

# Pan Am golf group opens door for many in U.S.

## Founders cited at Brackenridge

By Art Stricklin  
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Almost 45 years ago, when a group of local golfers got together to form a new organization, golf was something considered by most a sport of the rich with the working class lucky to get a chance to caddy.

On Saturday, founding members of the Pan American Golf Association were honored in San Antonio for making the sport accessible to thousands of golfers.

"The Pan Am Golf Association has become a big family," national president Ernest Perez told the large gathering at the Club House, next to Brackenridge Golf Course. "We owe our very existence to these gentleman here today."

Of the 36 founding members, 16 are still alive with 12 of them honored by the local Pan American group.

Ralph Cardenas, first president for the local organization, said he was thrilled to see so many of his old friends together at the Club House, which is lined with old photographs and faded newspaper clippings.

"It's amazing to see things growing like it has," said Cardenas, 80.

Now, the national Pan American Golf Association is chartered in 40 cities with a total membership of more than 3,400 golfers. When the national convention comes to San Antonio this August, more than 1,100 delegates are expected to attend.

"Before the Pan American Golf Association started, working people didn't play golf, but they did caddy," said national archives chairman Jesse Garza.

The mostly Hispanic organization was formed in August 1947 at a printing shop

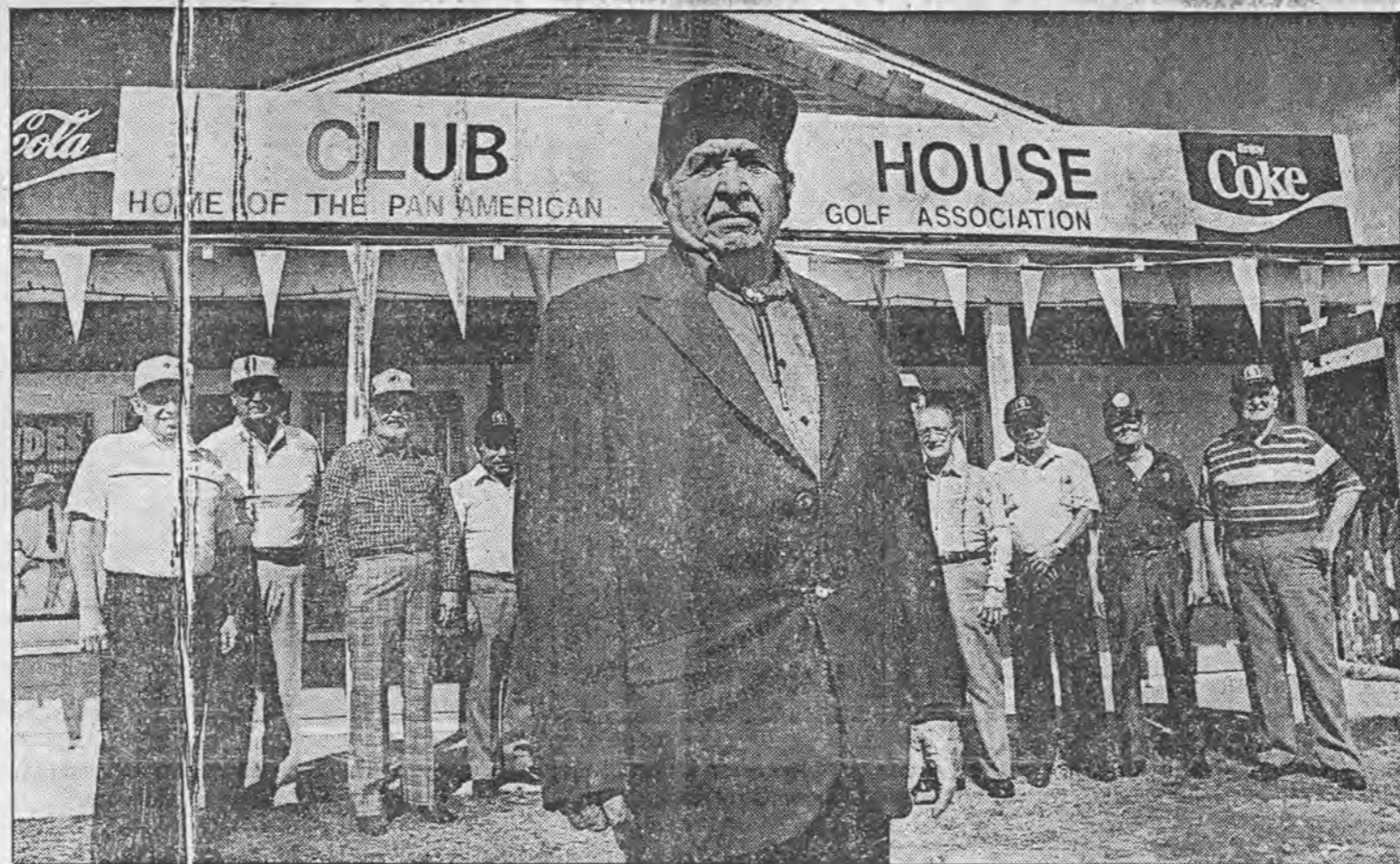


PHOTO BY RICK HUNTER

Richard Cardenas (center) was the first president of the Pan American Golf Association. Some of its founders are pictured.

on Cameron Street, across from the old Bexar County jail. It was actually the predecessor of the Fore Golf Association, which was formed in 1938, but folded during World War II.

A group of 36 local golfers, caddies and sportsman came together after the war to form another golf support organization.

The name was changed from the Fore Golf Association to the Pan American Golf Association.

"We already had the Spanish-American Baseball Association here, so why couldn't we have Pan-American golf," asked Claude Estrada, 81, who came up with the idea for the name change.

The local golfers set up a weekly Sunday tournament and in 1952 helped sponsor the first chapter expansion to Corpus Christi.

"As people moved on, they planted the seeds elsewhere," Garza said.

The growth was steady as the first national convention was held in San Antonio

in 1956 when six city chapters gathered for a one-day tournament and meeting.

Among those honored at the Saturday meeting were five-time national champion Ray Aguilon and his brother Ray, who won the first two national tournaments.

There was plenty of stories swapped, jokes told and memories recalled.

"It's good to gather and get all stories together," Cardenas said. "Not everybody remembers everything."

Today, Cardenas plays golf twice a week. The youngest person in his Thursday group is 73 years old.

The Sunday Pan-Am tournament, which is held weekly, has grown to nearly 100 players.

"When we started, we had nothing but blue-collar workers," said Garza. "Now 30 per cent of our members own their own business and 50 per cent are white-collar workers. There has been a lot of change."

The San Antonio chapter helps sponsor five college scholarships for the South Texas region.

Former PGA Rookie of the Year Robert Gamez was honored at the Texas Open in 1990 for his ties to San Antonio and the type of role model he has become for young golfers.

Gamez's father, Tony, graduated from Burbank High School and his uncle, Richard, has been secretary for the local Pan-American group.

The organization keeps growing. Cities as far away as Seattle and Chicago have formed chapters, a lasting testimony to the small group that came together 45 years ago to help promote golf in San Antonio.

"The association is not just local anymore, but all over the country and we're proud of that," longtime member Ray Ceales said. "These guys have come together and have grown together as a family."