



# Gretna Chronicles

Gretna, Louisiana

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April, 2023

## The Spring Tour of Homes is Back!

One of Gretna Historical Society's main events is the annual Spring Tour of Homes! People are excited that the 2023 Tour will be presented on April 16 after a three-year hiatus due to the pandemic. Tickets are only sold on the day of the event at the White House, 209 Lafayette Street, from 1 until 4 o'clock. The homes on tour will be open from 1- 5 p.m. Tickets for the tour are \$25 each.

Open for this year's tour will be two beautiful homes in the Gretna Historic District, the Historic Salem Lutheran Church that is celebrating its 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and two lovely homes in the McDonoghville Historic District.

In addition to this great lineup, Joe and Jo Ann Toomy's awesome penthouse residence located in the Riverview Condos on First Street will also be on the tour.

Although there are stunning views from several rooms in the 2,600-square-foot residence itself, the views from the 1,100-square-foot terrace are amazing.

The inside of the home is beautifully furnished with Toomy family heirlooms and artwork acquired on their travels abroad.

"We are both happy to be back in Gretna; it's our home. It is ideal to be on the river so we were very excited when this opportunity to be here came available," Joe Toomy said. "The terrace is my favorite. In 1950 when I was two years old, my parents moved here so my father could be the manager of the Molasses Terminal. I really grew up on the river. During college I worked on the river and today I am a Commissioner for the Port of New Orleans. It is nice to watch the operations on the river on a daily basis."

Besides the homes and church listed above, open for your enjoyment as a part of the ticket cost will be the GHS Museum Complex houses, plus a special treat of a blacksmith demonstration in the Gretna Green Blacksmith Shop. The German American Cultural Center and Museum at 519 Huey P. Long Avenue, with all it has to offer, will also be open for the tour.



# Celebrating Chris Ziifle's Life!



Family and friends of Chris Ziifle joined together to celebrate her life at the White House recently in a way that would have made her proud! Chris loved a good party and this final party of hers was well done indeed! There was, of course, great food and drinks, supplemented with Garland Gaspard's gumbo, Paul Coles' red beans & rice, Judy LeBlanc's meatballs and much more. A nice video of her life compiled by Rene Poche was played throughout the party. Songster Dale Hunter performed her favorite song, "I Did It My Way" and the party ended with a balloon release finish. The event was a beautiful way to remember wonderful, kind Chris Ziifle!

Among the guests (above) who gathered at the White House to remember Chris Ziifle were, from left, her son Tim Ziifle and his spouse Donna Jean Webb, State Rep. Joe Marino, holding a proclamation honoring Chris, and Gretna Mayor Belinda Constant.



Chris Ziifle



Judge Jay Wilkinson, author of "A Lie Will Suffice," was guest speaker at the March meeting. He entertained members with facts and witticisms from his book about his shocking discovery of his family's mafia connection!



Treasurer Sarah Daigle received a check from Judge Vernon Wilty for \$1,500 from the Valentine's Day weddings.

## GHS Annual Crawfish Boil!



The Crawfish Boil for members only will be held on May 11 at 6 p.m. at the backyard of the White House. Tickets will be available on April 4 at the White House and at the GHS Meeting on April 13. Tickets are \$15 per person for 4 pounds of crawfish, corn, potatoes and sausage. Deadline to purchase tickets is May 5.

## Calendar

- April 13 @ 7 pm General Meeting at St. Joseph Gym
- April 16 @ 1-5 pm GHS Spring Tour of Homes (Ticketed Event)
- May 11 @ 6 pm Crawfish Boil at GHS Complex (Ticketed Event)
- June 8 @ 7 pm General Meeting at St. Joseph Gym
- July 13 @ 7 pm General Meeting at St. Joseph Gym



## ***Times Past —***

**By Stephanie Dieterich**

### **Dr. and Mayor Gelbke!**



**Dr. Charles F. Gelbke**

Dr. Charles F. Gelbke was a beloved Gretna medical doctor and mayor. As a political and civic leader, he was chosen as the Jefferson Parish Coroner in 1904 and served two additional terms in that position. He was instrumental in the incorporation of the city in 1913, becoming the mayor of Gretna in 1916. He served as mayor off and on until his retirement in 1949. President Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed Gelbke as the Works Progresses Administrator for the Second Louisiana District.

As the mayor, he proposed to pave every street in Gretna. In 1922, he implemented 22 miles of sidewalk paving, curbing and gutter bottoms at a cost of \$2.05 per square yard. The “Gelbke Plan” was to use local labor to take care of Gretna’s unemployed and pave

Gretna at the same time. The citizens were very happy with their new concrete sidewalks until they received the bill! It was under his watch as mayor that all houses were numbered for home postal delivery. In 1931, Gelbke dedicated a \$400,000 sewer system by throwing the switch at the new red brick pumping station on Hancock Street. Hopefully, most outhouses became a thing of the past! Another of Dr. Gelbke’s credits is bringing the legendary Melvin Ott into this world.

Gelbke’s two-story palatial home, one of the largest in town, stood at 319 Lavoisier Street. At 2:50 a.m. on December 3, 1935, a tragic fire started from a gas heater in the rear of the house. Throwing on their clothes and grabbing cherished possessions, the family and guests retreated to the freezing street while the fire raged. Dr. and Mrs. Charles Gelbke, Dr. Caroll Gelbke who was their nephew and Mr. and Mrs. W. Richard White (Mrs. White was recuperating from a recent surgery) got out safely.

Then the two Gelbke men bravely dashed back into the burning building several times to save valuable books from the library. The flames swept to the second floor and rapidly ran from the rear to the front. Two cars were removed from the adjoining garage to eliminate the damage of a gasoline explosion. Four fire companies fought the fire while neighbors pulled their possessions and furnishings to the street to protect from the encroaching fire.



**The Gelbke home at 319 Lavoisier Street, before a 1935 fire destroyed the upper floor. (Photo courtesy of Sevilla White Finley)**

The second floor was almost completely destroyed, but only two rooms downstairs were touched. The house valued at \$15,000 had damages of \$8,000, and \$4,000 of contents were lost. After the second floor was demolished and the downstairs repaired, Dr. Gelbke moved back in and continued to live there until his death in 1951.

The home never looked quite the same without the upper floors, but it is still standing!

### **Welcome New Members!**

Joan Garner, Hiram & Haley Molina,  
Carol Schlueter, Steve Wilkinson,  
Tiffany Isemann and Gary Lassere

*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***

201-209 Lafayette Street  
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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's Auditorium at 7th and Newton Streets on the second Thursday of every month at 7:00 p.m. The society's newsletter, *Gretna Chronicles*, is published monthly and mailed or emailed to all members.

## **Gretna Historical Society**

<https://www.gretnahistoricalsociety.org/>

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- Ray Markase.....Vice President**
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