



# Gretna Chronicles



Gretna, Louisiana

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## Museum Upgrade Project

By M. Helen Williams

With its aim of preservation of homes and structures in Gretna and the history of its people, the GHS presented the Spring Tour of Homes 2024. The event was very successful with beautiful weather complementing visits to seven amazing homes, the German-American Cultural Center and the GHS Museum Complex that is currently being upgraded. Stephanie Dieterich, historian for the society will head up the project. With this project, the society will move from not just focusing on preservation, but also on education. Plans are to not only expand the promotion of tourism to Gretna, but a closer relationship between GHS, the Jefferson Parish School System and other local schools.

Part of the upgrade will include offering self-guided tours with appropriate signage explaining the artifacts and furnishings in the five structures in the Complex -- the Kitty Strehle House, the Ignacius Strehle House, the Blacksmith Shop, the Louisiana State Fire Museum and the White House.

Hostesses in period dress will be available to answer questions or assist guests as needed. A trial run on the costumed guides started the day of the home tour. Holly Williams had first shift in the Kitty Strehle House. Maleah Marcomb, a first grade teacher at Immaculate Conception School (ICS) and her 10-year-old daughter, Claire Marcomb, a fifth-grader at ICS, took second shift in the Kitty Strehle House. All were in period dress. The Marcombs are the daughter and granddaughter, respectively, of GHS President Lisa LaFrance.

Maleah was excited to portray Ms. Kitty since she is a teacher herself, while Claire thought it was most interesting that Ms. Kitty taught school at just 15 years old and had students older than herself. She was amazed to be in Ms. Kitty's home. In fact, Claire became so interested that she visited Ms. Kitty's grave at the Hook and Ladder Cemetery. Both Marcombs want to learn more about other Gretna historical figures, including Lily White Ruppel, Helen Cox and John Ehret.



Upgrading the museums will be expensive, and we are looking for funding. If anyone has old photographs, please bring them to the next meeting. The upgrade will take dedication, hard work, creativity and talent. Time is spent going through old items, perhaps shining them up, perhaps replacing them with even better ones. Walls may need painting or a chair refinished and reupholstered. Display cases will be added and pictures, paintings and artwork will have upgraded framing. GHS members, men and women, are invited to join the different committees needed to successfully complete the Museum Upgrade Project. Can you do minor carpentry tasks, or paint, or sew, or help gather the costumes, do historical research, or simply clean and polish items? There are many jobs, fun doing those jobs and pride to be a part of this new plan for GHS. If you're interested in helping, call Mary Helen Williams at 504.450.8481.



# Remembering Gretna's Amazing Mel Ott

By M. Helen Williams

At the April meeting, GHS members enjoyed guest speaker S. Derby Gisclair, sports historian and author who spoke of Mel Ott, Gretna's star baseball player.

On March 2, 1909, a 12-pound baby boy was born in Gretna who would put his hometown on the map of major league baseball forever. The Hall of Famer achieved records that are still current today. Melvin Thomas Ott, nicknamed "Master Melvin" in the sports arena, was an amazing professional baseball right-fielder remembered as Mel Ott. He never played in the minor league, but so gifted, went straight to the major league. He batted left-handed and threw right-handed, played his entire career for the New York Giants from 1926 through 1947.

As a 17-year-old "Boy Wonder" in 1926, his size belied his power. He was only 5' 9" tall and weighed in at 170 pounds, unusually slight in stature for a power hitter, but led the National League (NL) in home runs a then-record six times. He was an All-Star for 11 consecutive seasons and the first NL player to surpass 500 career home runs. He was elected to the National Baseball Hall of Fame in 1951. His family, including his parents Charles and Caroline Ott, older sister, Marguerite and younger brother, Charles, resided at 422 Newton Street. He was never referred to as Mel, but always called Melvin by the family.



Guest speaker and sports historian S. Derby Gisclair.



Lifesize statue of Mel Ott at his namesake park in Gretna.

### WELCOME NEW MEMBERS:

- Gaynell Paradelas
- Vicki Rondey
- Tracey Champagne
- Keith Parks

### WELCOME BACK:

- Victoria Panepinto Currault

Baseball seemed a part of his DNA. Some said he reached kindergarten and baseball at the same time. He played baseball in the parks and sandlots around town, usually with older boys. Mel attended Gretna Primary School, recognized early on as a gifted athlete, a prodigy. His natural swing and high leg kick remained his professional trademark throughout his career.

He is revered and honored in Gretna with his namesake, Mel Ott Park that opened in 1959 and also a fairly new landmark within the park, appropriately named the Mel Ott Recreation Center. There was simply no other name so aptly applicable for the \$5,500,000, 20,000-square-foot multi-purpose facility that opened in March 2013. His spirit lives on in the stunning life-size bronze statue depicting his hallmark stance in front of the state-of-the-art facility.

## CALENDAR

May 9 @ 6 pm Crawfish Boil at White House Backyard (Ticketed Event).

*Tickets are \$20 for 4# Boiled Crawfish, potato, corn & sausage. Tickets available at the White House until 5/7 ONLY to members (Must be in good standing with their dues!)*

**(Please bring a dessert to be served at the Crawfish Boil)**

June 13 @ 6 pm Membership Meeting at St. Joseph Gym.

July 18 @ 6 pm Membership Meeting at St. Joseph Gym.

**(Notice that this meeting is a week later than usual!)**

*Sadly, we've had complaints about rudeness at meetings. Be kind to anyone with a microphone by being quiet so everyone can hear what's being said!*





## ***Times Past —***

**By Stephanie Dieterich**

### ***What was Gretna like when I was growing up?***

This letter was found in our archives, although neither signed nor dated. It was obviously written by Katherine T. Spahr Ward (1927-2005).

“Gretna was a small, friendly town that enjoyed a ‘large family’ attitude. Everyone knew everyone’s family history. There were corner grocery stores and butcher shops in each area of the town.

“The City Hall as we know it today was the Parish Courthouse, which housed the Sheriff, Assessor, two judges and their courtrooms. Judge Leo McCune handled all juvenile cases. Judge Robert Rivarde handled all other matters.

“Heebe’s Bakery, located at 5<sup>th</sup> and Lafayette Sts., sent wonderful aromas throughout town when its famous French bread was in the oven and ready at 4:00 p.m., just in time for dinner. A box of mixed cakes cost all of 25 cents.

“It seemed that I was the one to run errands for my mother. A typical Sunday morning meant I would attend the Children’s Mass at St. Joseph Church, then off to Mr. Ziifle on 3rd St. to pick up delicious cream cheese, then a stop at Heebe’s Bakery for cinnamon rolls for my family’s breakfast.

“Mrs. Joe Menszer owned a dry goods store on 1<sup>st</sup> St. Mrs. Menszer felt that if the first customer of the day didn’t purchase anything, she would have a very unproductive day. My mother informed me to sit on the curb until the first customer left with a purchase and then enter the store so that I would come home with what I was sent for.

“We certainly had our share of colorful characters. Herbie Fink, owner of the Billionaire Club on Huey P. Long Ave., was quite a dapper dresser. His elderly mother would sit on her front porch with a shawl completely embellished with diamond stick pins and broaches.

“Law enforcement in Gretna consisted of a Marshall, later to become Chief of Police, and one policeman. The Chief, of course, was Beauregard Miller and the officer was Ippy Breaux, who was also a barber in McDonoghville.

“The Hollywood Movie House located at Newton and 3<sup>rd</sup> Sts. provided entertainment and news. We were thrilled when the Tower Theater opened on Huey P. Long Ave. A typical Friday night was attending a movie and then dinner at Brunie’s or Butirich’s.

“Stumpf’s Drug Store offered delicious sundaes and malts. We got special treatment from the ‘soda jerks’ who were our friends.

“Tony Romano had a vegetable truck and would go house to house selling fresh fruit and vegetables. On Fridays he offered shrimp and crabs for use in gumbos.

“There was little to entertain us, so as teenagers we would walk to Whiteside’s Restaurant, order a coke and dance to the jukebox. At the time, there was an empty field where Old Garden Park Subdivision is now.

“A bowling alley opened on Huey P. Long Ave. and we all indulged in bowling.

“One day I had gone to the bank for my dad and parked on Newton Street. When I came out I had a parking ticket on the car. I was incensed because there weren’t any ‘No Parking’ signs posted. I insisted I would not pay the ticket. Well, a few weeks later I was informed that Judge Leycester Trauth called and wanted to visit my parents. Needless to say, I was scared. Of course, my dad knew why he wanted to visit and led me to believe it was about the ticket. When Judge Trauth arrived, he informed me that he was asked to be the first King of Gretna and asked me if I would be his queen. I was thrilled! Never before had there been a parade and ball in Gretna.

“The day of the parade was beautiful and so exciting! That evening, the Ball was held in the Gretna Gym. I don’t believe any queen could have had a better time.”



**Katherine Spahr Ward’s home on Lafayette St.**



**Katherine Ward and Judge Leycester Trauth.**

*Gretna Chronicles succeeds the GHS Newsletter and the Gretna Historical Society Newsletter as the official source of news for the general membership of the Gretna Historical Society.*

# Gretna Historical Society

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## Gretna Historical Society Museum Complex

1840s Strehle Family Cottage, 1859 David Crockett  
 Volunteer Fire Co. No. 1 Fire Station (now Louisiana Fire  
 Museum), 1840s White Family Cottage

## Gretna Chronicles

is published for the members and friends of GHS

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### ABOUT THE GHS AND HOW TO JOIN

The Gretna Historical Society was founded in Gretna, Louisiana, in 1969, by Lloyd E. Gomez (insurance man, volunteer firefighter, and community activist), who descended from Gretna pioneers, German immigrants Claudius and Catherine Nuss Strehle. The Society's articles of incorporation were drafted by Gretna attorney Everette F. Gauthreaux and signed in his law office on October 26, 1969. Today, the GHS operates the Gretna Historical Society Museum Complex at the corner of Lafayette Street at Second. It consists of three 19th century Creole cottages, a blacksmith shop, and the Louisiana Fire Museum. The GHS also owns and maintains the caboose and train depot on Huey P. Long Avenue at Fourth Street.

There are no requirements for membership in the GHS, other than the timely payment of annual membership dues of \$25 per person. Monthly meetings are held at the St. Joseph Complex Gym at 7th and Newton Streets on the second Thursday of every month at 6:00 p.m. The society's newsletter, *Gretna Chronicles*, is published monthly and mailed or emailed to all members.

- Lisa LaFrance**.....President
- Ray Markase**.....Vice President
- Sylvia Schwarz**.....Recording Secretary
- Holly Williams**.....Corresponding Secretary
- Sarah Daigle**.....Treasurer
- Stephanie Dieterich**.....Historian and Archivist
- Blaine Daigle**.....Sergeant-at-Arms
- Val Coles**.....Parliamentarian
- M. Helen Williams**.....Board Member/Publicity
- Paul Coles**.....Board /Hospitality Director
- Cheryl Amacker** .....Board Member/Membership
- Monica Naquin**.....Board Member at Large
- Judy LeBlanc**.....Director of Facilities