Down Home in Gretna

“Ain’t No Big Thing, But It’s Growing.”

Nestled in the heart of Virginia’s Pittsylvania County is the town of Gretna, which celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2001.

The town sprang up from a railroad stop that was operational in the late 1800s. U.S. 29 Business, north to south, and Route 40, east to west, intersect at the town’s only stoplight.

The town is guided by Mayor Glenna Lingafelt and six councilmen.

The day-to-day business of the town is conducted by Town Manager David Lilly and Clerk/Treasurer Margaret Wilson, who have offices in Town Hall. Town Hall is also home to the Gretna Police Department, with a four-man force under the leadership of Police Chief E.L. Farries Jr.

“Gretna is a special place to put down roots and raise a family, live constructively during your middle years, or find fulfillment in lending a helping hand during your retirement,” says Mayor Lingafelt, a retired school librarian. “During the process, you have the help of friends and neighbors, churches and schools, businesses, service organizations, volunteer fire department and rescue squad.”

A Fledgling Town

Gretna’s first citizen was Jeremiah Talbott, who was more than 50 years old when he enlisted in the Confederate army during the Civil War to serve on behalf of another man, a common practice during the war.
Her book traces the town’s people and events. One significant event mentioned in her book is the establishment of the local Mecklenburg Electric Cooperative District. Clyde Midkiff, retired district manager, remembers the stories of the first office being located at Pete Moon’s livery stable in the year of 1938. This served as the building base for providing electricity to the rural areas surrounding Gretna.

Also mentioned is the famous bank robbery of 1946 when three robbers pulled a caper at Peoples Bank and escaped by pickup truck. They got away with about $7,000, a
big haul for the times. The three were later apprehended and prosecuted.

Gretna has the usual small-town atmosphere where everyone knows everyone and all about their lives, but Gretna also has many things that other small towns don’t have.

Gretna has one of Pittsylvania County’s industrial parks that is home to several industries. The county recently purchased 100 acres for expansion of the park.

Home to Three County Schools

Gretna is home to three Pittsylvania County schools: Gretna High School on Coffee Street; Gretna Middle School on Northside Drive; and the newly constructed Gretna Elementary School on Franklin Boulevard.

The county recently passed a bond referendum to build four new middle schools and one of them will be built in Gretna. Construction is to begin later this year.

The Riddle Learning Center was dedicated in 2000. It combines a branch of the Pittsylvania County Public Library with a distance-learning center for Danville Community College.

Gretna’s library was formed in 1965 under the sponsorship of the Jaycees and was located in a small red house on Franklin Boulevard. Addressing the need for a new library, Friends of the Gretna Library organized in November 1996. These volunteers single-handedly spearheaded a mammoth fundraising project that included children and adults from all walks of life working together to make the library possible.

Gretna has two large parks with picnic shelters, athletic fields and playground equipment.

The town also has two attractive mini-parks that are just for relaxing. The Railroad Park on Main Street features a bright-red caboose, a section of narrow-gauge track from the old F & P Railroad, benches and a swing built by the Boy Scouts. There is also a mini-park on the corner of Franklin Boulevard and Watts Street that offers beauty and solitude.

The Gretna community has two medical centers. Centra Health Gretna Family Practice Medical Center is part of Centra Health, a regional health-care system headquartered in Lynchburg and associated with Lynchburg General and Virginia Baptist hospitals to the north.

A second medical facility — Danville Regional Medical Healthcare Center — is located on Main Street and associated with Danville Regional Medical Center to the south.

Gretna Health Care Center, also in town, is a 90-bed skilled-care facility that meets the needs of the community.

Gretna is blessed with nine churches. This year several community churches, under the leadership of First Baptist Church of Gretna, worked together to build a home through Habitat for Humanity.

The town’s first shopping center, “The Junction at Gretna,” opened last year. Developer Cecil Creasy of Wilmington, N.C., has a special interest in Gretna. His family has owned property in town since it began.

Last February, the town hosted a 100th birthday party. The gala event brought out Special guest at Gretna’s 100th birthday party in February 2001 was 5th District Congressman Virgil Goode, who presented a flag that had flown over the nation’s capitol to Gretna Mayor Glenna Lingafelt.

young and old to enjoy musical entertainment by the Gretna High School chorus, Gretna Elementary School chorus and Gretna Middle School band.

Residents brought old photographs and memorabilia for display. The afternoon birthday cake and punch were sponsored by Mecklenburg Electric Cooperative.

A Great Place to Live

Gretna doesn’t stop at the town limits. It is a community filled with caring people who don’t just talk about needs and problems — they pitch in and do something about them. This spirit of community service makes Gretna a great place to live.

The town and surrounding community are fortunate to have Gretna Volunteer Fire Department and Gretna Rescue Squad. The fire department was organized in 1935 and the rescue squad in 1968.

Members are men and women who donate their time for training and service. They conduct fundraisers to purchase needed units, equipment and supplies. The rescue squad building is relatively new and plans are underway for a new fire station.

Dedicated Volunteers

The Merchants Association of Gretna annually sponsors activities and projects to enhance the town. Members are dedicated volunteers who organize Old Timer’s Jubilee and the Gretna Horse Show, and name a “Citizen of the Year” and “Business of the Year” each December.

Organized in 1985, Gretna PACE Club sponsors activities, community events and educational scholarships. Membership is open to anyone who wants to be part of a working organization.

The club co-sponsored the Miss Pittsylvania County Pageant, a preliminary to Miss Virginia, for 15 years before taking a break from pageant planning in 2001. Also, a real holiday crowd pleaser is the PACE Club’s annual Country Christmas Show.

Gretna Lions Club was chartered in 1953 and has been an active part of community life since. In addition to participating in service projects of Lions International such as assisting with sight- and hearing-related problems and providing exams, glasses or hearing aids to those who cannot afford them, Gretna Lions Club also gives scholarships to local students.

Last year Lions International gave the Gretna Club a $30,000 grant to assist in constructing a home built through Habitat for Humanity.

Gretna Junction Lions Club organized in 1984 as the ladies’ counterpart to Gretna Lions. Junction Lions conduct similar Lions projects and sponsor the “Tree of Lights” at Christmas, which illuminates bulbs in honor or memory and funds scholarships for high school seniors.

Gretna Ruritan Club was chartered in 1999 and conducts activities to better the town and community through various projects.

Gretna American Legion Post 232 became active following World War II. The post home, located on Leftwich Street, was built in 1950 and is available to family businesses and civic groups. The post conducts service projects and makes donations.
Residents Enjoy Simple Pleasures

“Gretta folk tend to enjoy the simple things of life — a Little League ball game, a country music band complete with harmonica player, a good book from the new library, a computer class, a school sports event, a Veteran’s Day program, Old Timer’s Jubilee and the great train robbery, an antique car show, rescue squad and fire department stews, a musical benefit, horse show, a leisurely walk around town, chatting at the post office, a cup of coffee with friends, an outdoor symphony, a band of former high school students and teachers, area school activities and band concerts, and people who make you feel at home,” says Mayor Lingafelt.

“Gretta is a place of caring, imperfect, hard-working people who volunteer for all kinds of needs (or things). And, when you go away for a while, you tell everyone who will listen where you are from, and you just can’t wait to get back home to Gretta,” she adds.

The town may not be so big, but the heart of its people is huge. The friendly, caring atmosphere exudes welcome and southern hospitality. Travelers entering town are greeted by a sign proclaiming “Gretta, Virginia: Ain’t No Big Thing, But It’s Growing.”

Susan Worley is a Pittsylvania County native and writer for the Star-Tribune, the county’s only newspaper, which was started in 1869. She is also on the board of directors and secretary of The Merchants Association of Gretta.

If You Go...

The only blockhouse standing in Pittsylvania County and possibly the state is Yates Tavern, located on U.S. 29 a fourth of a mile south of Gretta.

It was built around 1750 and sheltered travelers in what was a western wilderness. It is said to be the only dwelling in Virginia constructed with Elizabethan or Tudor overhangs on front and back jetties.

Deemed a blockhouse because of the 10-inch overhang of the second story, it is believed that the overhang was necessary so occupants could shoot down on the enemy in the event of attack.

Just outside of town and worth a drive-by is Whitethorn Buffalo Ranch. The home of Dallas and Mary Lee Riddle, who operate a local business, the ranch has the only herd of buffalo in Pittsylvania County.

The Merchants Association of Gretta annually sponsors the Gretna Horse Show, which attracts entries from across the state and North Carolina. The show is normally held in the spring.

The third Saturday in October is Gretta’s Old Timer’s Jubilee, which is sponsored by the Merchants Association of Gretta.

Located a short drive to the west is Smith Mountain Lake, with 500 miles of shoreline shared by Pittsylvania, Bedford, and Franklin counties. Smith Mountain Lake State Park, 423 acres with four miles of shoreline, is accessible from Pittsylvania County by car or boat.

Leesville Lake, a downstream reservoir created by the hydro-electric design of Smith Mountain dam, has 100 miles of shoreline just north of Gretta.

Canoeing, rafting and fishing are popular on the Pigg, Staunton, Banister and Dan rivers, Burton Lake west of Gretta near Climax and Cherrystone Reservoir near Chatham. Gretna is in close proximity to any of these rivers and lakes.

Old Timer’s Jubilee always features a “Parade of Power” for tractors.