

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Texas 200

Sailing the Texas Coast on a Couple of Other People's Boats

- Paul S. Howard (Sandbar Boats) September 18, 2023

In past years I've participated in the Texas 200 in a number of watercraft ranging from a homemade Mayfly 14 that I built in two months to a Catalina 22 with full cabin, electric fans, motor, and more. This year I decided rather last-minute that my little 12' long Fred Shell Swifty 12 was not ideal for the trip ahead of me. She sails well, but is really low on freeboard and storage.

Two weeks prior to departure she sank at Magnolia Beach while we slept in our tents. This was due to taking on water through the centerboard and over the transom as waves lapped at her throughout the night. I'm not saying she wouldn't have made it, but I was looking for a little less stress this time around. Fortunately, some lovely friends from the Renegade Northbounders were happy to have me as crew on their boars. All I needed to do was find my way down to Port Isabel with my kit.

The plan evolved over the next two weeks as such: I would "hitchhike" my way to Port Isabel by meeting up with Buddy Simons at his house in Spring. We then proceeded down to Lesa and Lannis Morris's house in Rosenberg where we picked up Dana and towed the lovely S/V Remedy for the long trip down to the southernmost harbor in America....Port Isabel. The drive was long, but the company was top-notch. We talked about sailing, food, fixing things, breaking things and all the topics that a couple of experienced conversationalists could think of to pass the time. Before we knew it we were pulling up the the marina to drop off the boat.

Work immediately began with prepping Remedy for her launch, helping Bob Rambo get Sandpiper's motor running, parking vehicles and trailers, and getting to our rental houses for the evening. It was a long hot day that was rewarded by a nice dinner in town,...if we could find a restaurant that wasn't too packed. After a few failed attempts to even find parking, we arrived at Dirty Al's for seafood, cold beers, and other fare.



Figure 1: Buddy Simons prepping the gin pole for stepping the mast.

The fare at Dirty Al's was a welcome treat for a tired group. I opted for the raw oysters which came to the table significantly faster than the cooked meals. Buddy's Oysters Rockefeller were damn fine too. Shared food, shared stories, and shared excitement filled the rest of the evening. We then worked our way back to the rentals for cold drinks and final shopping trips for myriad supplies that were forgotten or otherwise needed.



Figure 2: Kathy Robertson hanging out with Dirty Al

The morning found the whole fleet in the parking lot of the White Sands motel for the requisite captains meeting. The usual speech about the need to be self sufficient, how to communicate on a VHF radio, how to get to the bus on time, how you may die, was expertly given by veteran sailor Chuck Pierce. Burgees, stickers, and meal tokens were distributed and the fleet promptly departed to make the long shuttle to Magnolia Beach to drop off vehicles and trailers. As I didn't have skin in the game, I felt it was my duty and pleasure to drive Jeremy Bennet's (@blackfeetaustin) and Courtney McDevit's (@babe_a_fett) boat S/V Not Penny's Boat to Magnolia Beach. After all, they are my spirit animals and they gave me a Mikesboat. How could I not?

The trip to Magnolia Beach was not without incident. I drove non-stop to Port Lavaca, stopping only to look for a 16oz can cooler for Courtney and then headed towards Magnolia Beach. All was on schedule until just on the outskirts of town where a serious accident had occurred. Traffic started stacking up, as the accident had just happened and first responders were only beginning to arrive. Police began telling people to expect at least a half hour or more delay. The was time I did not have. I called Lisa Rambo to asked if the bus could wait for me, not thinking about the fact that they had not choice since the route was blocked. Suddenly they cleared a path and started letting people through. I arrived at JT's One Stop and parked the truck and trailer. I immediately boarded the bus, skipping lunch all together. Somewhere along the way, we discovered that Mark Verret's son was the one who got in a

wreck on his way to join us on the bus. Fortunately, he was uninjured, and his father and him planned to sail some portion of the event that week anyways.

The bus ride back to Port Isabel was uneventful, and the evening was spent making final preparations, having dinner, final trips to Walmart for supplies, and sleep. Late in the evening, Eric Dalhkamp came by to pick up an event burgee that I offered him, as he was unable to order one for some reason. He had a lot going on just to get prepped and make the long drive from Utah to Texas for the trip. He was gracious and wouldn't accept the burgee without something in return. I am now the proud owner of a carbon fiber kayak paddle....I guess I have to build another paddlecraft....not that an excuse is needed.

Day 1

Morning was a busy time of final packing, repairing, and otherwise rigging the boats for departure. I was to spend some period of the week sailing with Will Robertson on his homemade trimaran, and I would later plan to switch boats so his sister Jennifer could crew from Corpus Christi to Maggie Beach. He had all of his gear, some of his sister's, and now mine as well. I packed like a backpacker, but one still needs 5 gallons of water at a bare minimum for this trip. We were well-loaded to say the least. The Renegade Northbounder faction of the Texas 200 pushed off, with Will and I leaving last due to a finicky outboard that didn't feel like waking up.



Figure 3: Will Roberston assisting Bob Rambo with some outboard hiccups.

We left the harbor and headed out into the Laguna Madre. Winds out of the south-southwest made for easy sailing under mainsail along. We pointed north and began a long, smooth cruise downwind at about 5 knots average speed. The whole day was pretty much sailed on one tack with winds building consistently. By the time we made it close to Port Mansfield we were facing a beam reach in 25 knot winds for our tack out to the spoil islands of the Mansfield Cut.



Figure 4: Sandbarboats at the helm of Will's trimaran (I still don't know its name).



Figure 5: Captain Will Robertson at the helm.

We gybed to starboard and cut the corner across the bay to make Camp #1 and began to realize the power of the wind fully. Spray and waves had me bailing water in the stern of the boat for a good 40 minutes. We were making good progress across the waves and watched the island get closer. Most of the fleet seems to have made camp by this time, and we searched for the best approach. The north side of the Mansfield Cut was apparently shallow, as there were numerous fisherman wading. There was a significant accumulation of loose seagrass that presented other issues. We passed the island with the expectation of getting on the lee side and tacking up onto the beach, however we couldn't point high enough to make our target. We gybed away and headed west for a longer tack to get an angle that would work. Attempts to run the outboard failed, as the propeller was constantly getting clogged with seagrass. After about fifteen minutes of run to the west, we once again tacked to a close hauled point of sail to the beach. We were finally going to make it and began to feel some relief. Within about 100 yards of our destination, I felt a snap in the tiller/rudder assembly.

There had been significant weather helm, brought on by excess gear, water in the aft storage of the hull, and possibly some sail trim was needed as well. Will asked what that was, and I explained that we had broken the tiller. We immediately switched into survival mode and decided Port Mansfield was our destination for the night to facilitate repairs and/or exfiltration. For a moment we considered if we had enough fuel to make the crossing, and then realized that Will had installed a secondary steering system comprised of a loop of line and blocks that

allows one to steer the rudder from anywhere on the boat, without a tiller. This was our saving grace, and we made Port Mansfield about an hour before dark.

I honestly didn't even recognize Harbor Bait and Tackle when we arrived. The last couple of times I was there it was kind of a dump. The sketchy, rotten docks had been replaced with new ones. The dangerous sloping bank had been replaced a level bulkhead and parking lot. Stairs, running water, the works. Will went to the bait shop and secured rent for the slip and we took a breath. I approached the owner of the facility in the parking lot and asked if we could camp in the parking lot for the night. He agreed since we had paid for a slip.

Several other members of the fleet arrived in various condition. The Sea Scouts arrived for rest and repairs before continuing in the morning. A couple of Welsford Pathfinders also stopped by. A few others, who's names I can't remember also camped out for the night aboard their boats. One particular gentleman stood out in that he was asking where AirBnBs and hotels might be available between Port Mansfield and Corpus Christi. I don't believe he had studied his route extensively. I assured him that the best accommodations would be found in the land cut..."just pull in somewhere on the right side".

About midnight we saw SeaTow coming in with a sailboat in tow, a vessel we had seen run aground on a spoil island earlier. We were in no position to render aid as we limped into port under emergency steering. We were happy to see them safe in port.

Day 2

The following day was mostly uneventful. Kathy made arrangements to drive down from Magnolia Beach to pick us up in Port Mansfield. We lazily broke down the rig and packed our gear up in the parking lot. We helped various other sailors pull their boats out, chatted, drank a few beers, and napped until Kathy showed up. It was a hot afternoon, and by early evening we found ourselves looking for a hotel room in Kingsville and some Whataburger. A dip in the hotel pool and a few beers made for a relaxing evening with showers and early sleep.

Day 3

Morning, continental breakfast, road trip....we pull into Bob and Lisa Rambo's yard at the Indianola Social Club and catch up with friends. A short while later, Will and I bring his boat over to the workshop to see about repairing the rudder. Keeping with the original plan, Will and Jen (Will's motorcycle landspeed record-holding sister) will sail out of Corpus Christi on Thursday, and I will catch up with Bob and Lisa Rambo aboard S/V Sandpiper.

With the help of a flamethrower, we successfully extract epoxy-coated screws and begin to discuss alternative rudder arrangements. The beers and conversation distract us from repairs in favor of pool time and dinner. Pat and Sharon Hollabaugh cook dinner and we share a night of stories and laughter.

Day 4

Thursday morning we wake up before dawn. Will and I made the drive to the Marker 37 Marina (A.K.A. Snoopy's) to drop me off with Bob and Lisa Rambo. The rest of the fleet that stayed the night there was quickly pulling out for the long sail ahead. It was a welcome camp for those who stayed, as there were all accommodations needed including water, beer, ice, cheeseburgers, etc. Bob and Lisa promptly took my gear aboard and invited me to join their expedition.

We pushed off for a long and leisurely sail across Corpus Christi Bay with no incident. We made our way to the west as we neared the ship channel, hoping to reduce the distance that we had to travel up the channel to make our crossing. I believe it was Stingray Hole that we chose for the crossing, which meant we would motor or sail upwind for about a mile to make our turn north.

The large LNG tankers and other shipping vessels provided no shortage of entertainment. Dolphins jumped out of the bow wakes of two ships as if it was all just a game. The freedom these mammals have in the water is amazing. We left the sail up, but we kept the motor running to ensure a level of confidence in control of the vessel in case something went wrong.

Before we knew it we had turned north out of the shipping lanes and were heading towards Paul's Mott. It was a long but easy cruise up the coast with winds around 15 to 20 knots throughout the day. We made camp about 2 hours before dark.

That night was marked by a ceremony for lost sailor from our fleet, complete with shots from Buddy's trusty cannon, beers, conversations, and new friends made. It was hilarious to watch the various people searching for places to take care of their sanitary needs on such a small, remote beach.

Day 5

Bob and Lisa slept aboard Sandpiper, and I slept in my tent with a number of other folks. I awoke to the sound of numerous folks rapidly breaking camp in hopes of making miles early in the day. It was bound to be a long slog to the next camp at Army Hole. By my estimates we were facing a good 30 miles or more.

I waded out to Sandpiper with my two bags in tow and began helping Bob and Lisa load and organize gear for our departure. Just before pushing off, we raised the mainsail partially prior to pulling anchor. With me in the water, and Bob at the halyard. The main halyard was raised, and the gaff halyard was raised about halfway. During a conversation, I heard a 'ping' and watched a shackle fall off of the gaff, bounce on deck, and go straight into the water in front of me. I said "Oh shit that's not good", and Bob asked what happened. I said "don't worry, I'll get it", and reached into the water to retrieve the part. By some miraculous intervention, the first time I put my hand into the water and reached to the bottom, my hand landed directly on top of the missing shackle. I pulled it out, and we proceeded to drop the rig for re-installation of the shackle.

We had to fiddle with some other items on the rig to get things back in order. Something we removed got put back in place upside down or something rather. Gaff rigged vessels are quirky, but in the end we had the rig back together and were ready to sail. The only boats left a camp were ours and Chris and Cathy Tomsett in their Glen-L boat. They were taking their time after Chris having overexerted his back from some assistance with a folding schooner earlier. We pushed off and began the long slow cruise to Army Hole.

We had to choose our route at this point, and the options were limited to the Intercoastal Waterway or taking the backwater "dugouts" that guide you through spoil islands across San Antonio Bay. We opted for the ICW, but in hindsight may have preferred the dugouts.

The wind picked up substantially throughout the day and found us crossing an open bay section of San Antonio Bay during a 20 to 25 knots of wind on our beam. This was challenging in most part due to the presence of shoals, dredging operations, and barges. At one point we had to thread the needle between three active dredges and a double-wide barge at a very narrow spot. It was good that we communicated with the barge on the VHF, because he planned to hug the windward side of the channel, which would have been our preferred side in any other situation. Nevertheless, we popped out of that section and made our crossing into the Espiritu Santo Bay at Panther Cut and felt a sense of relief.

After getting into the bay, we were able to feel some relief from the wind and waves. A cold beer helped us to relax as we pointed north for the remaining miles to Army Hole. We made camp well before dusk and had time to unwind before the sun set. Most folks appeared to be pretty tired, and it got quiet shortly after dark. Stan Roberts and Chuck Pierce were the final mates to arrive that night, just before the sunset on the horizon. They were sailing a couple of small canoe-based trimarans they had built. It was a beautiful sight to behold seeing small wooden boats with balanced lugsails squeezing the last puffs of wind out of the air to make camp.

Day 6

The next day was rather lazy for us. About half of the remaining fleet at this camp had decided to take the bayous to get into Matagorda Bay, while the other half opted for the Mail Channel. We took the channel and headed into Port O'Connor. This route is pretty laid back and resulted in a light and easy sail all the way to the jetty's and beyond. We mostly just chatted and sailed on a broad reach from Port O'Connor to Magnolia Beach.

Shrimp Boil and Camaraderie

Many of the boats made it to Magnolia Beach by 2:00 p.m. and were either loaded on trailers or beached. A nice crowd began to build as volunteers set up canopies, distributed beers, and organized the meal. It was equally fun to talk about the week's adventures as it was to people-watch. There is a term coined by the Bar Karate podcast to describe the experience of watching sailors sitting at a dockside bar discussing their sailing adventures with flailing of arms in a manner that might look like some form of martial art to an outsider. This 'bar karate' was in full effect on Magnolia Beach.



Figure 6: Sandpiper in the foreground, followed by Stan Roberts homebuilt trimaran utilizing Michael Storer's drop-in outrigger design.

The majority of participants closed out their conversations, packed up their gear, and said their goodbyes as they headed home for much-needed showers and air conditioning. Other made their way down the beach to the famous Indianola Social Club for poolside entertainment hosted by the Rambos.



Figure 7: Captain Jeremy Bennet among other members of the club cooling off in the pool. No, the water was already that color when they got in.

Hitchhiking Home

The following morning had me a little rushed to keep up with my ride back to Montgomery County. I broke down my tent, filled up my water bottle and said my goodbyes. I hopped in the truck with Buddy and Dana for the drive to Rosenberg. We repeated the first day of the trip in reverse order, with my beloved Cherie coming to pick me up at Buddy's house in Spring. An exhausting trip it was, but I keep coming back for some reason.

In reflection, I have to say that this was the first Texas 200 I have experienced that had winds consistently out of the south or southeast. The challenges came most during times when major change in direction occurred. What most impacted me personally was the experience of not being the captain. I got to be crew rather than the one in charge, which was the first time I didn't have any stress. It was rewarding to just work for someone else's boat for once. As always, the Texas 200 never fails to teach us something and to provide us with the adventure we crave.

Paul