

Escape To Quarantine Shore

The Texas 200 in the Year of Covid 19

It is almost dark. The sun has finally hit the horizon as I tack down Matagorda Bay towards Pass Cavallo. When we launched at Magnolia Beach earlier in the day, we had decided that this would be our camp for tonight, and surely the others are there by now. I have gone back a couple of times to check on another friend who has not sailed in 3 years due to some pretty bad cancer treatment, and am running later than I'd like.

After sailing past the Port O'Connor jetties, I anchor for a half hour to give him the chance to catch up, but I am running out of time. Pass Cavallo is different every time I've been out there since Hurricane Harvey roared through the area in 2017. I do not feel confident that I can find today's version of the pass in the dark.

Filled with misgivings, I haul the anchor up and sail on.

In the last of the light, I see masts a mile or so away, and an anchor light on one of the boats. I head for it. As the sun drops below the horizon it gets dark quickly. Really dark. Darker than normal, even. I have read something about Saharan Desert dust in the air, maybe this is a side affect. It's 2020, after all.

I drag my Mayfly 14, **Gamaray**, ashore right at 9pm. One of the other guys immediately texts our missing friend. He replies that he is on a beach across from Port O'Connor with a couple of other Texas 200 boats, and that they are camping there for the night. I don't know why I was worried about him-this guy is smarter and has more sailing experience than pretty much anyone I know. We make plans to meet up at Army Hole the next day and as I am changing into my dry camp clothes I notice that my clip on sunglasses are still clamped onto the frame of my glasses. The Mystery of The Darkness is solved.

The next morning we get up, have coffee, breakfast, and some social time (properly distanced, of course) before we head out. This is a new and strange thing for me on the Texas 200. Usually, time is so tight that I am away at first light or shortly thereafter so that I can go the distance to the next camp and get set up before dark. This week, however, we have five whole days to make it to Quarantine Shore.

The Texas 200 Board had decided early on that the only way to avoid cancelling the event was for everyone to sail and camp in small groups, to start and end on whatever days they thought best for their group, and to be prepared to distance in camp to avoid spreading Covid 19 among the participants. Some of the fleet is starting in Port Mansfield, some in Magnolia Beach. There is no Shuttle Bus-the bus company is not even operating at this point. Everyone is truly on their own except for the one evening when we are all together. Quarantine Shore has lots of room for distancing, so it is the only spot that is formally designated as an official Texas 200 camp this year. The idea is for the fleet to meet up there on Wednesday June 17th.

The small group of friends that I am sailing with decide that we should put in at Magnolia Beach on Saturday and take out at Magnolia Beach the following Friday, giving us a seven day Texas 200 and no shuttle. That's five days upwind, and two days back down to Magnolia Beach. This means that we have time to explore.

Cathy Tomsett has recently gifted a 15 and a half foot Bolger Featherwind, **Hello Kitty**, to my friend Matt Schiemer. He replaces the poly tarp sail with one from Really Simple Sails, modifies the rigging for the new sail, and renames it **The Mystery Machine** after the van in the Scooby-Doo cartoons. The Bolger Featherwind is a flat bottomed skiff that is similar to my Mayfly 14, but a couple of feet longer. Matt has done many Texas 200's in an O'Day Mariner 19, a nice boat, but deep draft by Texas 200 standards. This year, he has decided to come over to the dark side of small plywood boats and balanced lug rigs. He is sacrificing the comfort of his larger boat for the adventure and cool sights that (down here, at least) can only be seen in small, shallow draft boats. We have decided that we will take less traveled routes whenever possible, and that starts today.

Our friend Stan Roberts spent a miserable, mosquito infested night pulled up onto a beach in the ICW. He will be heading through Fisherman's Cut out into Espiritu Santo Bay towards Army Hole, where we will meet up

and have lunch. Matt and I will go from Pass Cavallo to Sunday Pass, which used to be Sunday Beach until Hurricane Harvey opened a cut through the beach into the Gulf. From there it is on to Espiritu Santo Bay and Army Hole through The Fish Pond and Lighthouse Cove.

We aren't sure if we'll actually be able to make it through The Fish Pond, which is a foot or two deep on the fishing maps that we are using to navigate. The wind is from the northeast this morning. It will be at our backs going in, so the first thing we need to do is test the ability of the Featherwind to sail upwind in shallow water, in case we have to turn around and sail back out.

I have found over the years that the Mayfly 14 will go upwind with the leeboard and rudder kicked up in maybe a foot of water. This requires me to shift my weight to the leeward side of the boat. I'm still not sure how this works, although it has been debated (and by folks who know much more than I do about this stuff) on Internet forums and Facebook over the years. Is it the external chine log? Or the curved side and bottom rocker? Or is it all just an illusion? Right now I don't care how it works as long as it does. One of the projects I want to do when I retire in a few years is to compile hard data about this, which means I'll have to do a lot of sailing. It will be a tough and tedious job, to be sure.

I don't know if the Mayfly method will work in Matt's boat, which has a daggerboard and a cassette rudder. After some experimentation, he finds that with just 8 inches or so of the boards in the water, he makes good progress against the wind. Confident that we can get back out if we can't make it all the way through, we enter The Fish Pond.

The Fish Pond is a small lake located in the middle of a large area of grassy marsh. We have no issues sailing through. I get some great pictures of the Matagorda Island Lighthouse while we are back there. This particular version (the 3rd) was built in 1873 at a cost of \$32,000. It is 91 feet tall, and there is a small cemetery nearby where lighthouse keepers and their families rest. The lighthouse is a short hike from the harbor at Army Hole. If you are down there and decide to check it out, you want to stick to the trails. Going off trail through the brush can result in being bitten by a rattlesnake, as more than one person hiking the barrier island has found out the hard way.

Less than an hour after we enter, we are at the southwestern end of the Pond heading into a small bayou at Kayak Trail Marker #31. We sail out into Lighthouse Cove and head to Army Hole hugging the 2 foot line on the chart. From a mile out, we can make out the masts on *Spartan*, Stan's Michalak Family Skiff. 15 minutes later we pull up into the slough to the west of the harbor and have a break for lunch and a leisurely visit.

After lunch, Stan heads out into the bay while Matt and I sail through Bridge Cut into Pringle Lake, another very shallow expanse between Vandever Island and Matagorda Island. An hour and a half later we are through Rahal Bayou and coming up on tonight's camp at Hidden Pass. Hidden Pass, or Hasselman's Cut as it is sometimes known, is truly hidden now. We had sailed through the cut in 2016, but by the following year it had filled in completely. The only indication that the pass was ever there is the 30 foot run of bulkhead that sticks a few inches above the oyster shells.

As we push off the next day, Matt and I decide to head back northeast, to a cut we saw that seems to open into South Pass Lake. The other boats we camped with head for South Pass. We make plans over the radio to meet up with them later at Panther Point. South Pass Lake became famous in 2014 as a place where even a Puddle Duck can get stuck when a bunch of us got into 6 inches of water over the sand bars that surround the ill-defined "boat lane" at the northeast end of the lake. Some of the Ducks were able to be pulled, but the heavier boats had to be pushed over the bar a few feet at a time. Today we are not going that far up the lake. We make it through the cut and turn south, heading past First Chain of Islands into San Antonio Bay with no issues at all.

The next two days are pretty easy. Winds are still more out of the east than normal, and mostly moderate by Texas 200 standards. On the 5th day, we arrive at Quarantine Shore, a small group of boats who have sailed in shallow water a good part of the way. There are 27 boats at Quarantine Shore by the time the sun sets.

The next day, things become more normal. Conditions this week have been unusually mild, and I am uneasy, waiting for the other shoe to drop. That happens this morning. The winds are up. There is distant thunder. As we head out, I pull over and put the 2nd reef in. My worries are proved justified by the increasingly rough ride over to the lee of Mud Island. We hug the shoreline as the thunderstorms get ever closer.

Eventually our little group pulls over, and we all slip into rain gear then prepare the boats as the winds get higher and the wall of rain moves toward us. In a few minutes, the sleet is coming down hard enough that it stings even through my rain gear. After the cell passes, we head north again, stopping a couple of more times during the day to let bad weather pass.

Not all of the boats that left Quarantine Shore this morning are able to get off the water as the storms blow through. There are a couple of capsizes in the high winds and pouring rain, including one involving an experienced Texas 200 sailor who is unlucky enough to get caught out in the channel by a fast moving thunderstorm. He is rescued by a passing powerboat when he cannot right his turtled boat in the rough conditions. His boat is recovered a few hours later.

After a short night at Panther Point, Matt and I are on the water at first light. Stella the Crazy Dog is at the doggie daycare in Beaumont where she has spent the week playing with her friends. Tomorrow morning I have to pick her up. This means that I need to be home tonight. Matt has family stuff for Father's Day weekend. He needs to be home tonight as well. In the rising winds we head out before dawn towards Magnolia Beach.

By the time we get into Matagorda Bay that afternoon we both have 3 reefs in. The wind and waves build and build, so much that halfway down the Bay the Mayfly is surfing and exceeding her hull speed by several knots. Matt is far ahead of me-he later reports that *The Mystery Machine* hit 10 knots while surfing down the waves. Not bad for a 15 and a half foot boat. At Magnolia Beach, I visit for a while with friends who had come in ahead of us, then load *Gamaray* on her trailer and head for home.

Throughout the week Matt and I stayed true to our goal of sailing as much in the shallow water of the cuts and lakes as possible. Whenever we hit shallow water, though, he was constantly having to adjust his daggerboard and rudder. He made the comment later that I was just sitting there the whole time while he had to work hard to make it through the shallow spots. And this makes an important point about doing this kind of event in a small boat.

This year's 200 was not a particularly difficult trip except for the last couple of days. In a more typical June, there are high winds and big chop on the bays every single day. The singlehander in a small boat is juggling sailing the boat while trying to keep it upright, along with navigation, bailing, staying hydrated, and communicating on the radio when necessary. Anything that reduces the attention load is helpful in terms of completing both short term goals (like making the day's camp safely) and long term goals (like making it to the end of the trip safely).

Not having to constantly fiddle with stuff while singlehanding makes it possible to sail long days in those conditions without wearing yourself out. Not having to fiddle with stuff while singlehanding means fewer capsizes, fewer problems overall, and more completed trips. Daggerboards and cassette rudders can certainly work well in many situations, but there is a strong case to be made for the advantages of leeboards and kickup rudders if you are camp cruising in a small boat in these waters. This is, of course, only my opinion.

What a great week.

SPECIAL NOTE ON SAILING UPWIND IN SHALLOW WATER

I have sailed many round hulled boats over the years, and they, as everyone knows, simply slide sideways when the boards are up and you try to go upwind. This year, Chuck Leinweber's Michalak Toon 19 and Stan Roberts' Michalak Family Skiff sailed through some of the shallow water with us. None of the four boats had problems tacking upwind in a foot or two of water with boards kicked up, leading me to conclude that there is probably

something about the hard chines on the boats (which is the thing that all of the 4 boats have in common in terms of hull shape) that facilitates this. Jim Michalak favors hard chines on his designs for ease of construction, but it appears that they may help the shallow water sailing ability of the boats as well. Because of this, and because of my experiences with them over a decade's time, Jim's designs are supremely suited for sailing on the bays of the Texas coast, in my humble opinion.