Festival Country

If you hit the season at its peak, you can see knights in shining armor jousting to the tune of a back-bayou accordion, watch lovely young ladies in bright, brief costumes sweep the stage gracefully, bend, twist, pose — and poke frogs in the bottom.

In a month's time, you can watch — or join in — tests of skill in hog-calling, frog-jumping, butter-churning, fire-fighting, duck-calling, boat-racing, shrimp-eating, jam-making, pig-chasing, pole-climbing, bass-catching, ball-pitching and steer-wrestling. To name just a few.

And it all takes place within a 70-mile radius of Lafayette at harvest time in Southwest Louisiana, a time when the state's bayou country lays claim to the title of "Concession Mondiale de Joie de Vivre." For approximately 30 days, the area is truly the world capital of clean robust good times and unhindered joy of living.

The irrepressible Cajun spirit is evident at the Frog Festival in nearby Rayne. The highlight, a frog-jumping contest, bears little resemblance to the Calaveras County event in California, but Mark Tawin would have enjoyed the Cajun version.

There are frog jockeys — pretty young girls in brief, colorful costume with riding caps on their heads and quirks in their hands. These young ladies, while enjoying all the fun and public attention, are usually a bit leery of their companions in the contest.

Removing an entry from her wicker basket is probably the severest test of a jockey's courage, but she finally manages to transfer him to the "track." Then, stretching her arm to the limit so as to put as much distance as possible between herself and M'sieu Ouaoaouaron (bullfrog), she gingerly pokes him in the posterior with her quirt.

The crowd yells and applauds.

"Pooh-yi-yi!" someone exclaims.

"Did you see that jump?" And one wonders if reference is made to the distance covered by the frog in one direction or the jockey in the other.

Usually around mid-October, the Dairy Festival opens. It is held in Abbeville, home of the late Dudley J. LeBlanc, legendary Cajun medicine man whose barnstorming tour to promote his wonder medicine, Hardcoul, brought him fame and fortune. However, the lovely contestants in the Dairy Festival Queen contest are not toasted with Sen. LeBlanc's miracle potion, but with mugs of milk. (Milk punch is an acceptable form of the basic libation.)

Along with the pretty girls, parades, clowns and street dances, the dairy festival also features a butter-churning contest and a competition to determine the most proficient producer of the many dairy products offered by the area.

This event is noted for the drawing huge crowds and stellar personalities. Honored guests have ranged from Harry Truman to shoot-'em-up star Clint (Cheyenne) Walker.

And usually within a few days of the Dairy Festival, Opelousas honors the sweet potato at its Yam Festival.

In addition to fun and frolic, the Yambilee places strong emphasis on style shows, arts and crafts exhibits, flower shows, and a lavish children's pageant. There is also a unique, enthusiastic and loud Acadian Folk Song Festival.

Of course, everything centers around the yard. The festival singers are "Yamettes," and an inventive display titled "The Yaminals" features sweet potatoes unaltered in shape but give slight decorative additions which change them into remarkable likenesses of various animals.

At the Yambilee, as at all Cajun festivals, the most apparent feature is the joie de vivre of the participants.

That same quality is just as much in evidence at the picturesque little fishing village of Delcambre, where firemen knock each other down with blasts from their firehouses during the Shrimp Festival.

And a similar warm, happy spirit prevails at Basile, where the Swine Festival — complete with hog-calling and catch-the-greased-pig contests — is held.

Also not to be forgotten down in the coastal marshes at Cameron is the Fur and Wildlife Festival in which one lovely, red-haired lady has been a consistent winner in the nutria-skinning contest.

Until a few years ago, Morgan City was the home of the Louisiana Shrimp Festival. Today, the big celebration is known as the Shrimp and Petroleum Festival. The gathering is an ecological oddity — a tribute to the ability of the fishing industry and the oil industry to co-exist profitably in Gulf waters. At festival time, the traditional blessing of the fleet — one of the most beautiful of Cajun ceremonies — is no longer limited to fishing boats. The grand water parade now includes lavishly decorated crew-boats and other oil industry craft.

The agenda of Morgan City's festival is remarkable by reason of length and diversification. Along with street dances and other traditional Cajun events, the program includes bowling tournament, tennis tournament, professional rodeo, high school football jamboree, fireworks spectacular, bass-fishing contest, style show, arts and crafts exhibits, and an international hydroplane race.

The Sugar Cane Festival at New Iberia opens with Farmers Day on which the town is filled with men in bib overalls and women in long gowns, aprons and sunbonnets.

During this three-day celebration, there are agricultural and livestock shows, square dancing, and an exciting fireworks display on historic Bayou Teche.

A Queen Sugar and King Sucroce are crowned, then feted with a lavish ball. Livestock is auctioned, ball games played, and water fights held. There are boat races, parades, horse show, and a royal reception for Sugarland royalty.

"Sugar Lumps," Sugar Cane Festival counterparts of the Opelousas Yamettes, perform.

It is a fun-filled weekend, completely relaxed and open to any kind of uninhibited good time which is in keeping with the law and the strong moral sense of the Cajun people.