on a rug and appear to be in pain. The child started rolling about and really did appear to be in pain. Again, a crowd of people had to wave to an imaginary friend going away on an imaginary lorry. Not very hard, you say? Just try it, my friend, in front of a camera, in fact, three feet in front. All these things, all these headaches, are repaid, however, when just one such thing happens as I have mentioned, and makes one think that if you really try and never let up, there are wonderful pictures to be made. I hope I shall be lucky enough to be still here, working with the unit, when these pictures are made.

## Standard Rules for Safety-Base Splicing

### FILM DAMAGE COMMITTEE AGREES

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**T**HE need to standardise the size and type of film space of positive prints has been agreed by the Film Damage Advisory Committee which, in consultation with all sides of the industry, has made a number of important recommendations.

It was found that many projectionists were highly suspicious of any narrow inter-perforation joins even to the point of cutting these out