

**ALLIANCE OF PAN AMERICAN ROUND TABLES, CIVIL SOCIETY
MEMBER OF THE ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN STATES**

Presented to the Austin Pan American Round Table, October 3, 2005

Last spring I was asked by the Alliance Director General to attend a meeting of the Organization of American States in Washington D.C. At first I hesitated because I knew practically nothing about the OAS or what the Alliance of Pan American Round Table's function was. It was necessary to do some background work, and by the time I departed for Washington, I felt sufficiently knowledgeable about the OAS to represent the Alliance.

I'm honored that Janet, Beatriz and the program committee made room on the program schedule for this presentation to explain our participation in the OAS.

I'll begin with some factual background. These facts are known to most of you, but probably not known by all.

In 1889-1890, Benjamin Harrison was President of the United States and the year The Pan American Union was founded. It was first called the Commercial Bureau of the American Republics, two years later, in 1902, Theodore Roosevelt was now President, the name was changed to The International Bureau of the American Republics. The name Pan American Union was adopted in 1910 during President Taft's administration. The Pan American Union was created to promote international cooperation...it offered technical and informational services to all the American republics...it served as a repository for international documents and was responsible through supplementary councils to promote the furtherance of economic, social, juridical, and cultural relations.

During this time Mrs. Florence Terry Griswold, founder of Pan American Round Table is living in South Texas, close to Mexico and acutely aware of the political upheaval and revolutionary governmental changes taking place in Mexico. One can only imagine how interested she must have been in the work of the Pan American Union at the time. We know she wholeheartedly endorsed its goals. There were:

1. Achieving an order of peace and justice
2. Promoting American solidarity
3. Strengthening collaboration among member states
4. Defending the sovereignty, independence and international integrity of the nations of the Americas.

And she believed the work of the Pan American Union could be advanced by the woman of the Americas.

I'll repeat what all of us already know....that on October 16, 1916 Mrs. Griswold and 21 friends gathered at the Menger Hotel in San Antonio and formed the first Pan American Round Table. Each member agreed to represent one of the 21 member nations of the Pan

American Union at the time. During Roll Call at meetings, each member would report on her country. Today, most Tables continue to honor this tradition set by Mrs. Griswold and her friends.

In 1948, Harry Truman is now President of the United States. At a meeting in Bogota, Colombia, the Pan American Union was named the General Secretariat for the Organization of American States, now referred to simply as the OAS.

This is the end of the history.

We will now fast forward to the year 2000, 52 years later.

Gladys Simpson and Helena Richards, both former Director Generals began exploring ways for the Alliance to gain recognition, to find a new direction and purpose in the new century. Both of them live the United States but were born in South America and had a keen interest in the work of the OAS, and of course, both were well aware of Mrs. Griswold's interest in the Pan American Union so many years ago. They began to inquire about ways to merge all these objectives and actively participate in the work of the OAS.

Gladys and Helena approached Fabiola Chiriboga, a member of the Washington, D.C. Table. Her husband is a highly respected medical doctor who had in the past worked with the OAS. Dr. and Mrs. Chiriboga, both originally from Peru, opened many doors for the Alliance and offered guidance in the process. In order to participate, the Alliance would have to register as a Civil Society organization. To do this the Alliance would have to submit an application, and include several documents which were requested by the OAS. Helena was able to secure the documents from the Alliance Archives housed in Austin at the Bensen Library as well as from other sources. After all the paperwork was completed, Fabiola Chiriboga delivered in person the application to the OAS. A special OAS committee reviews all applications and a vote is taken to decide whether to grant registration. It was a lengthy process that took several months but ultimately.....

On October 2001, The Alliance of Pan American Round Tables was granted registration and became a Civil Society Registered by the OAS.

On December 2001, the Alliance-OAS Committee was established by then Director General Luchy de Elias. Helena Richards was named Chair and Fabiola Chiriboga co-chair of the committee.

The primary responsibility of the committee is to keep aware of hemispheric activities that affect women and children of the Americas, and keep in close contact with representatives of other Civil Society organizations.

There are three Events we participate in: Civil Society Hemispheric Forums, General Assemblies, and Summits.

Each Hemispheric Forum, General Assembly and Summit has a central theme.

At the Hemispheric Forums, you engage in dialogue with other civil society organizations, member states and the General Secretariat on a topic. You discuss, make recommendations and after three days of discussions, and much dialogue, a consensus is reached and a proposal written. Three to five from the group of participants are elected to present the recommendations at the General Assemblies or Summits.

At the General Assemblies the dialogue takes place between the elected Civil Society representatives, Ministers of Foreign Relations, Heads of Delegations of member states, and the Secretary General. The recommendations generated at the Forum are the base for the dialogue. A Declaration is announced if member nations agree on proposals and plans of action.

And at the Summits, the goal is for the Member states to forge a broad hemispheric agenda based on common principals, and to agree to plans of action for addressing the social, economic, and political challenges facing the hemisphere. A tall order that is not always as successful as we would all like.

In the past four years we have participated in several Hemispheric Forums, in two General Assemblies, one in Santiago, Chile, and the other in Quito Ecuador, and a Summit of the Americas in Monterrey, Mexico.

In April 2005, Helena Richards and I attended a forum in which the topic of discussion was "Delivering the Benefits of Democracy". Our objective was to engage in dialogue and make recommendations, but to participate only on issues that pertained to women and children, education, and gender equality. The recommendations generated at the Forum were summarized and presented at the General Assembly six weeks later, in June in Fort Lauderdale. Norma Flores and Peggy Clark attended that assembly. In November we'll be represented at the Summit in Buenos Aires, (Mar Del Plata) in Argentina by Norma Flores and Helena Richards. The theme for the Summit in November will be "creating jobs to fight poverty and strengthen democratic governance".

The OAS holds seminars, conferences and workshops regularly in Washington. We rely on members of the Washington Table to attend and participate in those discussions and report back to the Committee Chair.

The Alliance is 4 years into this endeavor and we're still taking baby steps trying to find our way. We may well be the most unique civil society member of the OAS. We are an organization represented by women from 18 nations. We have 4,832 dues paying members, and no political agenda...only to lend support to proposals that help women and children. This is really a unique organization and they know it. They know we are a woman's organization with connections in many countries.... we are in regular communication with one another.... and in a position to make a difference...if we choose to.

I'll try to answer questions, if you have any, but first I'll give you a few facts about the OAS.

There are 34 member nations in the OAS.

Cuba is a member but its government has been excluded from participating since 1962.

Headquarters are in Washington, D.C.

Activities include monitoring elections in Member Nations, promoting human rights through the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the Inter-American Court, which examines claims of rights violations.

They have programs that promote trade, agriculture, health initiatives, and economic development. Other programs aim to fight illegal drugs, terrorism and corruption.

The OAS is led by a Secretary General elected by members for a five year term. In May 2005, Chile's Jose Miguel Insulza was elected Secretary General.

Member nations pay dues. The United States pays about 60% of the organization's budget.

And finally, on many occasions not all member nations agree on action taken by the OAS. Decisions of the OAS general assembly have no binding power over members.

I hope that I've been able to clear up some questions you may have had about our involvement in the OAS.

Thank you.

Sylvia Williams
Director, Alliance Zone 1