

## S1E3: A Sense of Place

The Gulf Podcast

### Profanity Warning

**[Dr. Jen Brown]:** Hi everyone, Jen here. A quick note before we start. This episode includes a couple instances of language that may be offensive or inappropriate for younger listeners. It's just some good old-fashioned barnyard profanity, but I know it's not for everyone.

### Introduction and Opening Scenes

<<cheerful guitar and maraca music<sup>1</sup>>>

**[Brown]:** You're listening to The Gulf, a podcast that shares stories of people and nature on the Texas Gulf Coast. Texas has over 350 miles of coastline along the Gulf of Mexico. It's ten times that if you include all the nooks and crannies. That means there are lots of opportunities to go to the beach. And Texans love their beaches. A favorite is Padre Island National Seashore.

Back in February 2020, you know, back in the "before" times, shall we say, I went there for the 25th anniversary of one of the largest and longest-running beach cleanups in North America.

It's called the Billy Sandifer Big Shell Beach Cleanup. The cleanup is named after its late founder. Billy Sandifer was a well-known and colorful fishing guide. Today, a non-profit group called Friends of Padre runs the cleanup. The organizing and logistics are impressive. Even more remarkable are the volunteers who show up very early on a Saturday morning to pick up trash. In 2020, they set a record: 1,500 people.

After the cleanup in a busy parking lot, I spoke with Aaron Baxter. He's the President of Friends of Padre. Aaron told me why the event has been so successful.

**[Aaron Baxter]:** I think that historically this has been a very, I would say, local-centric beach. The locals have great pride in the Padre Island National Seashore, and so it was formed as a grassroots effort originally. I think that's one. Also, I think environmental awareness. Marine debris, plastics, things like that, are much more in the forefront than they were historically. And so people are starting to see these things on their beaches, they are not really enjoying seeing them, and so they look for ways to help out and getting those things off the beach.

<<waves/beach sounds building in>>

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<sup>1</sup> Lee Rosevere, "Wandering," *Music for Podcasts – The Complete Collection*, April 6, 2021, <https://leerosevere.bandcamp.com/track/wandering-3>. This song is licensed under a Creative Commons attribution license (CC-BY).

**[Brown]:** Aaron mentioned the local pride that led to the grassroots beach cleanup. Historians like me might call this a sense of place. A sense of place is the feeling of belonging and connection to the natural world. It motivates people to protect the places they love. In today's episode, we're going to explore this sense of place by focusing on a local—and international—favorite: Padre Island National Seashore. And we're going to hear from folks who work really hard to keep it trash free. <<waves/beach sounds fading out>> Before we get into that, I want to let you know that season one of The Gulf Podcast is sponsored by the Harte Research Institute for Gulf of Mexico Studies at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi. You can read more about their work at <https://www.harterresearch.org/>.

## Chapter One: The Creation of Padre Island National Seashore

<<waves/beach sounds building in>>

**[Brown]:** Padre Island runs over 100 miles down the Texas Coast from Corpus Christi south to almost the Mexican border. It's a barrier island, only a mile or two wide in most spots. This small strip of sand protects the mainland from dangerous hurricanes. In the 1960s, the island was split in two by the Mansfield Channel. The national seashore starts at this channel and protects 67.5 miles of North Padre Island.

**[Brown]:** Padre Island National Seashore preserves a unique landscape. The gulf's green waters wash up against miles and miles of beach. Some of it has super fine, with almost silty, sand. And some sections are known for being covered in shell fragments. The narrow beach runs up against sand dunes covered in vines and grasses—and a lot of rattlesnakes. <<waves slowly fading out>> On the back side of the island, coastal prairie, marshes, and tidal flats provide important bird habitat. A salty lagoon called the Laguna Madre separates the island from the Texas coast.

Padre Island National Seashore is also a favorite fishing, swimming, and birding destination. But it took decades to create. The big push came after World War II. In 1955, the National Park Service published a report called *Our Vanishing Shoreline*.

***[Our Vanishing Shoreline, read by Justin Ives]:*** Almost every attractive seashore on our Atlantic and Gulf coasts has been pre-empted by commercial or private development. Only a fraction of our long seacoast is left for public use, and much of this small portion is rapidly disappearing before our eyes...It is in part a product of postwar prosperity, and its spectacular acceleration in only a decade is nothing short of a business phenomenon. Isolated islands are being subdivided...The seashore has become Big Business.

**[Brown]:** More and more people began to spend their free time at the nation's beaches. Postwar affluence also led to the rapid development of American shorelines, particularly on the Gulf Coast.

**[Our Vanishing Shoreline, read by Justin Ives]:** *The seashore is a priceless scenic and scientific resource for which there is no substitute. Once subdivided and developed it is lost forever.*<sup>2</sup>

**[Brown]:** Preserving Padre Island in an era of sprawl seemed logical. At that time, most of the island was only used for some cattle ranching, navy bombing practice, and local recreation.

One of the biggest supporters was Ed Harte, the former publisher of the Corpus Christi *Caller-Times*. Harte was involved in the National Audubon Society and local conservation efforts. He was also a philanthropist (he's the one who donated the money to create the Harte Research Institute). His newspaper, the *Caller-Times*, covered the growing local support in the 1950s. Yet some developers continued to oppose the creation of Padre Island National Seashore. Here's Harte explaining some opposition back in 1997 in an interview with the Texas Legacy Project:

**[Ed Harte]:** One of the developers was a Corpus Christi family, big in real estate. And when the newspaper first came out for acquiring that land for the federal government, and getting them to preserve it...that was the idea, that we would preserve as many miles of open beach down there as we could. And the wife of this developer ran into me at a club here in Corpus Christi one day at lunch, and she shouted across the room. She said, "I hear you've bought a ranch in Brewster County," which we had. And she said, "I hope the federal government comes along and takes it away from you." Well, she's long dead. But of course, the federal government did come along and take it away from us, at our invitation (laughs). We gave it to them (laughs).<sup>3</sup>

**[Brown]:** Ed Harte was trim, well-dressed, and in the video, he seems to delight in telling that story. By the way, that land in Brewster County eventually became part of Big Bend National Park.

For Padre Island, Harte lobbied in Austin while others worked on a national level. Texas senator Ralph Yarborough took up the cause early on. Yarborough was an old-style Texas populist, who worked on issues such as education and the expansion of the GI Bill. He was one of the few southerners to vote for the Civil Rights Act of 1957. The next year, Yarborough introduced the bill to create Padre Island National Seashore. When it failed, he reintroduced it again the next session. And then again the next session. And when his long-running feud with another Texas Democrat, Lyndon Johnson, got in the way, he waited until Vice President Johnson went on three-week trip to Southeast Asia, and then made one final push through Congress.<sup>4</sup> When Johnson came back—and this is my favorite part of the story—Yarborough reportedly laughed when he told Johnson that the bill was on the president's desk, waiting to be signed.<sup>5</sup> And I just love the idea that here are two senators with this middle school type rivalry. But anyway, the bill got signed and passed and Padre Island National Seashore was created in 1962.

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<sup>2</sup> US Department of Interior, National Park Service, *A Report on Our Vanishing Shoreline* (Washington, DC: US Department of Interior, National Park Service, 1955), 7–15.

<sup>3</sup> <http://texaslegacy.org/narrator/ed-harte/>

<sup>4</sup> Patrick L. Cox, *Ralph W. Yarborough, The People's Senator* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 148–149, 152, 162–165, 177–181.

<sup>5</sup> "That Padre Island bill was lying on Kennedy's desk to be signed." Quoted in Cox, 180.

But it wasn't the politicians who made the park a reality. Padre Island National Seashore has always been a people's park. Its creation was a massively popular idea on the Texas Coast. Supporters outnumbered opponents 1,000 to 1 at a well-attended public hearing in Corpus Christi.<sup>6</sup> It was so popular that when the city held an election for mayor, all three candidates included it on their platform.<sup>7</sup> It was backed by sportsmen's clubs, garden clubs, churches, chambers of commerce, the American GI Forum, Mexican Americans for Political Action, and other groups.<sup>8</sup> Congress officially created the park in 1962. Since its opening, it draws hundreds of thousands of visitors each year.

## Chapter Two: A Poor Farm Boy From Agua Dulce, Texas

<<cheerful guitar and maraca music<sup>9</sup>>>

**[Brown]:** If you think about the history of nature, it's a human history. For good or bad. Or, most likely, some complicated story in between. For example, marine debris has plagued Padre Island National Seashore since its beginning. It took a poor farm boy from Texas to help deal with the problem. I'm talking about Billy Sandifer, the late founder and reluctant face of the Big Shell Beach Cleanup.

Billy had a certain reputation, as I found out when I asked the cleanup's organizers and volunteers about him.

**[Aaron Baxter]:** Um, this is probably a family program, I probably cannot tell you.

**[Brown]:** What was Billy like back then?

**[Russell]:** Wow. That's, uh, not rated for podcast, I will tell you that.

**[Jeff Wolda]:** The G rated version?...No, he was just a good old salty dog, loved the beach.

**[Baxter]:** Billy was a poor farm boy from Agua Dulce, Texas. That's how he would start everything when he told people about himself, but Billy was uneducated formally, very interesting life, biker gang to U.S. Marshal to legendary shark fisherman to epic conservationist

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<sup>6</sup> Additionally, tens of thousands of citizens signed petitions and over a hundred organizations supported the park. U.S. House of Representatives, Subcommittee on National Parks, Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, *Hearings on Padre Island National Seashore*, Hearing ID: HRG-1961-IIA-0068, April 13, 1961, pp. 37–38. ProQuest Congressional.

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Senate, Subcommittee on Public Lands, Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, *Hearing on S. 4: A Bill to Provide for the Establishment of Padre Island National Seashore*, Hearing ID: HRG-1961-INS-0019, April 11 and 13, 1961 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1961), 50.

<sup>8</sup> See testimony and letters of support in U.S. Senate, Subcommittee on Public Lands, Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, *Hearing on S. 4: A Bill to Provide for the Establishment of Padre Island National Seashore*, Hearing ID: HRG-1961-INS-0019, April 11 and 13, 1961 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1961).

<sup>9</sup> Lee Rosevere, "Wandering."

by the end of his life. So, Billy, jack of all trades, super guy, like I said, rough around the edges, not everybody liked him, but everybody respected him for sure.

**[Brown]:** I think Billy Sandifer was one of those likable misanthropes, you know, the kind of guy who doesn't like people, yet people adore him. Billy passed away in 2018 at the age of 70. I met him the year before to record an oral history interview. We sat down in his yard in Flour Bluff, an outlying neighborhood of Corpus Christi, beneath a big oak tree on a windy day. Billy had a trim white beard and a small ponytail. He was down to earth, good-humored, and led a fascinating life. It was a wonderful interview. He started off by telling me about his early life.

**[Billy Sandifer]:** I was adopted by my grandparents. They raised me from the time I was fifteen months old on a farm, southwest of Agua Dulce, Texas, between Agua Dulce and Alice. It was a 368-acre farm, about thirty head of cows, grain and cotton...I'll never forget my grandad, they put me in a cotton patch picking cotton when I was five years old. My grandad said he wanted me to understand the value of a dollar. Well I did, and I understood right off it wasn't worth it (laughter). So I don't think I've ever given a darned about a dollar since, it's just never been a priority with me...I always tell everybody I went to Vietnam to get out of a cotton patch because I thought it was going to kill me (laughter).

**[Brown]:** Like most farm kids, Billy grew up hunting and fishing. He fished a lot with his grandfather near Bob Hall Pier. After serving in Vietnam, he led an intriguing life, and eventually became a fishing guide on Padre Island National Seashore. Billy told me why he started the Big Shell Cleanup back in 1995.

**[Sandifer]:** Just tired of the trash. These old shark fishermen used to, we'd stayed in the same place three or four days, or at least a weekend, and as soon as you got there, soon as you got your baits out, you started stacking wood for a fire, got a fire going, and then as long as you were there, everybody walked around and picked up all the trash and put it in that campfire and burned it off. And hell, it'd be half a mile of beach would be clean from one shark camp. You could tell where the shark fishermen had been. Then, in the nineties, you could tell where the shark fishermen had been by the mound of trash he left. The new breed shark fishermen, and that's the direction it was going in. And so, I had a couple from Arkansas that were looking at the Coastal Bend as a very high potential for where they wanted to move to, to retire. And as soon as we hit the beach, that woman started sniveling about that trash. I kept explaining it's a convergence occurrence in the western Gulf of Mexico, da dee da dee da. And finally, she told me, she said, "Billy, we're not going to move here. The reason we're not is people don't care anything about this place." And I said, "Now wait a minute, most of this trash doesn't come from here. It comes from somewhere else." She said, "It doesn't make any difference, it is here, ain't it? And the local community does not care enough, does not have enough pride or self-respect to clean it up." I never could crawl out of that hole she put me in. I felt the burden of that. When I was a kid, I asked them, "Why is all that trash down there?" They said, "It's too big of a job to get it out." They went to the moon, going to the moon wasn't too big of a job, but the trash was still in the Big Shell.

**[Brown]:** So Billy organized a trash cleanup, despite the initial doubts from park service officials.

**[Sandifer]:** Superintendent of the national seashore, Butch Farabee, he said, “Billy I love you to death and you’ve absolutely finally lost it. Ain’t nobody can go down there and get all that trash.” I said, “Do I have your permission to try?” He said, “Absolutely. But it will never work.” So, the day of the first cleanup I took the southernmost section of volunteers, we did the southernmost section, my section did. And about two o’clock in the afternoon, Butch Farabee, the superintendent, drove up on us handing out hot dogs, and he said, “Well, kiss my back side you pulled it off.” And so it’s never been possible, it’s always been impossible. So we don’t worry about it, we just do it. One year on the T-shirt, they had me, and it said, “Shut up, suit up, show up, and pick up the trash.” That’s it. I mean that’s the whole story right there. I don’t want to hear all that whining stuff. No reason for it. We can’t do anything unless we make an effort.

**[Brown]:** That first year, Billy had 300 people show up. It’s only grown since then.

### Chapter Three: The Billy Sandifer Big Shell Beach Cleanup

<<sounds of busy parking lot as sections are leaving>>

**[Brown]:** By 2020, the cleanup had been going strong for twenty-five years. As it started, I spoke with David Sikes, the longtime outdoor reporter for the Corpus Christi *Caller-Times*. David covered the event almost since the beginning.

**[David Sikes]:** Yeah, I watched the thing evolve from a ragtag bunch of mostly surf fishermen who probably, you know, never did anything non-profit in their lives, but they followed Billy twenty-something miles down that beach to clean it up. He was a different kind of leader who attracted a different kind of crowd.

**[Brown]:** Along the way, Billy created a non-profit group called Friends of Padre. As the cleanup wrapped up, one of the longtime organizers told me about it.

**[Tyler Thorsen]:** Tyler Thorsen is my name. I am the Vice President of Friends of Padre. We have been doing this since 1995. I used to do this with Billy Sandifer back in 1999. I started with him. It was me and another guy, Ace Leal. Just the three of us would do this...Then about 2008, Billy decided that he wanted the Big Shell Cleanup to continue in perpetuity. So, he says, “Well, I want to continue after I assume room temperature,” is what he said. So we had this group formed...and it’s grown, grown, and grown by leaps and bounds. Billy passed away in March of 2018. So last year, we were like, we want to have a knockout, a home-run for Billy. So the biggest, uh, crowds we had before were like 1,100, and that was a lot. Last year, after Billy passed, we had another day just like this one today, an incredible amount of people showed up. We had 1,400 volunteers, they cleaned up 25 miles of beach, and removed 75 tons of trash. Today, I think we had more people than that, and it is just a testament to the volunteerism we have in people.

**[Brown]:** So, the cleanup works like this. Friends of Padre board members start planning and organizing six months before the event. On the day of the cleanup, the parking lot at the visitor center becomes a massive staging area. Early in the morning, people show up in their trucks and four-wheel drives. Once lined up, section leaders take about 10-15 trucks filled with people down to a designated mileage on the beach. By 7:00 a.m., several rows have already left to the far southern stretches. And then for over two hours non-stop, trucks line up, then leave section by section. Each section cleans one mile of beach. Because it's continuous sand and dunes, the mile markers are the landmarks. The cleanup usually starts twenty miles down the beach, at what locals would simply call the "Twenty." This year, they started at the 20 and went all the way down to the 47. Some sections even finished early and cleaned up more on the way back. Most finished by noon, hauled the trash back, and then park service employees helped unload the trash into large dumpsters in the parking lot.

It's quite the logistical feat. There are no roads, the beach is remote, and the sections have to drive 20 to 40 miles just to get to the cleanup area. And sometimes the weather doesn't cooperate.

**[Jeff Wolda]:** Uh, thirty-eight degrees blowing about thirty miles an hour and raining, and we still had three hundred people show up. It's amazing, people still show up and do this event no matter, almost no matter what. We have a core group of dedicated die-hards that come down here no matter what.

**[Brown]:** It's pretty remarkable how many people show up and how diverse the crowd is. Watching the sections leave, you see old farm trucks alongside new Jeeps. All ages of people from all walks of life. I asked some of volunteers why they came. Roadkill Willie has been helping in the parking lot for 12 years (and I never did find out why they call him Roadkill). He told me why he volunteers.

**[Roadkill Willie]:** Because you know these are my friends and I love the beach. We are always down here either fishing or just hanging out on the beach. And you know, the national seashore is beautiful especially where they're cleaning today.

**[Brown]:** And college students from Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi: Elizabeth, Harley, Lauren, and Kailyn, got up very early on a Saturday morning—on homecoming weekend!—to volunteer.

**[Kailyn]:** Um, in all honesty, I think we all wanted to help. Lauren's a marine biologist major.

**[Lauren]:** I am.

**[Kailyn]:** And I've done a lot of research on microplastics and how much they harm the ocean and I wanted to help with that.

**[Lauren]:** Yeah, I came I was a part of the Sea Turtle Club at Texas A&M-Corpus Christi. And so like I want to work towards cleaning up the beaches. Um, because nesting season is coming up, to get the beaches clean for that.

**[Harley]:** I came for the like the volunteering aspect of it because I feel like this is a great experience because there is going to be so many people showing up that it's going to be a great experience seeing that. Being here in a new college in a new city seeing how much people are actually like willing to volunteer so for the fact of seeing how much there is, uh, good people in the world willing to clean up the beaches with everybody.

**[Brown]:** And on the beach, some enthusiastic Boy Scouts were having a great time.

**[Justin]:** I'm Justin.

**[Cole]:** I'm Cole.

**[David]:** David.

**[Brown]:** David. Why are you here today?

**[David]:** We are Boy Scouts and we are camping on Mustang Island and, of course with scouting, part of it is conservation, so part of our trip was to come down here and do a beach cleanup.

**[Justin]:** And because it's fun.

**[Brown]:** You're having fun?

**[Cole]:** I found a coconut.

**[Brown]:** Whoa.

**[Justin]:** We found a starfish.

**[Brown]:** Nice. What about trash? Anything cool?

**[Justin]:** A really big piece of rope.

**[Brown]:** Once all the trucks left the parking lot, I got to ride in the command vehicle with Jeff Wolda. Jeff's a Navy veteran and fishing guide. We drove down the beach. Jeff's job is to troubleshoot and help anyone who gets stuck. Luckily this year, the weather was perfect and the driving conditions were so good that no one got stuck or broke down. We checked on all the section leaders.

**[Wolda]:** You all are good?

**[Section Leader]:** Yeah, we are doing good. We're getting a—pulled a fridge out and a full tent. We've got some stuff coming.

**[Wolda]:** Okay.

**[Brown]:** Did you hear that? He said their section found a refrigerator. Currents and winds combine in the Gulf of Mexico to dump marine debris along the Texas Coast. The Loop Current brings warm water up from the Caribbean. As the current moves north into the gulf, it spins off eddies. On a map, these currents look like a bunch of interlocking gears slowly spinning around. Two of the eddies happen to converge and dump trash out right at Padre Island's Big Shell Beach. So we get marine debris from around the gulf and from far away. And it's all sorts of weird things like trash thrown off shrimping boats to rope to entire tents or even drugs smuggled from Mexico. Billy found a bowling ball once. Messages in bottles.

**[Wolda]:** I was with Billy one time and he found a bottle with a note in it, and it was from a tanker ship off the coast of Norway. I was like, “Man, that’s cool.” They wanted him to write him back, tell him where he found it, and I said, “You going to write them back?” And he goes, “Yeah I’m going to write them back.” I said, “Cool, you are going to tell them where you got it and all that stuff?” And he goes, “No, I’m going to put a little note in an envelope and send it back to them, and all it’s going to say is ‘Quit throwing your shit in the ocean’” (laughter).

**[Brown]:** When I asked Jeff about the craziest piece of trash that he’s found, he said it was a Game of Thrones looking thing.

**[Wolda]:** (laughs) Uh, there was a piece, actually it was last year, one of the craziest things was a, medical waste gets incinerated, and there was a piece that had not been completely incinerated, so it was just this mound of needles and melted plastic.

**[Brown]:** And it gets even stranger. Here’s Tyler.

**[Thorsen]:** After Hurricane Ike, we had probably eighty-five tons of stuff removed. And it was crazy because there was so much stuff down there. We had, for example, you’d drive down there, and then within a fifty-yard stretch, there would be like four or five four-foot-tall nativity scenes that had floated from Galveston (laughs). There would be a couple of boats, so you just never know what you are going to get...One year we found a drift card from Ixtoc, the oil spill back in 1979. NOAA had put this laminated drift card out there to see where the, you know, where the oil was going to wash up, and thirty-eight years later we found it.

**[Brown]:** Despite the marine debris, there’s a bright side at Padre Island National Seashore. A sense of place has been marshalled to help keep the beach clean.

**[Wolda]:** The popularity of this beach has really grown, I mean, exponentially over the last three or four years, and because of that, I think more people realize that it’s good to give back. People—it’s become cool to pick up trash, like this beach hasn’t been cleaned yet. Nobody’s cleaned this beach this morning and look at it. Nobody leaves their trash behind anymore. If people see, you know, driving down the beach and they see people trashing the beach, they will stop and be like, “Hey, don’t mess our beach up.” So hopefully it is not just a fad, but for the last four years, we have had pretty big turnouts. The number has grown every year.

## Conclusion

**[Brown]:** As the cleanup wrapped up, we drove forty miles back from the turtle shack. And seeing the pristine landscape, next to the clear, green waters of the gulf, driving on miles and miles of clean beach, it was absolutely amazing. I found out later that over 1,500 volunteers picked up 60 tons of trash on 33 miles of beach. It shows us the possibilities of a sense of place, and that almost anything can be accomplished through sheer determination. Or, as Billy might say, “Shut up, suit up, show up, and pick up the trash.”

**[Thorsen]:** I know he's proud today, and he might even say "You guys did good," but I doubt it. He would say something like, "Y'all missed a spot between the thirty-five and the thirty-six. There's a half a mile of trash." That's what he would say.

**[Brown]:** I'm Jen Brown and you've been listening to The Gulf Podcast. This podcast is made possible by the Harte Research Institute for Gulf of Mexico Studies at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi. Special thanks to Jeff, Aaron, Tyler, and the other Friends of Padre board members. And many thanks to this year's volunteers. Thanks also to the Texas Legacy Project for the interview clips from Ed Harte and Lee Rosevere for the music. Justin Ives provided voice services and Max McClure is my student production assistant. You can read the episode script and a list of sources on our website as well as listen to the entire oral history interview with Billy Sandifer. Thank you all for listening. I'm going to leave you with some parting thoughts from Billy.

**[Sandifer]:** I think the important thing is, if we lose it, it can't be recovered. We can't get it back. We have to do something to turn that around because we can never get it back.

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