Flames Fostered Town of Palm Valley

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Deep within the archives of the Harlingen Public Library is to be found an architect's rendition of a large attractive southwest style building. The year 1928 rendition was publicized to entice individuals to become members of a new golf country club to be established along the Arroyo Colorado west of the F Street Bridge. The stock market crash of 1929 waylaid the plans which had come from an organized group of golfers called the Arroyo Country Club.

Still, the idea of establishing a golf course for Harlingen was a good one, so in 1929 the city, rather than private enterprise, picked up the concept. The Harlingen Municipal Golf Course of 168 acres was then built to the design of John Bredemus, famous golf course architect and secretary of the Texas Professional Golfers Association. The course with its 18 holes costing $127,000 for land and $120,000 for construction was opened for play in February 1930. Its formal opening took place in September when the $10,000 Caddy House was completed. This course is located off M Street, south of Expressway 77/83. It was a par 71 course of 6,360 yards having 120 sand traps and bunkers. A city owned gravel-dirt airstrip is south of the course in a 72 acre area later designated to become Sam Botts Park but which never comes to fruition. When in 1957 Expressway 77/83 is constructed, the course loses some land but expands to the south into a 27 hole course. And what about the current name of the golf facility—the Tony Butler Municipal Golf Course? Tony Butler first comes to Harlingen as a 25 year old in 1933. Born in Ganado, Texas 4/19/08, he grows up to be a slight to average-build young man. A protegé of the famed Austin golfer Harvey Penick, Butler is to turn professional in 1928 shortly after entering the University of Texas. He is to move to Port Arthur as a pro then return to UT as student/coach, the first golf coach at the school. In 1931 he wins the Texas PGA and a chance to play in the PGA Championship in Providence. This year he is in the money six times. In 1932 he places second in the Texas PGA Championship played in Harlingen. Butler would leave Harlingen for a position in Beeville but was soon to return and become a fixture as golf pro here for many years. He is good and plays the 18 hole course in a record 62 strokes as verified by his August 6, 1936 score card now in the library archive. The course par at the time is 71. In 1937 he is renting a room at 713 E. Jackson at the home of J.L. Cady, a barber by trade.

When he does leave for greener pastures his devotees petition him to return. On June 20, 1973 the course is renamed the Tony Butler Municipal Golf Course in recognition of his 40 years of service. He retires in 1975 and becomes Professional Emeritus. Butler is to die in December 1979 at age 71. In 1998 he is inducted into the Rio Grande Valley Sports Hall of Fame.

Some regular patrons of the course desire more amenities and perhaps a cozy watering hole. So it is that on 8/15/49 the Harlingen Country Club is incorporated and chartered with total assets of $450.00. The incorporating directors are; J.L. Head, A.M. Jones, R. Kroeger, L.R. Baker, Dr. Phil A. Bleakney, E.G. Pink, J.D. Chambers, Jr., H.H. Young, and Karl Gibbon, Sr. By the following year it has organized with a membership of more than 350. It soon becomes the owner of a two acre $125,000 property adjacent to the
municipal golf course. This facility can accommodate 300-400 people. A large swimming pool is one of its amenities.

It is in 1948 that the Municipal Golf Course holds the inaugural "Valley Open" with a $10,000 purse. The tournament lasts only four years after losing money. The noted professional golfers who were champions (in order) were Lloyd Mangrum, Cary Middlecoff, Jackie Burke, Jr., and Chuck Klein. Top notch golfer Craig Wood was also a participant. These golfers were among the best in the country at the time.

In January 1953 Lew Bray, Valley theater owner and citrus grower, will organize the "Life Begins at 40" Golf Tournament. The first tournament is held 4/53 with 79 entries. Over half a century later it has become a major sporting attraction and social event for the community.

With the reactivation of the airfield into the Harlingen Air Force Base in 1952, the city requires another municipal field to handle its growing population. A logical site is the sparsely populated farmland to the west of the city. It had been cultivated even longer than Harlingen itself. In fact, it is the year 1898 in which three families come to western Cameron County from the Indian Territory (Oklahoma). The Jesse Thomas Avary family has two small daughters and a son, Henry Avary, was to be born in the area now known as Palm Valley where the Avarys constructed a home.

At a 2003 reunion Margaret Fox, a 1935 Harlingen High School graduate and descendent of the Avarys relates an oral history. She recounts that 15 families were on their way to Veracruz, Mexico from Oklahoma. Their plans were to embark for Brazil where each family was to be awarded 694 acres. While camped in the Lower Rio Grande Valley the Avarys were robbed, so they did not continue onward. The family patriarch, J.T. aka. T. S. Avary (1/29/69-4/8/16), is buried in the Harlingen City Cemetery as is his mother, Catherine E. Avery (6/5/46-12/16/18), "Tender Mother and Faithful Friend."

From her obituary, a young Avary coming here in a covered wagon to what would later become the Wilson Tract area from Winnewook, OK was to be Mrs. Vernie Belle Avary Payne. Born 9/7/95 she is to die at age 66 on 3/27/62. After marriage she moved to Mercedes, but on 1/1/43 became postmistress of the Combes Post Office. This member of the First Methodist Church, Combes left two sons, one of whom was J. Paul Payne of Harlingen.

Mr. and Mrs. Jesse L. Adams and Mrs. Adams' parents, Mr. and Mrs. Ogan, are the other two families. The latter settle in the Tiocano Lake area where the Adam's daughter Carrie is soon born. Later the Ogans return to Oklahoma to be followed in 1912 by the Adams. The city does acquire the necessary acreage west of town. Charles (Cut) Washmon is Mayor (1952-56), when the Harvey Richards Field, Harlingen's municipal airport is opened in 1953 at 26.2 N/97.76 W immediately east of Stuart Place Road. After updating in 1959, the north-south runway is 4,950'; the NW-SE one 3,400'. It also has a third turf runway, taxiways, an apron, several hangars, and a terminal building. Operators at the field are Elliot Dusting Service, Elliot Aviation Company, Valley Flying Service, and Young Flying Service. By 1962 Harvey Richards Municipal Airport is operating with four arrival flights daily while six flights depart. Air travel times from Harlingen to major Texas cities are: Houston 3 hrs 22 min., San Antonio 2 hrs 32 min., and Dallas-Ft. Worth 4 hrs 50 min. It is also this year that the federal government closes the HAFB. Economic chaos envelops the city.
On 2/21/63 the City Commission in an effort to make use of valuable resources passes a resolution to establish a regional airport in Harlingen, but this immediately elicits protests from McAllen and Brownsville interests. Harlingenites, however, need an economic stimulus. By a four to one margin in August 1965, Harlingen voters approve a $1.25 million bond issue to convert the former HAFB to a major jet international airport. In 12/67 the Harvey Richards facility is to close as the airlines move to the much larger runways of the former HAFB. By January 1968 the old Air Base has become the Industrial Air Park and the commercial airline facility. Between 1/68 and 2/18/69, a total 3,000 passenger boardings occur.

It is in 1967 that disaster strikes the Harlingen Country Club; its well-utilized clubhouse burns. Some of its sharp-witted members see signs in the ashes. They have a vision, so within the year the 300 or so members of the Harlingen Country Club offer the city, actually the Harlingen Development Corp., its burned out clubhouse and 3 ½ acres next to the municipal golf course plus $133,650 for the 150 acre site of the former Harvey Richards Field. Matt F. Gorges is secretary of the club at the time and also a member of the HDC.

It is a win-win situation for all and the deal goes through. After obtaining 150 acres in what is to become Palm Valley Estates, the club in 1968 under its president Neal Bonner has contractor Frank Parker build a very stylish and enduring clubhouse. In late July 1969 with Matt Gorges as president, the club opens, and the course is inaugurated under its golf pro George McKay. The first golfers play the course on July 19, 1969.

The golf course owned by the Harlingen Country Club gets its first real test when it hosts its first annual Life Begins at 40 Tournament in the period 2/1-7/70. The 6,973 yard course was almost ready as was the clubhouse. A year later finds the Palm Valley Estates going up, primarily on the south side, on 233 acres surrounding the 150 acre course. The clubhouse for the golf course has been completed. Van C. Snell leads the Harlingen Development Co. (HDC) group. On its steering committee are Newton Liddell, James Alexander, Hill Cocke, Sr., Fred Flynn, Karl Gibbons, Evan Hurst, and Frank Parker. The company was formed to develop, improve, and sell the balance of 233 acres for cottages, homes, town houses and other facilities. It already has 23 two-bedroom cottages plus 12 larger homes. Ninety of 200 home sites included in the first three units have been sold and a fourth with about 100 lots is being prepared. All have underground utilities.

With growth and development come problems and concerns which have to be resolved or ironed out. So it is that on 11/3/73 the Palm Valley Home Owners Association is formed with its first board members being Ed Marcum, Willis Jondal, Wilson Palmer, Malcolm Adams, and Eloise Goulet. Jack Funk had been chairman of the Palm Valley Estate Utility District. The association charges an annual fee of $50 to its members. It paid for street light bills averaging about $80 a month. The Palm Valley Rangers are formed to cure rampant burglary problems. "Cotton" Owen became the area's first marshal after attending the Rio Grande Police Academy for eight weeks.

The HDC is anxious to exit the home real estate business. On 4/1/76 it sells the remaining unsold lots to developer Max Jones, who then foots the bills for security, trash pickup, and street lights. The south end of the tract was the first portion to develop. The community continues to grow with the continuing construction of upscale homes, townhouse and condominiums. Wanting to maintain its independence and possibly
fearful that its neighbor, Harlingen, might absorb it, the town holds an election to incorporate itself. The vote to do so is 197 in favor and 160 opposed. A general law form of government is set up. On 9/16/80 the City of Palm Valley with 383 acres, 150 which are in the golf course, is incorporated and in 1981 the city is granted a charter by the state. The property values at the time are $15,124,855. By 1998 the property values will have risen to $81,356,861. The census of year 2000 shows 1,299 people in the community. Some of the individuals who have served as the city's mayor are Bliss Clark, John Puhl (who served for 10 years), Charles Burd, James Matz, and Dean Hall. And so you now see how out of unfortunate events, the day was saved and both Palm Valley and Harlingen became beneficiaries.