

South Padre Island

The story of South Padre Island, once owned by Father J. Nicolas Balli, off the southern tip of Texas.

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After dad died in December 2000, I planned a vacation trip to show the family many of the places that were important in my upbringing, places like Lake Buchanan, Borger, Henrietta, Enchanted Rock, Marysville, and South Padre Island, among others. While there I bought this locally produced history of the island. Always with good intentions (especially on vacation when the pressure is “off”) and interested in the history of places, this went on my “top 24” shelf. Occasionally a book actually comes off of that shelf and goes on the “reading now” list. When I was picking four books to bring with me on this trip, the 2009 visit to South Padre, this one seemed an obvious choice, in kind of a “now or never” sense.

The author’s history with South Padre goes back to 1943. This nearly exactly parallels my dad’s. As a teenager, my dad (A. Bailey Duncan), his dad (Arthur B. Duncan) and my dad’s uncle Mark Duncan would make fishing trips to the sand bar. The deal was that uncle Mark owned the boat, my grandfather owned the motor, and my dad had the brawn. An interesting coincidence here is that uncle Mark owned the pharmacy in Sanderson. Although I certainly went there as a child, I can only remember specifically being there twice. Once on the way home in 2001 where we took the south route just to see places like that, and once about twenty minutes ago when the train stopped there on our way to San Antonio. Guess I’ll be back through in a couple of weeks on the way home too. Should have stopped in the pharmacy in 2001 to see if there were still any relatives around.

Growing up myself, we visited the then and future resort at the southern tip of Texas every second or third year on dad’s two-week vacation. Alternate times we would go someplace else like Colorado, Indiana, or the panhandle of Texas where my parents had grown up. There are many stories from my dad’s youth and my own from all these events that are out of scope here; this just demonstrates my interest in this place.

The story goes that my grandfather, a realtor and abstract and title person, would survey the sand of South Padre Island and exclaim that it wasn’t worth more than \$.02 per acre. The 1100 acres where the now city stands is thought to be worth several billion dollars today. Grandad wasn’t a very talented speculator (this isn’t the only story like that), nor does such talent appear to run in

the family, but reading this book, I see that there are other forces at work in making a particular place a world-class resort and granddad was not the only one to make such an evaluation. South Padre Island is a gem of a place for a particular set of things, particularly swimming in the surf and fishing. This secret has been in my family and a few others for generations. It is an international class resort because on June 25, 1950, John Tompkins declared that he would make it into one, and the preponderance of development, including roads and bridges for access, accommodations in various forms, and various promotions and attractions have followed that model rather than the hard-to-get-to adventuresome, stubborn, individualistic model of my forebears.

Before getting into the history and content of the book, it is necessary to point out that Tibbetts is not a very organized thinker, at least in his presentation here. He is skilled when referring to different parts of the book (he calls Chapters “Waves” and is always referring up to “Wave 14” or back to “Wave 8”), but he repeats himself in different contexts, throws in clichés, some of which probably require inside knowledge to follow (or which may just be non-sequiturs), and makes points in bold or with exclamation points where some authors would be more subtle. This may be generational. Dad was like that too, in a way.

History is presented, but the latter parts of the book have more to do with modern local politics and the fights over “renourishment” or replenishment of the beaches than with historical narrative. Tibbetts goes to some length about property issues including a whole “wave” on how to live in a condo complex and deal with the owner’s association and the other residents. There is another “wave” on how beaches form themselves and how to protect developments from storm surges and why we don’t want sea walls (like Galveston) and how cheap or expensive it can be and how any expense can be justified by all the people who want to live near or at least visit beaches. All this seemed colloquial and inbred and it was in these sections of the book that it began to remind me of **The History of La Canada Flintridge** by Don Mazen. That book also had some good historical material but towards the end was degenerating into poorly reformatted local newspaper articles. In general, neither book seems to have much plan. In Tibbetts’ case, he seems to use this as a platform to say whatever he wants to say about whatever he wants to talk about. A lot of the time this involves South Padre Island, his chosen retirement community, and in that case it’s all OK, but still a bit scattered. As in other self-produced books, I found many typos and some constructs that weren’t even sentences. As with Mazen, and as with Hushbeck, I could spend two weeks marking up the manuscript and talking to the author about flow and intent and how to make it five times better, and I’m not even a professional editor.

It also annoyed me a little that the author used three terms evenly and interchangeably for the area: Island, which it is; sandbar, which it is; and reef (or barrier reef), which it is not.

The known history of the island goes back about five hundred years. In 1553 a Spanish treasure fleet went aground on the island. Indeed, it is thought that considerable treasure was lost in the area, or was hidden there by pirates and never recovered. The sands and shorelines are continually shifting. There are few natural landmarks and there is no documentation. No one

knows even how to begin looking. This was following and during an era in which the principle inhabitants (recreational and otherwise) were the Karankawa Indians (or “Kronks”) first encountered by Cabeza de Vaca, the only known (or suspected) cannibals in North America.

When Texas entered the union in 1845, it was apparently unclear that Padre Island was part of the state. In 1848 a Catholic Priest, father J. Nicolas Balli, known as the “Padre” worked in the area and had collected some cattle. He petitioned the Spanish crown for title to the long and narrow island and it was granted.

After the colonial war of Mexico versus Spain, the land went to Mexico, then to Texas, then in confusion back to Mexico. This resulted in the Mexican American War (General Zachary Taylor, et al) after Texas joined the union and the union had the firm understanding that the boundary was the Rio Grande, not the Nueces. No sooner was that settled than the U. S. Civil War broke out. Texas joined the south, so the island was owned for a time by the confederacy. A month after that war was over, the final battle was fought nearby and won by the south. News finally reached deep south Texas that the fighting was officially over and when, in 1870, Texas was re-admitted to the union, South Padre Island finally became undisputed U.S. territory.

Sometime during this period the Singer family was shipwrecked and washed up in the area. Tibbetts mentions the Singers (related to the sewing machine magnate) several times and refers to them as “old money” in the “pecking order” of the island society but never actually tells their shipwreck or settlement story or gives any dates.

During the second world war, German U-boats were known to cruise the Gulf of Mexico, one was even sunk off Corpus Christi. By this time, the ship channel had been dug and the jetties erected (from granite brought in from the Marble Falls area, (my own knowledge)) so this was not an insignificant threat to shipping. The author digresses into a fairly lengthy account of the development, testing, and use of the atomic bomb, the latter led by Col. Paul Tibbetts. The author has to be related to the Colonel (and was a Colonel himself in the Korean conflict) but does not mention what the relation is. This is apparently relevant because So. Padre Island was one of the five sites considered for testing of the bomb. The Trinity Site, New Mexico, was ultimately used.

Tibbetts discusses the two lighthouses, the historic one that can be visited today (the second smallest state park in Texas) and its predecessor that burned down in the 1940s.

Something documented here that had never really dawned on me is that property on the island is owned about half and half by U.S. and Mexican citizens. Given its location I guess this makes sense. There is a lot of discussion about how economies, local and international, affect property values, visitation, and utilization. (On arriving at the resort a few days later, an informal survey confirms this bi-national occupancy.)

When I first went to South Padre Island, access was by the Queen Isabella Causeway (same Queen Isabel for which Port Isabel is named) which included a drawbridge, on which we waited once in a while for boats to pass. In 1974 a full-service four-lane bridge was built. The author mentions several times that this bridge is 2.369 miles long. The old bridge was used for fishing for a while, then condemned and destroyed.

Some years after this book was published, the bridge was taken out of commission for several months by an errant barge. At the time of the writing, it was unclear whether or not the cost of repairs for this put an end to talk of a second bridge.

(By the way, there is a “North Padre Island,” off Corpus Christi, a state park. The Matagorda Cut separates the barrier island in the middle so that the two ends are not connected by “land” or, more accurately, sand.)

In one chapter he talks about hurricanes, and hazards worldwide (like earthquakes in California and tornados in Kansas. He lists all the known hurricanes since habitation and development, including Beulah, the one that had us coming home from vacation early one year. Apparently the most remembered one now, possibly the one having had the largest dollar impact in recent estimation, was Allen in 1980.

Tibbetts does a good job of enumerating the different current inhabitants of the island. There are people who work there and people who retire there. The visitors are primarily:

Jan, Feb, Mar: Winter Texans, that is, snowbirds;

Apr, May, Jun: Spring Breakers, from the north, from Texas, and from the south;

July, Aug, Sep: Tourists like us, most expensive season of the year, fireworks on Fridays; and

Oct, Nov, Dec: Off season - mostly locals, retirees and the business owners. Good swimming. Cooler. Christmas.

Apparently the retirees and spring breakers get along pretty well because they get up quite early and stay up quite late respectively.

Tibbetts also gives what I consider a pretty complete list of what to do while there, motivations for going, including a few that mean driving back across a 2.369 mile bridge. I’ve done some of them. Swimming, fishing, digging a hole looking for fresh (sweet) water, driving up to the north end looking for drifted sand, beach combing, going out on the Jetty, visiting the lighthouse, shopping, going to Brownsville and even Matamoros, and just sitting watching the surf.

The book is dedicated to T-Bird Sitgreaves, an amateur golfer who made a golf course happen on South Padre Island, and nearly lived to see it.

As a result of finally having read this book, I feel more prepared to visit the Island this year. I not only have stories and history from my ancestors and myself, but I have the history of the place and the current stirrings, at least through 2001.