

Friday 24 SEP 2021

The street signs called me old, the signs delineating a dozen blocks spreading south from the ferry landing, docks, and jetty that watch over channel into the Corpus Christ Bay, staring at ships passing through the channel, admiring the finned arched backs of a pair dolphins wheeling among the waves, welcoming the sight of a line of pelicans skimming the waves, “Old Port Aransas” now being stenciled on street signs in what, in 1964, was simply Port Aransas. It’s a lie, “Old Port Aransas.” The shrimpers are gone from the docks; the word “condo” would have gotten blank stares in 1964, the first condo not having been built; houses raised on stilts to let a surge wash underneath are no more.

Of course, Port Aransas has a checkered history, lying on a barrier island that was once hard to get to, slowing the long arm of the law until the roads were built a decade before 1964. It was almost tamed in 1964, though a teenager could come down on a weekend to the Dunes Dance Land, a place that seemed unaware of any particular law regarding a drinking age.

Me and my Tesla set out, Port A to Corpus, that’s Port Aransas to Corpus Christi if you are a tourist looking it up on google maps. I was reversing the course I used to take so often in 1964 when I lived on “main side.”

Port A lies at the tip of Mustang Island — yes it did host a herd of mustangs once upon a time. Mustang Island is really just the northern 20 miles or so of Padre, Padres Island for you tourists looking it up on google maps, except for Packery Channel cutting through from the gulf, that’s the Gulf of Mexico if you are looking it up on google maps, the channel feeding smaller boats into a deep water port which, of course, hosts a city on the inline side, going by the name Corpus, sometimes C-Squared for the mathematically minded, Corpus Christi if you are looking it up on google maps. It means the Body of Christ.

Padre Island hugs the coast of Southern Texas, looking like a loose strand of hair on the map, going hundreds of miles to the tip of Texas, where the Rio Grande meets the gulf. Rio means river for those who don’t know a lick of Spanish, so it’s not the Rio Grande River. A Padre, that is *father* for those who don’t know a lick of Spanish, is what a Latin-American is likely to call a Roman Catholic Priest.

Of course, a Padre needs a Madre. Between Padre and the mainland lies Lagoona Madre, the breeding ground for many of the sea creatures the inhabit the gulf and the fishing grounds for many a fisherman, in an anchored boat staring at a bobber, drift fishing in a skiff, or casting as they shuffle through mud and sea grass in waders.

Padre and Mustang Islands have four zones: surf, beach, dunes, and mud flats — surf from the gulf; beach — hard packed enough so you can drive on it, much to the horror of relatives who once visited from Montana; dunes that host grasses, some cactus, and plenty of critters; mud-flats on the Lagoona Madre side marked by the never-to-be-forgotten pungent smell of the swallows.

Alister Street leaves Port A to become the highway that runs the length of Mustang Island to connect to the causeway that runs inland from North Padre to Corpus. In 1964 a two-lane road without much traffic, now sports more traffic and passing lanes.

Arriving at the intersection, I turn right on the causeway, the once two-lane road, with crushed oyster-shell shoulders, the once a toll road, that once had swing bridges that passed over that Intercoastal Canal and the Humble Channel, Humble having been an old Texas Oil company that had some rigs in the shallow lagoon long ago. Since few cars had a/c in 1964, the windows were always open, the buffeting sound of the salt air, the smell of the salt flats forever reminding you where you were.

Those days are long gone. A freeway makes the trip too quick, a bridge arching up over the canal above mast height. The waters of the lagoon is cut by lattice of dredged canals once used for oil barges, dotted with spoil islands made from the dredge clay, sand, shell, and mud, shallow but deep enough for a motorboat, sea grass, and sand bars beneath with ripples. I used read those waters as we ran our outboard to a fishing spot that promised speckled trout, red fish, and an occasional drum. The waters seem unchanged since 1964, but what is under it and over it seems to be in a sad decline. Fewer fishing boats mean fewer fish.

Where are the ducks? In 1964, hand-built duck blinds dotted the lagoon, as flights of Pintails, Bluebills, Red Heads, Cormorants dotted the sky. On the back side of the Padre Island in 1964, which hosted no subdivisions, canal houses, or condos, hosted a raft of a million ducks — yes it seemed like a black swath that ran for miles a mile from the blind; it had to be a million.

As I travel too fast down the causeway, some landmarks are still there, others gone. The tall buildings at the base still break as I glance left. Gone is the water tower that marked the DQ that would greet you when the causeway emptied into the Bluff, that's Flour Bluff if you are looking it up on google maps. That's F L O U R bluff, the name the subject of several myths, one of which is a barge crashing and dumping flour on the shore.

The Bluff became part of Corpus, a city that reached out like a hungry octopus annexing bites larger than itself, doubling each time in the 60's and 70's, gobbling up land all the way out to Padre. The Bluff lies between Laguna Madre and the Oso Bay. Oso Bay is really a mud flat most of the time, except when Oso Creek becomes a flash-flooding-torrent because a drought was ended by a sudden downpouring-rain storm or hurricane, the most common way a drought ends in this part of the country.

The freeway is elevated in Flour Bluff, slicing it in half like an ugly sword-scar across the landscape above what was once a three-lane road that had the one blinking light, the blinking light marking where Waldron Road crossed, the base, that is main side, a mile north, Flour Bluff Schools to a mile south. In 1964, I went to Flour Bluff High School, class of '64, a record size graduating class of 60. Needless to say, it has grown my multiples by now.

The water tower gone, the DQ, that's Dairy Queen for you city folk, is also gone. The old bait stands are gone. The only thing left is a rinse station from back in the day — one arched pipe

with spray nozzles you drive your car back and forth through to get the salt and sand your car collected in Padre. It used to cost a quarter; now its two dollars.

The litter is also gone — the ubiquitous American practice of throwing things out the window of your moving car — paper cups, cigarettes, beer cans, and anything else that had outlived its usefulness in what was in essence your second home back in the 60's. When you walked the streets, the shoulders would be lined with the stories told by the detritus of the '60s American culture.

What are the teenagers going to do without the DQ? The hangout, where you could pull up in your car and had a good chance of seeing someone you knew, talking through open car window, sometimes sitting on the fender or hood; my father's called us "fender lizards." At the DQ you could get a burger with the works, or what was called a "sissy burger" if you just wanted mayo, or a soft served ice cream cone, which, in the hot South Texas sun, ended up being a race between how fast you could eat at and how fast it would melt.

The kids who drank favored the lime drink — a good mixer for vodka — never was sure if this remained a mystery to Mr. Odanovich, a tea-totaler, given his religion. They didn't sell cigarettes either, sending a smoker to the bait shop next door, as the Odanovich's, the owners, were Christian Scientists.

Ok, I confess. I ended up with a second job at the DQ, even though it paid only paid 75¢ an hour, 50¢ less than Federal minimum wage, Texas not having one, about a 1/3 of what I made bagging groceries for tips at the commissary on the base. At the commissary we didn't get paid — just tips. Many did not do so well. But if you hustled — if stayed on your feet — if ran back from the car after you loaded the groceries and collected your tip — usually about a 25¢ for bagging and carrying out to the car and putting them in the trunk — if you knew the best registers and fastest cashiers — you could make over \$2.00 an hour, good wages unless you knew someone or was related to someone who could get you on an oil rig.

Why work at the DQ? When you are flirting with your girlfriend over the DQ counter, she, her mother, father, and sister working, more and more customers lining up to order, her, her mother, father, and sister moving faster and faster, what's a guy to do? I found myself on the other side of the counter helping out. When they asked me to work for pay, given that the turnover was high and the summers busy, I was almost highly trained.

What are teenagers going to do without a DQ? Oh, silly me — stare into their cell phones?

The freeway continues on, through what was once a stretch of farmland before you got to the brand spanking new Staples Mall, which, in 1964, sat at the edge of Corpus, the mall now lost in a continuous landscape of strip development. As I drive on the freeway signs announce the exits to the old streets, each street name a story from my youth, Ennis Joslin, which we called "snake road," weaving to hug the mud flats of the Oso, going over to Ocean Drive, the home of our local ead man's curve, every town had one, Airline, never having figured just what airline since it didn't go to any airport, though Joe and I slowed down to block a car one night, going slower

and slower, ha ha, the car turning out to be a cop car, a story for another time, Staples, the road that angles in to downtown, with timed lights which you could beat if you went about 10 miles over the speed limit.

I get off a Kostortyz, where the Saint Cyril and Methodius Church still stands, no longer proudly dominating the corner, now shadowed by an elevated freeway. The high school years in Corpus was my second time on Corpus Christi. My father, a Naval Aviator, had been assigned to Cabiness Field when I was in fourth grade — they sent us to Catholic School at Saint Cyril's on that assignment. Cabiness Field — an air-field, not an air-base — one of several airfields in the area, including Waldron Field in Flour Bluff, which had nothing but a fence around it and concrete runway for touch-and-goes. By way of explanation, an airfield is commanded from an airbase, the “main base,” Corpus Christi Naval Air Station in this case, situated where Flour Bluff meets Corpus Christi Bay. The main base was dubbed “main side” in casual conversation.

How do I describe Kostortyz, or much of Corpus for that matter? The humid, salt air makes buildings and cars old before their time, a little bit gritty, rust around the edges, held together in the last extreme by baked-in grit. Sometimes it seems to do the same for the people in it. It is something Corpus has always had, the little-bit-gritty sitting next to the occasional shiny thing.

After stopping at H.E.B., that's a grocery store chain for you Yankees, I ended up at W. B. Ray High School, where I went for a month or so while my dad waited for quarters on the base, which would put me in Flour Buff High School. We lived across the street in a complex of red-brick hot-house apartments when we arrived a year before 1964, for the second time. The Buccaneer Apartments, still there after all these years. Only rich people had air conditioning.

Driving down to Alameda, I went through six-points, so named for those who don't live in or near Corpus because three streets cross at the light, each street with two points of entrance. The traffic was managed by stoplights with a reputation for an interminable wait in high-speed teenage brains. Going several blocks on, I turned on Furman, still a quiet residential boulevard, the house of the nice old lady still there, the lady in probably younger than I am now, the lady who rented me a studio apartment for \$50 a month when I was first on my own a year after 1964.

A few blocks on, downtown Corpus, actually a little livelier than it was a couple of decades ago, a lot, lot less lively than it was in 1964, when on Friday and Saturday it hosed “the strip,” where, if we found ourselves without any girls, would head down to cruise the strip, windows down, sidling up to next to a car full of girls to shout out lame pickup lines, dragging between stoplights, pulling up for a shake and a burger at Picks. If we had dates, we were more likely to head over to the T-heads, where we could park and look out over the bay, maybe even go out for a walk in the breakwater.

We lived in our cars, we drove, talked, planned, joked, ate, played car tag on the crushed oyster-shell roads out in the boonies in the bluff, dated, double dated, triple dated with girls on laps, argued, made up, watched the nighttime submarine races at the seaplane ramps on the base, where we rented sunfish and water skied in daylight hours. There was no counsel in the front

seat, so if the girl riding in the front seat moved to the middle so you could put your arm around her, yes while driving with one hand, that meant she liked you. If she was your girlfriend and didn't move to the middle, you knew she was mad at you. We could put a couple of hundred miles on the odometer if we went to the strip and then out to Port A, sometimes stopping to buy some gas, often just a dollar, gas being around 25¢ a gallon.

It seems everything changed since 1964.

The changes aren't all bad. Back to the island, Padre Island that is, the beach no longer has hardly any trash or tar on it, offshore oilrigs having become more closely watched, glass bottles prohibited, litter bugging fined.

The murky water in the churning waves hold fish; fish attract sharks, neither of which you usually see, except for schools of fish when the water was clearer or an occasional skipjack jumping above the waves for what reason no one seems to know, maybe just being a bit of fish-fun. In 1964 there would be a couple of accidental bites in shallow every year in the shallow water where the sand sharks were hunting in the murky water, usually a toe, though every few years a larger shark would attack for real.

We often surfed next to Bob Hall Pier, out at the third bar, the bait house as you entered the pier displaying pictures of a 20-foot tiger and 20-foot hammer head caught off the pier. Dolphins where your friends; if you saw them sounding a thousand yards out, fins appearing and disappearing, you would assume the sharks were going somewhere else. Occasionally the fins did not disappear under the waves.

The big sharks are probably gone now, along with a lot of sand sharks, a hazard I would just as soon bear than think of the degrading fishery that haunts all the fish we caught, ate, and swam with.

The most important thing hasn't changed. The next day I put my trunks on, drove down to Bob Hall Pier, and walked into the surf.

The three sand bars are still there. While the ocean swells on most beaches straighten out because of the bottom friction on a smooth slope, Padre waves on the first and second bars come at two angles, the backwash from the bars often robbing them of the energy unless the timing is just right, making a complex, usually windblown, set of breaking waves.

The water piles up between the bars creating a current pushing you down the beach, the higher the swell the faster the current; in winter surf I had been known to be a mile down in just a few minutes. You learn the water, driving down the beach to pick a place to put the board or your body in, down current from a rip, that is rip tide for you land lubbers, when the sandbars have been broken through and the current riding down the beach escapes to go back to sea — but there is a texture to the waves that gives them away once you learn to recognize it. Of course, I been in a couple; swim sideways and survive, a little further out to sea, without much ado; swim against it and die.

Unlike the classic California surf beach, you have to wait and wait for the right combination to catch a good one, especially like me, if you are out there, with just you and your bathing suit, body surfing. Of course, a storm in gulf can emanate 6 foot and higher swells that break consistently on the third bar, about 150 yards out, a hurricane sometimes putting up 20 footers that are fatal to ride. Today a few breakers could be seen on the third bar, most breaking on the second bar, swell only about 3 1/2 feet — plenty for this 74 year old.

The joy is still there, in mother ocean, the water, the waves, the embrace.