First Pirogue Race Netted 39-Year-Old Grandpa $18

A week ago today Malcolm Le Blanc won the world's pirogue racing championship on Bayou Baratra for the fourth time and received in addition to a handsome silver trophy a check for $200. A number of other firsts were marked by this 28th renewal of what has become a bayou classic: For the first time a queen of the race was chosen, crowned and given a place of honor to rule the revels. For the first time, a ladies race was staged as one of the events.

All in all, it was a far, far cry from the first race, staged in 1894, on Oct. 13, when a 35-year-old grandfather, who spoke with a drawl of English, won it in a borrowed pirogue and received $12 as top prize money.

I don't quite remember how I was drawn into the organization of this first pirogue championship race, except that it was through Mrs. E. J. Thibodaux, head of the Barataria Women's Club. Mrs. Thibodaux was a very wealthy woman. Her first husband had been Col. C. V. Waggoner, who owned a great deal of the land in the general area of a point which Little Barataria becomes Big Barataria, and who placed in operation a hand-powered barges across Little Barataria, a scheme that would hold two small cars that was moved across the bayou by a man who pulled it over with a notched club which he applied in a series of grips to a cable.

'Santa and His Mrs.'

This was called Waggoner's Ferry. Its site has been spanned for many years by the Waggoner bridge. Just downstream from this ferry, on a small island which was created by digging a canal around that section of the bank, was the home where Col. Waggoner's widow, later the wife of 'Judge' E. J. Thibodaux, lived. The site was one of great beauty, as was two other homes, one of that of Miss Margaret Thorne opposite Fleming Plantation on what was called Pointe Isle Bonne, the other the Fleming mansion of which Meigs Frost's daughter Madeline is chelaine to this day.

Mr. Thibodaux's judicious title was bestowed on him as a matter of courtesy. He was actually referee in bankruptcy for the federal court in this district. His thick beard and heavy moustache, once a fashionable red, had turned snobby white with the years, and it was his custom to sit in a chair, 'Santa Claus for the school children' of the area, both white and Negro, visiting the Rose Thorne school at Crown Point, the Fisher School at Lafitte, and so on each Christmas with Mrs. Thibodaux, and distributing a gift to each of the school children.

Mrs. Thibodaux had thus become the head of a women's club which she organized largely for the purpose of taking charge of what welfare work needed to be done among the needier families when times were bad, which was not often. Trapping was excellent, and in good years the returns from it were fabulous; mosa gathering, shrimp trawling, turtle hunting and frog-shining were other ways of supplementing the family income. Game was plentiful to assist the larder, and the almost unbelievably fertile soil produced fresh vegetables twelve months out of the year.

There were no roads to speak of. Motorists from New Orleans had to cross two of these hand-power ferries if going either to Lafitte or to Barataria. One was at Waggoner's crossing, the other across the mouth of the bayou des Oies (pronounced locally 'Baye-vah Zwaht') and the third over Bayou Villars from Pte. Isle Bonne. (For some totally unreasonable reason Bayou Villars was locally pronounced 'Bay Willow').

Birth of An Event

Naturally, local travel in the area was almost wholly by pirogue. Crab fishermen ran their lines by pirogue, many families went to church by pirogue of a Sunday, and only the shrimp fishermen used luggers with 'gazzers'.

Beaucoup Cousins

He won handily, covering the four and three-quarter mile course in 51 minutes and 9 seconds, for which feat he received the winner's purse — $18 — and a silver-plated cup which he explained through an interpreter he proposed to fill with wine as soon as he got home, and pass the vessel around to celebrate his victory. He was 39 years old. His seventh cousin, Etienne Billiot (for quite a while, thought the latter's name was H.N., and wondered what those initials stood for) was 15 years his senior, and likewise many times a grandfather at 54. He took down $13.00 as prize money. Still another Billiot, Andre, 22 years old and a bachelor, took third place and $8.98, and Henry Fernandez came in for fourth money — $4.93. I am no longer certain who figured out these pennypinching divisions, if it was not Miss Thorne, the school teacher.

Andre Billiot was the owner of the lot. He stood up in his pirogue, a clumsy and heavy one, to drive it forward. This feat would have been beyond many of the other contestants, among whom the most interesting one to me was a Certain Billiaud, junior. He had made, divided $45 of prize money into four sums and used it out in ponies.