



THESE PHOTOGRAPHS TAKEN DURING THE ROYAL TOUR OF TONGA WERE RATED TWO OF THE 200 OUTSTANDING PRESS PICTURES OF A DECADE.

# A photographer met the Queen

## ROBBIE WRIGHT'S CAMERA SPOTLIGHTS PACIFIC LIFE

By STUART INDER



The man behind the most famous camera in the South Pacific islands, Wright has photographed the Queen.

IN Nukualofa, capital of the Kingdom of Tonga, Queen Salote in her private beach house one day in 1956 was talking with a distinguished visitor. They were admiring a batch of Press photographs when a slight figure approached them.

Smiling to her visitor, Queen Salote said, "This is Robbie Wright, of Suva."

In such an informal manner as this did Robertson Ramsay Wright, the man behind the South Pacific Islands' most famous camera, meet Queen Elizabeth II of Britain—who happened to be the distinguished visitor. The Press photographs which the two Queens had been admiring had been

taken by Rob Wright, and were of Queen Elizabeth's South Pacific tour.

Wright has been known to Queen Salote since he was a young man. He has photographed most of the important royal occasions in Tonga in recent years, and most of the other important occasions in the South Pacific, too, for that wide area is his beat.

He works principally for the Public Relations Office of the Fiji Government, though his photographs appear regularly in the world's leading magazines, and in newspapers and periodicals everywhere.

Two of his pictures not long ago were selected by the Encyclopedia Britannica to appear among the "Best 200 Press Pictures of a Decade."

Like the work of most first-rate photographers, Wright's pictures have a sparkle, a sharpness and a particular form of composition that is typical.

Because of the publicity that Wright's pictures have brought the islands, and to Fiji in particular, he

received the M.B.E. in the Birthday Honours of 1959, although he insists he hasn't the vaguest idea of what the honour was for.

What he does know, he says, is that he likes his job. And he got it through the back door.

Born at a Government station at Sigatoka, Fiji, in July, 1906, son of an Englishman whose family had originally migrated to Australia, young Wright grew up with Fijians.

### Tasty toasted crickets

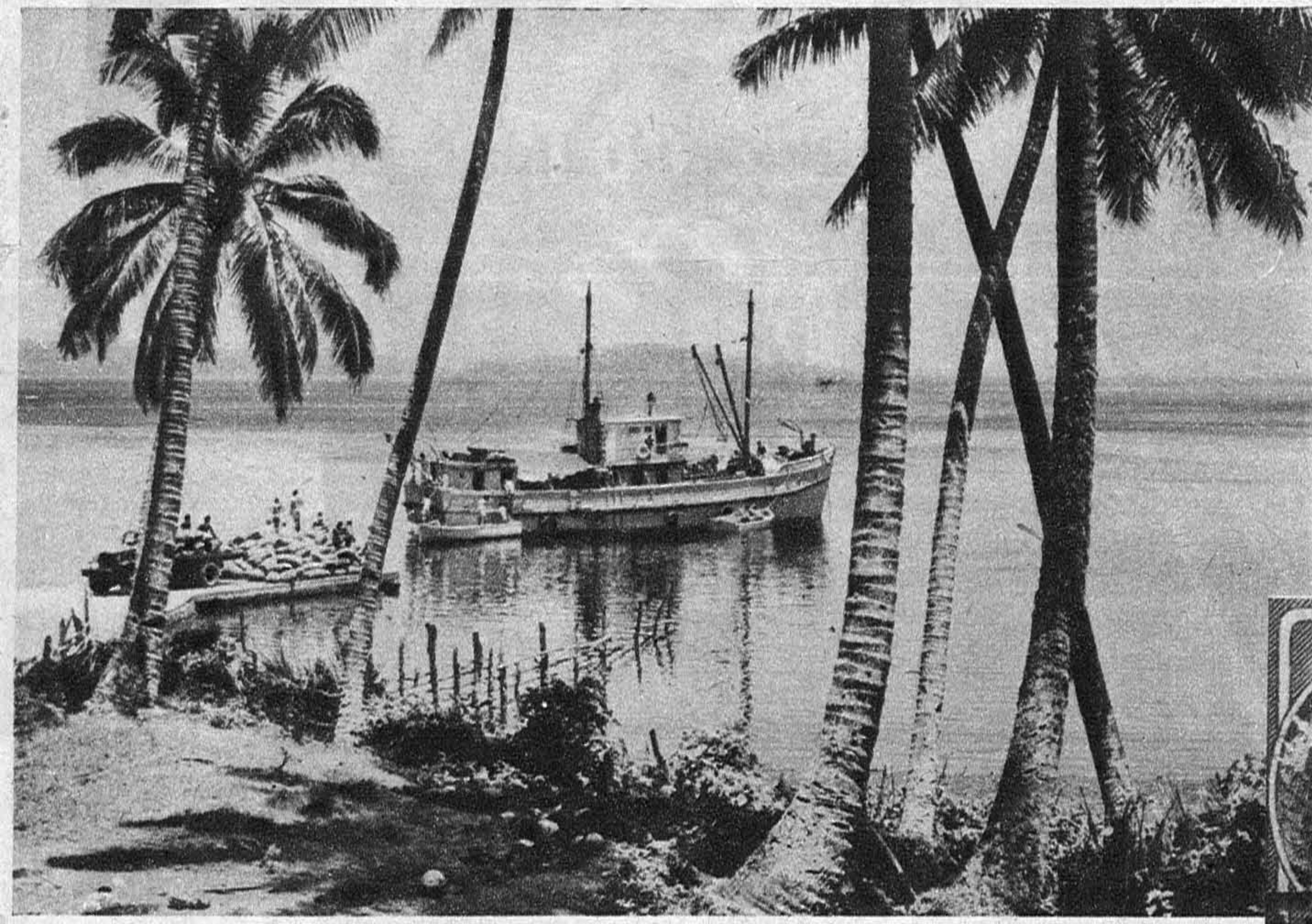
His earliest memories are of visits to the interior when he was carried in a swinging chair by Fijian prisoners. Wright senior was then Governor's Commissioner of three Fiji provinces.

Young Wright's guardian angel at that time was a native police sergeant named Tomasi, and Rob often sat in his hut at dusk while the big Fijian fed him toasted crickets—quite a delicacy in those parts.

Rob had no complaints, although his parents may have had other views if they had known about it.

In the Rewa River area, Wright learned to swim, and fish—the start of something which, next to photography, is his greatest interest today. He is a skilled skindiver, and an authority on fishing in Fiji. He has taken many underwater pictures.

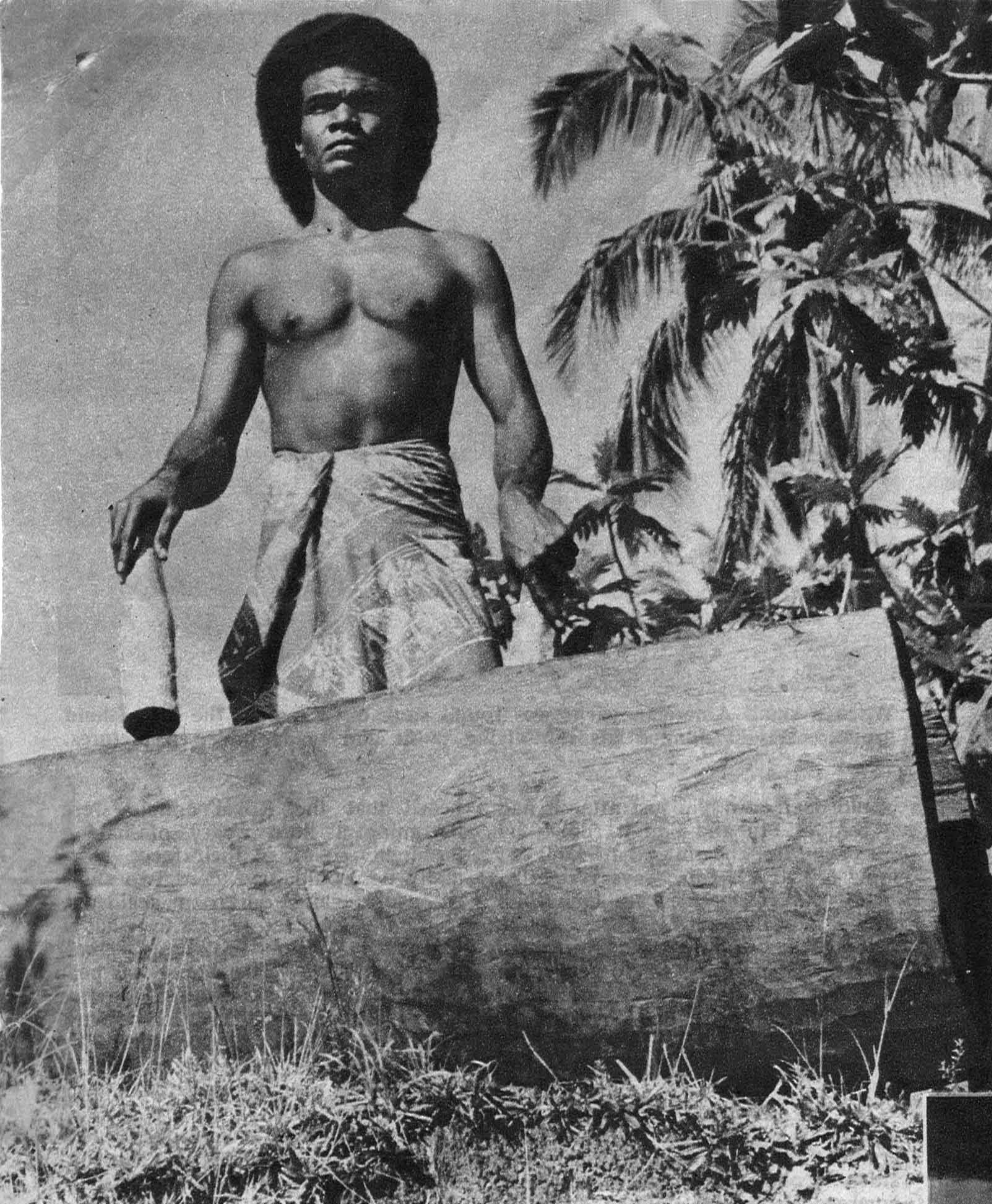
About that time, Wright's parents took him to Sydney, accompanied by



His symbolic study of South Pacific industry — sacks of copra being loaded on to a freighter — was embodied in a Fiji postage stamp.







A low angle was chosen to accent the fine figure of a Fijian against the sky. The drum was once used to summon warriors to war and to cannibal feasts.

a shock-haired Fijian named Livai as his attendant. Livai attracted quite a lot of attention from Sydneysiders, as also did Rob, because the pair chattered volubly in Fijian.

At 16, a fairly husky youth, Wright drifted from one job to another until his future career was discovered for him by a Continental photographer named Matzene who visited Fiji.

Wright became fascinated with photography, and occasionally borrowed Matzene's 11 x 14 camera for portraits. When Matzene left Fiji, he left behind a young man determined to get into the photographic business.

There was no immediate opportunity for making a living at photography in Fiji at the time, so Wright acquired a saxophone, taught himself music, and left for Sydney and Melbourne, where he played with a number of dance bands and theatre orchestras and eked out a somewhat precarious living.

When the talkies came, Wright thought he saw the beginning of the end for live musicians, returned to Suva, and was soon headed east to the United States in a 50ft yacht, which a mate had bought in Suva.

It was the early 1930s, when the future seemed to hold little for youth, and the four who made up the yacht crew took six months to sail her to the U.S., calling at such magic-named places as Tonga, Pago Pago, Pukapuka, Suvarrow, Penrhyn and Honolulu on the way to San Francisco.

That type of travel is fairly common now, but not too many had sailed north-about in small boats in those days. Captain Hal Ferris, now of the

Matson Line, and Wright, are the two survivors of that little epic.

In the United States, Wright spent several years around the west coast, making music in nightclubs and speak-easies, during the prohibition days. In San Francisco alone there were several hundred "speaks" and what passed then for nightclubs. For young Wright, who was growing up, it was an exciting era.

He played rugby for San Francisco's Olympic Club, champions of Northern California, during a revival there of that type of football. The team included South Africans, New Zealanders, Australians, as well as Americans. For a while Wright was a rugby coach at the University of San Francisco.

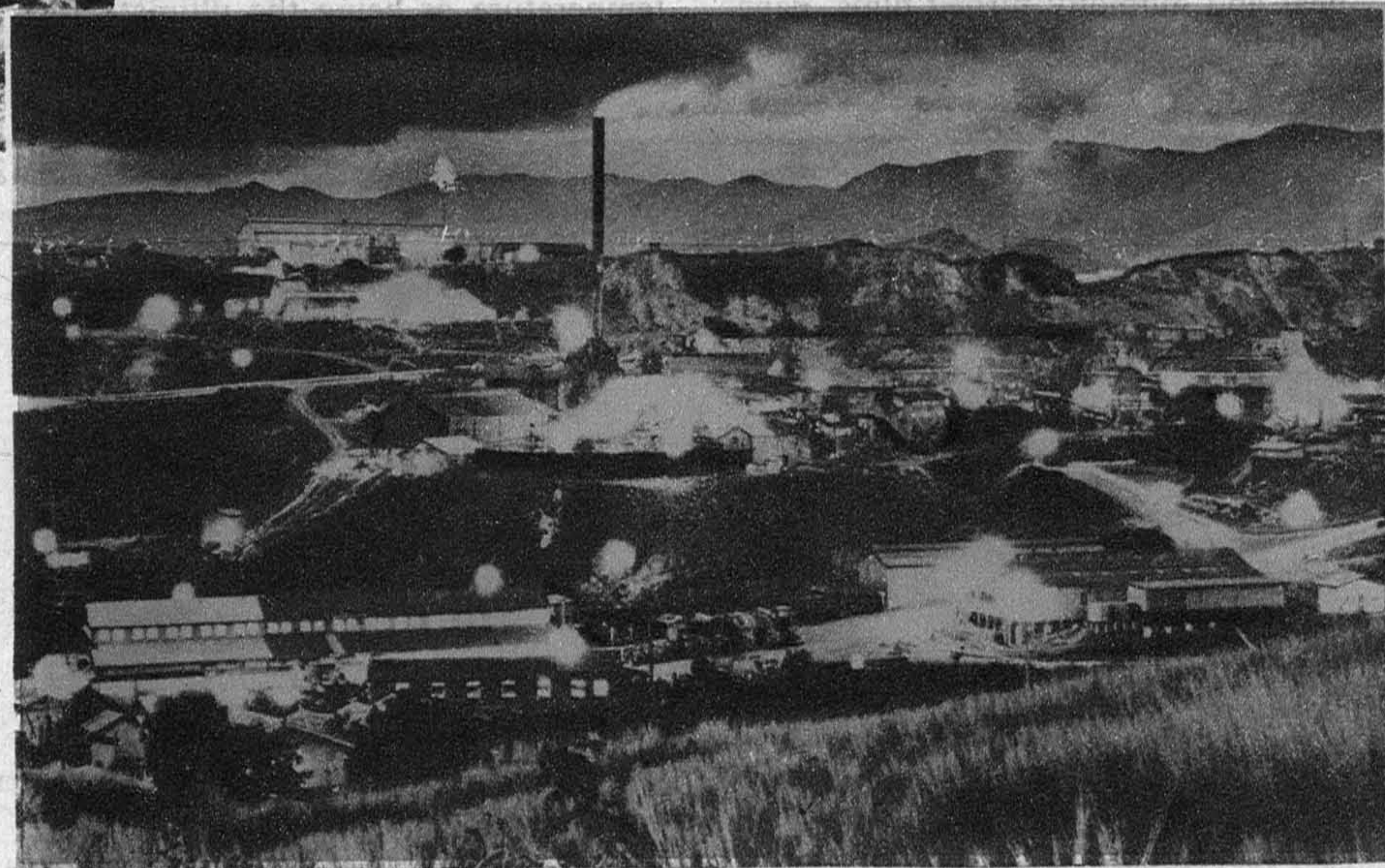
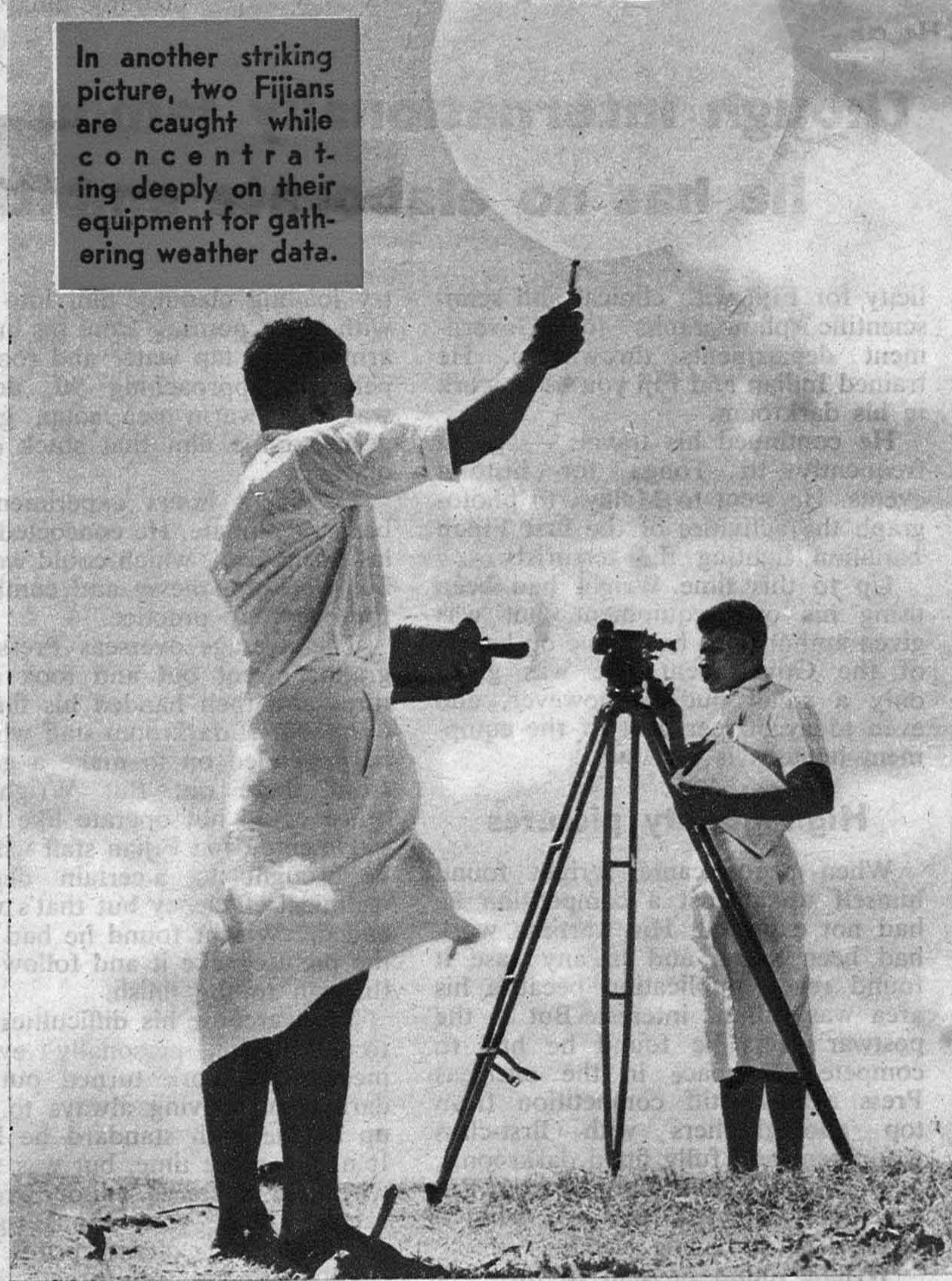
### Like the real thing

Then the lure of gold called. From Fiji Wright senior wrote to his son telling him of fabulous gold strikes around the Tavua area of Fiji. Rob Wright had tried gold fossicking around the Sierra Nevada country in America, without success, but Fiji looked like the real thing, so back he went posthaste.

He found the field at Tavua staked for miles around, so he did the next best thing and went to work for one of the two large established mines—Loloma, which was then in the process of development.

Shift work on this job left him with time on his hands. He imported a camera, enlarger, lights and all the bits and pieces. His only accommodation was in a barracks, but he built

In another striking picture, two Fijians are caught while concentrating deeply on their equipment for gathering weather data.



After making a calculated under-exposure at dusk to register buildings' outlines, Wright waited for lights to come on and exposed the film a second time.

a miniature darkroom nevertheless, and put all the time he could to acquiring a practical knowledge of photography.

The mine management became interested in his hobby and commissioned their employee to take photographs of the mine development, both on the surface and underground.

When Wright married about that time (to Suva girl Helen "Micky" Tarr) one room of their new home was turned immediately into a darkroom.

The Pacific war came and family commitments took Wright to Suva to be with his aged parents. He called in to see Harold Cooper, then the chief of a newly-formed Government Information Office in Suva.

The War Ministry in London wanted pictures of the war effort of the Pacific Islands so Wright was employed on trial. He soon won a job on the staff, travelling widely through

the South Pacific getting the pictures wanted by London headquarters.

All the Pacific island groups came within his orbit—the Gilberts, the Solomons, the New Hebrides, New Caledonia, Funafuti and Tonga. Both Cooper and Wright were commissioned in the Fiji Military Forces and were given passes to make their travel into most zones easy.

Much of Wright's work found its way into the overseas Press, and such was the publicity gained for the Pacific area by Cooper and Wright that when the war ended it was decided to continue the wartime Information Office under the new title of Public Relations Office. A new P.R.O. took over, in Len Usher, an old Fiji hand who has been editor of the daily "Fiji Times" for the past three years.

Wright's time was almost entirely devoted to documentaries and pub-



## Though internationally famous, he has no elaborate ambitions

licity for Fiji, with clinical and semi-scientific photographs for Government departments thrown in. He trained Indian and Fiji youths to work in his darkroom.

He continued his travels — going frequently to Tonga for historic events. He went to Malaya to photograph the activities of the first Fijian battalion fighting the terrorists.

Up to this time Wright had been using his own equipment, but was given authority to buy some on behalf of the Government. He was given only a small budget, however, and even today 50 per cent of the equipment he uses is his own.

### High quality pictures

When peace came Wright found himself up against a competition he had not expected. His wartime work had been good, and in any case it found ready publication because his area was full of interest. But in the postwar years he found he had to compete for space in the overseas Press against stiff competition from top photographers with first-class equipment and fully fitted darkrooms, who produced their pictures from Europe and America, and not from a tropical South Pacific island.

Wright found he had to turn out quality work in a climate where the heat and humidity turned films, paper and the photographer limp. He had to

try loading clammy film into a tank with sweat pouring from his brow and arms. With tap water and room temperature approaching 90, developer was like warm pea soup, giving a grain to the film that stuck out like marbles.

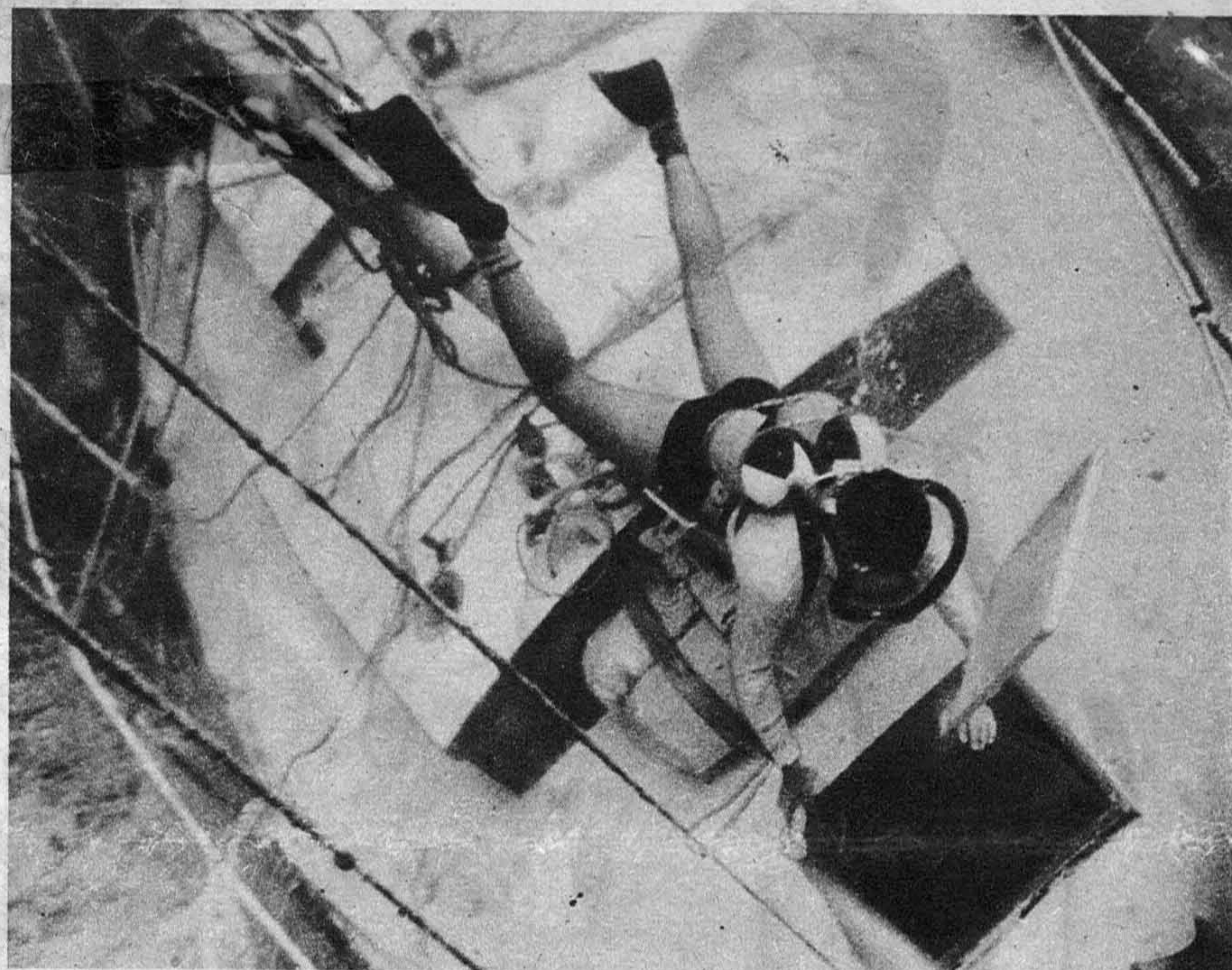
He spent hours experimenting to beat the climate. He concocted formulas of his own, which could work well but were too messy and cumbersome for everyday practice.

The average overseas Press photographer went out and took his pictures and then handed his films over to an expert darkroom staff who could be depended on to make a good job from there on. But Wright's Fiji office could not operate like that.

He employed Fijian staff who could be brought to a certain degree of technical efficiency but that's where it ended. Wright found he had to plan the picture, take it and follow it right through to the finish.

To overcome his difficulties he had to scrutinise personally even the mechanical work turned out in his darkroom, striving always to keep it up to the high standard he had set. It meant more time, but was worth it when an overseas editor wrote and said, "Thank you, Mr Wright, for some very nice quality prints."

Wright had to forget the text books which called for a 68 degree temperature as being the ultimate for good photographic work. At times he



When a small American yacht was found sunk on a reef in the Lau Island group, Wright donned his skin-diving outfit and made undersea pictures.

would open raw film just after it had arrived in Fiji and find it ruined by fungus. "But beating that kind of thing is half the fun," says Wright.

His many successes are bound up with a percentage of failures, a fate that besets even the best craftsmen. One he is unlikely to forget could have been one of his best pictures. It was in Suva during the Royal tour.

### Wonderful background

On the evening of the State banquet and ball, Wright went to Government House early to get into position to photograph the Queen as she emerged from the lounge to walk across the lawn to a big marquee.

Earlier in the afternoon he had selected a spot which provided a wonderful tropic background. There were husky Fijian guards in national costume and the whole atmosphere of a tropic night. Wright suggested to the Governor, then Sir Ronald Garvey, that it would make a wonderful picture if the Queen could come out alone ahead of the others. Sir Ronald promised to do what he could.

At the appointed time the Queen, alone, came on to the lawn. Wright waited until she was in the preselected position and then shot a flash. He made only one exposure, as he had

heard that the Royal couple were becoming a little weary of having flashlights go off in their faces. Normally he would have used two shots to ensure against darkroom accidents.

"I was well satisfied with what I had until I came across my 'great' photo," he says. "The setting was perfect, the Queen was exquisite in her gown, but the bright flash in the dark night had caused her to blink. The Queen had her eyes closed."

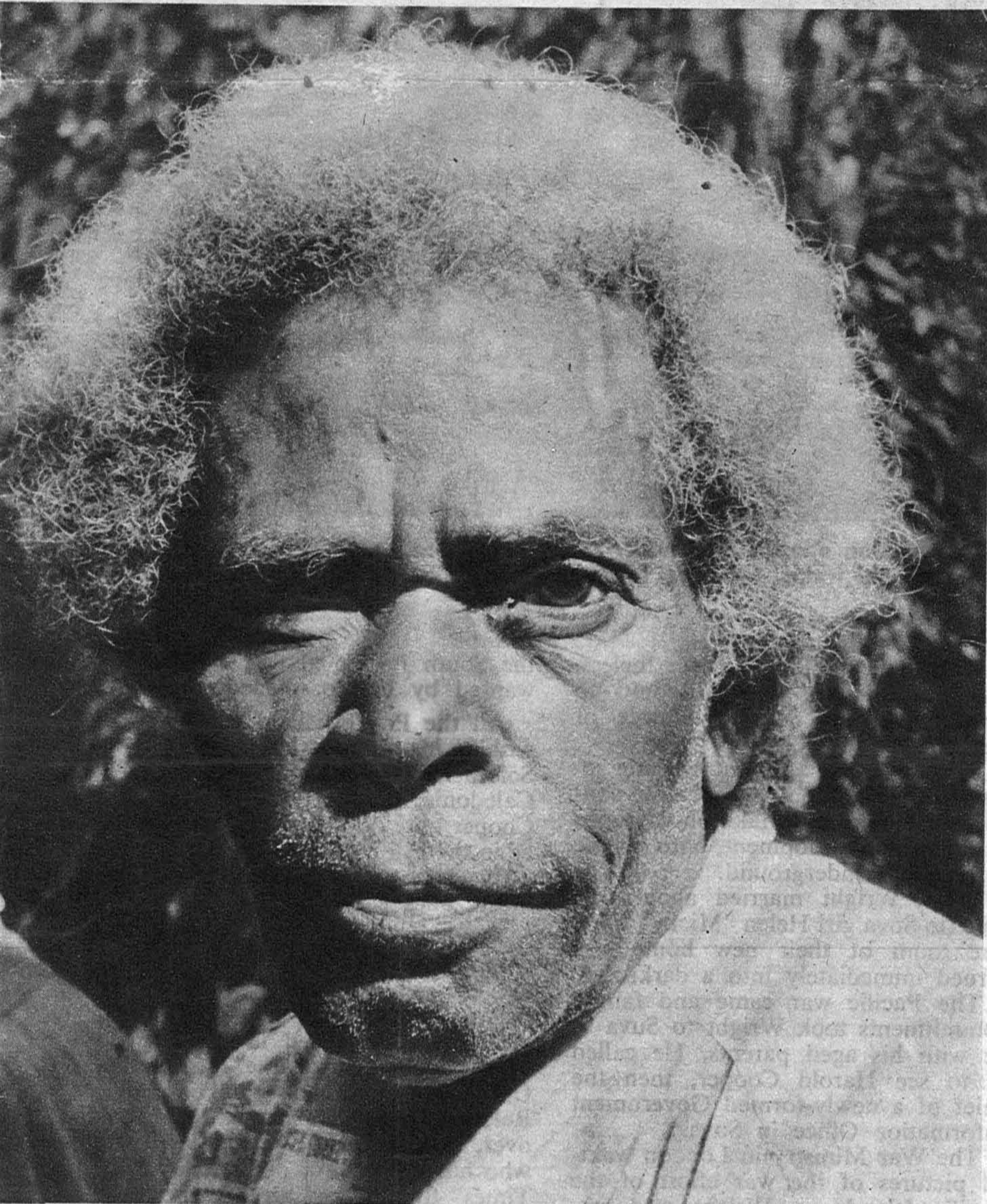
That was one picture that never left the darkroom.

One of the first to introduce spear-fishing to Fiji, Wright is also a recognised local authority on line fishing. A regular fishing column he writes for the "Fiji Times" is widely read.

Once he spent three months of his leave lugging an underwater movie camera around the sea beds of Fiji, to make a colour movie for an American company.

Rob Wright has no plan for the future, except to keep fishing, keep photographing and to see his young family of three children grow up to become citizens of Fiji.

While he continues to take his pictures of the South Pacific there is no doubt the world's Press will continue to use them. All the photographs used with this article are from his cameras. #



At first glance it appears this picture was taken in blazing sunshine. Actually it was done with an electronic flashlight which was held high off the camera.



The making of a ceremonial yaqona is portrayed. The man behind the tanca is squeezing the fluid through a type of flax. A flashlight lit up the shadows.