

Camera Unit in Africa

IN the March issue we announced that the first camera unit had gone to West Africa to carry out the first programme of overseas filming. This is by far the most significant development which has taken place in the short history of the Unit. The principle has been agreed that the majority of the films to be made for showing to colonial people must necessarily have a colonial background. On account of war difficulties we have hitherto had to rely for colonial material on that faithful band of overseas workers who gave up a great deal of their very limited leisure to the production of 16 mm. films under conditions which might well have depressed the most enthusiastic worker.

Our first camera unit left England by air for Accra on 5th January. It consisted of a director-cameraman, an assistant cameraman and an editor-manager, with Mr. W. Sellers as producer in charge. They were supplied with two cameras, recording gear and essential transport and equipment to ensure their mobility. The cameras and a minimum amount of equipment were taken with them by air, while the heavier material and camera trucks followed by sea.

The party arrived in Accra, Gold Coast, on 7th January and lost no time in settling in and preparing for early operations. It was essential to carry out first a complete range of camera tests, as no member of the unit had yet worked with a 35 mm. camera under tropical conditions. These first tests despatched to London by air were received in good time, processed and screened at Soho Square on 16th January. It was dis-

Shooting a weaving scene





A new experience for the village

appointing to find that the quality of the majority of the tests was veiled and flat. It was obvious that the important problem of exposures and suitable filters was not yet solved.

Meantime, the camera unit received its first setback, for with the initial camera tests still incomplete, Mr. P. Sargent, the director-cameraman, had to be admitted to hospital. With the limited time at their disposal before the breaking of the rains, this was a particularly unfortunate incident. The assistant cameraman struggled along manfully with three short *Cinemazine* items which it was proposed to take as further tests for the two cameras. The first item was taken at a Scout camp which happened to be in progress in Accra. Some days later, one of the Gold Coast regiments returned from the Far East for demobilisation, and it was thought advisable to cover this. Before the end of January, the Secretary of State for the Colonies arrived in Accra, an event which was well worth recording.

Meantime Mr. Sellers was busy investigating what was considered to be the most important film in the programme, on the subject of tuberculosis, a disease which has long been a scourge in the West African colonies. Unfortunately, the Medical Department's specialist on the disease was at work up-country and it meant a long, trying journey of over 400 miles by road. It was well worth the effort for, with his assistance, a satisfactory treatment was knocked into shape. Just as it was finished, news came through of the arrival of the Secretary of State. The return journey to the coast was done in a single day, a remarkable feat of driving under such difficult road and climate conditions.

The first rushes from London were screened in Accra on 30th January. They were accompanied by the fullest possible report, offering a

variety of suggestions for the improvement of the quality. It was a great disappointment to the unit to find there was so much veiling and flatness, and this was particularly noticeable with the material taken with the No. 1 camera. The suspicion was growing that the lenses in this camera were too soft for the strong tropical light. Rushes now continued to arrive in a steady stream, but, in varying degrees, they showed evidence of the same flatness and veiling. Each batch of material received was carefully reported on by air mail.

It transpired that over a period of nearly six weeks there was a complete hold-up of airmail correspondence, which, of course, meant that the unit was working completely in the dark. Fortunately, Mr. Sargent was discharged from hospital after the fifth week and quickly got down to the problem of exposures. By making a series of hand tests he arrived at the conclusion that No. 1 camera was unsuitable for tropical work and discarded it completely.

In late March news was received that fourteen airmail letters sent from London between 30th January and 7th March, most of them containing detailed reports on material received, were delivered to the unit together on 15th March. This was the second serious setback for, with the approach of the rains, every day was valuable. By this time the unit was hard at work at a village in Avatime near the Togoland border, making a film on weaving. Previously a very primitive method of spinning and weaving existed in this village. A pupil from the village school who worked his way to Achimota College introduced into his village the more modern methods of spinning and weaving which he had been taught at the college. The result was a thriving village industry which

Making recordings



has completely revolutionised the life of the people. It should make a most interesting film story.

When things appeared to be going admirably, the No. 2 camera broke down completely and work came to a standstill. The Film Officer of the Gold Coast happened to be with the unit at the time. He and the cameraman started to strip the camera and motor completely at 3 o'clock in the afternoon. They discovered that two of the cog wheels were rubbing. A delicate washer was made to separate the wheels, and by 2.30 the following morning they had successfully reassembled the camera. There were, of course, a few exciting moments before the camera was given a trial run, and naturally, sighs of relief when it was found to be working perfectly. Shooting was resumed without the loss of any valuable days.

It became obvious to everyone that the risk of relying on one camera was too great; approval was given to send out by air another technician with a more suitable camera. He left Hurn airport on 11th April, arriving in Accra on 13th April, which was about the date when shooting was scheduled to begin on the tuberculosis film. A personal contact with the unit at work was of particular value at this stage. The technician taking the camera had seen the West African material screened several times and had taken part in the lengthy discussions. He was thus able to give much detailed information which it is often quite impossible to set out satisfactorily in the most careful report. Furthermore, as the unit had been working at high pressure for several weeks, often ignoring meals to finish important sequences, the arrival of an additional worker was a welcome relief and improved the prospects of completing the programme before the rains set in.

Judging by the quality of the later sets of rushes received, it would appear that the difficult problem of exposures has been solved. The material of the arrival of the West African troops in Accra has cut well and should be available for theatrical showing quite soon. Now that the unit has returned from West Africa, final editing of the other material can begin.

There is a tremendous amount of work waiting to be done. The Gold Coast alone estimate that, dealing only with urgent subjects, one camera unit can be kept fully occupied for at least five years. Nigeria has many problems which the film can help to solve and is anxious for a unit to start work there as early as possible. It was originally intended that half of the first tour should be spent in Nigeria and half in the Gold Coast. On account of the late start and the various delays in production, it was realised that neither colony would benefit much by a divided effort; it was decided after consultation with Nigeria to complete the whole of the short tour in the Gold Coast. Efforts are being made to organise two units to start work in Africa next October.

Even though the time at the disposal of the camera unit on this occasion has been so short, many valuable lessons have been learnt which will certainly result in a great saving of effort and time in all subsequent trips.