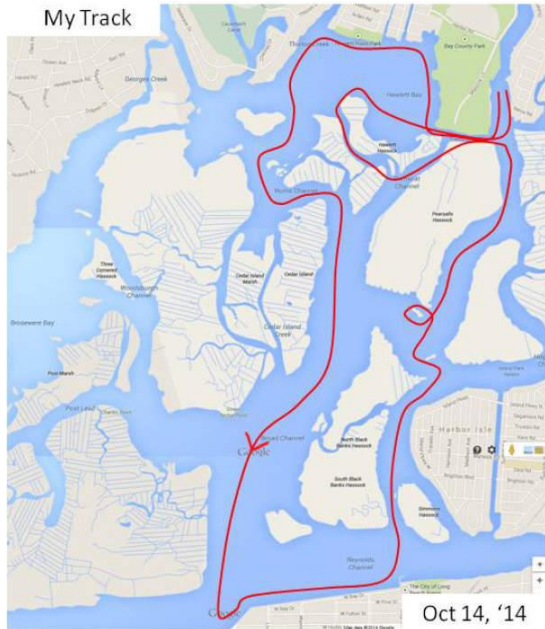


# Not Quite Sixty

by Bill Menke, October 14, 2014



It's the day before my sixtieth birthday.

In between dropping my spouse Dallas off at JFK at 7AM, and helping my mother with the delivery of her new bed at 11, I paddled in the bays of southern Long Island. The trip was nostalgic. I had boated in these waters frequently as a kid growing up in East Rockaway, New York, though never in a kayak. Back then I plied its waters in a motor boat and, later, in a sailboat.

Today, I used my trusty plastic sea kayak Hraun (Icelandic for *lava*). Though the slowest of my boats, it is the toughest and most stable. I launched from the beach beside the boat launch at Bay County Park in East Rockaway and headed west, following Swift Creek towards Hewitt Bay. I passed the memorial to Erik Vilela Simone (05/21/1980-06/28/1997), a high school student who tragically drowned in the unpredictable waters of this deep and fast-flowing tidal channel.

The incoming tide was strong today; I stroked vigorously against it. The land (if it can be called that) south of the park is salt marsh, with many low islands of *Spartina* grass and a few higher ones with *Phragmites* and birch trees, and shallow channels and mud flats in between. I paddled into Hewlett Bay, the northern shore of which is suburban. I passed two small beaches. My family had a membership to the eastern beach when I was a kid, when it was operated as a private swim club (as it still may be). However, I only remember using it once or twice. The western beach is at Hewlett Point Park. I frequented it more often because it also has a swimming pool.

On account of the tide being low, I followed the navigation markers and took Nums Channel through the salt marsh. I spotted many interesting birds, including Snowy Egrets and Great Blue Herons. They were also common when I was a kid,

too. I also passed two large flocks of Brants (a kind of goose). I recall seeing none as a kid. Only during the last decade have I noticed any in southern Long Island. My route merged with Broad Channel, a rather choppy body of water with waves raised by today's south breeze. I was glad that I was wearing a skirt, for water occasionally rolled up onto the deck of my kayak. I could see the buildings of the city of Long Beach ahead of me in the distance. The Lindell Elementary School, an old and stout brick building on the waterfront, stood out. I used it as a waypoint.

Reynolds Channel, the main east-west waterway, had a bit of motorboat traffic on it, which surprised me for a weekday morning in October. I had to time my travel to avoid several speedboats. I then paddled east, following the shore, until I was a little past the Long Beach Swimming Pool. I learned to swim as a child in this pool. One winter in the 1960's, I regularly took a school bus from the East Rockaway Village Hall to it for instruction.

While most of the salt marsh to the north of Long Beach is a nature preserve, one island, with high trees, has cottages. One south-facing cottage is particularly picturesque - a well-maintained grey house with flag and wind turbine, set against a backdrop of trees in their fall colors. It's on the island called South Black Banks Hassock. I then headed back, crossing Reynold's Channel once again and making for a channel between South Black Banks and adjoining Simmons Hassock. I passed several more cottages. One, painted bright red, sported an osprey nest on its roof. Though surely they are older than me, I have no recollection of any of these cottages even though, as a teenager, I boated frequently in the area. I was more interested in the fish, birds and mudflats.

I joined East Rockaway Channel and took it north, back towards Bay County Park. It follows the west shore of Pearsalls Hassock, one of the larger and higher islands. As a teenage boater, I used the large green tank that the island once hosted as a landmark. It exploded on June 3, 1976, when two kids, Ricky Willis and Robert Creech, threw firecrackers into it. I doubt that they realized that the sewage that it contained released methane, an explosive gas. Sadly, Robert died. The damaged take, its lid half-hanging off, stood for years but is gone now. Only a substantial dock and an overhead crane remain. Ospreys have built a nest on some of the remains.

I connected with Swift Creek at the northern end of Pearsalls Hassock and took it west again so that I could further explore the marshlands. The tide was now high enough that I could venture into some of the shallower water, so I circumnavigated Hewlett Hassock, one of the smaller islands. I passed the rotting pilings of an old dock – reminders of days when the *bayers* derived a livelihood from fishing and farming these islands. I scooted down Swift Creek one final time, now with the current. Three kayakers from the Long Island Kayak Club were launching as I pulled ashore. We chatted for a few minutes before I packed up my gear and headed over to my mother's.

Two and a half hours.