

Jim, Bea, and James Harrison

Sailing the Texas200



A number of years ago, I was reading a history of Matagorda County and came upon an account which took place during the Civil War. A group of volunteers from Matagorda sailed out to attack the Union troops that were stationed on the barrier island across the bay but, tragically, a sudden storm blew in and the southern troops drowned in the bay. This tragedy made me begin to think about the types of boats that plowed these shallow bays prior to the invention of our infernal combustion engines. I have motored and fished these bays for over 40 years and I don't ever remember seeing a sailboat in the bay. Sure, occasionally you see a sailboat in the Intracoastal or bigger deeper bays like Corpus or Galveston, but not the shallow bays which represent most of our bay systems. With gas prices what they are, I found the idea of sailing across our shallow bays very intriguing.

Several years ago my wife and I started sailing with a friend in Washington State where we spend our summers. We really fell in love with sailing, but I knew a conventional sailboat wouldn't work in most of our bay systems in Texas. It was during this time period that an acquaintance of mine, Chuck Leinweber, started a sailing regatta named the Texas 200. I had met Chuck and his wife on a canoe trip on the San Juan River in Utah. Chuck has an internet business call Duckworks, that sell supplies, plans, etc. for people who build wooden boats. While everyone else on our San Juan trip was using our

indestructible plastic canoes, Chuck, Sandra and their son were using wooden boats they had built. I was impressed. I have always been interested in building boats. I have helped others build wooden canoes and I volunteered one summer at the Maritime museum in Cedarville Michigan where I helped work on wooden boats. I guess I have always had a love affair with boats, all sizes and shapes. To me there is nothing as beautiful as the curvilinear shapes of a well designed boat. This might explain the five boats I have in my yard.

Chuck's Texas 200 is a group of people who get together and sail 200 miles up the Texas coast in the bays. The route always starts down the Texas coast and heads north/east to take advantage of Junes predominately south-southeast winds. Most use small sailboats that they build themselves. They gather after a day of sailing and all camp together. Well, this sounded like a lot of fun to me. My wife and I have spent many years navigating and camping along the Texas coast albeit in powerboats, canoes and kayaks. But, since my wife and I work in the summer at a museum on the Washington State coast, I was forced to only read online about the first three Texas 200s. 2011, brought a change in scheduling and the museum didn't need us until July 1st. This meant we could do the Texas 200 and still barely have time drive to Washington to start work. In the meantime I had researched sailboats that I thought might work in the shallow Texas bay and I could afford. I ended up buying a boat called a San Juan 21 which has a swing up keel, which means you can get it into relatively shallow water. Of course, I didn't think about whether you can sail this type of boat effectively with the keel all the way up.

I started making noises to my wife and grown son that I might want to do the T200. Of course my son, although he lives in Washington State, was gung ho about the whole idea. He lives for challenging adventures. He completed the Texas Water Safari when he was 18 and solo backpacked across Olympic National Park last year; you get the idea. So my wife and I started planning and taking the boat out for overnights to get the kinks out. We learned a lot about our little boat and our sailing. I was pretty low on the learning curve. If you learn from your mistakes, my sailing smarts were increasing exponentially.



the San Juan 21

The 2011 Texas 200 had about 50 people and 36 boats participating. The weather was predicted to be perfect - nice and sunny all week long and winds 10-15 from south/southeast. The boats varied from canoes with sails to 24' fiberglass sloops. The vast majority were on the smaller side and homemade. The route was shifted down the coast a little and we started at Port Isabel/Padre Island and ended at Seadrift with five camping days in transit.

We left PI early Monday and it was wonderful to see sails spread out across the horizon behind and ahead of us.

Several times we were visited by dolphins who seemed curious about our quiet mode of transportation. As we made our way up the Intracoastal Waterway through the Laguna

Madre, my wife noticed water in the bottom of the cabin. Because of all the additional gear we were hauling, the waterline of the boat was lowered such that the hole where the keel cranking cable came into the cabin was underwater when we rolled in the swells coming from our stern. The first night's scheduled camp was along the Port Mansfield channel at the jetties, so we decided to put in at the Port Mansfield harbor for repairs. I was able to fix the problem using a beer cozy, epoxy and a stick. On day two we sailed to a camping spot along the land cut. We were towing one of our kayaks behind our boat and although I had done this a few times before, the following wind kept shoving it around and it flipped and sank quickly. The rope broke and we had to chase it up onto the shallows. We finally got it aboard and the only place to stow it was on top of the boat, over one side of the cabin which really cramped our sail handling ability. The wind really started to blow that afternoon after we got there and tents were being blown down. So much for the wind predictions. Everybody was hunkered down. People were looking for shade wherever they could find it because the heat was setting records that day. My wife, son and I pretty much hid in our boat's cabin until late that afternoon when the wind dropped and everyone began gathering together visiting. The next day the wind really blew and pushed us up the Intracoastal and past Baffin to our next campsite along the backside of Padre Island. I was impressed by the sailing skills of the folks in the small wooden boats. After getting off the water I was told that the winds were measured at Baffin Bay at that time to be gusting to 33mph. We ran aground a couple of times as we left the Intracoastal and tried to make our way to the campsite, but we finally found better water and slowly motored in. I was envious of how the little flat bottomed wooden boats could fly across the 12" to 18" shallows. Our campsite was beautiful with a sand beach and nice clear water. There were a lot fewer boats camping at this site. I saw some boats head on down the canal and some of the others had not shown up and we wondered what had become of them. The wind had scattered us and some boats were having problems. The next day we were scheduled to cross Corpus Christi Bay. After listening to the weather forecasts for the next day and talking to some other folks we decided we were going to take out the next day. A couple of guys who were using Hobie Catamarans were also quitting and they could give me a ride to our truck. The Hobie guys said they were concerned that the strong following wind was going to blow them end over end. Quitting was a hard decision, but we were on a tight schedule to leave for Washington State immediately after this trip and taking care of a boat stuck on an oyster reef or worse sunk wasn't in our plans.

As we crossed the Corpus Christi causeway the next afternoon, and looked out over the white-capping bay, I was really glad we decided to bail. We drove down to Seadrift Saturday for the shrimp boil at the end of the Texas 200. It was interesting to talk to everyone about their adventures and misadventures. Nineteen of the thirty-six boats had finished. One of the participants was a



Jim and James

sailboat designer and racer from Australia named Michael Storer. He told my son this Texas 200 was as wild a ride as any he had been on. Seadrift really rolled out the red carpet for the gang. My hat's off to the 2011 Texas 200 participants. They're a great bunk of folks and top notch watermen/women. Chuck has really started something with this sailing get-together. I hope it continues on and I hopefully I can built my own rig and try again.

If you are interested in reading about other participant's adventures and see some photos, I encourage you to visit www.texas200.com. If you want to learn more about building wooden boats check out Chuck's emagazine at his website www.duckworks.com.

And I predict that sometime in the near future as you are chasing speckled trout in the bay you might see some sails flying across the south shoreline.