



OUTDOORS

Book honors Port Aransas culture, spirit

PORT ARANSAS — Author Jim Wiggins does with words what Norman Rockwell did with a paintbrush. Rockwell's timeless snapshots of innocence, pride, pure joy and patriotism captured the essence of Americana during and after World War II. Wiggins does the same for Port Aransas during a similar time frame in his posthumously published book "Hard Heads and Half Gales, Tales from Tarpon, Texas."

It is fitting that proceeds from the sale of this collection of essays, combined with watercolor plates by Ivan McDougal, benefit the Port Aransas Museum. Both the book and the museum honor the spirit of people who built and rebuilt Port Aransas. Stories of Wiggins' favorite place depict the color, quirkiness and dignity of resilient and giving folks. In some cases, he doesn't name names, while others are familiar surnames with legacies. Throughout the book, Wiggins evolved from respectful observer to intimate's fabric. And I know

See SIKES, 6C

SIKES from 1C

these tales of tribute will forever secure his status as both.

Wiggins writes of frightful storms, small town politics, tragedies and triumphs, business ventures, partnerships and friendships. But this book would not have garnered my review without tales of frigid duck hunts, maritime mishaps, boat mechanics good and bad, the Landcut under lights, tasty seafood and, of course, fishing and fisherman.

The author was a San Antonio radio man turned entrepreneur. He built rental houses in Port Aransas and then did quite well with a series of boat barns there.

As best I can tell, Wiggins was not an expert angler or boatman. He loved to catch fish when the fishing was good. And out of necessity he became a competent boatman.

The stories that struck me most are about people. One, entitled "The One that Got Away," displays the author's wit, humor and regret over the escape of a budding friendship with a local youth of uncanny angling skill.

now Horace Caldwell Pier, I suppose. It was a time when tarpon fishing was still good.

Walking the long wooden pier was a nightly ritual for the Wiggins family, a happy place for his wife and three children. The three-tiered social strata of the pier mirrored that of the town. Wiggins described the distinct categories as island regulars with summer homes there; the sunburned and colorfully clad pure tourists; and, the smallest group, locals.

Within the latter group was a more exclusive contingent of boys and girls whose parents owned and operated motels, bait houses, charter boats or stores.

Always the keen observer, Wiggins singled out one 12-year-old member of this category as special. This bare-backed kid on the pier was able to draw the envy of boat anglers such as Wiggins by often being on the action end of a fishing pole.

Wiggins described the boy as unfailingly polite but always aloof when it came to his fishing success. But when the young angler wasn't fishing, he began to reveal much about why.

The list of reasons included

murky water, wrong wind direction or moon phase, or the tide wasn't right. Intrigued over time by the boy's accuracy, Wiggins' curiosity intensified.

The two developed a relationship that resembled that of mentor and student. Wiggins felt a bit silly investing money and effort into an expensive boat and fancy tackle, while this kid filled his stringer regularly using a simple single rig on the pier.

One July evening in 1955 after the Tarpon Rodeo — today's Deep Sea Roundup — the boy was waiting for him. With a confidence beyond his years he confided a secret that Wiggins felt privileged to receive.

"He explained quietly that when the tide changed at 3 a.m., the sow trout would be in the shallow water," wrote Wiggins, who was 35 at the time.

This was big, like the secret password to a clubhouse for the elite. The elder student had no doubt his mentor's insight was valid. He could not have paid for this kind of information.

But alas, Wiggins' will was strong but his body was weak. He overslept and missed an opportunity that would never

repeat. Wiggins arrived three hours late to the appointment, guilty and ashamed. Old anglers with limp fishing lines told stories of a 12-year-old boy who had left earlier with a stringer of eight big trout, the smallest of which weighed five pounds.

Next time they met on the pier it was obvious the relationship had regressed. The young angling prodigy was distant and aloof again, but still polite. That winter the boy's family moved off the island and Wiggins never saw him again.

For nearly 20 years, Wiggins scanned the planks and railings of the pier during evening walks, looking for a fellow resembling that kid, only older. He longed for a second chance to earn his friendship.

That kid would be 70 today. If you think you might know who he is, tell him to read the story on page 18. You'll know by his expression whether he's the boy.

Please tell him I'd like to meet him at the pier.

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