EVERYONE knows about the Panama Canal. It's not a natural body of water, but was created by men to meet the needs of men. It's a long, narrow channel running between Darrow, La., and Blind River, about 60 miles upriver from New Orleans.

What's that you say? You thought it ran between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans? Oh, you're thinking of the OTHER Panama Canal. THIS one runs between Darrow, La., and Blind River.

The similarity in names isn't likely to cause confusion. After all, the purposes of the canals are entirely different. The “big” one is a channel for ships and the “little” one is a watershed—or, if you prefer, a drainage ditch.

At least, that's how Louisiana's Panama Canal got started, back in 1928. Every time there was a heavy rain, you had to put on your swimsuit up in Ascension Parish. Roads became pathways for boats. Farm fields became look-alikes for rice paddies. Homes on dry land became waterfront cottages—if not indoor swimming pools. The flooded conditions were likely to last days; the water was trapped.

Then the people in the area got together to improve their lot, and dirt started flying on the Panama Canal. They worked with shovels and mule-drawn slips, and they gave the water a place to go.

J. W. Duplessis, who has lived all his
Louisiana's Panama Canal could once have been likened to an oddly shaped pool of stagnant water, as shown in the photo at far left. Now, though, it's a fine waterway. At left, Chalmus George and Ruffin LeBlanc enjoy a boat ride on the Panama Canal. Going in, they pass Junious Johnson, above, fishing from shore.

Life in the area, said things got better right away. But as the years went by, the canal slowly filled up with silt and logs, and the land began to flood again. A massive cleaning project was called for.

Then, in 1960, the Ascension Parish Police Jury asked the Louisiana Soil Conservation Service for help in cleaning the canal out. The job was completed in 1968. The Panama Canal is now deeper and wider than ever, and its flood protection has reached an all-time high.

And that's not all. Lo and behold, after it was cleaned out, people discovered they had a great place for fishing, boating and swimming.

Lester Robert, who has lived on the canal for 25 years, says, "As far back as I can remember, the canal dried up in the summer—we didn't have a place to fish nearby.

"It isn't that way now," Robert said as his son proudly displayed a string of bream. Ruffin LeBlanc's "thing" is boating. He's another who lives right on the bank of the canal, making it quite a handy thing for him.

"Before the canal was improved," he says, "boating was dangerous—if not impossible. The canal was full of obstacles and snags, and sometimes it would dry up completely. Now, though, I see a lot of people in boats all up and down the canal."

"The fishing is better, too. A lot of swamps empty into the canal. There are about six or eight places right now where the water is just pouring in, and those are good places to catch bass. In fact, I took one little girl out fishing once—she'd never fished before, and she caught 18. You catch some fair-sized ones, too. I've heard of people taking eight-pounders out of this canal."

Lawrence Allen and his family like to swim, and the canal is right across the street from them. It's deep enough for diving, too—it hasn't gotten shallower than seven feet since the improvement was completed—so they've built themselves a diving platform.

"Now that the trash and dead trees are gone," says Allen, "the water's fine. It's clean enough to swim in. You get a little trash in it now and then, but not enough to make any difference."

C. M. George, district conservationist with the Louisiana Soil Conservation Service, says, "The main purpose of the Panama Canal—flood protection—is being achieved. That's not surprising. What is surprising is the amount of fun that's been gotten out of it."

To the sportsman as well as the farmer, too much water is just as bad as too little. But in the Panama Canal area, there seems to be just enough.
There are really no losers in Garyville roll. C. J. Tastet, a Louisiana State University fan, had to push Carl Monica, a Greenie supporter, last year.

Guess who Andrew Mury and his son, Darren, root for? Last year Mury got to ride because Tulane beat the point spread.

Leroy St. Pierre, with LSU hat, and Jerry Templain, cutting cake, started wheelbarrow parade with a friendly wager back in '58. It has grown into quite an event in Garyville.

Text and photos by
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