

Voyage of a Midlife Chrysler

I met my step-brother Mike at 8 on Saturday morning in the parking lot of First United Methodist Church, La Grange and he piled all his gear in the back of my truck with eager anticipation of what the next week might hold in store. A couple of hours later, we blew out a tire on the trailer outside of Victoria which required some quality time spent at Discount Tire. Looking back now on this failure at the beginning of the trip gives me the impression it served as a prequel for things to come...

It's a long drive to Port Isabel but we were elated when we got there, checked into our hotel, and headed for the boat ramp to step our heavy 26' mast and lug all the gear aboard before launching. We had pulled in right beside Rachael Doss and Jacob Arnold rigging out their 13' Guppy. Being members of sister sailing clubs on Lake Somerville, Rachael and I had exchanged messages about the arduous preparations needed for this event. And now, here we were, both getting ready to launch and everyone was giddy with excitement, especially Mike.



After launching we motored over to Tarpon Marina, tied up next to the Guppy and retired to the hotel only to discover that the rooms of the two boats crews were also side-by-side. After a very informative Captain's meeting the next morning I spent the rest of the day in transit as Mike did the last of the shopping. It was on the bus trip back to Port Isabel that I was able to visit with Gary Kohut at length

about the challenges of sailing a racing dingy like his Precision 185 in this event. I had done the “geezer route” of the 2014 TX 200 in another class boat of the same length and swore that I would never attempt it in a high-strung centerboard racer again. This year I had brought a mild-mannered, high-freeboard cruising boat with a ballasted swing-keel. This year, I was going to play it safe...

Mike and I slept aboard the boat Sunday night and were ready to shove off at dawn Monday morning except that we had promised to escort Guppy given the forecast for high winds and seas in the Laguna Madre. We followed them out of the harbor and hoisted only the jib in an effort to pace them and not outrun them. Gary and Meredith Kohut were also flying a single sail on their 18' Precision but blew right past us in short order. As the winds and seas built throughout the day we would pass the Guppy, which was under full sail, and then drop our jib and sail under bare poles until the Guppy was a half mile ahead. We leapfrogged like this all day until we got a distress call from them around 4 that afternoon when they experienced rudder problems.



Photo credit: John Hippe

We hoisted our headsail and made a beeline for the Guppy, now sailing along at 3 knots under bare poles. I past them a long towline as we went by and we turned left, broadside to the wind (now gusting to 35 knots) and seas to take shelter in the Port Mansfield harbor. On a broad reach in these winds our

Chrysler 22 was approaching hull speed with just the headsail, even with the Guppy in tow. I radioed Rachael and quipped that she had better enjoy the ride because this was the fastest the Guppy had gone all day.



Guppy under tow to Port Mansfield – Day 1

As soon as we got into the mouth of the harbor we were suddenly becalmed as three-story buildings on either side of the channel blocked the wind. Rachael radioed to ask if she should start her engine and I told her that once clear of the entrance we'd be off like gang-busters again and in short order we were.

We screamed up the channel on a close reach. The wind was all the stronger as we sailed against it. The channel split and then narrowed and turned southerly, even more into the wind. Getting closer and closer to the lee shore, we desperately needed tack but the winds were so high Mike was afraid to and pinched instead. I looked back at the Guppy and made three attempts to garner Rachael's attention on the radio. Afterwards, I looked forward and saw that the low boat speed and high leeway were going put us on the rocks. There was no room to maneuver and nothing to do by wait for the inevitable.

After impact, Mike jumped overboard to push the bow off but the wind was too strong, the boat wouldn't move. The Guppy was likewise glued to the rocks by the shrieking wind. Fortunately, what we didn't know was that we were being watched. Some of our compadres had also sought the shelter of

the Port Mansfield harbor and were even now soaking up the local color from the safety of Pelican's Cove Bar and Grill at the end of the channel.

The next thing we knew Calvin Holt and Francios Ruel came swooping down the harbor in their beautiful Pearson Ensign "Black Opal." After a couple of passes they were able to recover the towline to Guppy and haul them to the dock at Pelican's Cove. Meanwhile, as Mike pushed from the bow and I at the stern we managed to move the boat a little down the rocks until the rigging got tangled in an overhanging tree. I was finally able to break off the overhead branch snagging the forestay with the boathook and the boat drifted back into clear water. I started the engine and motored slowly against the tempest while Mike walked all the way around the end of the harbor to join us at Pelican's Cove.



Black Opal – Day 1

Our TX 200 compadres gave us a hardy welcome and adult beverages were served in short order to begin the rescue celebration in earnest. Mike procured a four-plate seafood sampler and we ate hardily, as well. We were two old duffers sailing on a middle-aged Chrysler enjoying the company of a young couple we had just shared a death-defying experience with. We were finally safely ensconced in a well-provisioned oasis while the wind continued to shriek through the rigging of the boats outside. Yeah, Port Mansfield is a great place to seek safe harbor in a blow.

We were introduced to a guy who had a shop where we could make the parts to repair Guppy's rudder. I volunteered to do the fabrication and about 8:00 we all walked over there. We scrounged up some materials but tools were in short supply, especially those that actually worked. More and more tools had to be procured and it was getting dark in the unlit shop. Finally, Rachael announced that she had decided to withdraw from the regatta in Port Mansfield so there was no need to continue with the repairs and we all retired to our rooms.



Guppy departure for Port Mansfield boat ramp – day 2

After the harrowing experiences of previous day Mike and I were in no hurry to leave the hotel and get started on Tuesday morning. We got down to the dock after the first boats had already left and saw the rest of them off when we got there. Rachael and Jacob were the last to leave, headed for the boat ramp. We shared a sorrowful goodbye and then we, too, made preparations to shove off. Just like the day before, the weather started off relatively benign in the morning and intensified in the afternoon. Fortunately, we had entered the land cut before it got really hairy. We agreed that Rachael had made the right call as today had been a virtually replay weather-wise to Monday.

Eventually, we slid up in the mud at Hap's Cut and watched with amazement as camping gear was unloaded from small craft and erected to form a miniature town on the otherwise barren beach. At 7 pm we attended the memorial service under the trees. I visited with Gary about the capsize on his Precision 185 and privately reflected that he had lost pretty much the same gear I did in the TX 200 - 2014. Later, we beached the boat on the other side of the cut and fell asleep looking at the constellations in an amazing night sky undimmed by ambient light.



Photo credit: John Hippe – End of Day 2 – Hap’s Cut

The next morning we awoke early and began ghosting down the land cut about 5 am. We shook out the reef in our mainsail and enjoyed a delightfully calm beam reach all day. Given our early arrival to Padre Island Yacht Club we decided to sail past the entrance and wound up at Snoopy’s for a late lunch, where we also picked up ice. Later, as we approached the yacht club prepared to tie up to the bulkhead a club member motioned us to follow him to a regular (big) boat slip in the harbor and helped us tie up. Spirits were light as everyone enjoyed the food and facilities offered there – it was great!

Thursday morning we once again got a early start before 6 am. Winds were light so I put up the huge genoa and motorsailed past the causeway. Ever so slowly the winds began to build and we began to work our way across Corpus Christi Bay and through Stingray Hole. Once we cleared the cut we turned right and found ourselves on a close reach going down the Ship Channel headed for Port Aransas. By the time we got to the ferry crossing in the channel the winds were blanketed by onshore structures and the tide was against us as well. We tacked relentlessly until we were able to round the corner into Lydia Ann Channel.



Pirate ship in front of Lydia Ann Lighthouse

From this point the sail was purely pleasurable. I went below and served up lunch. The water was a beautiful aqua color and the wind was now abaft the beam. With our big genoa pulling in the now unobstructed 10-15 knot breeze we were approaching hull speed. As we sailed on into Aransas Bay the winds and seas began to build intensity, just as they had every day of the trip. We left the ICW because Mike wanted to skirt the Rockport shoreline for some sight-seeing. A quarter of a century ago we used to meet in Rockport during the spring for a few days of sailing Aransas Bay each year in what was then my Cape Dory Typhoon, which Mike now owns.

After surveying the Rockport coastline we rounded up on a close reach to skirt the reef off of Ninemile Point and then turned back downwind headed for Fulton. By now we were surfing off of the wave crests and the big genoa was pulling the boat along with the power of a freight train. As we approached the harbor I went forward to take in the huge headsail and when I returned to the cockpit discovered we had overshot the harbor entrance. To make matters worse, we were now adjacent to the harbor concrete bulkhead which reflected the big waves crashing into it causing a very steep, confused sea.

We came about under main alone and began to tack back to the harbor entrance. On the third tack we attempted to come about near the bulkhead but got caught in irons and the wind pushed us back into the bulkhead where the boat was beat unmercifully against the concrete. The seas were so violent that it was impossible to stand up and we were both thrown from the boat. Standing in 5.5 feet of water we tried to push the boat off the bulkhead but only wound up getting crushed between the two.

Someone on shore saw our predicament, called the authorities and a boatyard in the harbor which responded with three employees manning their yard boat. As they quickly arrived on the scene they took Mike aboard and passed a line to our stern to pull us off of the bulkhead. Once clear, I tied the towline to the bow so we could head into the harbor. Unfortunately, as they powered up for the tow at a right angle to the bow their towline sheared off my running light as it and the stemhead fitting are in front on the mooring cleat on the foredeck. I went aft to clear the tiller and a few seconds later the heavy mast came crashing down inches away from me in the cockpit. One hundred and fifty horsepower

exerted against the line wrapped sideways against the stemhead fitting had pushed out the pin securing the forestay.

An ambulance was waiting for Mike on the pier when we arrived in the harbor and the game warden was waiting for me. I got Mike's bag off the boat and took it to the ambulance where he was sitting up and said that he was alright with a smile. I went back to the boat and pulled my driver's license and boat registration card to hand to the game warden and then caught up to the last yard employee remaining who was returning Mike's life jacket. I shook his hand, thanked him, pressed money in his hand, and asked if there was any way they could help me re-step the mast. He said, "Sure, if you can get your boat over to the haul-out slip we can use our manlift to get it back up."

Once the ambulance and game warden had left I started the engine and motored over to the yard. The employee took the biggest diesel-powered manlift I've ever seen and lifted the mast back up upright on the boat while I secured the jib halyard to the stemhead fitting and finally slid the pin in the forestay clevis. By then it was quitting time and I was left in an abandoned yard to begin trying to reconstruct my shattered boat.

When the heavy, 26' mast came down it first hit the new bimini top and then the open pop-top on the coach roof of the cabin, smashing them both. Looking back on it, they probably saved my life and kept me from getting hit by the mast. I dismantled and scrapped the bimini and folded the supporting legs of the pop-top in a way that would allow it to nest in its proper place on the coach roof. The attachment screws had been ripped out of the fiberglass so there was no repair I could effect at this time. One I had cleared away the carnage I discovered that I was extremely thirsty and couldn't stop drinking water. The game warden had asked if we had had anything (alcoholic) to drink and I had replied while looking first at the wreckage of the boat, then at the ambulance, and replied, "No, but I think that I'm ready to now!"

While piecing the boat back together I watched Black Opal glide in headed for the public docks at other end of the harbor close to where Mike had reserved a cottage for us that night. Around dusk when I was finally satisfied that the boat was in good enough shape to proceed the next day, I put on some shoes and made my way to the other end of the harbor to locate my lodgings. Walking in shoes proved to be too painful as the barnacles on the bulkhead had taken numerous divots out of my feet and I soon retraced my steps on the street before reaching my destination.

Once back at the boat Mike called from the Portland hospital and appeared to be greatly enjoying himself. Having never suffered a broken bone in his life he had been diagnosed with a fractured clavicle (collarbone). What's more, as a retired MD who cut his teeth in the ER he was now a patient for the first time. He was getting a glimpse from the flipside as a patient and found it most intriguing. In contrast, I could only feel deep remorse about the whole situation. I texted my wife and explained the circumstances. She really wanted me to stay put at Fulton so she could come get me. I told her that my chances were pretty good for being reunited with my truck and trailer if I could just make it to Port O'Conner.

In spite of the wind howling in the rigging and the boat surging and bucking in the concrete slip on the lee shore of the harbor and the intense yard lights providing daylight all night, I managed to sleep a

little. With no forward running light I delayed my departure under mainsail alone until dawn an hour after the shrimp fleet had left. The wind was almost as strong as the afternoon before but abated somewhat as the sun began to rise higher, so I hoisted the jib as well.

I made my way across the bay and picked up the ICW, running for the ditch. The winds were more easterly today and I frequently found myself on a close reach. I had noticed a boat shadowing me in the distance and from the sail it appeared to be about the same size as my boat. Throughout the entire day it lingered in the distance but feeling quite sullen and withdrawn about the events leading up to Mike's hospitalization I had no desire for company. Approaching the end of the ditch I tied off the tiller to go forward and prudently tie a reef in the main. I had an aversion to San Antonio Bay as result of my crossing of it in the 2014 TX 200 where the foredeck of my low freeboard class boat actually dug into the following sea in front of it. Once in the bay I found the winds so light that I shook the reef out after a half an hour. But the winds predictably increased, accompanied by a high cross sea half way across the bay making for a very spirited and lively crossing.

I was getting tired and sunburned. I had found a long-sleeve shirt and had my bare legs tucked in a sail bag. I needed gloves for my hands but didn't want to leave the tiller while crossing the bay to go forward and rummage through the cabin for them. Normally, before I acquired the bimini, I would have had the pop-top up, the companionway hatch closed and steered from inside this "pilot house" with the tiller extension. Everything in the cabin would be in easy reach and sailing solo would have been a breeze.

None too soon, given my level of fatigue, I entered the ditch anticipating landfall in Port O'Conner at the other end. The easterly wind was causing me to sometimes pinch to stay in the channel but the miles were still passing under the keel as we soldiered on. The large sail in the distance was still there behind me. Finally, I got up to the Coast Guard Station in Port O'Conner and lowered the jib to pinch up the channel under main alone, My progress was painfully slow against the current but I didn't care because my destination was in sight.

I looked behind me at the boat that had been shadowing me all day to see that they had dropped their sails and were now motoring toward me. It was Brant Bedford and Rick Schraeder in the Catalina Capri 22. They pulled up alongside and asked where to moor for the night and I told them, "Clark's Marina." I declined their offered of a tow and they were on hand at the dock to pass me a mooring line when I landed there later. We wound up being moored in adjacent slips. They secured a room at the Inn as result of a cancelation and I stayed overnight on the boat to wallow in my well-deserved misery.

About 6:30 the next morning Brant came down to the dock and we started talking about his plans for the day. He had wanted to pull his boat out at Magnolia Beach and I replied that the ramp there was quite shallow and unpaved. Given the Intrepid's 3 foot draft and his aversion to getting stuck (they had been aground for 24 hours on day 1 trying to make the approach to the Port Mansfield jetties) a deep, paved ramp would be a better option. He asked what my plans were and I told him that I had originally planned to make landfall at Magnolia Beach and allow my crew to drive on to Port Lavaca while I sailed the boat up the coast, but now I had no crew. He asked if I knew the ramp and I replied I had checked it out on Memorial Day weekend and found it to my satisfaction.

I told him that the other option was to pull the boat right here at Clark's but then, how do we retrieve our rigs from Maggie Beach? He said that he had the phone number for the Port Lavaca taxi so that was going to be his destination. He gladly consented to my coming along with them and sharing the cost of the taxi. Once clear of the jetties the boat shot through the bay like a bullet and I seized the opportunity to ask him the question that had been burning in my mind all the previous day: "How in the world is it that in this wing-keeled 22' class boat ya'll never overtook my 22' 40 year-old Clorox-bottle shaped swing-keeled cruising boat???" He replied that they had two reefs in the main and I had none. They had been wondering about my severe angle of heel in front of them all the previous day. Of course, my freeboard was so much greater than theirs that I never dipped the lee rail in the water. I also didn't have a spare set of hands to go forward to tie a reef back in the mainsail and I was so distraught about the overall situation that I wasn't about to stop until I got to Port O'Conner.

As we were making our approach to Port Lavaca Mike called and said his daughter had driven down to collect him as he was currently being released from the hospital. He went on to wax euphorically on all the positive attributes of pain medication. Obviously, he was having a lot better time than I was at the moment.



Intrepid at Port Lavaca

We landed at Bayfront Peninsula Park and tied the boat to the public boat ramp pier around 11:30. Part of the timber breakwater was missing and the boat reared and plunged on the lee shore dock. Brent called the cab and after a short wait we were on our way to Maggie Beach. Brent pulled his car around and filled up with gas at JT's while I went in and bought a slice of pizza and a Big Red before making tracks to Port O'Conner. When I pulled up to the ramp at Clark's Calvin and Francois were guiding Black Opal up on the trailer from walkways on either side of the boat ramp. I took Calvin's line so that he could back his Pathfinder a little deeper into the water to float the boat up on the trailer.

Once he had it where he wanted it, the Pathfinder would only get up to the break-over point on the wet ramp and then spin its tires so I hooked a chain to my truck and pulled him out. Next, I used the same chain to tie my truck and trailer together and backed in. When I pulled the boat out it was too far back

on the trailer and the tongue went airborne on level ground. We got it hooked to the trucks hitch and I backed in beside them to de-rig and pack.



Black Opal on trailer before leveling

I asked Calvin how he was going to get his stern-high boat forward on the trailer and then lent him my chain come-along and showed him where to pull from at the base of the keel. Next, I took my turn performing the same operation on the Chrysler. Calvin and Francois worked like a well-oiled machine while getting Black Opal packed up to head for Maggie Beach and both boats were soon approaching the finish over asphalt.

Once we arrived, the long-awaited boiled shrimp plate was a rich reward. Various accounts of the past week titillated the ears as numerous parties 'fessed up to their high jinks and blunders. The other Eric (Dahlkamp) told me about breaking his mast just moments before while pulling his boat out. I relayed my story to him and he grabbed Matt's (Schiemer) arm and asked him, "Have you heard this? Tell him what you just told me." I did and now I've told you, too.

It's said that the only rule of the TX 200 is don't be late for the bus on Sunday afternoon. I'd add a second: Don't do anything that might land your crew in the hospital. Those momentary lapses complete with expressions of a deer in the headlights while you sit powerless as the boat careens onto the rocks or slams against the concrete breakwater can maim, perhaps even kill. Don't go there, stay far, far away. Nobody wants to be a statistic no matter how good the pain meds are. Well, except for maybe Mike...

- Epilog -

There were so many great people we met and the hospitality was superb. It's amazing how so many people who have never met each other can come together and help one another out to achieve a common goal. I have too many people to thank, including EMS and hospital staff I have never even met. Mike is back home and enjoying his convalescence following his harrowing experiences.

Amazingly enough the midlife Chrysler shows very little hull damage from its brush with death – it looks ready for next year!

Which brings up the question: What about next year? Mike and I are talking about bringing his Cape Dory in addition to the Chrysler. I had dissuaded him from doing so this year because it has a 3' fixed keel. But after witnessing the exploits of another Alberg design with the same keel, Black Opal, why not?

Rachael and Jacob are planning to join us for a sail on Lake Somerville next month to discuss their plans as well. As for Mike and I, we'll have to convince our wives first. We've been told that we have a lot of explaining to do...



Mike in Lower Laguna Madre