The Louisiana Mother's Day Classic—

A Bayou Pirogue Race

Louisiana's famed 19th-century pirate, Jean Lafitte, would hardly recognize his old hideout on Barataria Bay if he returned there now—especially if he arrived on Mother's Day. For the second Sunday in May is also the official day for descendants of the pirates and French colonists who settled the bayou country to gather at Barataria Bay for the annual World Championship Pirogue Races, sometimes called the Bayou Olympics. But even Lafitte would feel right at home racing one of those narrow, double-powed, shallow-draft vessels. They were the principal means of transportation through the bayous in his time. Today, racing these historic crafts is a festive, sports event found nowhere else in the country. Thousands of picnickers, cheering spectators, jam the bayou banks, perch on piers, boats, and even in the water itself along the mile-long course to watch the colorful spectacle. Although the Bayou Olympics, sponsored by the Lafitte Yacht Club, has trophies and cash awards for the winners, most of the contestants enter the race merely for the fun and glory—and the thrills. No pirogue race is complete without a contestant or two pushing his foot clear through the hull of his paper-thin craft, or without a pirogue sinking gently below the waves because of water splashed into the craft by overenthusiastic paddling. There are races for everyone, too. Women, and teen-age boys and girls, using any pirogue that's handy, compete against each other in a series of preliminary events. Then comes the big race that determines the world champion piroguer, a popular hero in the Louisiana bayou country.