

Sailing the 2020 Texas 200

This was the first full week's sailing on my Bay River Skiff 15 MK2 named AIRO, Designed by Graham Byrnes and built for me by Bobby Chilek. AIRO is a New Testament Greek word that means "to weigh anchor and sail away".

Sunday, Day One

John Votaw and I left my apartment in Webster, TX around 5:30 am on the way to Magnolia beach, launched at the ramp in Maggie Beach, under sail around 9 am, on the way to Port O'Connor jetties. Nice full sail breeze blowing from east to northeast. The swell coming across the bay built enough to hide the hull and occupant of a 14' Mayfly that had launched just ahead of us. We turned the Port O'Connor jetties around mid day, sailed down to Fisherman's Cut and on into Barroom Bay. We saw a sea turtle, looked to be 18-24" in diameter along there somewhere. This was easy down wind sailing and got us on down to the shell bank at Hidden Pass (which is still closed). This worked over oyster shell is a pretty good place to camp...just be sure to have long enough tent stakes to hold in the loose shell.

Monday, Day Two

South Pass lay before us, but the wind was in our favor for easy passage. South Pass Island seems to get smaller every time I see it, no doubt someday it will wash away. For as long as I can remember, at least over nearly 50 years, there was a large pipe marking the west entrance of the pass...unfortunately, it is no longer there. It was an easy sail on down to Panther Point, which we turned, nosed ashore and enjoyed lunch, along with several other boats. Panther Point looks very interesting, should be easy camping with opportunity to find a lee on either side of the point. Enjoying the favorable wind (so much for the hard way), we sailed on down toward Ayers Island and Dugout.

We were going along the windward shore of Matagorda Island as we neared Ayers, but were hugging the shore thinking there might be a new pass farther south. We could see a promising opening, but it was dead up wind and narrow and not knowing the depth, we opted to backtrack a little and sail through Ayers Dugout into Mesquite Bay. From there we tacked on down to the entrance to Cedar Bayou, about 3.5 miles where we were joined by several other hard way boats. We all found anchorages but I can't say much positive for the ground there. Not a lot of room to pitch tents, and at night, the mosquitoes generated a fearful symphony, amazing to hear. Don't believe that I can recommend this place.

Tuesday, Day Three

Today's sail would get us on down to the Quarantine Shore, a day early, for meeting the north bound contingent on this year's Texas 200. But first, we had to get through Belden, Cedar, and Carlos Dugouts. This route is well marked with posts, and can be verified with your nav program. It all checks out. Passing through Carlos Dugout we

sailed by an interesting very small island that was a heron rookery, where someone had constructed nesting sites for the birds. We will revisit this island on a later day. Of course, no unauthorized access to the island is allowed. Still having some east in the wind, we sailed on down to Paul's Mott which point we turned, nosed up to shore and took our lunch. The Mott has really changed a lot since I saw it last, but still looks to have some good camping sites, and you can tuck into the lee of one side or the other of the point, depending on the wind direction.

From Paul's Mott, we set a course for Blind Pass, which runs behind Mud Island. We wanted to see the lay of the land, and it had been over 50 years since I had sailed through there in my 17' Aunty Helen Wm. Atkin designed cat ketch. There was some indecision as to exactly what we were looking at with regard to the pass as we tried to enter. It did become clear, though...bear to the left after you pass the ranch house facility and you are in the pass. We sailed along, seeing Longhorn cattle and short palm trees, and the occasional windmill. Just about the time you think, this looks like the old west, there is an oilfield installation in the midst of it. As my son, John, put it, "Yep, that's Texas for you".

We finally got out past the south west end of Mud Island, after hitting some shoal water off to our starboard, and sailed on over to Quarantine Shore. As the wind was holding a little north of east, we assumed correctly that we would be looking at a lee shore with waves breaking along it...no place to anchor a boat up to shore. We considered that Corpus Christi Bayou might suffice for the night, as it turns away in a southerly direction from the bay, but after sailing up close, we saw no open beach and turned around before we would have had to beat out the channel. We were familiar with the good anchorage and camping at Mud Island, so we headed back in that direction where we found the right place to pull up the boat and set up camp. Several of the hard way boats ended up there for the night.

Wednesday, Day Four

This was the day to meet up with the northbound boats over at Quarantine Shore, but they weren't expected until later on in the afternoon, so we had some free time just to hang out or sail around the area. We had a 12' square tarp up for shade which was a life saver for spending lazy time on the beach. The Pilgrim crew and Barco Loco crew sailed Pilgrim over to Port A for lunch and supplies while four boats left to explore some of the cuts through Mud Island. Airo crew did some daysailing around the area, up Lydia Ann Channel for a little way and back again. A little later in the day, we saw a few boats beginning to show up with the northbounders, so sailed on over to Quarantine Shore to meet the fleet. The wind had veered around to a more southeasterly direction, so there was no lee shore and the water is surprisingly deep right up to shore near where Corpus Christi Bayou meets Aransas Bay. A lot of interesting and different boats, many home built, made way for some good conversation. We had decided to leave our camp up on Mud Island since we liked the area and had plenty of room, so we sailed on back over there before dark.

Thursday, Day Five.

We have decided to get back to Magnolia Beach tomorrow, so leave early, just after sunup. Nice southeast breeze and we are away. Main and mizzen full up, no reefs today (if we only knew). We are making a bee line for the entrance of Carlos Bay and the beginning of the dugouts going north. Only Pilgrim and Airo are taking this route that we can see. Other boats are hugging the windward shore.

There is chatter on the radio about a thunderstorm that appears to be building to the south, which spreads from the Gulf all the way inland and is beginning to cover Rockport. The wind is increasing as we run with it. We are hoping the brunt of the storm will move inland behind us, so we keep heading north. Pilgrim is behind us, gaining ground. The wind continues to build...the water here is very pretty, almost dark blue; there are ripples on the face of the swells, indicating an increase in velocity. We are surfing down the swells, but still under control. It doesn't take long until we realize we need to reduce sail, and we drop the mizzen, effectively cutting sail area nearly in half. The boat is easier to handle now, but seems to still be sailing at hull speed and more as we continue to surf the waves.

We are now into Carlos Dugout at the entrance to Carlos bay. John looks back and remarks that whitecaps are building indicating higher wind on the way and the rain is near. Just ahead is the Heron Rookery Island to starboard, so we decide to beach the boat and anchor, dropping the main in the process. John goes ashore (a no no) and secures the anchor in some brush and gets back aboard just as the rain starts. We both have large golf style umbrellas which give us very good protection from the rain. The Pilgrims come in behind us and anchor on the island, but they have the advantage of a cabin to get into.

The storm blows on by, and we are again on our way north, through the dugouts and into Mesquite Bay. The wind drops to become very light, but more storms are still south over the Gulf and appear to be coming our way. Pilgrim takes the lead as we head for Ayers Island and that dugout. The wind does come back, and the storm has blown itself out before it gets to us, but the cloud front came on over, bringing some more wind. We pass through Ayers with no drama and take a bearing on South Pass, our entrance to Espiritu Santo Bay and Hidden Pass, where we intend to spend the night.

We decide to leave Panther Point pretty far to starboard, taking a more direct route to South Pass. Airo is a very seaworthy little boat with high topsides and side decks, and that is a good thing because San Antonio Bay was living up to its reputation of being a tough cookie to cross. Airo is a wet boat, there is just no getting around it. John was sailing the boat and I was sitting forward, soaked to the skin and worn out from the San Antonio Bay washing machine by the time we cleared South Pass. It was then only a few short tacks to starboard to land on the shell beach at Hidden Pass (hidden so well that it doesn't exist). Pilgrim had just gotten there and set her anchors when we arrived.

Friday, Day Six

Having around 28 miles to go today, we leave early just after sunup. We are now sailing into the sun which is doubly bright, being above the horizon plus reflecting on the water. A good breeze off our starboard quarter and full sail up, we are hugging the coast of Matagorda Island having learned our lesson crossing San Antonio Bay yesterday. Pilgrim thumbs their collective noses at us and heads directly for the Ferry Channel that leads into the ICW and Port O'Connor. We have decided to go north of Grass Island and Bayucos Island to intersect the channel the goes through Fisherman's Cut to the ICW. This is an interesting route, and the water is fairly deep. There looks to be some possibilities for camping according to the shell banks that we can see on Bayucos. I had camped there many years ago, but we didn't stop to look at anything since we were anxious to get back to Maggie.

The southeasterly wind had been building some during the day and by the time we cleared the little jetties into Matagorda Bay, it was blowing nicely, that is to say, fairly strong. Most of the time we were sailing wing and wing, which is a fun tack on an unstayed sprit boomed cat ketch rig. If the wind is not blowing too strong, you can let the sails go out past the beam, tie off the tiller, and the boat will sail itself. Too much wave action today, though, for that tactic. In fact, in all the years and times I have sailed on Matagorda Bay, I have never seen the swells run as high as they did today. Little Airo was surfing down the face of these waves, maintaining a speed of 8, 9, and 10 mph, topping out once at 11.4 mph. This was the quickest trip from Port O'Connor to Magnolia Beach that I have ever made on a sailboat.

Thanks to my son, John Votaw, for sailing with me on this trip. He is an excellent navigator and small boat sailor, having far outstripped anything he learned from sailing with me when he was growing up. I couldn't have attempted this trip without him. I will be 84 years old this August first, and don't know if I have another trip like this in me, or not. This was my tenth time to sail on the 200. I sailed Pilgrim on the inaugural trip in 2008. Also, thanks to all my friends that I got to visit with at one time or another, and thanks to Matt Schiemer and the Texas 200 Sailing Club board for their continuing efforts to keep the event going.

W. Travis Votaw