



# Gretna Chronicles

Gretna, Louisiana

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An Official Publication of the Gretna Historical Society

March, 2021

## The President Presiding...

By Sylvia Schwarz, GHS President

- Well, it's happening! The new GHS website is complete and will be live on March 15, 2021. Created by Charles Hancock with CED Graphics, the website is awesome and presents a true picture of the Gretna Historical Society and our beloved historic Gretna. Charles, a Houston convert who grew up in Gretna had his "heart in the project" as well as his skills. Go to [www.Gretnahistoricalsociety.org](http://www.Gretnahistoricalsociety.org)
- May the luck of the Irish befall you in this month of March! With luck, we will have a General Membership Meeting soon. The state is loosening regulations on group meetings, plus many of us have already received the vaccine. As more feel comfortable going out publicly, we will be able to resume our meetings. We will make the determination of how and when to proceed at the March Board Meeting.
- The Valentine Day Weddings were held on Sunday, Feb. 14. With the "Marrying Judge," Vernon Wilty in place and blacksmith Tommy Verret present, we were ready for the marrying to begin.

Despite the cold weather, the atmosphere was warm. Originally, two weddings and one vow renewal were scheduled. When the renewal and one wedding cancelled, we married the one couple and we did it with flare and enthusiasm! Sarah Daigle, decorator extraordinaire, created two beautiful wreaths for us and also decorated the complex.

In preparation for the Valentine weddings, we decided to light the forge in the blacksmith shop to provide a little bit of warmth for those inside. Unfortunately, after many valiant attempts, Irvin Schwarz was not able to keep the fire lit. He followed up with several hours of work to discover the belt on the blower had stretched and become rotten. A special thanks to Irvin for replacing the belt and

returning the forge to working condition.

The wonderful volunteers assisting on Valentine Day were Janet Parker, Lisa Guidry, Sue Richard, Rosalyn and Bob Herring from Wyoming, as well as Irvin and I. Hopefully, I did not forget anyone. Thank you, thank you all!



- The GHS participated in the House Floats Krewe of Old Gretna with its theme "Yaaasss, Queen!" and locals enjoyed the house float parade on Feb. 13. Our talented members including Judy LeBlanc and Sarah Daigle decorated the White House, Kitty Strehle House and the Depot. Sarah Daigle made two Mardi Gras wreaths to adorn the doors of The White House. I think we should crown Sarah, the wreath queen.
- The final usufruct agreement between GEDA, the Farmer's Market and GHS is still in process.
- Please keep the White House in mind when you hear of people planning events like showers, weddings, repasts and parties. With all the renovations and the expanded patio, it's a lovely venue for rent. We already have three rentals scheduled for March.
- B.J. LeBlanc, our beloved Director of Facilities, has been ill and hospitalized. Please continue to pray for him and any of our members who are suffering. Members take care, stay safe and healthy.



## Remembering the Amazing Ziifle Sisters of Gretna

By M. Helen Williams

The Ziifle sisters, devout members of the Gretna Historical Society, were known for their brilliance, class and civic-mindedness. The last of six siblings, Ruth Claire Ziifle, passed on Jan. 27, 2021, at 95. Her baby sister, Myra A. Ziifle Thalheim, had passed on Sept. 27, 2019, at 92 and Hilda Ziifle Jung died Jan. 18, 2011 at 88.

Their ancestors emigrated here in 1854 from Wurttemberg, Germany. Their parents, William and Leonora Giboney Ziifle, had six children and all lived above their grocery store on 6<sup>th</sup> and Lavoisier Streets, across from St. Joseph Church.

William Ziifle was among the benefactors who donated land in 1930 for Gretna's City Park of which the sisters were very proud.

Myra, age 4, followed Ruth, 6, to school where their older sister, Leonora Ziifle, was a teacher and their cousin, Lily White Ruppel, was principal. Quiet and studious, Myra was allowed to stay. Ruth and Myra went all through school together in the same grade from elementary through college, always at the top of their class. At their Gretna High graduation in May 1942, Myra was valedictorian and Ruth, salutatorian.

Ruth and Myra graduated from Newcomb College in 1946 with majors in Physics, minors in Math. Their brilliant sister, Hilda, three years earlier graduated from Newcomb with a major in Math, a minor in Chemistry.

While a college student, Hilda's physics professor invited Hilda to become her assistant in Chicago on a highly secret WWII research project, but her father wouldn't allow her to go. It turned out to be the Manhattan Project that developed the atomic bomb!

During WWII Hilda was employed as a physicist at Higgins Aircraft, a government facility at Michoud. Post-war she worked as a research chemist at the Department of Agriculture's Southern Regional Research Lab.

Her independent research of the effect of a new



From left, Hilda, Myra and Ruth Ziifle.

chemical on cotton cellulose led to her invention of the formula for "wash and wear fabric!" After WWII foreign countries were especially interested in Hilda Ziifle's method.

The USDA awarded her for her accomplishments. She was recognized in "Leaders for American Science, 1964-65," "Who's Who of American Women" and "American Men of Science, 1967." Hilda later married Julius R. Jung Jr.

Ruth spent her 45-year career as assistant to renowned cardiologist Dr. George Burch, the Department of Medicine Chairman at Tulane University Medical Center. She edited his hundreds of papers and textbooks.

Myra married young Gretna attorney Richard Thalheim. She chose teaching to be home earlier with her four children. Her children ranged from 15 to 8 when her husband died suddenly at age 45.

Her son was a student at Isodore Newman, a private school. When Myra learned that the school offered scholarships to faculty children, she took a job there teaching Algebra that lasted for 25 years.

Older brother Robert Ziifle was born in 1912, just a child when the Storm of 1915 knocked down the steeple of St. Joseph's. A graduate Tulane engineer, he headed up NOPSI's Transportation Department. He died on May 3, 2012, at age 99.

Some of the information above was used from Sevilla White Finley's story, "Growing up in Gretna." In 2016, a video documentary was produced called "Growing up in Gretna" featuring Ruth, 91, and Myra, 89. The video, produced by Jefferson Parish School System's Keith Paolini, can be viewed at <https://vimeo.com/184900581>.

An era is sadly over. The Ziifle sisters will be long remembered in Gretna.

## **Times Past —** By Stephanie Dieterich

### **“Suburban Park Race Track”**

New Orleans was once one of the major horse racing cities in the U.S. In 1820 a private race track was laid out by M. Francois Livaudais on his plantation in what is now the Garden District. The first public track in New Orleans, the Eclipse Track opened in 1837 in Audubon Park. Metairie Track, now Metairie Cemetery, followed in 1838 as one of the finest race tracks in the country. Bingaman Track opened in 1840 in Algiers and Union Track, presently known as the Fairgrounds, opened in 1852.

Horse racing was very popular and prosperous before the Civil War. During the war, many tracks closed down completely, never to reopen again. Two new tracks opened in 1905, the City Park Race Track where Tad Gormley Stadium is located today and the McDonoghville Suburban Track.

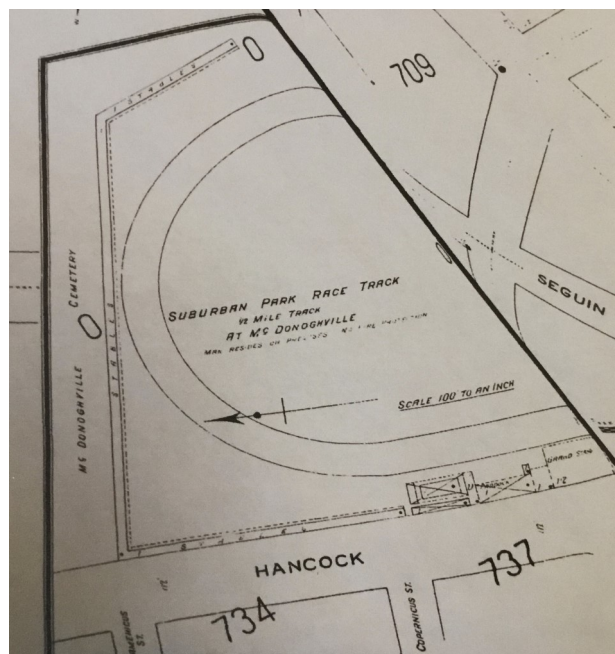
The Suburban abutted the McDonoghville Cemetery. Suburban Racing Association members were Phil Foto and Theo J. Layla from Algiers, as well as the Hon. John R. Langridge, the Hon. L. H. Marrero Jr., Anthony Roupnich and John Stumpf of Jefferson Parish.

This little half mile track only charged 50 cents admission and was a huge success. The Union Ferry Company operated double ferries at Canal Street to accommodate the patrons who, after crossing the river, could ride a streetcar to the track in less than ten minutes.

In 1907 a fire swept over the long line of stables, destroying all but 35 of the 172 stables. The fire mysteriously stopped at stall #13. The superstitiously inclined, of whom the racing game counts quite a few, marveled at this fact. Fortunately all of the 120 horses on site were saved from harm. The damage was listed at over \$10,000. Rebuilding was immediately started and quickly completed.

It was bad news for horse racing in 1908 as all over the country anti-gambling bills became law and were enforced. Louisiana was no exception

with its Locke Law in place. The Fairgrounds and City Park race tracks closed down. The Free State of Jefferson defied the law and at the Suburban Race Track, it was business as usual! After Governor Sanders threatened to send in the militia if the Suburban wasn't closed down, Sheriff L. H. Marrero Sr. had no choice but to shutter the little track.



According to this Sanborn map, the stables ran along Americus St., now part of McDonoghville Cemetery. More stables as well as the paddocks and grandstand backed up to Hancock St.

In 1911 a new floor was installed under the grandstand for dancing and a baseball diamond was laid out on the property. Attractions were bicycle and foot racing as well as shoe scrambles and moving pictures. In 1915 the old bandstand was blown down and other buildings badly damaged by the hurricane that caused widespread destruction all over town.

In 1917 once again all eyes were on the little track when it held a race to test the legality of the Locke Law. That was the last race at the Suburban!

A year later 125 acres of land comprising the Suburban Track were plowed by mule teams and planted with corn.

*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

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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 \$20 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. Guests and prospective members are always welcome to attend the meetings.

The society's newsletter, *Gretna Chronicles*, is published monthly and mailed or emailed to all members.

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is published for the members and friends of the

### Gretna Historical Society

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