

# A CALIFORNIAN DOES THE TEXAS 200

by Kim Apel

The Texas 200 is a “Raid”-type event; that is, it involves a scheduled gathering of small boats traveling more or less in company from Point A to Point B over a period of several days, camping along the way. 2009 was the second year for the Texas 200, which goes from Port Mansfield Texas, on the Gulf of Mexico, north for five days and about 200 miles along the Intracoastal Waterway (ICW) to Magnolia Beach Texas. <http://texas200.com/route.htm> For any who may be unfamiliar with the ICW, it follows the Atlantic and Gulf coasts from New Jersey to the southern tip of Texas, providing a more or less protected waterway of canals and bays for commercial barge traffic, an alternative to open ocean shipping. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intracoastal\\_Waterway](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intracoastal_Waterway)

The Texas 200 was established by Chuck Leinweber, founder of the Duckworks website <http://www.duckworksmagazine.com/>. Chuck competed in the Everglades Challenge (EC) several years ago, and wanted to do more of that kind of thing. The Everglades, however, are a long trip from his home in Texas. Chuck thought he could organize a modified version of the EC, right on the Texas gulf coast.



Chuck appreciated the physical and mental challenges of the EC, but was looking for something with a broader appeal than the hyper-competitive, hyper-demanding format of the EC. Not as soft and civilized as the European raid model; something in between. The European model for a raid includes an organizing committee, advance notification of appropriate government authorities, beautiful pedigreed craft, entry applications, fees, an approval and invitation process, safety requirements and inspections, escort boats, catered meals & wine, campground reservations, sanitary facilities, scenic routes, evening entertainment, competitive scoring and trophies. It's all very organized, civilized and sophisticated. And not what Chuck had in mind.

By contrast, the Texas 200 projects a uniquely Texas character. It's come-as-you-are, no fees, no rules, no prestige, rough-and-tumble, barren, primitive, muddy, salt-caked, hot-and-sweaty, anything-goes, you're-on-your-own, survival-of-the-fittest, no-time-to-eat, falling-down-tired, cowboy-sailing. It's rodeo on the water, minus the spectators. "Toto, I think we're not in Kansas California anymore."

Chuck planned a route and outlined a concept. He publicized the proposal on the Duckworks website, and the idea caught on immediately. A separate website was established just for the event. Despite \$4 per gallon gas in the summer of 2008, about 40 boats and 60 people showed up from all over the U.S. This is an example of something that could never have happened before the internet. I watched the whole thing evolve on-line, skeptically at first. The success of the 2008 event led to the decision to repeat it in 2009. I read the website accounts, saw the photos and videos, and decided I had to be there. So did others.

The course and calendar are chosen for a reason. In June, on the Texas gulf coast, the wind typically blows steady and strong from the south to southeast. The course lies generally northward, within the barrier islands that buffer the Texas coast. The result is mostly downwind sailing, in mostly "protected" water. June is after the season of spring thunderstorms and before hurricane season, eliminating those extreme scenarios. The downside is that June in south Texas is hot and humid.

Sailing downwind doesn't necessarily mean a casual effort. Even under ideal circumstances, averaging 40 miles per day average is a challenge for small sailboats. As Chuck says, "When you finish (he could have said 'if' you finish), you'll know you've done something." I read words such as "easy", "downwind" and "protected water" and underestimated the challenge.

My friend Dan Rogers and I decided that we had to go. He claims I talked him into it; I remember it the other way around. Dan likes to sail solo, and he had plenty of time to make the 3,600 mile round trip drive from California. I had a

suitable boat, but the drive was daunting. Knowing my dilemma, Chuck referred me to Marty Williams of San Antonio, who had a newly-built Core Sound 17 (CS17), but limited experience. Marty was looking for an experienced crew member and camp organizer. We talked on the phone and formed our team. I would fly to Texas, and Marty would meet me at the airport. It's a bit risky committing a week of vacation to travelling in close quarters with a near stranger, but I'd actually done similar ventures a number of times before, with good results, so I plunged ahead.

The day finally came. I flew from Los Angeles to Corpus Christi, TX, met Marty and drove on a few more hours to Port Mansfield, an isolated coastal village on about the same latitude as Miami. We poked around town meeting other sailors, admiring their boats, figuring out where to launch, and finding some dinner. Dan had arrived from California.

There was no precise roster of confirmed participants. The skipper's meeting on Sunday morning was the first solid indication of the size of the event. I counted about 55 people. More would arrive later. Mostly it was older guys, but there was a gratifying (and a little surprising) representation of 7 or 8 women. There were husband-wife, girlfriend-boyfriend, father-daughter, and mother-daughter crews.

Chuck took the roll of those signed up for the bus shuttle. Next, rather than a welcome speech, or navigational briefing, or dos-and don'ts, or advice what to do if something goes wrong, or pleas for this or that, Chuck stood on a boat still on its trailer and politely reminded us all of the central idea of the Texas 200: that this would be a group cruise, that in the event of any problems, we would try to help each other, but that help or rescue was not assured and the fleet would not wait or return for those who may fall behind. If there was any hope of getting to the end in five days, it couldn't be any other way.

If the event ends 200 miles from where it starts, there needs to be a way for vehicles and trailers to be at the end when you get there. Everyone launched their boats, then drove four hours to Magnolia Beach, where a charter bus was waiting to bring them back to the start. It took all day.

Marty did the shuttle. I tended to the boat and sat in the shade mostly, trying not to start the trip with a sunburn. I got sunburned anyway, sitting in the shade, apparently from reflected UV radiation off the nearby water. The power of the tropical sun should not be underestimated. This pampered Californian was also trying to acclimate to the heat (90s) and humidity (90%+). It didn't seem to bother the locals, so I decided to act as though it didn't bother me. It took a few days, but I did acclimate to some degree. The heat was uncomfortable, but to a fair-skinned guy like me, the sun was the bigger threat. After my initial

miscalculation, I covered up everything, all day, every day, in addition to sunscreen lotion.

Day 1 After much anticipation and preparation, 8:00 am Monday morning was at last time to cast off and sail. No time for breakfast, nor any appetite for it; maybe it was the heat. We joined a parade of boats leaving the harbor, entering the broad, shallow Laguna Madre. The low barrier islands to the east were over the horizon; it looked like the open sea. At the helm, Marty was nervous as the wind picked up and the boat kicked up a little spray. We followed the navigation markers until the channel turned north and the wind came aft. Marty's CS17 performed well, and we passed a number of other boats in the fleet.

As the day warmed, the wind and waves increased. After several hours, the Laguna Madre gradually narrowed, the barrier islands merged with the mainland, and the navigation channel entered what is called the "land cut", a man-made canal about 200 feet wide, like others throughout the intracoastal waterway. With only low sandy plains on its banks, the following wind remained strong, but at least the waves diminished, making for fast, easy sailing, or so we thought.

We passed a few boats on the shore attending to one sort of gear issue or another, like Phil and Andrea Lea with their mast down. We passed within hailing distance, but they waved us on. We saw the reason and heard their story later: Sailing along, relaxed at finally making the land cut, and with his forward visibility constrained, the upper yard of his lug sail struck a navigation marker, the shock was transferred through the mast to the mast partner, which split, and the freestanding mast fell. If it had been me, I would have been waving for help. Instead, Phil set about improvising an ingenious jury rig involving many turns of rope and a tightening mechanism.

This was also where our problems began: The kick up rudder seemed not to be fully down. Marty told me to pull vertically on the attached line, which I did with such dumb gusto that I pulled the rudder out of its gudgeons. By the time I got the rudder back in place, we were on the muddy leeward shore. We pushed off, back into the channel, only to find the rudder was still up, and the control line wouldn't bring it down. A 15-20 kt. breeze pushed us to the lee shore again. Closer inspection of the rudder revealed that the pin on which the lower part rotates was out of its bushing. It was a blind fit, and, short of some prying and pushing and dumb luck, there was no way to get it back in place. I was beginning to have dark thoughts, when Phil and Andrea, freshly repaired, pulled in beside us, and offered to help. They had some tools and spare hardware. We accepted a few wood screws and crudely fixed the formerly kick up rudder in the down position. Back in business; thank you Phil and Andrea.

Getting off the shallow lee shore was harder with a fixed rudder. Marty was in the water, trying to position the bow for a clean getaway. As he walked the boat toward water deep enough for the rudder, the dredged channel dropped away suddenly, the wind filled the sails, and we were accelerating with Marty hanging over the side, the pressure of the water making it hard for him to get aboard by himself. He ended up back at the transom, the boat surging forward, even with sheets eased. I figured I had only a few seconds before the situation got even worse. I dropped the tiller, grabbed Marty by his PFD, and pulled him over the transom. We were sailing again, with a mixture of relief that we were back under control, and horror at the unseamanlike spectacle we had just committed getting off the beach. I'd been sailing long enough to have been humbled by many such gear failures and misjudgments; I try to let them roll off my back and focus on the next challenge. Fairly new to sailing, Marty was not expecting this kind of thing. I think he was a bit shaken by it.

Then it got worse. There was a sickening cracking noise, and the main (fore) mast fell, tipping forward. Back to the beach again. At least the mast didn't break; the step had pulled out. Marty could hardly believe it. He'd built and tested this boat, and it had broken twice in half an hour. I was trying to be upbeat, but I could tell that it was all quite a blow to Marty.

We laid the mast down the middle of the boat, secured it, and continued under mizzen alone. We wondered if the problem was repairable, and if not, should we drop out? We were a long way from the truck and trailer. Optimism seemed unfounded; the best we could manage was a neutral wait-and-see attitude.

The boat actually handled OK under mizzen alone, with a strong breeze to push us along. We made it to the first camp, at a place called Happ's Cut. There was a long, wide beach with plenty of space, and a few vacation cottages nearby. The cottages were noteworthy because since Part Mansfield, except for navigation markers and a few non-Texas 200 boats, there were few signs of civilization. I like the semi-wilderness feel of much of the Texas 200 route. So far we had encountered no commercial traffic. Happ's Cut is in a very remote area of Padre Island. Access to the cottages is by boat only. I wondered what they do for water and electricity.

I'd done a lot of canoe and boat camping over the years. I take some pride in being able to prepare good hot food in camp, and I came prepared to do so at the Texas 200. It was a surprise, then, that neither Marty nor I had any appetite or energy to prepare a hot evening meal, despite eating next to nothing all day. Cooking seemed an absurd notion to us and almost everyone else in camp. We each had a ham sandwich. It was enough. It was the same every day. We were up at first light, in a hurry to get on the water as early as possible. We

never had a real breakfast or lunch; just a piece of fruit or some peanuts when we could manage it.

That evening, as the last of the fleet arrived, was the first time that (almost) everyone had been together in the same place. I counted 44 boats. There was an amazing variety of sailing craft and people. The boats, ranging from eight to 30 feet long, had one-two-or-three masts on one-two-or-three hulls. There were home-builts and production craft. There were many stories of new boats that had been completed just in time – or older boats rehabbed just in time to launch for this event. There were familiar designs. There were marvelous (and odd) one-of-a-kind owner-designed boats. Personality and creativity, craftsmanship and determination, as expressed through boats, were on display everywhere.

We heard that several boats that started the Texas 200 had dropped out. I didn't know it at the time, but as I walked the beach, a drama was playing out with a boat that had failed to make it to Happ's Cut. Dismasted and believed to have withdrawn, Laurent Coquilleau and his proa recovered and caught up with the fleet in the middle of the night.

Our expected power boat escorts were nowhere to be seen. Tom Best's Sea Pearl 21, a boat with a solid reputation in events like this, had capsized and lost its rig in Laguna Madre.

At Happ's Cut repairs were underway on a number of beached boats. Marty searched out Charlie Jones, well-known Texas small boat sailor and builder, including builder of several CS 17s like Marty's. Charlie inspected the damage and pronounced that it was probably repairable, with supplies that could be obtained during our second night's stop at Padre Island Yacht Club. Things were looking up.

At this point, I need to explain to anyone who may be unaware, what is a Puddle Duck Racer (PDR). <http://www.pdracer.com/> The PDR is an eight foot by four foot box-boat that makes the Bolger-boxes look elegant by comparison. It was designed to be as simple and crude and cheap as a sailboat could possibly be. There were five in the '09 Texas 200, a fleet within the fleet.

The PDR provides a useful first time experience to sailor/builders with little money or skills, but ambition to try something, and thereby gain useful experience. Such a concept has its place, and is even admirable. What may strain one's understanding is that the PDR has attained a kind of cult following. The cult's adherents have no illusions about the PDR's crudity. They appreciate, and may even own and sail more refined designs. They embrace the PDR anyway. Even stranger, some in the PDR cult have adopted the Texas 200 as their ultimate class event. Confounding the skepticism of many, including myself, three PDR sailors finished the original '08 Texas 200.

Five PDR sailors were in 2009 Texas 200 fleet, including some returning for a second round, such as Andrew Linn, all the way from Oregon. The PDR guys already know that an eight foot box is inappropriate for a 200 mile passage in five days along the Texas coast, at least according to the usual criteria of speed, safety and comfort. They know that it's an eccentric thing to do (crazy is such a harsh word), and they do it anyway, with exuberance and panache. They do it to prove that it can be done, and that they are tough enough to do it. They sail together and look out for each other. They suffer and succeed together.

Andrew Linn made a remarkable record of the 2009 PDR fleet's experience here:

Other extreme craft at the Texas 200 were a pair of Hobie "Adventure Islands." These are sit-on-top kayaks with a sail rig and trimaran outriggers, sporty little boats and probably quite capable in the right hands. I don't know how they managed to carry camping gear, but they did. Mostly though, they're wet-wet-wet. I don't know how they withstood sitting in salt water all the time. It had to be even less comfortable than the PDRs. Andrew Tatton and Stephanie May sailed the two Hobies. I bow to their grit and determination.

Day 2 We again launched as early as possible, sailing under reefed mizzen alone. It became clear that, whether or not the main mast could be repaired, we could probably finish this way, if necessary. It was slow going, however, and not much fun being passed by most of the fleet. The dolphins rescued the day. Many boats in the fleet, including ours, were surrounded by dolphins for a half hour or more, swimming around and under the boats, and reportedly bumping some boats playfully (we think).

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X1uoj5ESJ6l>

It's one thing to see these animals on TV or at Sea World. It's another to have them all around almost at arm's reach. These were 400 pound wild carnivores after all, not pets or TV actors.

Finally emerging from relative wilderness, into the urban fringe of Corpus Christi, we made our way to our second stop, as guests of the Padre Island Yacht Club. Marty and I found that our borrowed, old outboard motor worked for the narrow, upwind approach to the club. The short shaft configuration didn't quite get the prop low enough, so we had to put all our weight on the port side, lowering the prop a few inches, and then it seemed to work OK. We never would have made it with Marty's standard auxiliary power, an electric trolling motor. The Texas 200 fleet overflowed the available dock space, and the seawall, and the grounds, and the clubhouse.

In delightful contrast with the primitive surroundings of the previous nights, we had an air-conditioned clubhouse with showers, with a choice between a ride to a local restaurant or dinner delivered to the club. I rode to "Snoopy's" seafood

restaurant, with 20 or so others piled into an RV. I had four kinds of fried food on a single plate, and lots of good conversation on the side.

Back at the docks, with a combination of donated epoxy resin, other materials gathered by Marty in a trip to the store, and the generous help of Charlie Jones, the broken mast step was restored, better than original. That night, we “slept the sleep of the just”, the just-repaired, just-showered and just-fed. I drank about a gallon of water that evening, replacing all that I had lost in the day’s heat.



Day 3 We got another early, no-breakfast start. This day was expected to include the first navigational challenges of the trip. No more straight-line



cruising down the ICW corridor. We had to actually make correctly timed turns to port and starboard, with the likelihood of encountering commercial traffic as we passed through Corpus Christi Bay. We formed a buddy-group of three boats. With our untested mast, we set out with reefed sails, though the breeze was mild at first. Soon we left the ICW to take a more direct path to our destination, with less exposure to shipping traffic. It crossed an open bay, however, and as the day warmed and the wind increased to 20+ kts., the waves built up, and we were having a rough passage. Here is where I learned that describing the T200 as occurring in “protected water” is a relative term. Perhaps it was even rougher five miles away in the Gulf of Mexico, but Corpus Christi Bay did not feel protected to me. It was all we could do to keep the boat under control. At least the repaired mast was still up.

That much wind blowing over shallow water (6-7 feet) creates a more difficult wave pattern than on the open ocean. The waves were “only” three to five feet high, but the crests were very close together, the wave faces were steep and the troughs were narrow. It was a rough, white-knuckle ride, with the constant threat of broaching. I’d sailed in conditions like that before, but in a 9,000 lb., 30 foot keelboat, not a 17 foot open skiff. The boat handled as well as could be expected. Though we took some green water over the side, I gradually gained confidence that she would take care of us.

We were sailing toward a gap between Pelican and Mustang Islands, a place called Stingray Hole (love that name). Beyond the islands, we would re-enter the ICW, turn to starboard, and get some relief from the waves, if not the wind, in the lee of the island. As we approached the gap, a ship passed on the ICW, inbound to Corpus Christi. We judged it would be well past by the time we entered the ship channel, and we relaxed, thinking our challenges would be easing soon. Seconds later I saw something ahead that at first I could not grasp: we were headed toward a line of 6-7 foot, left-breaking surf that hadn’t been there a moment before. My first thought was, “That can’t be; we’re miles from where surf ought to be.” An instant later, my second thought was, “Screw your analysis; it’s surf, and you’re headed for it. Do something – now.” The wind was still pushing hard from behind, so there was no going back. Holding course would take us right into the center, so the choices were to veer port or starboard. First I went to starboard, thinking the surf would diminish as it moved left, but new waves kept forming behind. Then I went to port, trying to get ahead of the breaking waves. Fortunately we were carrying plenty of speed and could maneuver effectively. We passed over three six-foot waves in quick succession, but they were round on top, not breaking, so we passed through without taking on a drop. It all happened in less time than it takes to tell about it. The rest of our buddy group was likewise fortunate.

In hindsight, I misjudged the hazard of a passing ship. A ship's wake in deep water may be bad enough, but when that wake encounters shallow water, such as in the gap between the islands, it rises and breaks like surf on an ocean beach. Like any boat wake, I suppose, except this one was Texas-sized.

Paraphrasing the lyrics of a classic country song, All the Gold in California (by Texan Larry Gatlin):

. . .It don't matter at all  
Where you ~~played~~ sailed before,  
~~California~~ Corpus Christi is a brand new game.

That excitement behind us, we turned to starboard, down the shipping channel, and had an easy close reach for awhile. Here we picked up a fourth boat in our buddy group, Pete Brigatis and Tom Allen in another CS17. We learned later that they had been on the beach facing the ship channel when the Big Surf hit, an even worse scenario than ours. The series of huge waves that came ashore could have rolled or shattered their boat as it rested on the beach, but they quickly pushed off the beach, toward the oncoming waves, and stood in the water, holding the boat on either side, so that the wave might lift the boat as it passed. Like us, they dodged the bullet.

Eventually, we all turned to port, into the Lydia Ann Channel, which led us into Aransas Bay. The bay turned windy and rough again, but after the experiences of that morning, we were somewhat desensitized. It became routine.

Our expanded buddy group of four: three CS17s, and Phil and Andrea in a modified Michalak design, sailed in company, searching for the next night's camp at a place called Paul's Mott. A "mott" in the lingo of the Texas gulf coast is a piece of relatively high ground in the otherwise flat and marshy landscape. Not a hill, mind you, just a spot more than three feet above sea level. We left the dredged navigation channel and experienced the shallow natural character of the coastal bay. Even a half mile off the beach, we were occasionally bumping our centerboard on the bottom, a low-tech shallow-water-warning-system that we used to protect our rudder, since it had necessarily become fixed.

We arrived at Paul's Mott, or more precisely the oyster shell beach near Paul's Mott, a long spit extending into the bay. The T200 fleet gathered on the leeward side, beached or anchored, according to size. It was my first experience with a shell beach, versus sand or gravel or cobble. Thousands of years of accumulated oyster shells, broken into pieces by wave action and weathering, produce a beach notably unfriendly to bare skin and tents. It was a beautiful spot, though, and we were glad to have it, in comparison to most of the surrounding unprotected and damp shoreline. The fleet made an impressive show lined up tightly along the beach, with a forest of masts in the sky.

Neither Marty nor I had said a word all day about our main mast, though it was on both our minds. Not that I believe we would “jinx” the mast repair by talking about it, it just seemed better not to. A friendly passerby on the beach broke the silence, attempting to make polite conversation, “Well, it looks like your mast repair held up today.” We both winced a little at hearing the words spoken so brazenly, but hey, we’re here! I guess he’s right. That bit of suppressed anxiety was swept away; we didn’t worry about it anymore.

Late in the day Mike Monies arrived in his 12 ft. Bolger Cartopper, looking much too small to have come alone across Aransas Bay on a day like this. Hours before, Mike had endured capsizing and dismasting, but with the good fortune to do so near Carl Haddick and the PDR fleet. Carl helped Mike to shore, and there the PDR guys shared their meager resources, and amazingly got Mike back underway. One part of the story involved shortening a donated mast with an axe. Mike was then supposed to find some civilization, phone for help, and withdraw, but he didn’t.

Last of all, the PDRs came over the horizon of Aransas Bay, sailing in formation, five across, like a D-Day invasion fleet. They hit the windward beach together just before sunset, greeted by cheers and congratulations and snapping cameras, a welcome given to no other boats. It was a beautiful sight. After 12 or so hours on the water the PDR guys were still cheerful and enthusiastic. I can’t tell you what admiration and respect I have for these guys as sailors and men.

Dan Rogers and some others never arrived at Paul’s Mott. I couldn’t raise him on our little VHF. I didn’t have his cell phone number, and we were way out in the boonies in any case. I wasn’t too worried about Dan, as I knew no one was more experienced or had a better prepared boat. I assumed that he was holed up safely somewhere.



Day 4 After deliberations and a decision the evening before, Marty and I and two other boats withdrew from the Texas 200 and headed for Marty's family's beach/vacation house in Rockport, 12 miles across the bay. The prediction for Day 4 was more high wind and shallow-water navigation challenges. Most of the fleet had no reasonable bailout option, but Marty did. He took it, and extended an offer of shelter to others who had had enough "banzai" sailing. I would have continued, but I supported my skipper's decision.

Bailing out in Rockport turned out to be not as easy as it sounded. We had a challenging half-day getting to our destination. The last several miles were upwind against the same strong wind we'd faced all week, or rather, that had been behind us all week. Attempting to sail close-hauled under reefed main alone, with the sprit distorting what little sail we had up, we made slow progress to windward, with constant spray over the side. "Calm and focused" I told myself over and over, knowing that we'd get there, if we just persisted, and didn't make any foolish mistakes. We got there.

Six sailors and three boats landed at Marty's comfortable house with a dock on a canal leading out to Copano Bay. Though he lives in San Antonio, this is where Marty usually does his sailing. A rental car was soon arranged to make the trip to Magnolia Beach to retrieve the trucks and trailers. Rigging was stowed. Gear and clothing were cleaned and dried. Bits of information were

gleaned from cell phone calls about the fleet still en route. Day 4 was proving as tough as expected. The losses continued. The approach to Ayres Dugout was the scene of both heroism and bitter disappointment.

Then another unexpected, and this time a wonderful twist. Cathy and Meredith Wright, a mother-daughter team in a 12 ft. O'Day Widgeon, decided midway through Day 4 that they couldn't keep re-repairing their rudder over and over again. The potential consequences of its failing in the wrong place or at the wrong moment were too severe. They went ashore, and started to walk, hoping to get a ride somehow to Magnolia Beach, and then return to retrieve their boat. To make a long and amazing story short, Cathy made some cell phone contacts, finally connected with Marty whom she didn't really know, got a ride from a passerby out to the main highway, rendezvoused with Marty, who took them to Magnolia Beach, where they retrieved their car and trailer, then their boat, got showers back at Marty's beach house, and joined us (now a party of eight) for a great dinner at The Big Fisherman restaurant. Phil and Andrea Lea insisted on picking up the check (thank you . . . again). For a bunch of supposedly defeated Texas 200 dropouts, we were sure having a good time. I had a hard time remembering why, just a few hours before, I had been reluctant to drop out. I rose and proposed a toast: "Let us toast our friends camping tonight on Matagorda Island . . . tired . . . sweaty . . . unwashed . . . poorly fed . . . beaten but unbowed. May tomorrow they safely reach the end of their journey, and attain the glory they so richly deserve." Actually, I offered no toast, but I should have.

We'd received some news from the fleet that day, but nothing about Dan. Back at the house I remembered, now that I was reunited with certain of my possessions left behind in Marty's truck, I did have a slip of paper with Dan's cell phone number. I called Dan and woke him from a sound sleep. He was safely tied up in a marina in Rockport, a few miles away! We caught up on the events of the past two days, and agreed to meet the next day, if possible.

After a good night's sleep at the beach house, boats were retrieved on trailers, and the group went their various ways. Some went to join the fleet for a shrimp boil and party at Magnolia Beach. Some headed home. We cleaned up the house pretty well; only the full trash cans gave evidence of the visit of eight wayward sailors. Later, Marty's extended family arrived for the weekend. Marty and I picked up Dan and had him over for dinner. He regaled us with stories of his trip, including the drive from California, which lurched from oppressive heat and crushing boredom to worry, pain, frustration and finally redemption. The next morning Marty took me to the airport, and it was over.

Epilogue As I write this, weeks later, I still think about the Texas 200 every day, trying to figure out what it all means, and why am I apparently still obsessed with

it. I wasn't there, but I understand that 34 of the 48 or so boats that launched actually finished at Magnolia Beach. That's a sobering ratio.

Even though I knew the record of the '08 Texas 200 and heard the warnings, I admit that, when in the midst of it in '09, I was concerned with all the problems and boat-carnage. Didn't the havoc mean that something was wrong? One might be tempted to criticize that the Texas 200, with all its foreseeable risks, was a bad idea. One might assert that changes are needed in the future to mitigate those risks. I can imagine that in California, where I live, and perhaps elsewhere, there would be complaints, criticism, and perhaps worse.

Would it surprise you, then, to learn that the Texas 200 participants, as far as I can tell, feel no inclination to criticize the event, or to tame its wild character? Rather, the website accounts acknowledge, but do not over dramatize the difficulties. The accounts written by those suffering the worst misfortune of all do not criticize, blame, or express regret. Rather, they express gratitude for the help they received in their distress.

There were sailors of all degrees of experience and boats of all degrees of suitability for a challenging course. It's noteworthy that the boats that were disabled and crews that withdrew were not necessarily the least experienced or least-suited to making such a trip. Several boats and skippers that should have succeeded did not. Some of the most vulnerable succeeded. The sea, it seems, decides whom it will punish or not. John Miller returned for a second year. His first attempt was a cascade of spectacular failures; the second year a smooth success. We can be prepared and determined, but we do not control everything.

Some of those failing to finish in 2009 are already thinking about returning next year. What, are they nuts? What's going on down there? Perhaps those attracted to the Texas 200 are not typical sailors. Perhaps they are looking for an adventure and a challenge a step or two beyond what the common sailor regards as "fun." These are the type of sailors who might be crossing oceans or setting records if it weren't for middle-class jobs and mortgages and families, and for some, if it weren't 30 years too late. So they do what they can. They show up for a modest, but real adventure, with real risks, obstacles and discomforts, and with real accomplishment at the end, if they get there. They probably wouldn't attempt it solo, but there is a measure of moral support that comes from being part of a group, and the added social dimension makes it more fun. They know that if problems arise, there may or may not be material support, depending on luck and circumstance. It's like life in that way. They expect no praise or attention if they succeed, nor sympathy if they don't. They know it makes no sense to most people.

The whole thing is an odd mix of 21st century, internet-enabled, GPS-guided technology, in contrast with home-built boats and home-grown attitudes that seem a wonderful throwback to another era. Yeah, I think I'll be back next year, and I hope to finish.