



Photo by Fran Lapolla

Ossabaw Island's donkeys: Justin West tells their story.

The eight donkeys living on Ossabaw Island are some of the most beloved of all Ossabaw Island creatures. They are the remaining members of several generations of Sicilian donkeys who first came to Ossabaw in 1965. By 1998 the original herd had grown to approximately 150 animals and were impacting the ecosystem of the island. At the request of the State of Georgia, most of the donkeys were rehomed to families on the mainland, selected by Mrs. West and Roger Parker. The eight donkeys that remain are carriers of equine infectious anemia and are quarantined on Ossabaw for life.

In June, TOIF talked to Justin West, youngest child of Eleanor “Sandy” Torrey West, about the donkeys’ decades-long history on Ossabaw.

How the donkeys first came to Ossabaw Island:

“[The donkeys] were a present for me, years and years ago. I was 12. It was Christmas morning. We always had a big Christmas tree from the island that reached all the way to the ceiling in the Main House. Under the tree was an envelope [for me.] I opened the envelope and it was a clue. It led me to different places in the Main House, and then to the Club House. The last clue was to the barn near the Boarding House. We all went down to the barn and there were three donkeys. My mother and father [Clifford West] had gone down to Bull Island [South Carolina] in our blue Volkswagen minibus and loaded them in the bus and drove them back to Savannah.

“There were three original donkeys. Then we thought, ‘that’s not going to be good for the gene pool.’ Within a year or so we got [eight more]. I don’t think they were from Bull Island.”

Controlling the growing donkey population:

[By mid-1975, the original herd of 11 donkeys had grown to 69 animals.]

“The donkeys were populating the island at an alarming rate. Bill McCort from Penn State suggested that they might be interested in vasectomizing the donkeys [to stop the donkey expansion]. We rounded up a bunch of the donkeys. [A vasectomy clinic was set up] in Middle Place field. A bunch of vet students came down from Penn State. McCort was interested in animal behavior; the vasectomies didn’t change how the donkeys behaved. This was when Arthur [Graves] was the superintendent; Eugene [Graves] and Roger [Parker] and the rest were all there too. The vasectomies worked, except they missed a couple of the donkeys.

“I had grown up on the island and reached that age where nothing surprised me. It was just another day on Ossabaw—a bunch of Penn State vets with their masks on, and their instruments, operating a field hospital.”



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Justin's personal connection with the donkeys:

“I did feel ownership of the donkeys; in the sense they were always referred to as ‘Justin’s donkeys.’ I remember my mother asked my permission to do the vasectomies because they were ‘my’ donkeys. At some point, like everything on Ossabaw, they became the island’s.

“When I’ve told people the story of the donkeys, people who have never been to the island don’t believe it—it sounds made-up. People who have been [to Ossabaw], there’s so much to absorb that it just fits in with the alligators and the snakes. It’s a bit of an Alice in Wonderland situation—you don’t really question the fact there are hedgehogs playing croquet because everything else is so unusual.

“I’ll be talking to someone, and they’ll say ‘Oh, I was [an Ossabaw Island Project] member down there. Are those donkeys still there?’ Or I’ll see a picture that someone did from the island, and there are the donkeys out in the marsh; or someone will send me a poem that their mother wrote about them.”

Justin's reflections on donkey life:

“They travel widely and fast but they don’t seem to rush. You’ll see them at North End and very soon after that we’ll see them at Middle Place. They are the quintessential Buddhist animal, they are in the moment, they take their time and don’t hurry.

“I don’t want anyone messing with them. They should have a full life and peaceful death on the island. They’ve woven themselves into island life and into what has come out of the creative life, as an integral part of the island.

“I’m sure the donkeys will appreciate being written up; they like their moment in the sun.”