

I have a friend with a boat. A big boat. I guess you could call it a yacht. Not one of those sleek high-speed look-at-me boats nor a gussied-up party barge, but a sound, practical, seagoing 55-foot Grand Banks trawler. He recently invited me to help him crew his vessel down for the weekend from Kemah, Texas, located on Galveston Bay, just south of Houston, to Offatts Bayou, located within Galveston Island.

Of course, I accepted his kind offer. After all, I have a long history with water. By way of background, I grew up in Jacksonville, Florida, near Ortega River. We did not have a boat in our family, but that did not keep me from finding things that floated and getting on the water. At various times I went out on a little inflatable rubber raft, an 8-foot rowboat, and anything else I could get on that would float, and sometimes things that did not. My interest in the water intensified when, in high school, my friend Bill asked me to help him sail his racing dingy. I became entranced with sailing and the power of the wind. Further, I loved the freedom it gave me. I could travel anywhere I wanted, and best of all, the power to do so was essentially as free as the air.

My fascination with sailing only got worse in college. Eckerd is located right next to Tampa Bay. The college had sailboats, and I took full advantage of them, sometimes to the detriment of my studies. I did a lot of racing but almost exclusively in small dinghies. After my graduation I spent way too much time on the water. I borrowed sailboats, raced with friends on some bigger boats, and even bought a couple of small boats. Tampa Bay is a wonderful place for cruising, and I took advantage of it. I even tried working in the sailing industry (such as it is) by working building boats for Morgan Yachts, doing a little teaching at Annapolis Sailing School, and selling boats at St. Petersburg Yacht sails. However, like a good Boomer, I got married and needed to make a living, so I joined the Navy as a surface line officer.

My time sailing stood me in good stead as a Naval Officer. There is a feeling that a boat gives you on the water, a balance of movement of wind and water. Most of my experience before I joined the Navy was with small boats, but everything that happens to a large boat also happens to a small one, it just happens faster. As a Surface Line Officer, I was responsible for conning a ship. We are called 'black shoes' because the aviators wore brown shoes, or 'boat drivers' because that is what we did. Specifically, the conning officer would give orders to the helmsman, such as 'come right to new course zero three zero', and similar directions to the lee helmsman who would signal the engine room with an engine order telegraph for the new speed. My first two ships were WWII era destroyers which had very different bridges than modern ships. If you have seen the movie 'Titanic' the bridge of that old ship gives you an idea how things were on those destroyers. The old FRAM destroyers were very maneuverable, even in coastal waters, and I enjoyed acting as

conning officer and officer of the deck. I got good enough that in 1984 I was awarded the Pacific Fleet Ship Handler of the Year award. I was very proud of that award, although no one else cared. Nevertheless, I always enjoyed driving ships as a conning officer. My naval service meant that I had lots of time at sea, with more time driving the ship than most. As I became more senior, I found that I spent less and less time up on the bridge and more and more time doing paperwork down below. However, the Navy does have a robust recreational sailing program, so I got my boat driving fix by renting sailboats, most often on San Diego Bay. Moving to Texas greatly reduced my time on the water, and I had to shift from mostly salt water to mostly fresh. Even so, I have retained my love for being underway on the water.

Thus, the offer from my friend Dick to go down in his boat from Kemah, Texas down Galveston Bay to Offatts Bayou was gratefully accepted. Dick owns a Grand Banks 55, a very solid and well-made yacht. I think of it as the Airstream of yachts soundly made by excellent craftsmen. Dick's home in Kemah is on the water with a slip that is just right for his yacht, Pilgrim II. We arrived at his house in time for us to go out for a nice lunch, then we returned to make all necessary preparations for getting underway. Dick is nothing if not well organized and it did not take long for us to cast off, maneuver out of his slip and head down the various cuts and canals to get to Galveston Bay. Waterfront property is more expensive (more on that later) and so developers make lots of little channels to maximize the number of houses with waterfront access. Pilgrim made her majestic way slowly past the Kemah boardwalk and out into Galveston Bay.



Pilgrim in her home berth



Tom driving on the flying bridge

Once we were out of the narrow and congested channels, Dick let me take the helm. The day was sunny and fine, so we drove from the station on the flying bridge. I mentioned how well built the Grand Banks was; it was also very modern. There was a very nice wheel on the conning station, but I preferred to let the sophisticated autopilot drive, showing the route superimposed on the electronic chart. Pilgrim is, of course, equipped with the Automatic Identification System (AIS) which not only tells you where other ships are but their identity, course, speed, and closest point of approach. It was not really needed on a sunny fall afternoon, but still very nice to have. Pilgrim's switches were logical and pretty easy to use, but alas not foolproof. Naturally, I soon pushed the wrong button, discontinuing the autopilot, but I immediately noticed my mistake and was quickly about to regain course.

Crossing the expanse of Galveston Bay we eventually intersected the main channel and ran down the west side of the channel, giving a wide berth to the commercial shipping coming in and out of the port. Houston is one of the busiest ports on the United States if you count the ships that come out of the refineries at Texas City. There are also lots of commercial fishing boats as well as plenty of pleasure craft. Fortunately, the bay is wide and there is lots of water for a yacht like Pilgrim. The big twin diesels rumbled serenely on until we reached Galveston Island. Crossing beneath the I-45 bridge we then curled around to Offatts Bayou. We motored to the center of the bayou where we anchored across from the futuristic pyramids of Moody Gardens.



Dick enjoying the ride



Sharing the channel with big ships

There we remained with a lovely view of the bayou on all sides. We relaxed, watched TV in the spacious lounge back aft, read, watched the sun go down and generally relaxed.

What I did not do was go below and verify where all the electrical switches were in the forward berth. Pilgrim has a large bed forward, another berthing area to starboard with two bunk beds, all sharing a spacious head. Aft was the owner's large, comfortable berthing

area with its own head. I waited until after dark to settle into the forward berth which was a mistake as I had to hunt for the light switches. One of the switches in the head was a GFI, basically a circuit breaker. Of course, while turning on lights in the head one of the switches I closed was this GFI, which turned off the power outlets and AC fan in the forecabin berth. I sleep with a CPAP machine which requires electrical power, but the various electrical outlets did not work. I figured I could just snore away in my stateroom. However, the lack of air conditioning made the forward stateroom pretty warm, so after a while I relocated to one of the bunk beds in the berthing area where I was finally able to get some sleep. The next day I sorted out the GFI issue I was able to use my CPAP and the stateroom AC and was able to sleep up in the forward stateroom very comfortably.

I always tend to wake up early. This was a very good thing for my time in the Pilgrim as I got to enjoy some very nice sunrises while sipping coffee in the pilot house. With the splendid views I could thoroughly enjoy the transition from night into day. After Dick got up, we had a little breakfast and then put the tender in the water. Pilgrim's tender was a very nice little RIB dingey with a great 40 horsepower Yamaha outboard. The Pilgrim has a clever crane which made putting the boat down into the water easy. Dick let me take the tender out for a spin around the bayou. I quickly found that that little inflatable would get up and go, in fact go faster than I was comfortable going. I throttled back a bit and cruised the area taking in the sights. Some of these sights included damage remaining from Hurricane Beryl's passage over Galveston a few months before. There were several wrecked yachts still visible, well, at least partly visible, above the water. Several large boats were still cast up on the shore, apparently waiting for the insurance company to pay someone to drag them out of the water to the breakers.



Sailboat sunk next to the dock



Pilgrim resting easily at anchor

That afternoon we took the dingy on a long ride over to visit Harborwalk Yacht Club.

Galveston is an interesting place. Despite the risk of hurricanes, people continue to build expensive homes on the water there. The land on the Texas coast is sandy and flat. That means the water is shallow and the land is low lying. This means boats must stay in the channel and buildings have to be built high enough to withstand flooding. The Texas coastland is inherently shifting, which makes it difficult for property rights. Land on the water near a major metropolis is going to be expensive and landowners are reluctant to allow their property to literally shift away. Adding to the pressure are conservationist concerns. There are many who feel the low sand islands provide critical habitat for a wide variety of fish and waterfowl, which it does, and also protects the mainland from hurricane damage. This means that the low scruffy land in and around Galveston Bay is very expensive. This results in three types of shorelines. Uninhabited sandy islands, some of which are barely above the high tide lines. Shoreline packed check and jowl with dense housing, each house taking up as much of the precious land as possible. Finally there are very large (and expensive) mansions which generally serve as second homes for the very, very wealthy. All of the houses were clearly built to withstand high water, being raised on pilings with the first floors designed to withstand flooding. It makes for a very interesting bit of waterfront scenery. We took full advantage of the sights on our ride to and from the yacht club.



The waterfront is absolutely packed with houses



Except for the big ones.

Life at anchor on a lovely weekend is most pleasant. We watched a movie about the development of chronometers called Longitude. I seldom get to watch movies like this, and I very much enjoyed it. Sunday morning Dick and I took the dingy over to a nearby marina and had brunch at a restaurant called Number 13 Prime Steak where we had an excellent meal. Then we returned to our safe haven onboard Pilgrim; there were books to read and Sunday football games to watch. In the evening, we watched the sun go down before retiring early for a solid night's sleep. It may sound a bit boring, but it was in fact relaxing and most satisfying.

The next morning, we hoisted the dingy up on board and headed back up the bay on a flooding tide. I have taken the trip from Galveston to Houston many times, but none of the trips were more pleasurable. We arrived back at the Kemah house where Dick skillfully backed Pilgrim into her slip. I was standing on the stern waiting to step ashore to handle lines as soon as we got close enough when I noticed Dick was no longer driving from the flying bridge. He was standing on the stern maneuvering the boat with a little pugged in controller. That way he could be right there to see precisely where the boat was in relation to the dock. And precise was the landing he made. Ah, technology!

We cleaned up the boat, stowed our gear, and then had a nice lunch at a Kemah restaurant before making the drive back up to The Woodlands. It was a most pleasant way to spend a weekend.