



THE LIGHTHOUSE

A PUBLICATION OF THE MUSEUM OF THE GULF COAST

**Becky Barksdale:
A Hometown Hero
With a Legacy**

**Also: Revisiting
Frank Cricchio**

January 2026

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January 2026

CONTENTS



- 3 - from The Director
- 4 - How Railroads Shaped PA
- 5 - From the Vault
- 7 - Meet Charlotte Schneider
- 7 - Frank Cricchio: The Man
- 8 - Hometown Heroes
- 9 - Photography Contest
- 10 - Memorials
- 11 - Donations

On the Cover: Becky Barksdale with Michael Jackson

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from The Director

Welcome to the New Year—great things are ahead for the Museum of the Gulf Coast. We are excited to announce that renovation work is nearing completion, bringing new artifacts and a fresh look as part of the Sports Hall of Fame project. Our improvements include enhanced memorabilia displays and new video features on our 55" sports touchscreen that allow us to showcase more inductees and better tell their stories. A ribbon-cutting event to celebrate the reopening of the Sports Hall of Fame will be announced soon.

Just a few months ago, we filled our new archivist position by hiring Sebastian Russo to give added attention to our collections. Shortly thereafter, our curator, Robert Fong, announced his retirement and plans to move to the Austin area, making it a blessing to have someone as capable as Sebastian step in as our Interim Curator. He is quickly deepening his knowledge of regional history as he works through the collections and archives, and we are grateful to have him serving in such a vital role for the Museum's future.

We also welcomed our newest employee, Charlotte Schneider, who now serves as Archival

Assistant to support the curator. With the Sports Hall of Fame project nearing completion, we look forward to focusing this year on adding new inductees to our Halls of Fame and Legends Exhibits, and we will be sharing news about these additions very soon.

I would like to extend a special thank you to the members and community supporters who have honored loved ones through memorial gifts, a meaningful way to preserve the legacy of this region while helping keep its history alive. We also greatly appreciate those who have chosen to become Life Members with a \$1,000 donation and are now recognized on our new back-lit Donors Wall at the front of the museum.

These contributions are essential to helping the Museum share the unique history and heritage of our community and region. Through your support, we are able to provide free educational visits for school groups, teaching students about our story "from Jurassic to Janis," and demonstrating that opportunity and success—reflected in more than 260 local Hall of Famers—are possible right here.

Thank you for your continued support through memorials and Lifetime memberships. We invite you to enjoy the Museum of the Gulf Coast Radio Station online or via the Heart app, or by asking Alexa or Google to play it—an easy way to experience the music and sounds of our region. We hope you'll tune in and visit us again soon.



Tom Neal

A City Born on the Rails: How Port Arthur Began

Port Arthur is unusual among Texas cities. It wasn't founded because of a natural harbor, fertile farmland, or a growing frontier settlement. It wasn't an old trading post waiting to be rediscovered. Instead, Port Arthur exists because one railroad builder with an unconventional streak pointed to a blank stretch of shoreline and insisted that a city could thrive there. That builder was Arthur E. Stilwell, and his Kansas City, Pittsburgh & Gulf Railroad—later known as the Kansas City Southern—became the spark that transformed an empty Gulf marshland into a planned community with national significance.

Stilwell was ambitious, imaginative, and sometimes controversial, but he understood the power of transportation better than most. In the 1890s, he envisioned a rail corridor that would link the manufacturing centers of the Midwest directly to deep water on the Gulf of Mexico. This wasn't a modest idea; it was a bold attempt to reshape American trade routes. He believed that if he could build a railroad to the right spot on the coast, a port city would naturally grow around it. Stilwell

wasn't looking to support an existing town—he wanted to create a new one.

When surveyors pushed his line southward, they passed miles of sparsely settled prairie before reaching the shore of Sabine Lake. There, Stilwell chose his endpoint. No city existed at the site—not even a proper road network. Yet he ordered the tracks laid anyway. In a very real sense, the railroad arrived first, and the city blueprint came after. Streets, businesses, and neighborhoods were drawn around the iron rails that cut through the wilderness.



Once the last spike was driven, the transformation began. Rail access brought workers, merchants, land speculators, as well as entrepreneurs almost overnight. Hotels sprang up to serve new travelers coming down the line. Warehouses and docks followed. This new railroad provided something unique the landscape alone never could: connectivity. It tied Port Arthur to Kansas City, Omaha, Chicago, as well as the broader American interior. Goods could



KANSAS CITY SOUTHERN PASSENGER DEPOT, PORT ARTHUR, TEXAS

flow south to the Gulf and beyond to global markets, and people flowed in to seize new opportunities.

This railroad-driven momentum set the stage for everything that followed. The port facilities expanded rapidly because rail freight justified the investment. Early industries planted their roots in Port Arthur for the same reason: the tracks guaranteed a steady supply of materials and a dependable route for finished products. When the oil boom ignited, refiners found Port Arthur irresistible. The combination of deep water and reliable rail transport made the city a natural hub for shipping petroleum across the country and around the world.

More than a century later, Port Arthur's geography still reflects its railroad origins. Industrial districts trace old rail corridors. Port operations sit where Stilwell first imagined maritime commerce. Even the city's early neighborhoods align with the routes laid out for workers who came down the line.

Before Port Arthur had a port, it had a railroad—and that railroad made everything else possible.



From the Vault

Not every museum has the stretch of information that the Museum of the Gulf Coast covers. From rock & roll stars & groundbreaking inventors to the early history of Texas's oil & gas industry, our Museum has had the pleasure of acquiring tens of thousands of artifacts that can help paint a picture of the past, present, and future of Southeast Texas. Many of our artifacts stand as tributes of what can be done with the right amount of dedication and persistence. As there is only so much space that can be used to display artifacts, the majority of our collection is in storage, awaiting a chance to be put on the floor for guests to see and admire.

I would like to share with you a small sample of those pieces which help tell a story of Port Arthur, her people, and her legacy.

C.J. Chenier arrived at the 54th Annual Grammy Awards wearing this crisp white jacket which quickly set him apart on the red carpet, giving his February 12, 2012 entrance over in Los Angeles a confident blend of zydeco flair and modern elegance. The look popped against the backdrop of the Staples Center, giving his appearance a polished, standout quality. That year, his album *Can't Sit Down*

(Cont'd on Next Page)

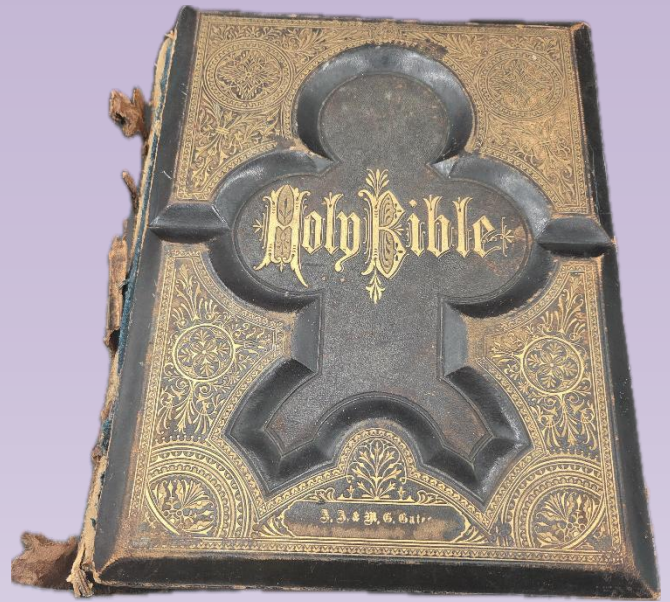


earned him a **Grammy nomination for Best Regional Roots Music Album**, marking a high point in his recording career. Chenier, a renowned zydeco musician and bandleader, is widely celebrated for carrying forward the legacy of Louisiana Creole music while earning critical acclaim across roots music circles. His nomination underscores both his artistic achievement and the broader recognition of zydeco on the national stage.



The framed photograph above captures **Anna Zrotalova Kaessmannova** with her children, Mary Louise and Marcel Leslie, preserving a moment of family life before immigration reshaped their world. In 1909, Anna's husband, a Mr. Marcelin Kaessmannova, emigrated from Czechoslovakia, carrying this photograph with him as he searched for work and prepared a future home in the United States. The image of Kaessmannova's family served as a source of comfort and resolve during the years the family was separated. In 1911, Anna and the children followed, arriving through Galveston and settling in Deweyville. Donated to the

Museum of the Gulf Coast by Rose Mann in 1993, the photograph stands as one of the institution's earliest donations and a powerful testament to the region's immigrant heritage.



This beautiful **Gates Family Bible**, now more than a century old, bears the visible marks of a life spent in faithful use. Time and devotion have left it in a delicate condition, with worn pages and a spine that will require some repair after years of handling. Having been owned by the **Gates Family**, the Bible was passed down through multiple generations as a cherished expression of their Christian faith. Its wear tells a story not of neglect, but of regular reading, reflection, and family tradition. As an artifact, it stands as a quiet witness to the spiritual life and continuity of belief within one Gulf Coast family who played a prominent role in the region's growth and development.

It was difficult to pick just a few artifacts worth mentioning, but be on the look out for more in the upcoming newsletter editions. The Museum's collection of well over 40,000 artifacts always has something to behold.

Meet the Museum's Newest Employee: Charlotte Schneider



The Museum of the Gulf Coast is pleased to welcome Charlotte Schneider as our new Archival Assistant. Over the past several months, Charlotte has been a dedicated volunteer, working closely with staff to help organize records and artifacts on the third floor. Her consistent, detail-oriented work made it clear that the Museum would benefit from a role focused specifically on preserving and maintaining the archives.

In her new position, Charlotte will assist the curator and staff with archiving records, documents, and collections, ensuring they are properly cared for and documented as the

Museum continues to grow. She will also continue to support daily operations, assist with event setup, and remain a familiar, welcoming presence for visiting school groups, where her friendly demeanor and ability to connect with students greatly enhance the tour experience.

Charlotte, a mother of two, is excited to continue contributing to the Museum in this expanded role. We are grateful for her dedication and are proud to welcome her as a permanent member of the Museum of the Gulf Coast team.

Frank Cricchio Revisited: A Personal Story

Brett Hudson, a history major at Lamar University, recently visited the Museum of the Gulf Coast to conduct in-depth research on photographer **Frank Cricchio**, a member of the Museum's Notable People Hall of Fame. Brett came to the Museum with a strong interest in learning more about Cricchio's photographic techniques, artistic approach, and lasting influence on visual storytelling in the region, and his research also carries a personal connection—his grandmother studied under Mr. Cricchio, learning firsthand from one of the most respected photographers in Southeast Texas.



During his visit, Brett explored archival materials and historic photographs that deepened his understanding of Cricchio's work and teaching legacy, and he has since completed a comprehensive **33-page essay** examining Cricchio's career, techniques, and impact. While fitting the entire paper into a newsletter proved impossible, the essay is available upon request. Contact **Sebastian Russo** at **MOGC.Curator@gmail.com** to learn more or read the full work. Thank You to Brett for your time, hard work, and dedication!

HOMETOWN HEROES:

Becky Barksdale

Becky Barksdale is a native of Port Arthur, Texas, whose musical journey began at an early age. Growing up in a community rich with musical talent, she developed a strong foundation as a vocalist and guitarist, skills that would carry her far beyond the Gulf Coast. Along with performing around the world with her own band, Becky toured with Canned Heat, in the 1990's as lead guitarist and as co-lead vocalist. Her career led her into professional recording and touring circles, where her talent and versatility earned her a couple of record deals along with opportunities to work with major artists. Among the highlights was working with Michael Jackson, an experience that placed her on one of the world's largest musical stages and reflected her musicianship at the highest level of the industry.

Though Becky stepped away from the spotlight for a time, music was always front and center. She continued writing music for film and television as well as a wide range of major studio projects. Today, Becky is actively returning to her craft, releasing new material and exploring fresh creative directions. She released a new song this past Christmas and has additional projects and ideas planned for the near future. Deeply connected to her roots, she has always carried a piece of Port Arthur with her. As she faces current health challenges, our thoughts are with her, and from her hometown we wish Becky Barksdale strength, comfort, and continued inspiration as she moves forward - both in life and in music.



The MOGC Art & Photography Contest: Past & Future

The Museum is already looking ahead to its **2026 Community Art and Photography Contest**, and now is the perfect time for artists and photographers of all ages to start preparing. Each year, this much-anticipated event brings together creative voices from across the region, turning the Dunn Gallery into a vibrant celebration of local talent and community spirit.

The 2025 contest marked a milestone year, celebrating a decade of artistic achievement and community participation. The opening reception welcomed more than 100 artists, families, and guests, and the range and quality of submissions were impressive across every category. Youth and teen artists drew attention with standout works such as *Beach Landscape* by Kenleigh Harris and *Vanitas* by Harley Babb, while photographers captured compelling images through winning entries like *Busy Bee* by Rosemary Mathis and *Brown Beauty* by Elizabeth Carrillo. In the adult divisions,

pieces such as *Blue Carnations* by Ashley McNeil and *Kanchanphon #1 – 2025* by Johnny Charles Milich highlighted the depth of talent found throughout the Gulf Coast region.

A special feature of the 2025 contest was the Rauschenberg Award, inspired by Port Arthur native and internationally renowned artist Robert Rauschenberg. The award was presented to Grace Mathis for her piece *Summer*, underscoring the Museum's commitment to honoring local artistic legacies.

Entries for the upcoming **2026 Art and Photography Contest** may be submitted **until January 26, 2026**. The exhibition will be followed by a public reception on February 13th and will remain on display through the spring. The contest is a fun and exciting way to get involved with the community, showcase your creativity, and support the Museum of the Gulf Coast's mission to celebrate and preserve the region's rich cultural heritage.



Memorials

DOT HALL BELL

Colleen Sims
Leanne Moore

BECKY DUNGAN

Dr. Gary & Nancy Stretcher

FLOYD GASPARD

Patti & Stuart Salter
Ann Boutte

DORIS GUERRERO

Gary & Shelly Parsley
Tom & Linda Neal

GLENN JOHNSON

Dean and Ann Boutte Priddy

BETTY MENARD TWEEDLE McFATTER

Doc & Denise Perron

LINDA MONROE

Mary Linn
Gary & Shelly Parsley
Becky Guidry
The Frederick Family
The McDonald Family
Bernie & Carol Brown
Ed & Barbara Boone
Tom & Linda Neal
Kathleen Healey Gumberger
Bill & Carolyn Worsham
Connie Nicholas
Bart Bragg
Larry & Mary Kay Eaves
Charleen Commings
David & Donna Schion
Robert & Donna Fong

Larry & Sharon Neff
Dean & Ann Boutte Priddy
Gene Bourgeois
Mary Joyce Dorsey
Danny & Carolyn Brantley
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Frances Boudreaux
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Salvador & Pat Sierra
Jeff & Sylvia Williams
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Ken & Carey Stickney
Dr. Gene Jones

JO ANN MOSER

Ann Boutte

CPO ROBERT PEELER

Drs. Gary & Nancy Stretcher

ROBERT "Bobby" WALKER

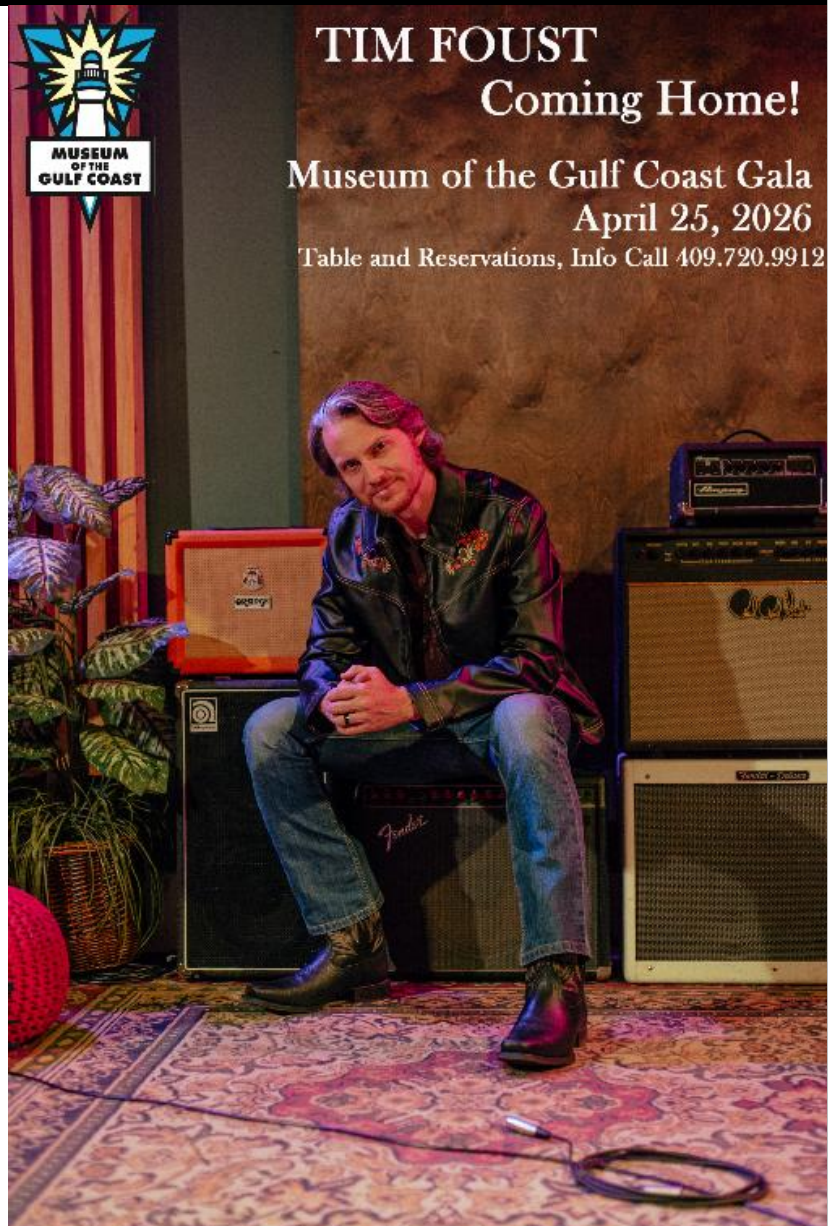
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Colleen Sims
Leanne Moore

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Colleen Sims
In Honor of Leanne Moore
In Honor of Carol Greiner Eddins
Larry and Sharon Neff
In Honor of Charles Robertson



Thank You

Thank you to our steadfast supporters of the Museum of the Gulf Coast, and the Port Arthur Historical Society. Your generous contributions are a vital part of our effort to preserve the storied history of this region. Those members and non-members who wish to contribute a memorial in the name of a loved one, or to make a donation, please call (409) 999-6282, email us at MuseumoftheGulfCoast@gmail.com, or visit us at MuseumoftheGulfCoast.org.



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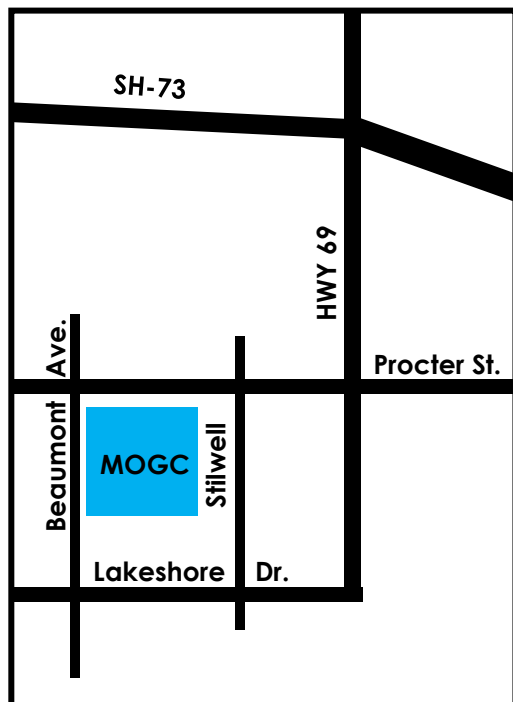
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