

by Susan Worley,
Contributing Writer

Again in the year 2002, we're making our way around Virginia, each issue visiting a small town and meeting some of the folks who make up the heart of electric co-op country. On this year's second stop, we'll be ...

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



Always popular at Old Timer's Jubilee is "The Great Train Robbery" re-enactment. Sheriff Boyd Ayers (left) points out the trouble to Deputy David Lilly. In real life, Lilly is Gretna's town manager.

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.



Police Chief E.L. Farries Jr. distributes advice and information to young people at the grand opening of Gretna's shopping center.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SUSAN WORLEY AND TIM DAVIS, THE STAR TRIBUNE



Gretna's Railroad Park on Main Street has a caboose that is open for tours.

For his service, Talbott received 408½ acres of land in Pittsylvania County and built the first house in what was eventually to become the town of Gretna.

In 1879, the Franklin & Pittsylvania Railroad was completed. Gretna was then named Franklin Junction and served as a passenger and freight station. The post office was called Elba.

Talbott sold land to Hunt Tardy and Thomas C. Creasy, who built stores. The railroad stop was becoming a town. More people moved in, purchased land from Talbott, and put up homes and buildings to establish businesses.

The village of Elba had grown by 1901 to include five stores, two livery stables, a hotel, a drug store and approximately 150 residents. From 1909 until 1922, the sale of tobacco was the main industry and there were four warehouses bordering the town's dirt streets.

The town was incorporated in February 1901 by special act of the Virginia legislature. The charter of the town of Elba was renewed and amended in 1912.

By an act of the legislature of 1916, the name of the town was changed from Elba Post Office and Franklin Junction Station to Gretna. The name was selected by town council from a list of names furnished by the post office department.

Gretna Has Everything

Located about halfway between the cities of Danville and Lynchburg, Gretna residents have the best of both worlds — quiet country life, but close enough to enjoy urban amenities.



Pictured are Gretna Volunteer Fire Department, Gretna Police Department and Gretna Town Hall, which share a building in downtown.



One of the oldest homes in town was built by Thomas C. Creasy around 1883.

A prized documentary of the town's history is a labor of love by **Estelle Ironmonger Tyler** — her book entitled: *The Junction, Elba, Gretna, Virginia*.

Mrs. Tyler and her late husband, Kenneth S. Tyler Sr., came to Gretna as educators and fell in love with the students and town. She taught at Gretna High School for 27 years of her 38-year career and still lives in town. Mr. Tyler was a well-known and respected Gretna High School principal.

Mrs. Tyler says Gretna is "a friendly town with the kind of people who wave to strangers."

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.

Adding to the beauty of the town are projects of Weed and Weep Garden Club, organized in 1959, and Gretna Garden Club, organized in 1949. The clubs alternate sponsorship of the Christmas door decorating contest held each December.

Anderson Masonic Lodge No. 258 A.F. & A.M. received its charter in 1894. The lodge maintains a clothes closet in Gretna that provides clothing and other necessities to families who lose their homes to fire and to others in need. The lodge also provides scholarships and donates to Grand Lodge charities.

Gretna has an active youth sports program that organizes teams for softball, baseball and football.

The face of the town has changed over the years. Some businesses or industries have closed, new ones have located, and others have renovated and remodeled. Some residents have lived in Gretna all their lives, raised children and grandchildren and are content to spend retirement here. Others are new families moving in, eager to enjoy the quality of small-town life.

Residents Enjoy Simple Pleasures

“Gretna 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.

“Gretna 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 Gretna,” 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 “Gretna, 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 Gretna.

February 2002/www.co-opliving.com

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 Gretna.

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 Gretna 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 Gretna’s **Old Timer’s Jubilee**, which is sponsored by the Merchants Association of Gretna.

Located a short drive to the west is 20,600-acre **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 Gretna.

Canoeing, rafting and fishing are popular on the **Pigg, Staunton, Banister and Dan rivers, Burton Lake** west of Gretna 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.



Just south of town is Yates Tavern, a blockhouse built around 1750.

Hunting opportunities are available on the 2,710-acre **White Oak Mountain Wildlife Management Area** south of Gretna and the **Smith Mountain Game Refuge** at Smith Mountain Lake. Both are operated by the Virginia Commission of Game and Inland Fisheries.

Tomahawk Mill and Winery is located west of Gretna and offers tours and demonstrations.

About 15 miles west of Gretna is the Callands community and location of the annual **Callands Festival**. The festival takes place the first Saturday in October and focuses on an acre of crafts and demonstrations. On the site is the county’s earliest clerk’s office, built around 1770, and the courthouse and gaol (jail) believed to have been built in 1773. Also on the site is an impressive veteran’s memorial.

The **Town of Chatham** is located 12 miles south of Gretna. Chatham First sponsors **Christmas in Colonial Chatham** the first Saturday in December.

Chatham, as the county seat, is also a good place to see the **Pittsylvania County Courthouse** built in 1853. It is listed as a state and national historic landmark.

Chatham also has one of the county’s early clerk’s offices, built in 1813. It is restored and houses collections of the **Pittsylvania Historical Society**.

Climax Ruritan Club sponsors the **Sorghum Festival** at Climax the third Saturday in September. Climax is located about 11 miles west of Gretna.

The **birthplace of Rachel Donelson Jackson** is on Route 686 east of Gretna. Only a chimney remains. Rachel, the wife of President Andrew Jackson, was born in 1767 at her homeplace along the Banister River.

Cedar Forest Grist Mill on Route 761 near Long Island is a short drive northeast of Gretna, but worth a morning or afternoon trip. It is the county’s only working mill that produces flour and corn meal.

Mount Airy Roller Mill on Stinking River east of Gretna is also a working grist mill, but produces feed for animals. ■