Pirogue Races:
A Paddling Tradition
By Gil Wevre

Flip backward the pages of time 31 years. Then travel to the fishing village of Lafitte on Bayou Barataria.
Not much had happened there since a pirate, first name Jean, made the area his headquarters.
But in 1934, the Barataria Women's Club staged an event.
Cake bake? Quilting bee? No, these hearty Cajun folk do better than that.
They held a pirogue race.
Nine of their men entered that first race, cutting cards for post positions. The paddling winner, one Maturin Billiot, won a silver cup and $18 cash for his efforts.
Today in Lafitte, the World's Championship Pirogue Races will be held on the history-laden bayou. Some 20 entries are expected in the four-mile world championship event, scheduled to begin at 4 p.m. This carries a $200 cash prize and is now sponsored by the Lafitte Yacht Club.
Odds-on favorite is Malcolm LeBlanc, who will be paddling for his seventh consecutive win. His older brother Gerald had won the race for four years preceding the younger LeBlanc's ascent to the championship.
A water parade will kick off the prerace events—with trophies for the best-decorated...
LeBlanc, who makes a living trawling for shrimp, applies a thin coat of wax on the hull of his racing pirogue. It's plywood and built especially for championship events.

This is set for 11 a.m. A series of two-mile contests (for men, women, boys and girls) will be run prior to the championship event.

Aside to Louisiana newcomers: a pirogue is a boat made by hollowing out a cypress log. These craft draw little water; fishermen and trappers use them to travel bayou-country streams, some of which are very shallow.

But racing pirogues differ from these workboats. The racers are about 20 feet long, very narrow, and made of plywood. They skim through the water with more speed than the workboats.

Thirty-one years ago, the Barataria Women's Club staged a race—one that revolutionized the art of pirogue making—and thereby launched a Louisiana tradition.

Photograph shows contestants in first race, run in 1934. Winner received trophy, $18 cash.