

My first Texas 200
Cay Smith Osmon

Part I: "It was a dark and stormy night"

I felt the anchor rode burning through my padded gloves. It didn't help that the rode was a bit undersized, not for the size of the anchor, but certainly under the present circumstances. Holding the rode with both hands, I tried to crab my way forward in the bucking boat while trying to keep my arms from slamming down onto the wood coaming in every trough. The wind—around 16 mph, gusting higher—had bulldozed water thirty miles across Matagorda Bay into 2- to 4-foot waves with some groups 3-to-5-feet by the time they got to me. Were they out to get me? They really couldn't care less about my predicament and were relentless in their goal of reaching the lee shore of Indianola, a thousand feet away.

I glanced over my shoulder and could see car lights slowly passing LaSalle's glowing monument on shore. *Ha! LaSalle and Indianola, two great dreams wrecked along this bay.* I sat back on my haunches, soaked by the water sloshing around that had shipped when *Dreadnaught* and I had experienced a—umm—heeling moment earlier.

I had managed to get the main down and the jib to furl, but the furler wasn't up to the wind conditions and had left out about two and a half feet of it flogging us even faster toward shore. I had been certain that small lunch hook I had put overboard was going to drag, slowing us enough for me to get things sorted. Damned if it hadn't held fast; it had about 15 feet of chain but it was on a short rode and I was coming to the bitter end....

I renewed my resolve NOT to become another wrecked dream, but along the crabway I had now come to an obstacle: the shroud. There was no way to get around it with what little bit of rode was left; I couldn't hold it with just one hand, even for a second; I was too exhausted.

My expletives were lost in the gusts. Bashing waves coming out of the blackness, salt spray blowing across the gunn'ls, and my only thought was, "If I braced my feet against the side of the boat,"—pushing against wind, water, and current—"I wonder if they would go right through the hull?".

"A cautionary tale"

I grew up in and around salt water and boats. My father built boats, shrimped and fished, and taught me how to handle boats from the very beginning, it seems. Whenever someone asks me when I first started sailing, I have to say that I don't remember; I've never felt like there was a "first time;" sailing, being on boats, being around the water was just always "there." I put together my first sailboat when I was 11, and bought my first real sailboat when I was 16, fearlessly taking off on my own to explore the waters around Bolivar Roads (between Bolivar Peninsula and Galveston). I always felt comfortable on the water, and became an exacting, conscientious captain. My long, *naturally-felt* life in sailboats was so different from my first go at the Texas 200.

"But, what *was* going on that night?!" I hear you ask. "What were you doing out there; it doesn't make sense!"

Exactly.

The first part of this account of my first Texas 200 is for those who may think the ill effects of going without enough sleep can be banished if only you drink enough strong coffee. Studies have shown that the effects of sleep deprivation on mental and physical performance is so pronounced that it's just as bad as being drunk. Even missing as little as two hours of sleep can affect alertness. Lack of sleep affects the ability to think, remember, and process information. Impaired concentration—a brain fog—slows reaction time and seriously increases the risk of making mistakes. I wasn't drunk that first night; but I was certainly operating in an altered state, and all because I hadn't gotten enough sleep the previous week.

Without sufficient sleep, I had become a person who made up her own realities. My judgment was faulty, options were nowhere to be found, the truth of a situation was my own truth, and with no one around to challenge it, I blithely succumbed to its consequences. The most dangerous effect of being sleep-deprived for me was that I wasn't aware of it—at all—ever.

"I'm doin' that!"

I first heard about the Texas 200 from Johnnie Eichor, who had made the trip multiple times in his Blackwatch 18. When I read more about it, I knew it was the perfect trip for me and I resolved to do it—in *my* Blackwatch. But it would take a year-long re-fit before it would be ready. When I finished in December 2019, the price of shipping my boat from Yucatan, where I live, to Houston, had risen beyond my means. So, I decided to find a boat to buy in the US, one that would be more suitable and one that would live in the Clear Lake (Texas) area, ready for subsequent camp cruises.



I fell in love with the Welsford Pathfinder (17'4" wood, open cockpit) and was lucky to find one for sale—in Oregon! Well, it turned out to be lucky even though the logistics were pretty complicated, because the owner/builder, Richard Holcombe, is a wonderful man who did an exemplary job building and fitting it out.

S/V Dreadnaught stole my heart! I tried to find someone to haul it to Houston, but in the end, I really wanted to meet Richard and take it to Houston myself. In February, 2020, I flew from Merida, Yucatan to Houston to Denver to Eugene, Oregon; rented a U-Haul, and drove to Florence on the coast to pick it up. The trip to *Dreadnaught's* new home in Clear Lake was a breeze.



But having a boat living in a country I don't live in is problematic, to say the least—I only had a couple of cold, windy sails on Clear Lake, and just a very short jaunt into Galveston Bay on that trip, then I flew back to Yucatan. So, I had a new boat, with a rig (gaff sloop) that I had no prior experience with, and had extremely limited sailing time on.

Then came COVID. I wasn't even sure if I could get back to Texas for the June trip or, if I was there, if I could get back home afterward. And what if I became sick while I was there? I have no insurance in the States and wouldn't be allowed to travel if I got it. I also needed about a week before the event to get the boat ready and provisioned, and maybe try to get some sailing/camping in, too. This trip to Texas involved rental cars, uber trips, U-haul pick-up truck rental (since you can't pull anything with a rental car), shopping, and discovering that, no, it's NOT possible for me to step the mast on this boat by myself after all (it was just a little dent in the coaming!). A lot of work; a lot of caffeine; a lot of stress; and a *lot* of sleepless nights.

One of the biggest issues of having a boat in Texas is not having a vehicle to pull it with. How would we get to Magnolia Beach?

Sooooo, I put the word out on the TX200 FB page and Mike Singleton's grandson, James, was willing to help me out.

I arranged for James to pick us up in Houston and haul us to Magnolia Beach on Saturday, the 13th. By 3:00 pm, he had helped me get the mast up and the boat in the water at the ramp; had dropped off the trailer at JT's, and was on his way back to Corpus Christi.

We were alone.

In perfect hindsight, this was probably the first indication that something was *just. not. right.*

The weather was beautiful though the winds were up—high enough to convince some of the sailors to elect to put in at Port O'Connor (I later learned). There were a few I saw leaving from

Maggie Beach. This is where the “inability to perceive potential danger” caused by lack of sleep starts to kick in. The boats I saw were bigger than mine, but that fact didn’t register. The wind was brisk, but I had only one reef in and didn’t consider putting a second or even third one in until much too late. I was there, in the water, and I felt like I had to go.

By now, it was around four o’clock; I needed to leave but I wasn’t moving; I felt stymied, which could have been simply exhaustion. Pat Hollabaugh came up. As we talked, he said it was too windy for his Mayfly 14 so he’d probably stay on the beach that night and leave the next day. (*Nope, no red flag went up.*) I told him I was trying to decide if I could leave the pier under jib without being blown into the rocks of the breakwater. He said he thought I could and gave me a big push. I did make it out without a problem but why hadn’t I just started the motor? Because it never occurred to me. *Hmmmmmm.*

I had one reef in the main and, even with the jib, I felt secure and under control. But the wind was rising and it was getting late. It became obvious fairly quickly that I wasn’t going to get to Port O’Connor before dark. It also occurred to me (*finally*) that I didn’t know of a place where I could get out of the weather. I didn’t know these waters *AT ALL*. I had been looking at charts and maps of the whole coastal bend, and even planning routes and waypoints for more than a year. But I hadn’t looked closely at the coast from Magnolia Beach to Port O’Connor.

I was stuck. By that time, I was too far from the ramp to turn back, and the shoreline ahead—and any hazards in between—was completely unknown.

I had shipped water on two jibes, but I was too worried about the wave heights to heave to and reduce sail. That’s when I had the brilliant idea to put my little Danforth out, just to slow down a bit. It was in a bag at the transom. *“I’ll go ahead and put it over and it’ll drag, and I’ll just walk forward and tie it off to the cleat on deck. Then, I can get my bigger Northhill out; that’ll get us to windward and we’ll be tickety boo.”*

And no, the rode wasn’t tied to anything but the Danforth.

Alone, exhausted, delusional, ill-prepared as to my familiarity with the boat and the waters, high winds and rough seas, all ingredients for disaster.

“Oh, well, whatever”

The bitter end came fast; I couldn’t hold on any longer and let go.

I rushed forward, grabbed for the flogging jib while making a mental note to change out the rock-hard bowlines for soft shackles. I was able to furl it completely, then got my other anchor out of the locker and over the side. I tied it off after giving out plenty of scope, then practically collapsed, sitting, onto the floor. I felt stunned, but I at least had enough sense left to know I needed to stay alert long enough to check that the anchor wasn’t dragging. I also knew that

setting my other remaining anchor *really* was the smart thing to do, but I was feeling physically sick and weak from exhaustion. It was all I could do to set my anchor light and assure it was secure. After about 20 minutes I felt that we weren't going to drag, at least not unless the wind picked up, and if it did, I was resolved—or more accurately at that point—resigned to just dealing with ending up on the beach or the rocks, whichever one it would be that would do us in.

I collapsed on the cockpit floor and pulled the loose main over me.

“Dawn, and another day”

I woke at first light and was disappointed to find that the wind and waves were still on the march, although with a little less gusto. It was a relief, however, to see that my capable Northill had kept us in one place. The sky seemed open, welcoming after a night heavy and oppressive, like a leaden blanket smothering me. And my head was clear, my thinking rational and focused. The events of the previous night seemed unreal—unbelievable—certainly not events *I* had participated in. They were actions made by another person, someone I didn't know; a stranger under the influence, perhaps. I was at a loss to explain what had happened, and why. It was inconceivable that I had actually made a *conscious* decision to sally forth in those conditions. I was embarrassed, ashamed, even; it was all too much to try to analyze at the moment so I just put it out of my mind and felt relieved that I had something to get on with.

First order was to get the water out of the boat (another mental note to replace gaskets in all access ports), then get something to eat and drink. Afterwards, I started the motor, shipped anchor, and motored sufficiently far from shore to safely raise sails.

From then on it was a beautiful and incident-free sail to Sunday Beach.

Part II: “That's more like it”

The second part of this account will seem to be in stark contrast to the first part. I can hardly reconcile the two parts myself except that it serves as the best example of what can happen to someone suffering from sleep deprivation. Although the litany of possible hazards that could be encountered on the Texas200, as iterated in the Club's "General Information" sheet, may not include sleep deprivation, it is something that should be taken seriously, and I hope that this account will raise awareness of its dangers. The effect it had on me is alarming to reflect on now, and I'm very fortunate that neither I nor my little boat were hurt or lost from the experience.



When I arrived at Sunday Beach, I was welcomed with open arms by Glenn and Brian Graham, who I dubbed the Gourmet Tribe, not only for the extensive cabana set-up they had—which included two camp stoves, tables, cookware, dishes, JetBoil, and a seemingly un-ending supply of provisions, a highlight of which was the fresh fish Brian and Mike Olson caught—but even more so because of their welcoming and inclusive demeanor to me, inviting me to eat

and caring for me like my own Grandmother would! Brian’s trimaran was a magical treasure chest of supplies, loaded to the gunnels but still performing well under sail.

I couldn’t have gotten a better antidote for the harrowing experience I had just had; so I decided to stay there and enjoy it. Later, Ziggy Lavengood came and stayed for one night, then moved on. And Brant Bedford and his father, Bert pitched their tent there.

Sunday Beach is a beautiful, tranquil spit of sand along a recently-opened inlet between the Gulf of Mexico and Matagorda Bay across shallow water from the historic Pass Cavallo, which ran along the eastern point of Matagorda Island. The original Pass Cavallo, now closed to the Gulf, which had been in relatively the same location for hundreds of years, was known to many Spaniards, French, and later, American settlers, in addition to the peoples of the various tribes who hunted along this coast. The region is saturated with history and wildlife.

Now, a steady stream of flats boats plowed their way through the sand bars to get to, and sometimes, through the new inlet and out into the Gulf. This confluence of gulf and brackish waters was alive with bait fish and the game fish feeding on them: speckled trout, flounder, shark, tarpon, black drum, Spanish mackerel, and redfish among others. Day and night, fishermen came into the cove area, beached or anchored their boats, and fished the beautiful waters around the point.

Mike Olson in his Pathfinder, *Crucible*, was also there. I had been in touch with Peter Menegaz, and we had talked of having a Pathfinder meet-up, which had looked forward to very much. I hoped the three of us could buddy-boat since this was to be my first TX200, plus I thought it would be kinda cool. Unfortunately, Peter couldn’t make this trip. Mike had come with Glenn and Brian and on Tuesday, they planned on crossing Matagorda Bay to check out new areas. Well, I wasn’t quite ready to experience the Bay again, so I stayed at Sunday Beach with Brant Bedford and his father, Bert.



Wednesday, we left Sunday Beach for Army Hole. Brant and Bert in their Harpoon left first, and after touch-and-go's over the sand bars, were well on their way in their much faster boat. I left and made my way easily back up the inlet, taking a left into Saluria Bayou, and a right through Mitchell's Cut, sailing along past Grass Island and into Espiritu Santo Bay. The sailing conditions were perfect, and I took advantage of the mild winds to sail almost to Hidden Pass, back up the Bay almost to the channel to Army Hole, then around the Bay again; with one reef in (just in case the winds picked up), and the jib, I rarely had to touch the tiller. I had a leisurely lunch and finally got to take a video under sail.



When I got to Army Hole around 3 pm, I was the only boat there.



I spent a tranquil night with a delicious breeze throughout, counting the stars in the Milky Way, and woke to a glorious morning. By mid-afternoon, boats started arriving: Eric Angles and Ryan Fish on *Waqa* (who I had seen at the ramp at Maggie Beach); Michael Pilgrim on *Rocinante*; Terry Dunk and crew on *DeNovo*; Bill Jardine and his son, Charlie on *Apostle*; Ziggy Lavengood on *Ziggity*; and Bob Carson and Mike Singleton on *Lulu*. There were also some Hobies whose masts I could see way on the other side of the marina.



It appeared that most everyone who had "come up" from the southerly direction, were pretty tired, so unfortunately, I didn't get the chance to visit with any of them other than to exchange "hello's." Many of them were gone by the time I was out of my tent the next morning (Friday). After getting my boat shipshape, I was also on my way across Espiritu Santo Bay in the Army Hole channel, through the cut into the ICW, and on the way to Port O'Connor. I had heard of Clark's motel and

thought I would spend the night there. It was full, but I found a slip at the Bait Pier for \$15 for the night.



It was quite a show there, with all the boats coming and going, in addition to being able to watch the tugs and barges plowing through the ICW. Being Friday, there was a fishing tournament going on so I got to see all the big fish coming in to be weighed and measured. I set up my camp chair (that I had salvaged from Sunday Beach) under the palm trees to watch the world passing by. Later, I was able to help Ziggy Lavengood fold up his Windrider 17 and afterward we went for

Tex-Mex food. Unfortunately, we didn't find the restaurant, but we found another place and had a delicious lunch.

I called James Singleton, my chauffeur, and he came on Saturday with a friend of his to get us on the trailer and back to Clear Lake.

"Postscript"

I had the good fortune to meet Chuck Leinweber when we were pulling *Dreadnaught* out at the ramp. He asked about the builder, and when I told him Richard Holcombe, he seemed to remember the name ("Duckworks" made the sails and I feel confident that some of the rig and hardware also came from there). When he introduced himself, I pointed an accusing finger at him and said, "So, *you're* the one responsible for this madness!" With his years of experience and accomplishments, Chuck doesn't have to prove anything, and was good-natured enough not to be offended, even by this seemingly wacko stranger. I told him that I wasn't sure that I would even keep the boat, let alone participate in another TX200. He encouraged me to come again next year with my sweet boat.

Clearly, even after a week of beautiful weather, beautiful campsites, friendly people, and gorgeous, incident-free sailing, I was still shaken by my inexplicable experience, enough even, to seriously consider selling my fearless little boat.

I'm writing this a month later, after much analysis and reflection, and I can say now that if I'm able, *s/v Dreadnaught* and I will be there for the 2021 Texas 200; and we're doing the whole enchilada.