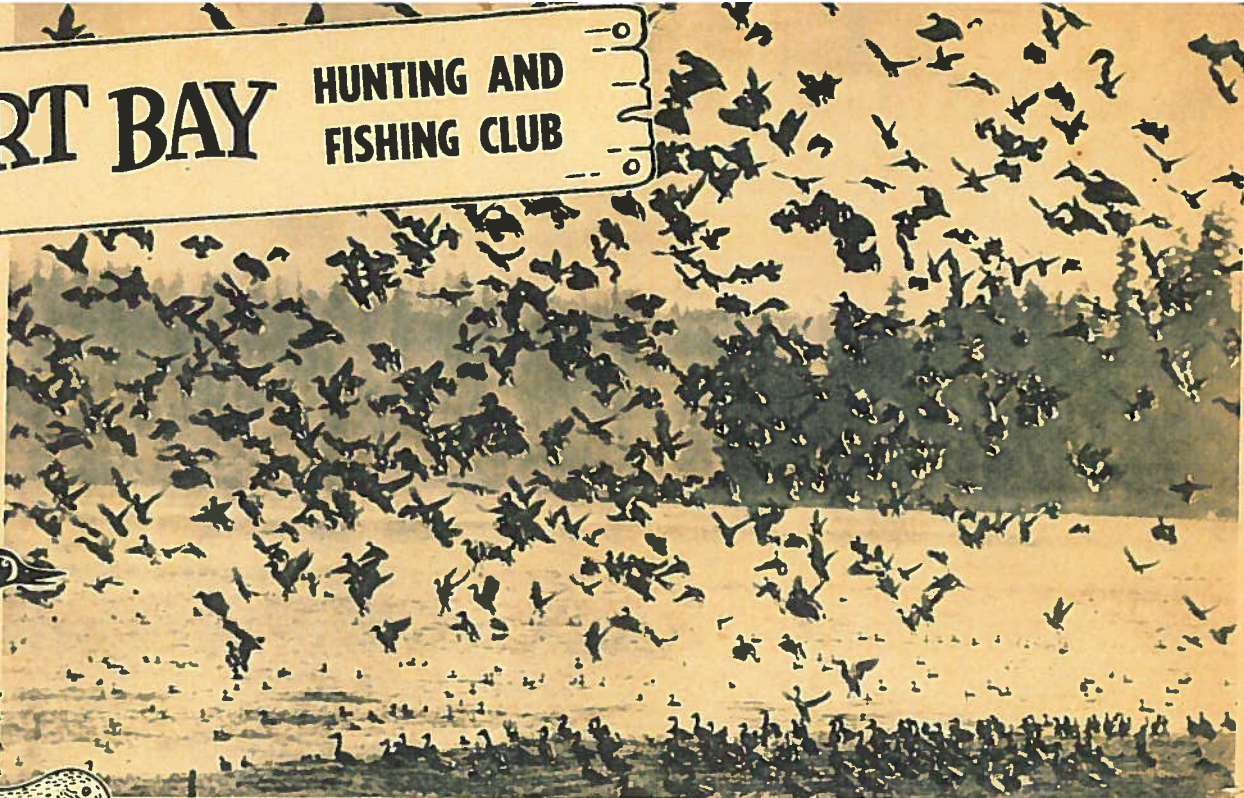
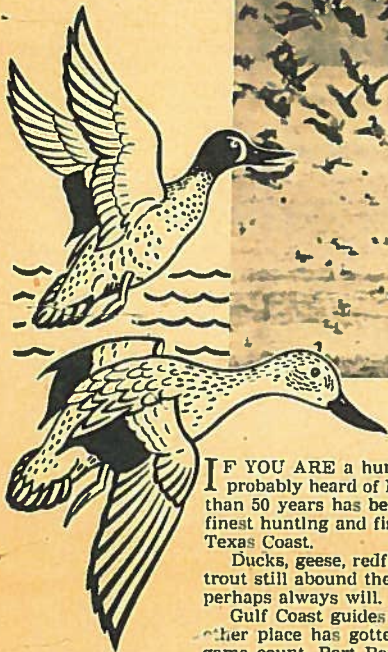


PORT BAY HUNTING AND FISHING CLUB



Clouds of ducks used to fill the skies over Port Bay. The place still offers some of the best hunting on the coast.

IF YOU ARE a hunter or an angler, you've probably heard of Port Bay, which for more than 50 years has been considered one of the finest hunting and fishing spots on the entire Texas Coast.

Ducks, geese, redfish and scrappy speckled trout still abound there in great quantity and perhaps always will.

Gulf Coast guides will tell you that if any other place has gotten ahead of Port Bay in game count, Port Bay still will beat it all to hollow for accessibility.

Port Bay's fame as a sportsman's paradise.

plus its accessibility, led to the establishment of the 100-member Port Bay Hunting and Fishing Club 38 years ago.

Charter members included business and civic leaders from distant places—big cities like New York, Chicago, St. Louis, Cincinnati and Atlanta, and smaller places like Rockford and Kankakee, Ill., Ridgeway, Mo., and Weston, Mass.

It's no wonder they came from so far away to join Texans hunting there. Old-timers can tell you stories of hunting at Port Bay that will make any present-day hunter drool.

I. C. Thurmond, 72-year-old retired Amarillo banker-cattleman and only charter member of the club still active in the organization, describes Port Bay as the greatest hunting ground he's ever seen. And he has been hunting around the Copano Bay area for 42 years.

"The first time I ever went hunting down here, I journeyed to Swan Lake, two miles from this club, and shot 42 ducks in just five shots from my 12-gauge, automatic shotgun. That was enough for me. I quit for the day," Thurmond said.

"At that time, ducks would fly over the bay about 10,000 at a time, almost blackening the sky. You could shoot in any direction and hit them."

Thurmond said he "discovered" Port Bay, also known as Puerto Bay, quite by accident in 1908. Then a resident of Oklahoma City, Thurmond had heard a lot about duck hunting on the Texas Coast, and while visiting San Antonio, he asked a San Antonio banker about it. The banker recommended Port Bay.

"He gave me Andrew Sorenson's name as a guide. Sorenson soon showed me what real hunting was like. I would come down from Oklahoma City to spend two or three months at a time," Thurmond said.

Sorenson was operating a place at Clubhouse Point, across the bay, in 1908, Thurmond recalled.

"Andy bought the present club property about 1909 and operated it as his own hunting and fishing camp. Before Sorenson bought it, it was the old Kemp Place, already famous for its hunting and fishing. In May, 1912, Sorenson decided to incorporate it into a club. He sold shares at \$150 each to 100 members. Since that time the club has gone along so well that shares have sold as high as \$1,500. I still hold my original stock," Thurmond said proudly.

Membership changes by individuals, but never in number. There still are 100 members. Nearly half of these—some 48—are San Antonio business and professional men.

Some live in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Others come in from North Texas cities and from as far away as New York City and

Santa Fe. Even Galveston men, with hunting and fishing grounds in their own backyard, feel that it's worth driving 275 miles on a week end to hunt and fish at Port Bay. The Galveston delegation—with 13 members—is second only to San Antonio's 48 and is ahead of Houston's third-place 10.

When Andrew Sorenson moved across the bay from Clubhouse Point, he floated two buildings on barges across with him. These now serve as the kitchen and the dining room, respectively, of the clubhouse, and have been added onto through the years until the clubhouse is now a rambling, one-story structure, 200 feet long, with a bayside porch and banister of equal length.

Outside walls are white, with green trim, and porch flooring is battieship gray. The building is encompassed by a white picket fence, patrolled by Lady, a black and white collie. Oleanders and a few cottonwoods shade the building in summer, when whistling winds cool the screened, inside bunkrooms, which contain 34 beds.

Each room has a name, something ducky—like spoonbill, mallard, redhead, teal or sprig. The dining room Andrew Sorenson brought across the bay four decades ago has appropriately been named "Tall Tale Room."

IN WINTER during duck season, lockers that line the hallways crash and clatter in the wee hours of morning, heralding preparations for the hunt. Hunting pictures on the walls remind hunters of the birds they can expect to see. And of a winter evening, the pleasing aroma of roast duck and goose, coming from a huge iron stove, with a crackling wood fire inside, floats over the premises.

It was this sort of setting that caused the Thurmonds to build the first of four cottages adjacent to the big house. They are happy they did; at one time their son, I. C., Jr., was a frail lad, they said, but he seemed healthier at Port Bay than anywhere else. The Thurmonds spent many months there, and their son became sturdier all the time. Today he weighs over 200 pounds.

F. W. Chesebrough of New York City, a member of the Vaseline manufacturing family, built the second house, next door, Thurmond said. Dr. W. H. McBride of Kansas City built the third, and Dr. J. B. Miller, San Antonio, built the fourth in the row. Around the corner, on the other side of the clubhouse, Judge W. F. Ezell of San Antonio built another house.

Today those houses are owned, respectively, by Thurmond, C. J. Schneider of San Antonio, Dr. D. C. McKeever of Houston, Dr. Miller and J. W. Madden of Denison. In summer, firewheels and other wildflowers grow in their yards.



Motor-driven skiff puts into 740-foot pier at Port Bay Club.



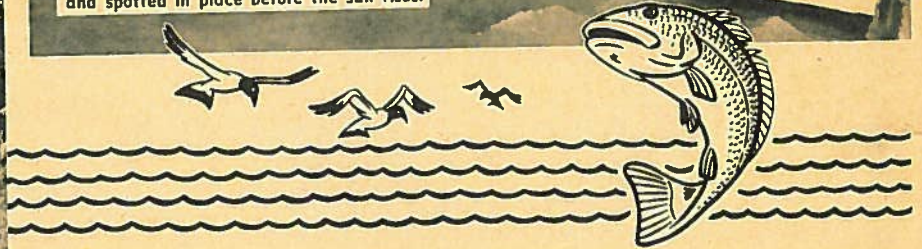
The clubhouse is a neat, rambling structure, 200 feet long.



The I. C. Thurmonds have been going to Port Bay for years.



Caravans of skiffs are towed by launches and spotted in place before the sun rises.



All told, the club owns 40 acres on Port Bay, and J. D. Dodson, San Antonio, one of two honorary members, lets the club use his 16 acres adjoining the club land.

THE CAMP is able to take care of from 35 to 40 hunters at a time as far as guides are concerned. Ninety-five per cent of the hunters use guides in winter to avoid chances of getting lost on the wind-swept bay. Each member is allowed a maximum of three guests at a time.

Present officers are T. A. Lambert, San Antonio, president; William Negley, San Antonio, vice-president, and Dr. D. O. Poth, San Antonio, secretary-treasurer. R. N. Gresham, Dr. G. P. Robertson, Frank G. Huntress, Jr., and Dr. C. T. Stone serve on the board of directors. All directors except Stone, who is from Galveston, are San Antonians.

Many of the members have seen the duck limit set and reset through the years, first at 25 ducks per hunter and finally down to only four.

Thurmond says he will never forget the jitney service started in 1915 by Charles Cleveland and carried on for a number of years. Hunters would ride the old San Antonio and Aransas Pass Railroad, now a Southern Pacific branch, as far as Gregory.

Cleveland would drive overland from the camp to the railroad station and pick them up in a Model-T Ford. Round-trip was 40 miles cross-country.

"He had a faculty for never getting stuck, no matter how foul the weather might be," Thurmond said. "Finally, he was operating two Model-Ts and later became a Ford dealer in Rockport."

Thurmond now always travels by plane. His wife drives their Cadillac.

"We've had some great kidders in the club. Governor G. W. Peck of Wisconsin was one of the best 30 years ago. W. A. Van Brunt, a Wisconsin manufacturer of wheat drills, was another. Then there was the baseball player, Tris Speaker, finest centerfielder of all time. They used to call Tris Speaker the 'Gray Eagle' and 'Old Spoke.' His hunting eye was as good as his batting eye. He once gave a Chesapeake dog to Arthur R. Curry, who managed the Port Bay Club for a long time."

Curry was club manager from 1918 until 1943, when he resigned from the management to become sheriff of Aransas County, a post he still holds. Along with Dodson, Curry completes the club's honorary membership of two.

The sheriff, now 68, said Thurmond got him the job as manager of the club. He termed Thurmond as one of the finest shots and sportsmen to ever hunt on the bay.

"Mr. Thurmond never believed in killing

ducks just for the sake of killing them. He never wasted a duck. He always fed the club with them or gave them to the poor," Curry stated.

"Twenty-five used to be the daily bag limit, and as I recall you could ship 75 home. It was about 1920 that they cut the limit to 15, then to 10 and finally on down to four."

In the old days, as now, motor launches would tow the hunters out in skiffs and spot them into positions before sunup. Then the hunters would wait, hearing only the call of wild birds in the darkness and the slup-slup-slup of small waves, blown up by the wind, whacking the punts of their skiffs. The wind would cause the ducks to fly, and the shooting would start at dawn.

The system is still the same today. There are two motor launches and 28 skiffs, painted brown to blend with the brush and numbered so close account can be kept of them in case any one should get lost during a squall or norther. Decoys have always been used.

Curry has no idea how many ducks have been killed at Port Bay. He did recall having sold 75,000 shotgun shells there in one season. His own gun, a 12-gauge automatic, already had had some \$4,000 worth of ammunition fired through it when the original owner gave it to him in 1927.

Asked for a comparison between sportsmen of today and yesteryear, the sheriff said there are many more today—hundreds of thousands where there used to be just thousands. Though infinitely more numerous, today's sportsmen are better educated to the need of conserving game, Curry believes.

CURRY STARTED noticing the decline of ducks during the 1930s and is of the opinion that drouths caused diseases that, in turn, caused ducks to die in the Far North. Lead poisoning of ponds, due to excessive hunting, added to the tragedy, he added. In those days he frequently killed ducks and found as much as an ounce of shot in their gizzards, all accumulated during feeding.

Goose hunting is nothing like it used to be, he said, recalling how he once shot 16 big geese in 16 minutes.

"The goose is a smart bird and won't stay around for long once you start shooting at him," the sheriff remarked.

"We used a lot more double-barrel, 12-gauges in the old days. The trend has been toward 20-gauge automatics and pumps lately," Curry said.

Etched in Curry's memory was the time in 1920 when he was sent out to get some food for the club and returned in 30 minutes with 50 ducks.



Caretaker Milton Harrell uses paintbrush to brighten decoys.



Veteran hunters can spin yarns that make youngsters envious.

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PORT BAY CLUB Continued

Curry said he has landed many a tarpon in Port Bay during late summer months and remembers how Charley and Rufus Cleveland went fishing one foggy day and landed 600 huge speckled trout before dark. And there was Tom Matthews, who years ago caught 35,000 pounds of redfish and trout in one haul of his seine in lower bay waters.

"Tom glutted the market with fish, and when he couldn't sell anymore, he penned the fish in the seine until he could sell them," the sheriff said.

ADMIRAL A. L. Mertz, U.S. Navy retired, was one of Curry's favorite characters. For 15 years, from about 1921 to 1936, the admiral came down from his home in Greenwich, Conn., to hunt on Port Bay.

"He was a wonderful shot, and when he got too old to shoot standing up, he started shooting from a piano stool. He could turn that way. I've never seen such a man for numbers and accuracy. He kept a record of some 50,000 game birds he'd shot around the world. He used to weigh every bird on the spot," Curry reported.

Tired of hearing people bicker over which way was north from the clubhouse, the admiral back in 1925 got out a compass then asked for a hammer and some copper tacks. The arrow of tacks which he drove into the flooring of the front porch 25 years ago still points out magnetic north today.

Hurricanes have always been the bane of camp managers. Those of 1916, 1919, 1942 and 1945 were the worst. The one of 1942 ruined Curry's oyster bed, and the one of 1945 finished it off entirely.

"The storm of 1919 knocked out the pier, boathouse and decoy house. We found our boats scattered over the prairie. We invited one fatalist to come with us to higher ground, but the man just snapped, 'The storm can get me here just as well as it can anywhere else,'" the sheriff said.

George M. Harrell, who succeeded Curry as manager in 1943 before becoming constable for two precincts in Aransas County, has been on the bay all of his 59 years.

He said the 1945 storm registered 135 miles an hour before blowing the wind gauge off the weather station. He believes there may be some meteorological significance in the three-

year separations between the 1916 and 1919 storms and those of 1942 and 1945.

Constable Harrell laments that the days when ducks came over in such clouds that their wings made a roar are gone forever.

"Game is moving south all the time. You can order wild game at most any restaurant in Mexico. That is a sign it's being slaughtered there. The United States and Mexico ought to get together and work out better conservation measures," Harrell opined.

"Fishing here is right smart better than it has been for some time. I worked many years to get this bay closed to seines, and I believe it's beginning to show effect," he added.

"For my six years here, I can say one thing. The Port Bay Club is the best bunch of men I've ever worked for and the best bunch of sports. It's the best hunting and fishing club on the coast. It's members obey the laws. You can ask any federal or state game warden," the constable said.

Harrell's son, Milton, a 33-year-old six-footer who has been a guide for most of his years, became club manager when his dad became constable.

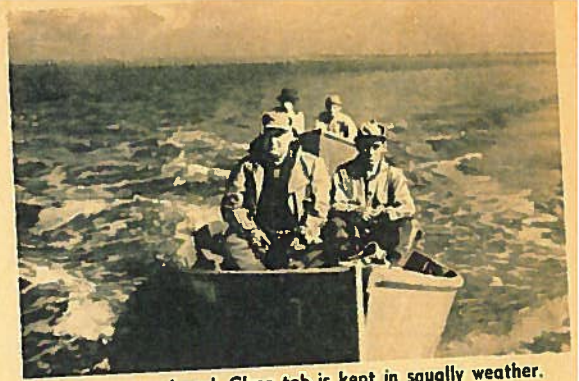
Milton Harrell, like the oldsters, has a weather eye for squalls and careless hunters. When he was 13, a pal dropped a 20-gauge shotgun that discharged and struck Milton in the foot. He still walks on 48 pellets, according to X-ray count.

TWO YEARS later when Milton, then 15, was serving for the first time as a guide, a hunter shot a hole through the bottom of the skiff. Thankful that the score was no hits and one error, Milton carefully wrapped a handkerchief around a used shotgun shell and plugged the hole in the boat.

Milton Harrell contends that in the early morning or late afternoon a strong south wind is equal to a strong north wind for making ducks fly so you can shoot at them.

The best redfish fishing, in his opinion, is in October when the fall tide comes in, and the small fish which redfish subsist on head for deep water. The hungry redfish take the hook at that time.

The glint in the man's eye when he talks about the game and fish at Port Bay tells you he likes his job.



Skiffs are numbered. Close tob is kept in squally weather.



Milton Harrell (L) succeeded G. M. Harrell (R) as manager.



Rufus and Charles Cleveland went fishing one foggy day and landed 600 big speckled trout before nightfall. Here they are with just one string and ducks.



Charles J. Schneider, San Antonio, likes to use live bait for fishing. Here, he casts his net for mullet.



Charles Cleveland sits with children on running board of jitney in which he hauled hunters from trains to club. Mud couldn't stop him.



Arthur R. Curry, Aransas County sheriff, managed club 25 years, once shot 50 ducks in half hour.