Carib Indians used it, Spaniards and French Canadians used it and the French explorers of Louisiana adopted it. The history of the Louisiana pirogue is fascinating and somewhat mysterious, for it is a source of wonder as to how its original name found a way north from the Carib Indians of South America and the lesser Antilles to Louisiana and French Canada.

Originally the pirogue was a dugout, hollowed out of a huge cypress log with fire and stone age tools by aboriginal natives of South Louisiana. Early French and Spanish settlers of Louisiana discovered the Indians using this small craft to travel over the marshlands. Later the Acadians, masters of "Making do", adopted the pirogue and have never stopped using it since.

Adaptable and versatile, the pirogue was to early Louisiana what the covered wagon and cow pony were to the West. All three brought settlers their arms, provisions, wives, mistresses and other amenities to parts of a country otherwise totally inaccessible.

In many parts of South Louisiana the pirogue has been the only transportation. Early exploration and commerce depended largely on the pirogue in Louisiana as did the progress of adventurers of the North and Midwest hang on the birch bark canoe and the western settlers upon the covered wagon.

The pirogue itself antedated the coming of the white man by more than a thousand years. Earliest references to it in Louisiana history are found in the accounts of Antoine Le Page Du Pratz. In 1718 he commented thusly: "For carrying a great number of men and their necessary baggage the Indians found it essential to have other conveniences; and nothing seemed so proper for this as some of their large hollow trees; of these they made their pettyaugres, some of which carry ten or twelve tons of weight. The pettyaugres are conducted by small oars, called pagaes, about six feet long, with broad points which are not fastened to the vessel but managed by the rowers like shovels."

Granddaddy of all Louisiana pirogues is an old primitive one now on display at the Louisiana State Museum in New Orleans. Reputedly over 200 years old, this one was discovered by accident, when a salvage company started looking for sunken logs and timber out of the streams near Ponchatoula. Under eight feet of mud, it was dredged up, a colossus of the pirogue-maker's art-fifteen feet long, several feet wide and pur cypress. Discoverers and museum authorities still cannot decide if it is of Indian or early French origin.

A descendant of these Indian hollowed out logs, the pirogue was, and still is, long, slim, low and pointed at both ends. Ideal for portage, it has a flat bottom that enables one man to drag it over marshy terrain and float it over practically "wet grass", as the saying goes. Or, to put it another way, the pirogue, Louisiana Acadians say, "walks the water" and can "ride on a dew."

When the French first came to Louisiana they brought with them hand axes and foot adzes. With the advent of these tools building went from slow primitive methods to a
production-line basis and soon these crafts were rolling into the bayous at the rate of one every four or five days.

The art of hewing the Louisiana dugout pirogue from a single cypress log is fast fading away with the passing of the last generation of veteran builders and the dwindling of available logs from the once vast virgin cypress swamps.

This ancient skill, passed on from father to son, has given away to modern technology. The present day trapper or fisherman may now go to the nearest lumber yard and secure necessary pre-cut cypress planks for building today’s counterpart of the old dugout.

Neither the last mentioned product nor its method of manufacture are quite as picturesque as the former but the modern plank-type pirogue which can be built in a matter of hours, is appealing to today’s rovers of the marshes and bayous.

A pirogue is nothing if not versatile. Among the Acadians of South Louisiana’s bayous, pirogues have been used for a number of purposes other than mere transportation—-even for such diverse ends as courting, elopements and funerals. Around Grand Chenier, pirogues are even used to round up cattle. In other sections, when corn is ready to harvest, a pirogue hitched to a mule helps gather the crop. In the bayou country pirogues have been used as a watering trough, dog houses, and places for hens to lay eggs.

And, when the folks along Bayou Lafourche refer to a three-pirogue wedding, they don’t mean there were so many guests that it required three pirogues to carry them across the bayou to Church. Mais non! At many weddings it takes three pirogues, filled with cracked ice, just to cool the liquid refreshments.

Its versatility notwithstanding, the pirogue also gives the impression of being tricky and perverse, if not carefully handled. Local legend says a pirogue can capsize if the rider shifts a chew of tobacco too vigorously from one cheek to another. One must also take care to wink at a bayou girl with fine legs, using both eyes at a time, lest the delicate balance be disturbed. But all legends have been topped by mischievous and chauvinistic tales of a pirogue’s well-ordered response to the mellifluous tones of the French-Acadian jargon, whereas the rasping phonetics of an “American” accent tend to rile the little boat.

A pirogue really displays its mettle at a race between two or more of these crafts. Pirogue races are not new but the championship tournament—the “World’s Series”—of all organized bayou pirogue races started in earnest over thirty years ago, when a group of Barataria clubwomen developed the Pirogue Racing Association with the first races held at the community of Lafitte on Bayou Barataria. More than half the racers then, as now, came from one bayou clan, the Billiot family, which has intermarried with the oldest families in the area and supplied a lion’s share of the winners.

The World’s Championship Pirogue Races sponsored by the Lafitte Yacht Club, are an annual event in the Barataria country south of New Orleans. They draw upwards of 50,000 spectators and a score of pirogue entries. Barataria Bayou and nearby Goose Bayou serve as the arena and take on a festive, holiday air. Yachts, motorboats and other sportscraft serve as vantage points for visiting Orleansians. Louisianians from all over the state, curious Texans, Arkansans, Mississippian, plus hundreds of other visitors and tourists from all parts of the nation.

Having proved its usefulness over ten centuries to the redman and for almost three centuries to the French Acadians of South Louisiana, the nimble, simple and humble pirogue is still around.

To Our Readers
Due to several changes in our business operation and staff, it has been necessary for us to close out Volume II with this issue. Therefore Volume III will include only three issues for 1970.

However you will receive the exact number of issue for which you subscribed. Volume III will begin with the first quarter of 1971 and if your subscription was for one year, you WILL RECEIVE ALL four issues.

We regret that there has been a delay and we sincerely appreciate your patience.