

LA FETE DE JEANNE D'ARC

400 year old Pageantry in New Caledonia

By DORIAN SAKER

THE MONTH of May in New Caledonia is a month of fêtes. Almost every Sunday, under the white glare of the blistering sun, some scene from history, some procession, is organized in the village square, under the massive flamboyants and tall mimosas. It is our privilege, members of the N.Z.E.F.I.P. quartered in the village, to witness these pageants.

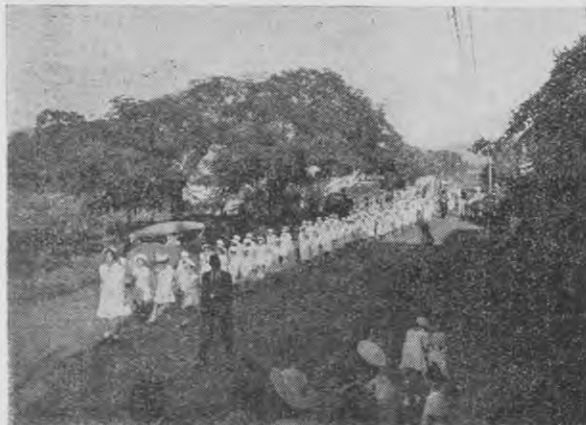
Of all the fêtes the most historic, the most important, is that in honour of Joan of Arc, the young saviour of France. Preparations for this fete are well in hand months before the actual ceremony. The young demoiselle who is to play the part of the Saint has to be picked from a host of aspirants. The robes have to be cleaned and garnished. Horses have to be groomed. Old armour has to be renewed, and all have to be rehearsed in their parts. For this is the great day of the year. On this day all the housewives of the village will be attired in their best—silk stockings will be worn, and the latest thing in hats. Friends will come in from farms deep in the Chaîne Centrale, relations will be seen who have been absent for a year. You will meet any

one you want to meet, and maybe some whom you were avoiding, in the square at the Fête of Joan of Arc.

For myself, I have picked out a comfortable seat on the stone wall of the house belonging to one of my French friends. From here I can see everything. Opposite me is the concrete church, with its iron roof—the only cool haven in all the district. In the portals under the massive tower the altar is placed, covered with white drapes. On the steps are the two small boys whom I know well, servers on this occasion, dressed magnificently in scarlet. I would hardly know their serious mien.

The square itself is a mass of shouting colour. Near the steps of the church, in two groups, are the young "élèves" of the Ecole des Soeurs. The girls on the left are like a cloud of birds in their white frocks and blue scarves. The boys, restless and animated, wear green scarves. The head girl and the head boy carry richly embroidered banners. In between the two groups are the dignitaries of the district and their wives. Here are the Mayor and the local doctor, the town clerk, the lawyer, and the chief gendarme.

Farther back society begins. The women are in front to show their new dresses, and to look at them in their catty, coteried groups, you would never dream they were thousands of miles from the Boulevards of Paris—or that, in fact, most of them have never seen the capital of fashion. In the paragons of to-day, you would not recognize the housewives of tomorrow, going about their drab tasks, gossiping the siesta time away under their shady verandas.



The procession.