

A Small Effort – Rowing the 2015 Texas 200

The fearless driver of the 18 wheeler I am drafting behind doesn't seem at all concerned about the construction here on I-35. Neither am I, although after a couple of energy drinks it sometimes feels like my brain is not connected to my eyes. We drive south together for hours, but finally something has to give. 20 miles south of San Antonio, I pull off the road behind some construction barriers, turn off the engine, and am asleep in just a couple of minutes.

I had tried to row the Texas 200 the previous year and failed, pulling out on the 4th day. When I first conceived the idea, I contacted Al Freihofer, who had rowed 452 miles along the East coast and had written about that adventure in *Messing About in Boats*. One thing we discussed at length was mental preparedness. I thought I was good to go, but sadly this was not the case.



Lunch stop Day 1



Wind and waves Day 1

I was well prepared with navigation planning, plenty of food and water, sun protection, and safety gear, but I did not push myself hard enough in training to get to the wall or the bonk. I really thought that I had this thing licked. I was good for 10-15 miles in training, but this was not enough, especially given the wind and waves I would encounter.



Andy and Rick after a long rough day in their 8' long Puddle Ducks.



Crews "Embracing the Suck" of a hard first day.

For most of the third day the wind was hard, solid and unrelenting on my stern starboard quarter. The third afternoon I gave up on reaching camp and spent the night on Shamrock Island. I could not face the waves and wind in Corpus Christi Bay. Physically I was unprepared for all of the extra effort it took just to keep the skiff tracking. I estimate that I used 1/3 to 1/2 of each stroke to compensate for the wind. On the morning of the 4th day, I was worn out. I looked long and hard at the charts. Do I pull out in Port Aransas, or press on and face the unknown? I was tired, sore and unsure how long I could keep going. I opted for the former.

The wind was higher than I had hoped that morning as I struck camp and headed into the bay. It was overcast with low morning haze all around. Using the chart and compass I aimed dead on toward the gap between Pelican Island and the island to the west. Running downwind, there were times I couldn't see over the waves. The land on the horizon disappeared completely more than once. I knew that I was coming up on an area with lots of wellheads and began to get cautious, but the wave heights were increasing and boat was starting to surf. I will never forget the feeling when I caught THAT wave. It was like when you're body surfing and it just keeps going on and on. I stayed on that wave for probably a hundred yards. Amazed and giddy, I put the oars back in and started to pull. I scraped the sandy bottom about a foot down. I had caught the wave as it was getting shallow and the wave stayed connected with me on it, until its energy was spent shallowing up. When I looked around at the surroundings and my charts, I was exactly where I needed to be. Cool. I asked a fisherman for directions to a marina and found it then caught a ride from a local to Maggie Beach.

I lost at the mental game in 2014, but was committed to trying again. This time I knew what to expect. I knew what I had to push through, and knew the first 100 miles of the route by sight. I would face everything and adapt. No matter how hard it seemed, I knew it was a small effort compared to what Al Friehofer had done. I spent many hours reviewing the route on Google Earth and poring over John Alesch's excellent chart-aerial photos. It was much easier relating water color and land forms after having seen it from 4' above the water. Every day I visualized the trip as I went through my daily routine. I got the boat in the water on White Rock Lake (a great place to train) and rowed at every opportunity. Most of the needed gear I had from last year, although this year I added a marine radio and waterproof video camera.

On Friday morning about 10:30am I finally pull into Port Isabel after the 12 hour drive from Mesquite. The fleet leaves on Monday, but I learned last year that a rowboat needs a head start. I load the boat, put her in the water, change clothes, and I'm off. The Laguna Madre is waiting.

Here We Go Again

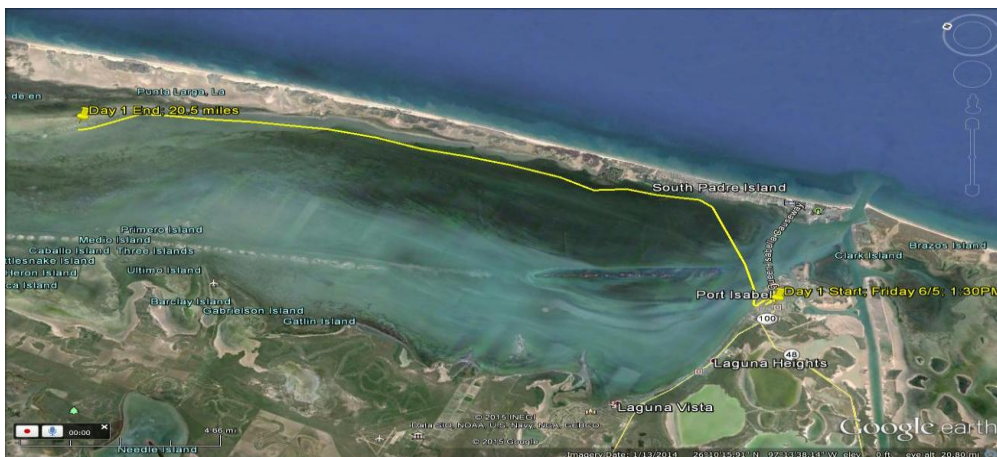
By the early afternoon I am in the middle of the Mother Lagoon. The waves are large and the wind is strong, but the new skeg is helping tremendously with tracking. About a third of the way out the water is clearing and a round grey thing bobs up next to the stern. When I pull on the oar, it disappears. This thing looks like a semi submerged bowling ball with one eye and I wonder for hours what it is. I don't figure it out until months after the trip when I run across an article (with pictures) about the Dolphin Lady of Port Isabel in Texas Parks and Wildlife Magazine. I have never before seen a picture of the back of a dolphin's head. Mystery solved.



Winds are around 15, but the water is clear, and the waves shallow. My plan of hugging the barrier islands to stay out of the worst of the waves is working. Birds are everywhere. I see a caracara, also known as the Mexican Eagle, when I stop for lunch. As the afternoon wears on, the condos and other structures on South Padre Island slowly disappear behind me. After 6 hours of rowing I select a small sand island and row up to the beach. I set out the chair, table, and Jetboil, and realize that once I stop moving that I am slowly sinking into the sand, so after a quick dinner I make up the boat for sleeping. As the mosquitoes make their appearance at dusk, I lay my scrubs and shirt out on some bushes to dry, and slip under the nets for the night. I am lulled into a deep and satisfying sleep by the growling, squeaking, and whining sounds of the local shorebirds.



End day 1



Overnight, the tide has gone out. Down here, that means that the water is maybe 7 or 8 inches shallower than when I arrived last evening. After breakfast I load up the skiff and drag her for about 30 minutes in the sandy bottomed emerald water. Finally she is in the 8 to 10 inches that she needs to float with me

aboard. To the north, towards Port Mansfield, I can see dozens of wind turbines. Just how far away they are becomes apparent as the morning stretches on and they do not seem to get any closer.



Morning espresso and oatmeal breakfast.



Tide had gone out overnight.

The water is flat and the wind is down. There is a deep silence conducive to a long conversation with God as I start to row. Contemplation of what lies ahead consumes my thoughts. The boat and I ghost for hours over clear water. As the infamous South Texas sun climbs I lather up with SPF50, then get the bimini up and search for my scrubs, which I think that I've left on the bush back at last night's camp. However, (unlike some) my boat does not berate me at every misstep, and I therefore have only the nagging little voice in my head to listen to. I pull a t-shirt up over each leg, tuck them into the leg elastic on my bike shorts, and pour water over them in an attempt to keep my legs covered and cool in the growing heat.



Clear emerald waters



Little wind and flat, hot rowing.



Bimini tilted forward to catch light breeze.

The breeze slowly builds. By the time it hits 8 knots I tilt the bimini forward as a crude sail to take advantage of it. Standing, I glide over and observe the abundant life in the water. Trout, sheepshead, crabs, mullet, and stingrays, stingrays, and more stingrays. Later in the morning, I pull slowly over the shallow water while watching the bottom go by and I see a stingray right over where I can drop an oar to surprise it. Before the oar hits the bottom, almost faster than I can follow, the stingray spins and I hear (and feel) the barb hitting the composite oar blade.



South end of Mansfield Channel.



Deeper water and wind is picking up.

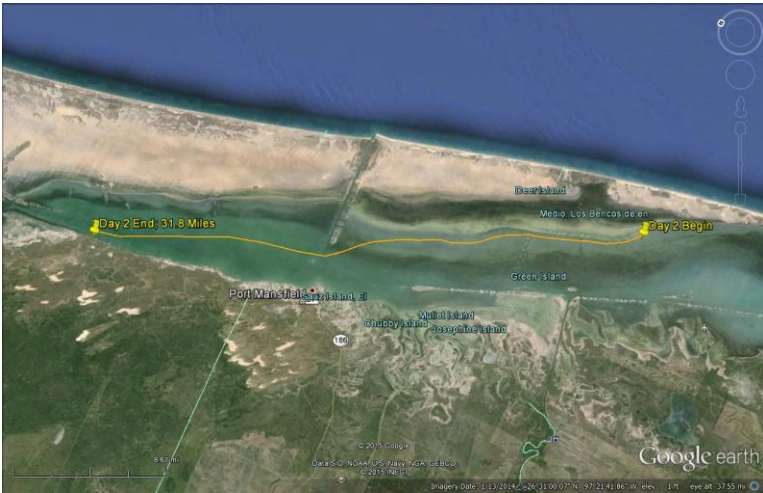
The sea gulls and terns are keeping me company, maybe coming by to check out the slow quiet white thing in the water. I let the oars drag in the water as I pulled lunch together. The tuna packets and tortillas were a welcome break from the rowing.

The water gets deeper as I approach the Mansfield Channel. The channel connects the Laguna Madre to the Gulf. As the water deepened, the size of the waves increased. The waves were coming from several directions at once, making a bumpy and unorganized ride. I went ahead and lowered the bimini as the wind had picked up and the flapping was distracting me from the strokes. The waves and chop made forward progress slow, the oars would not land together for a smooth stroke as the skiff was rolling and yawing. I watched as Fred Stone Park and the wind driven generators faded off the stern. At about 7PM I realized I was not going to make the ICW land cut to make camp. The charts showed a crescent of beach to the west and I turned to make camp there. As I started turning, a noise off to my right startled me. A manta ray had just surfaced and was gliding by me with its wingtips sticking vertically out of the water. It was a fine sight that I hadn't seen since my youth growing up on the Delaware Bay.

Landing on the sandy crescent I see that it is about 6' wide, with sea grass growing thick shoreward. The beach is part of the King Ranch. Thoughts of rattle snakes, nalgai and ranchers on horseback kept me from venturing into the grass far. I laid out my sleeping bag and pulled out the cooking equipment while watching a wonderful sunset to the west. Firing up the Jetboil I made dinner, dehydrated chicken and rice, not bad. There must have been a hatch of sand flies that day. They weren't biting, but they were thick. I covered myself with DEET and slid under the mosquito netting as the stars were beginning to show bright. It was a solid night's sleep with the small waves lapping the beach 3' away.



The buzz of a boat in the distance woke me up. It was predawn and the sky was just beginning to change from purple to a light blue. The Milky Way was amazing and still showing bright. Lying on my side, watching the eastern sky brighten, I took stock of how I was feeling. The hands are slightly swollen with a stinging from the blisters that formed yesterday, nothing serious. Legs and back feel good. It was time to grab the breakfast of instant oatmeal and espresso. The sunrise was absolutely awesome. The rays of light radiating upward through the billowy clouds offshore energized me as I began planning the day. Fresh Gatorade was mixed up and I drug the boat out to deeper water to start the day. The campsite from last year's first stop was the minimum goal for the day. The plan is to row out to the ICW, get into the land cut and row until evening.



The shore line to the west was coming together with Padre Island, I had reached the land cut, where the width of the water was just the width of the ICW. I heard a noise that was a bit different from the splash, clonk, clonk of the oars. It was a large snake swimming by me between the boat and the oar tip. I am not usually nervous around snakes, but this one was holding his head about 10" above the water. That was a sight to behold. The wind was a slight breeze on my stern; it was going to be a great day. The flats fishing boats would scream by me at I'm guessing 40-50 MPH and they would just stare at me as they went by. I started waving at as many as I could, just to see their reaction. Reactions got more interesting the further from civilization I was.



The water is not as clear as it was yesterday, a muddy color. The fishing shacks were interesting to watch as I glided by, ranging from well thought out two story affairs with AC to leaning walls barely maintaining the floors above the water. Passing campsite one from 2014, I rowed until about 4 o'clock when back spasms got the best of me. There was a cut through the spoils islands on my left with a solid sandy beach. Looking at the aerial photos, I see the Hap's Cut is about 2 miles away. Gulping some ibuprofen I began looking for some

shade. I lay on my sleep pad under the empty house on the corner and napped. I guess I had been asleep 45 minutes when a flats boat came roaring out of the cut and headed north. The back was feeling much better and I needed to make dinner before the evening onslaught of mosquitoes. The wind had built to a steady 15-20 mph and I had to use my sleeping pad as a wind break to cook dinner. Red beans and rice was on the menu. I sat eating the meal as I got to watch another awesome sunset display. The dolphins were numerous; it must have been dinner time for them. Wind turbines slowly turned in the fading rays of sunset as the sun slid below the horizon.



The fatigue and realization of what I was attempting again hit me pretty hard. Blisters growing a bit, but that is to be expected. I'll just have to tough it out until they become calluses. I keep thinking of others that had rowed through hardships and distances and what a walk in the park this must be compared to their challenges. Al Freihofer, Roz Savage and Ernest Shackleton came to mind. "What one man can do, another can do." - Charles Morse (Anthony Hopkins) in the movie *The Edge*. In correspondence with Mr. Freihofer, this last year, he reminded me the mental challenge is as strong as the physical. I succumbed to the mental stresses last year trying to muddle forward with no success. I would not let this be the reason for stopping early.

Monday morning I wake up to a light breeze with my muscles a bit tighter than yesterday. Hands still stinging, the blisters are beginning to harden. Today's goal is Padre Island Yacht Club. The club's committee has graciously hosted the Texas 200 stopover in the past years. Looking at the aerial charts and prepping the gear, water and Gatorade, I see today will be a long day but there is a route that should keep me out of the bulk of the open water and waves. I didn't make breakfast; I thought I would get a jump on the day and eat along the way. I shoved off at 7AM to a crowd of waving seagulls. It's like they all came in to say good bye and good luck. As many came to the beach and landed, thoughts of Hitchcock's *Birds* came to mind.



I rowed out of the land cut and into the waves and headed toward the back of North Padre Island. Wind was steady 10-15mph I would guess. The waves weren't too big and were consistent wave trains, the skeg was working perfectly. It was another glorious day on the water. There was emerald water probably a foot deep for miles. I would row towards the shore then tilt the bimini so I could stand and watch the water and wildlife go by. The crabs and trout were abundant with few mullets or stingrays. The thalassia or turtle grass was everywhere.



At 3PM I pulled down the bimini and dropped the anchor for lunch. I sat in a foot of clear water and made my tuna tortilla wraps. A little later I passed two guys fly fishing the flats with their boat about 50 yards away. It was a postcard setting for sure. The Bird Island Basin store had just closed as I arrived, missing an opportunity for cool fresh water. This is a windsurfer and kite surfer haven and several windsurfers were unrigging their boards. They offered cool bottles of water that slaked the thirst that had been building. I wasn't out of water, just tired of warm water and Gatorade. After the pause that refreshes, I headed out to cover the final few inches the aerials showed remaining to reach the PIYC.



As I rowed along the eastern edge of the ICW I pass bungalows set back on spoil islands, painted as if they are in New England. I imagine the fun and excitement the children must have during the summers on these little islands. The water is very shallow to my left and the blade of that oar scrapes with every stroke while the right is at a normal depth. Shallow water forced me too adjust my hand overlaps opposite of normal as I pull through the stroke forcing the left oar's stroke to be shallower. The sun is setting and there is another colorful, spectacular sunset. The sunrises and sunsets in Dallas just don't do it for me. I reach into the dry bag and grab the bow lights to attach to the Velcro mount. It is getting dark quickly and being this close to reeds and weeds the mosquitoes begin to feast on the fresh meat that's rowed into the vicinity. DEET is a lifesaver for me on this trip.



The abundance of fauna seems to have increased as it got darker. Every swish, clonk, clonk sound from the oars were accompanied by a skittering sound of something that I've disturbed. I was getting sloppy with the strokes and worked to straighten them out, and felt a loud clonk at the blade. I was looking right at it when it happened. Whatever I hit lit up the water around the blade. Bioluminescence and a headache! The splashing of fish seemed to increase as I rowed into the night.

The lights to my left began to increase from one or two in the distance to larger numbers close by with a glow accompanying the lights. I found a row of navigation aids, now silhouettes in the glow of the onshore lights

directing me into the protected channel. Following the channel slowly several buildings came into view, then many more. Condos and houses were built right on the channel. The PIYC was on the right with a couple empty docks. Pulling quietly into the farthest dock, I tied off and rolled onto the creosote soaked boards. Standing and stretching back, legs and neck I see it is 10:10PM. Forgoing dinner, I made one walk around the PIYC to see if there were any couches or chaise lounges I could sleep on. With none found, I made my bed on the dock with little regard if it was proper to be lying out like this, on a pad covered with netting, with large sailboats berthed nearby. As I drifted off I recalled the red skimmers, egrets, herons, mullet, trout and reds I'd seen through the day.

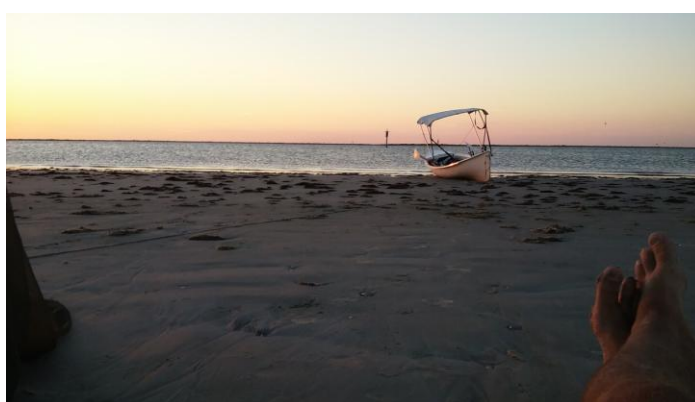
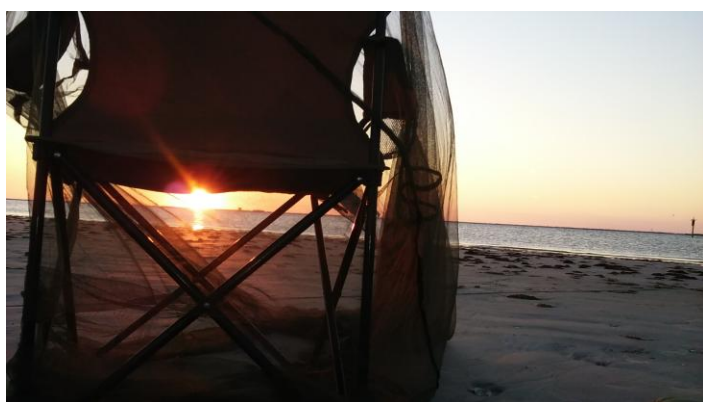


I was a bright and sunny Tuesday morning when I woke up, missing the sunrise. I made a full breakfast on the dock and sat back reflecting on the previous day, sipping on espresso and watching the porpoise in the channel. I estimated the trip on Monday was about 40 miles. At about 8:30 the yacht club leaders began showing up for a meeting. I was able to get a key to the showers and was able to remove 4 days of grime off me and rinse the salt from my clothing. I met three wonderfully accommodating gentlemen on staff, Jim, Dave and Fred. Refreshed, I organized the gear and refilled the 5 gallon water jug and seven 32 ounce Gatorade bottles.

Leaving the docks I was eagerly anticipating my next stop, Scoopy's, at the Corpus Christi Causeway. Scoopy's is an ice cream emporium serving up cold Blue Bell Ice Cream. Once inside, I am reminded of the Blue Bell recall. I had to settle for Blue Bunny, sheesh. The Coast Guard has a good presence in this area. Many boats congregate here and a slow cruise by from a gunboat with weapon mounted on the front while crew is staring at you, is daunting. I guess they realized I didn't have a bale of weed on my 18' long 43" wide skiff and motored on by.



When I got to the south end of CC Bay I held my breath. This was the tough crossing last year that ate my lunch. The place where I succumbed to my doubts about being able to finish then didn't. This year took a deep breath, relaxed and got to rowing. I settled into a familiar stroke with good wind, low waves, and pretty scenery. It was like rowing White Rock Lake in the summer breezes with better scenery. When I reached the other side of the bay I skirted around Stingray Island into the Corpus Christi Channel. Turning right, I headed towards the Gulf. About a mile further this smooth sandy beach beckoned for me to stop. Once the thought began rolling around in my head, I could find no reason not to. It was early, but I was not sure how far I would have to go to find a place to camp. This would be a good place to end the day.



I nosed the skiff on the shore and set out the anchor and the full length of line. The beach was a clean gently sloping sandy beach that crested with tufts of grass at the top. Walking to the top I see a dry playa with a ridge leading off to the south to the high area of Stingray Island. I pulled out the lawn chair and cooked up dinner. The sunset kept me mellow and amused while watching the boats slide by. I'd put up the cooking gear and had laid out the pad, netting and was reclining when I heard the blast of a ships horn. A large cargo ship was coming up the channel. The ship passed with the sun on the horizon behind it and dolphins riding the bow

wave. The thought occurred as it passed that there should be a big wave, but there was none. As that thought was passing from the mind, the water started rising, rising up the beach with no wave, like a tidal bore.

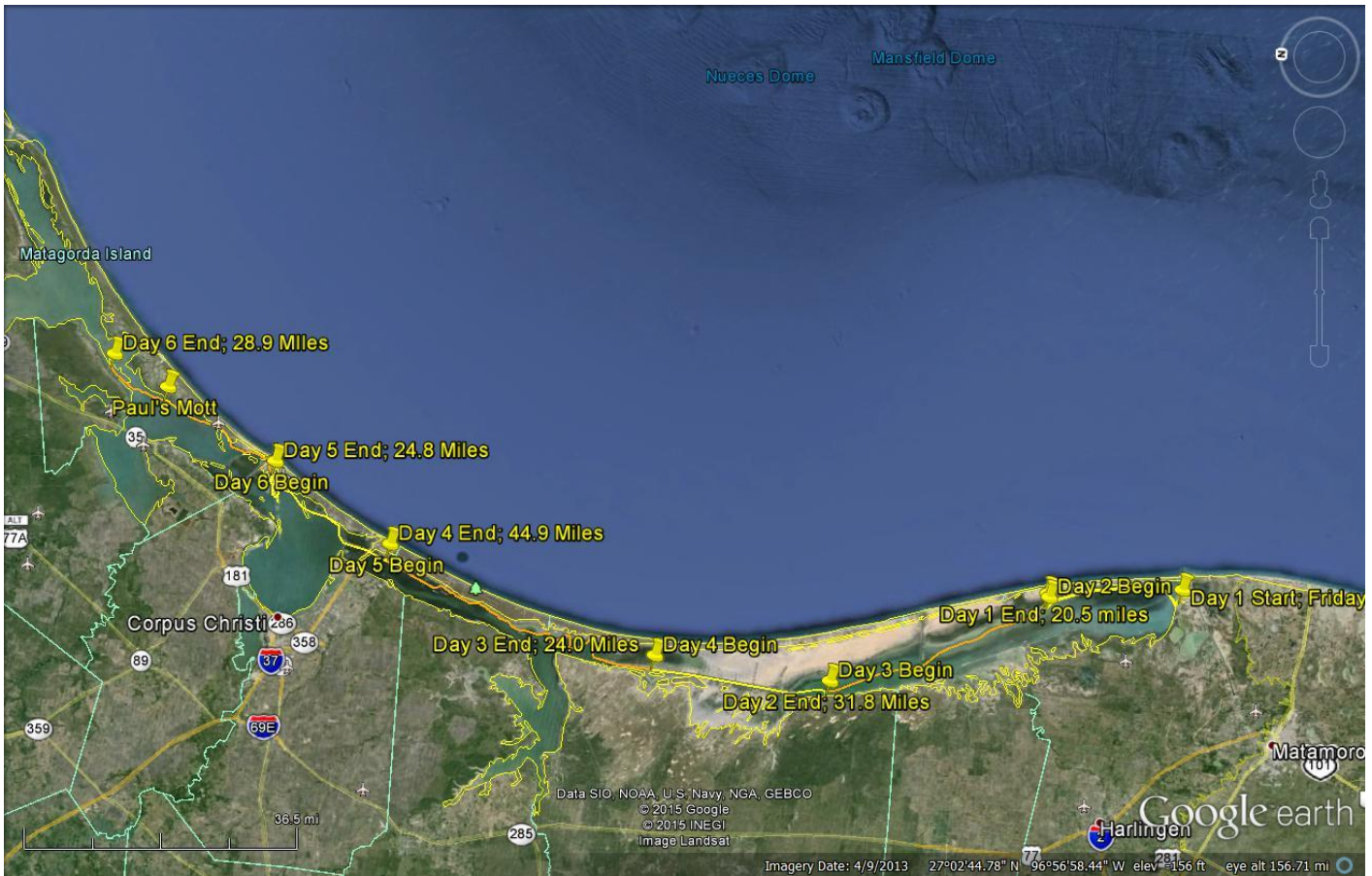
The boat floated free of the beach and I watched a moment as the water rose. It did not stop. The water kept coming; panic gripped me as it reached close to me and again, kept coming. The water hit my sleeping pad and netting as I jumped up to stay dry. The water engulfed the area where I'd been laying and floated everything I had there. I was running grabbing everything, throwing them higher up the slope. As the water started receding, receding quickly, I realized everything in the water would be sucked into the channel. I saw the anchor line tightening on the skiff as it was being pulled out. I grabbed the rope handle on the skiff as the corkscrew anchor let loose in the soft sand upslope. I would be up the channel without, if it was pulled from my hands. Hanging on and leaning back I stopped the movement further into the channel. I pulled the skiff way up onto the beach, above where the majority of the wave had been. Feeling safe, I set anchor again and reorganized my gear further upslope. Wringing the water from the sleeping bag and pillow, I contemplated where I was and several scenarios of problems ahead. The mosquitoes were relentless as the adrenalin rush subsided.



Lying on my side after it had gotten dark I was surveying the lights to my east watching the ferries plod back and forth across the channel. I watched the nighttime display as the stars shone and satellites passed. At about 12:30 I saw a silhouette of an animal moving down to the beach. Not sure if it was a dog or a coyote, I watched as long as I could. I awoke and looked toward the light to see if the animal could be seen. It was nose down following the flotsam line coming towards me. Those fight or flight thoughts are bouncing in my head. I waited until it was within six feet and jump up yelling, out of fear and boldness. That coyote went screaming up the slope and I last saw it as it passed over the ridge into the darkness. About an hour later he brought his friends back to serenade me. They were quiet the first time I asked them to shut up, politely of course, but not the next three times. As I faded back into unconsciousness I heard a blast of a ships horn. Foggily I recalled that meant a ship was coming by, that's nice. Whoa, that means chaos! I jumped up and performed the same drill as earlier ending up hanging onto the boat as the water was trying to suck it seaward. Re-lathering up with DEET, I lay back down. This drill was performed two more times before dawn, in between coyote serenades.

Wednesday morning welcomed me with the skiff sitting 30 yards from the water. The sun was cresting the ridge to my east. I figured I would worry about it after I had a little breakfast, for today I was rowing into uncharted territory. Last year I had reached this area and turned northward to end the trip at Port Aransas. The peak of this adventure, my summit, was to be today. The Corpus Christi Channel combines with two other

channels to form a busy crossroads of vessel traffic headed outbound and inbound from the Gulf. I proved I could do the first 100 miles; this is the second time I'd done it. My only option was move forward. Standing, I leaned into the task of completing what I had dreamed of, planned for. The feeling is not unlike leaning into a strong wind blasting me, trying to push me down. Gathering my gear, I see coyote tracks all around my sleeping pad. I look up to see if they are watching and see two large hogs ambling across the playa about 50 yards away. The camera battery looks like a salt brick, so cell phone camera and video stills will have to be relied upon.



Reaching the edge of the ferry crossings, I sit and watch to see if there is a pattern I could use to time my passing through the five ferries working back and forth. Hailing them on the radio did nothing. I passed the eastern ferry docks with two pulling out and three coming in. No problem. Breathing much too fast, I had to mentally and physically slow down to stay focused. I stopped to talk with the guys fishing on the public pier. They could not believe I had put in at Port Isabel. Neither could I.

The final channel crossing laid about one hundred yards ahead. Lining up on the back end of the motel, about to cross I hear a motor revving up. I see a white 60-ish foot sportfisherman with outriggers waving, headed my way. With bow high and not on plane yet, the boat passes me and leaves behind a massive wake, from where I'm sitting. Pulling hard I quickly aim the stern into the face of the wake. The St. Lawrence skiff has proven itself seaworthy again. Cutting the initial wake was no problem, dropping into the trough behind that was not what I expected. The hotel and horizons disappeared; I guess the wake was six feet high. Running through my mind in milliseconds were thoughts of how to recover all my gear when the skiff swamps. Surprisingly she rose up as the crest reached the stern like a duck on a pond. The three following wakes were no problem. Pulling hard on the oars I crossed the channel in moments. As I reached the channel marker on the north side,

another large sportfisherman was headed out of Lydia Ann Channel. Not on plane yet, he turned towards the Gulf and I rode more scary wakes as he passed.

With my mountain peak climbed, I relaxed a bit and refilled my water bottles and mixed up some Gatorade as the skiff glided past two parked barges. The sounds of the ferries and large boats faded into the distance as I was rowing through an area of flat water, not even a ripple. Duck hunting blinds dotted the water and shoreline reinforcing the complete change of scenery. The morning haze had burned off completely as I ghosted behind Mud Island headed towards Hidden Pass. As I reached the Pass, I could see cattle grazing in vibrant green grass along the shore with a ranch house and windmill. The sky was bright blue with white cumulus clouds forming, with one low grey cloud sprinkling down on me.

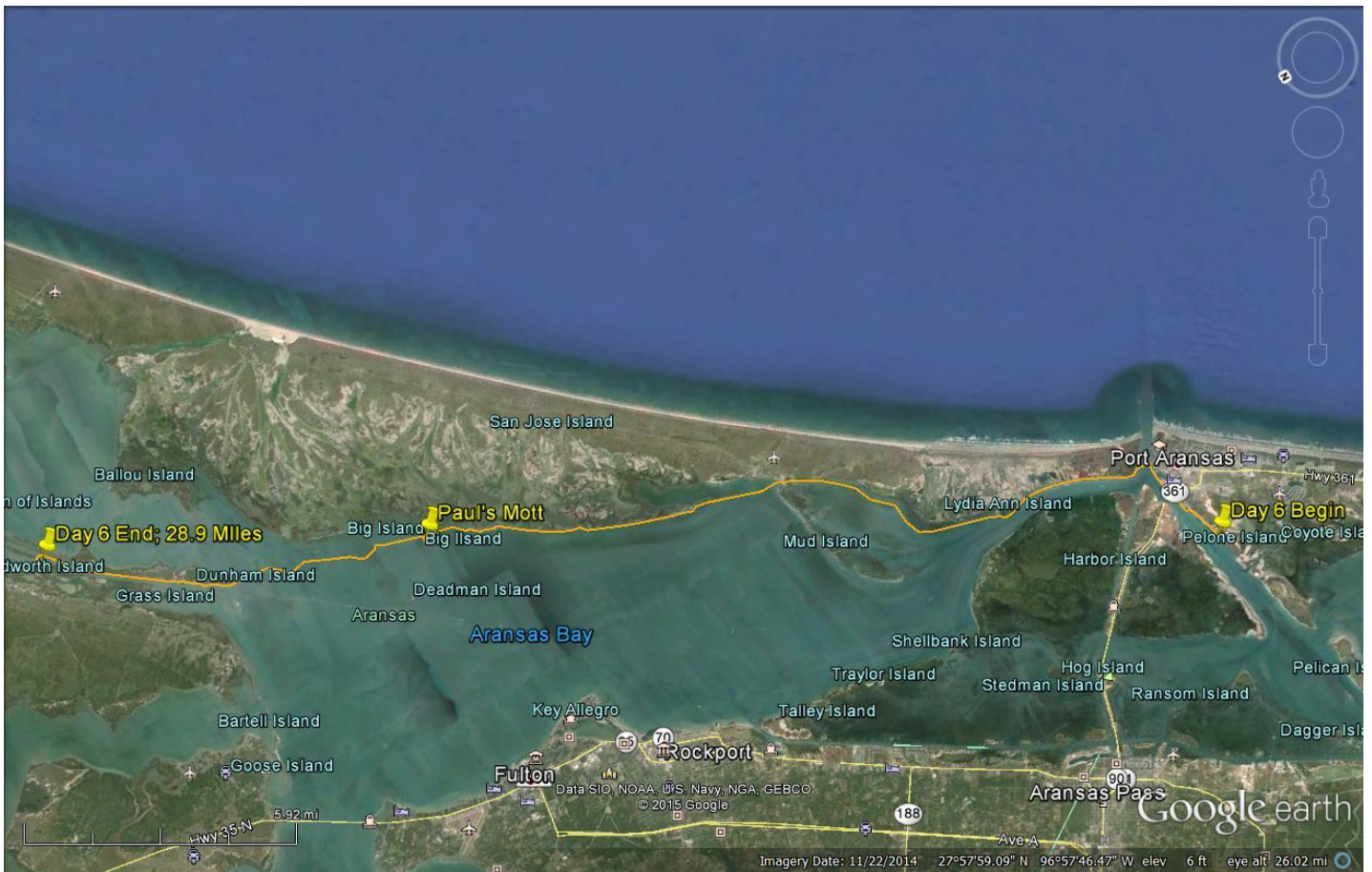
Reaching Hidden pass was like stepping into a new environment. The water color cleared up from the muddy complexion through the channels. The shoreline has changed from sand and mud to stark white oyster banks. This type of beach is known to shred hull bottoms, centerboards, and unprotected feet. The wind freshened up and the waves grew a bit as I headed on towards Paul's Mott. There was no one particular direction the waves were coming from; a confused chop by all definitions. Crossing Aransas Bay, I followed close to the back side of the barrier island. The shorebird rookeries were full of pelican, terns, skimmers, and seagulls, all segregated into their own groups. Each group had several sentries that would come out and berate me for interrupting their peace and privacy. Except for the pelicans, they just nodded as I rowed by.

I pulled up to Paul's Mott at about 3PM. Paul's Mott is a triangle of oysters jutting into Aransas Bay, one of the stopping points for this year's 200. Getting out to stretch I understood all the warnings about the oyster shells mighty quickly. I could hear and feel the razor sharp oysters modifying the skeg's fiberglass sheathing. The terns were very upset that I had disturbed their peace and quiet as I walked along the south shore. Again, the pelicans just nodded. I rowed around to the tip where a fisherwoman was and ate my lunch and re-assessed my day.

Rowing through the waves and chop would put me at the Third Chain of Islands at about 6PM and camping spots close by aren't obvious in this area. I planned on rowing towards the Third Chain and then re-assessing as I approached. As the day wore on, wind held steady at about 15 mph. White caps here and there accentuated the beautiful scenery of the back side of San Jose Island. The offshore platforms being built lying on their sides faded in the west. The wind and waves were wearing on me and it was decision time. I decided to duck behind the spoil islands of the ICW and cruise along the channel to find a suitable camping area. Up close, the spoil islands are much different from the aerial photo charts. Pulling behind the first island, the land reached upward 50-60 feet, blocking all wind on this portion of the ICW. The brine flies and greenheads were swarming around the boat. Even rowing to the landward side of the channel didn't stop the swarms. A barge with pusher was stopped along the back side of the spoils in a staging area. The captain questioned my sanity and said he was waiting on a berth in Corpus Christi. Pushing on I kept looking for a landing area but the spoils islands had thick, non-inviting, brush and rambles right to the edge. Landward the riprap and warning signs about trespassing encouraged me to continue on.

Landward the shoreline came to an end a point of riprap with a breeze flowing across it. This opened up into what is the aptly named Sundown Bay, a small lagoon off the ICW. The spoil island was low and far enough away to allow the breeze to keep this area free of flies. The sun was approaching the horizon as I tied off to the riprap and let out all of my anchor line. The welcome breeze kept me pointed into the small bay that was calm with very green shorelines of riprap and low bushes. Checking the NOAA weather reports I could be confident the wind would continue through the night. If the wind shifted to the north, I would be dangling into the ICW and

in the way of barge traffic. Directly off my stern the sunset was again, glorious. Setting up the mosquito netting and sleeping pad I prepared for the night.



A blinding white light woke me up. Thoughts of train headlights and UFO abductions raced through my foggy mind. A barge passing by was checking me out. Oh no, I had drifted into the channel! Jumping up I could tell that wasn't the case and the light illuminated my position very well. The light went out as the barge continued droning toward me. Settling down, I turned my back to the barge. The captain must have not believed his eyes as he lit me up two more times as he passed. Two more barges checked me out through the night. Not a good night's sleep, but it was very comfortable.

A passing rain shower woke me up at dawn. The tarp was unfurled and pulled over me just as the rain stopped. Packing my gear best I could, I made a cup of espresso to jump start the morning. I planned on grabbing a bite to eat on the other side of Ayres Bay. Setting out in a nice breeze I rowed across the channel to follow the spoil islands to Rattlesnake Island then turn into the bay and cross to the back side of Matagorda Island. This would put me in front of the Second Chain of Islands. The wind was dead and humidity was high as I rowed in the wind shadow. Loud grunting and a ruckus behind me made me turn and I caught a glimpse of a hog bolting into the brush. The trip waiver came to mind, "You may die".

As I rounded the channel marker at the end of Rattlesnake island the breeze hit me. It was solidly white capping, 20mph I guessed. The sweat soaked shirt quickly cooled off as I turned into the wind. That little white mark on the aerial chart was actually an oyster reef that I hit squarely. Climbing out and pulling over through the increasing waves was awkward as I tried to remain upright on the uneven oyster covered bottom. Once in boat I realized this crossing was going to be a challenge, rowing into a quartering wind with waves. A Coast

Guard RIB with a small cabin on it was blasting by on the ICW until he saw me. Coming off plane, he turned toward me. I knew there was something that caught his eye; I wasn't wearing my life jacket. It was so quiet on the channel that I hadn't strapped it on yet. Throwing the life jacket on and grabbing my radio to show him I had a VHF, he turned back toward the ICW and continued on.

Crossing Ayres Bay the storm I had been watching caught me. Running to the shelter of the spoils islands was not an option, I wouldn't make Army Hole when the rest of the Texas 200 boats would arrive. The noise from the wind, rain and hull pounding was deafening. It was a struggle to keep the bow turned into the wind to keep from swamping. Again the skiff reacted, as I pulled to maintain position, by floating up each wave as a bobber would on a pond. As the wind flattened the waves (this was scary I'd never seen that before), rays of sun beamed down from heaven as if to say "you're alright and you'll be fine". Reaching a sandy beach on the other side the skiff had about 3" of water sloshing around my feet. Breakfast oatmeal with more espresso was made and I sat back in the lawn chair and enjoyed the beauty of this area. The bright blue skies with the white cumulus cloud were the order for the day. The breeze had dropped to about 10mph and water was a little muddy along the sand and mud shore.

Rowing along the western side of Matagorda Island through very fish productive waters, the fish would bolt out of the grass reeds growing in the water. Rowing past a few fishermen with their backs toward me I enjoyed surprising them by yelling a good Aggie Howdy at them. I always got the "where did you come from" in one form or another. There were also, many comments questioning mental capacity in one form or another. By noon my back was beginning to spasm. Grabbing the ibuprofen after pulling onto an oyster beach I sat back to take a nap and let the medicine kick in. I woke about 30 minutes later with no pain and sat and watched the fishermen to my left. Another squall hit as I was beached. Unfurling the tarp I attempted to cover up but the wind would have nothing of that. Wrestling with the tarp, I watched the fishermen just keep on fishing with no regard to the rain and wind. My anxiety dropped after that. Pulling out I headed towards the First Chain of Islands and Blind Pass.

The row from Ayres Pt to the First Chain showed me why the fishermen were in the area. There is a large nursery of reds and trout. The rowing was fantastic, wind was about 15-20, but water was in the wind shadow and flat. The rowing plan was working, stay in the flat water up against the shore. Bird life abounded in the reeds and bushes along the edge with many redwing blackbirds and cardinals. There was a constant series of inlets and small bays that I rowed along trying to cut across the larger gaps. This constant zigging and zagging ate up a lot of time. The pass through the First Chain of Islands, Blind Pass, was found with little problem. The narrowness of this pass surprised me, what 20-30' wide. The shell island to the west has a white house with a water tower and all sorts of what looks like farm and oil rig equipment on it.

Pulling out of the pass I turned eastward toward Army hole, which I estimate is 10 miles away. The heat of the day and earlier struggles were wearing on me and it was time to find a spot for the evening. I found a bush that was tall enough to project shade and pulled in next to it. Placing the sleeping pad on the shell beach in the shade I sat back and watched the sun ease towards the horizon. Teriyaki Chicken was on the menu for tonight. As I ate the rehydrated chicken thinking about the texture, I began wondering and if it was really chicken. The wind stayed up as a gorgeous sunset unfolded in front of me. Rays of gold and yellow radiated upward as the sun set behind the clouds and horizon.



Noises near my feet woke me up. It was just about daylight and there was a ruckus just past the bushes at my feet. There was a slight incline down to a small pond twenty feet away that hogs were splashing in. I won't bother them and we'll all be fine was my mantra that morning. I didn't make breakfast, just organized the boat and headed about at about 7AM. It was going to be an easy row of about 10 miles to Army Hole this morning.



The toughest part of today's row was the anticipation. I certainly didn't want to pass Army Hole. The last fisherman I spoke to did let me know there were buildings there and I couldn't miss it. I must have looked over my shoulder a thousand times expectantly this morning. Finally saw the building structures and it seemed like they not come near, no matter how much I rowed before looking back again. Pulling into a little lagoon just south of AH, I dawdled just looking around and getting my bearings before committing to a landing area. I could see a windbreak had been set up at the picnic table on the point of land facing west. Dang, I'm late, I miscalculated days I missed the group. I pulled up the boat through some mud into tall grasses just below a picnic table and shade cover.

As I was tying off, I saw two people walking towards me. It was Gordo and Karen Barcomb! What a sight for sore eyes! I'd met them a year before on the 2014 TX200. This couple knows no strangers and no matter where you are, they make you feel like you're old friends or family. In a few minutes a cold Lone Star beer was in my hand. Show me your hands, they exclaimed! No biggie, the blisters were solid calluses by now. Gordo and Karen had sailed out with John and Rosa Goodman in John's colorful sailboat the evening before. I indeed had been the first TX200 boat to arrive. Not really a big claim considering I left Port Isabel couple days earlier than everyone else.

Army Hole has a docking area shaped like a U. Wind pushes you hard down one leg of the U then you hope to burn speed and energy making the 180 into the docks. That didn't always work. Splinters and bowsprits were sacrificed. The first sailboat to arrive was a Hobie trihull kayak type rig with a single sailor, no crew. He slid in from the direction I had come, not from to the NW of Army Hole as many were expected to come from. Sitting under Gordo's shade sipping cold beer we watched the other sailboats flogging dead upwind to AH. The first 3 monohulls to arrive were MacGregors. As much as we had been discussing the expected first boats, a MacGregor had not been mentioned. This was certainly a testament to the fine sailors aboard as well as the usefulness of the 25 and 26 in the TX200. I was able to get a shower in the open air shower before everyone else showed up. Meeting many of the friends I'd made in the previous attempt in 2014 was a high point of the trip. Brian Graham and his dad made me a welcome member of their campsite. I met Pehr, Matt, Chuck and Jack again from last year. I also, met Chris, Leah and Molina bringing their outboard powered shanty boat on the TX200.



Fiddler crabs, I had to mention this. Walking down to the rip rap at end of the docks, the ground was moving, I had to stop and focus on the ground. There were thousands upon thousands of fiddlers moving and migrating about, en mass. It was an awesome sight to behold. The tales of rattlesnakes on Matagorda Island weren't lost on me. Walking through the tall grass was done slowly and gingerly. I placed my sleeping gear on top of the picnic table.

There was a lot of discussion of the route for the final push to Magnolia Beach. Everyone had their favorite route or their own reasoning for why they were going as they were. My thought was to row in a relative wind shadow until almost due N of the Matagorda Island lighthouse then turn downwind to Falwell Island, skirt the east side then slide downwind to Grass Island skirting to east before reaching it. This would put me near the opening of Saluria Bayou. Go east through bayou, turn north at the end and run downwind to Magnolia Beach was the plan.

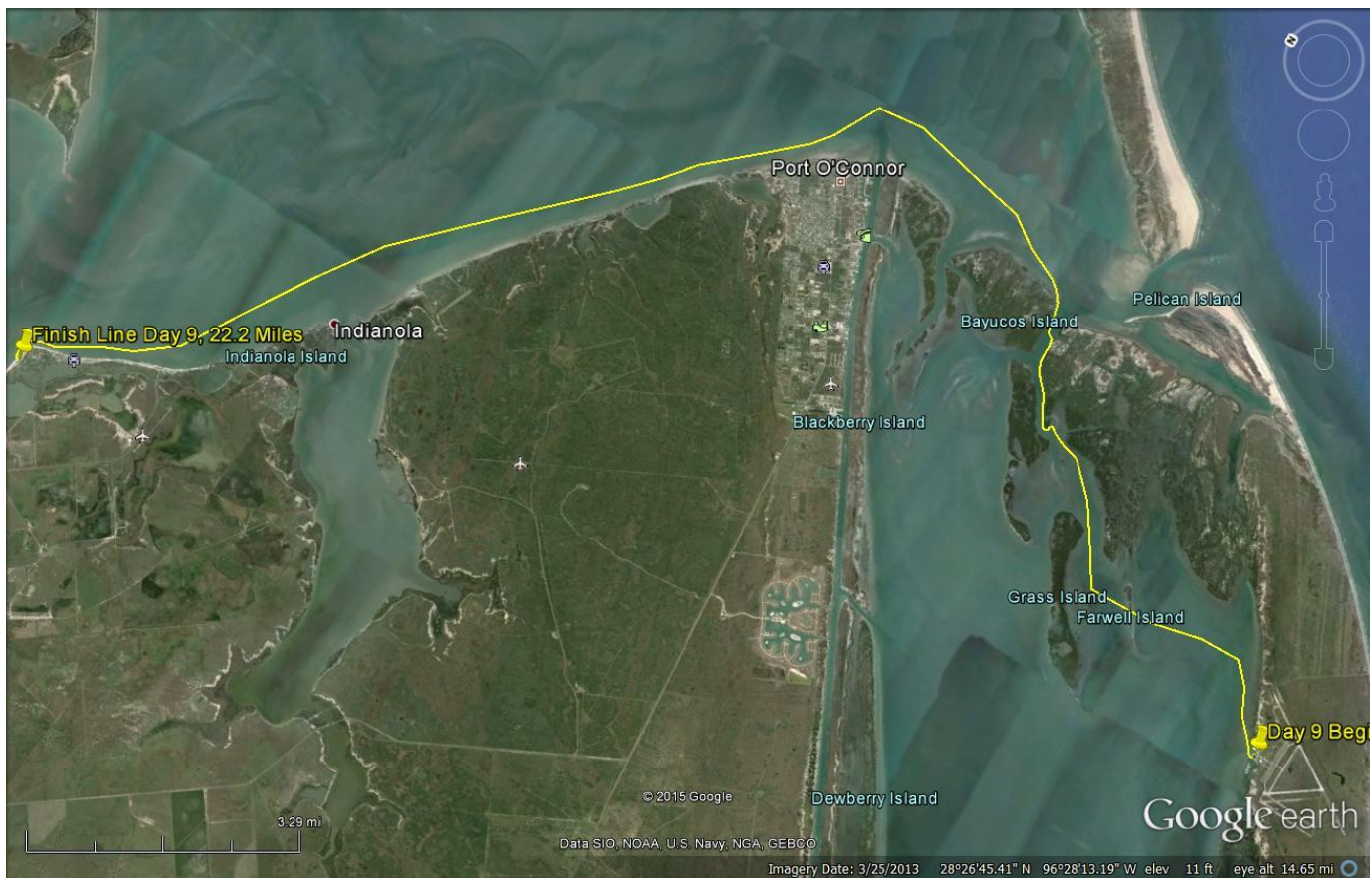
All were up and stuffing gear in dry bags with excitement at sunrise. It was 24 Miles to Magnolia (Maggie) Beach. Everybody was packing some, most cooking breakfast. A few discussions were had regarding the route

for the day. Some were going to run downwind to the ICW then eastward out through the jetties into Lavaca Bay then run downwind to Maggie Beach. Others were planning their own individual attack on Saluria Bayou.



Walking back to my picnic table where I had planned to do the espresso and oatmeal breakfast, Glenn and Brian Graham asked me over and cooked up some pancakes and coffee for me on their Coleman stove. They even threw in some bacon. It took about three sentences from Glenn before he asked me if I knew Jesus Christ. I really enjoyed spending time with them, assuring Glenn I did.

I'm a strong believer in "plan the row and row the plan". The plan I had yesterday will be a go. Rowing perpendicular to the wind isn't my favorite thing to do, especially in a technical section. But when in Rome, follow the chariots. Watching the fishermen in powerboats led me to the opening of Saluria Bayou and I was able to stay on the relatively smooth water in the bayou. Four other TX 200 boats reached the bay about the same time I did and turned north. The wind was pushing me in northward. The size of the rollers were pretty big as I was approached the east end of the Port O'Connor Jetties. Brian boat sailed within shouting of distance his dad's. As I reached the end of the jetties they jibed and headed north. This last day was going to be a breeze, Maggie Beach, due north, downwind.



Or so I thought. The waves were not consistent and it was hard to gain any speed on the front slope of the waves. Waves coming across the bay seemed to be reflecting back from the shore to my left stacking up into chop. Waves turned into unorganized chop about 2-3' high. It was a constant struggle to maintain any heading and forward progress. Forget feathering the oars, as they were in the water at different times. The hull was rolling as it slid up and down the chop coming from the sides. While one oar was biting in the water the other would have been lifted to wave in the air. No rhythm. Definitely this was my toughest day on the water. I think I may have been defeated had this been day one or two. Barn sour now, nothing was going to stop me from getting to the finish. All the sailboats had passed me by now. Looking at the bright side, the shrimp will be ready and the beer cold. Rain clouds would form close by, dump on me, then the sun would be out again. It rained on me 3 times before I reached the finish.

That last turn to my right to pull up on the beach was a great feeling. A few hard pulls and I would be on the beach. 2:30PM. The landing was exactly as I had hoped it would be. A quiet, landing allowed me to stumble out of the boat with few people looking on. I got my bearings, straightened up and looked around. There were three or four people coming up saying congrats and talking about their trip. I pulled the skiff as far up onto the beach I could, not wanting to lose it now for sure. I was very tired, I couldn't believe how tired. All I could focus on was walking up to the picnic table that had the Texas 200 Finish Line banner on it. I said a few Howdy's and searched out Chuck Pierce and Chris Breaux for a finish line photo.



After a few plates of boiled shrimp and a few cold brews, I looked around to see who and what was where. The schooner was being folded. The Bobcat was placed neatly on its trailer. Jack gave me a ride up to the Shell station where my car and trailer were. I love it when a plan comes together. I had finished what I had set out to do; I'd reached my goal of rowing the Texas 200, something that had never been done. Others had rowed farther along the coast and across the Atlantic, but this was mine.

The time for recovery and packing for the trip home was here. I showered and planned on spending Sat night here on the beach and then driving up to Galveston to meet Andy Green on Sunday. Andy is the gentleman who conceived the tooling and the Kevlar St. Lawrence skiff that carried me this past week. He is quite the pioneer when it comes to composites and uses. I had been introduced to him by email earlier in the summer by John Mullen, who had originally introduced me to the St. Lawrence skiff. But, this leads to other stories to come.

