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Getaway: Step into an American classic

Monroeville, Ala. is the former home of *To Kill a Mockingbird* author Harper Lee, and inspired the novel's setting.

by *Cheré Coen*

PASA hosts a traveling theatrical version of *To Kill a Mockingbird* Sunday at the Heymann Performing Arts Center while Lafayette reads the best-selling novel by Harper Lee as part of Acadiana's "Big Read."

To glimpse into the history of the Pulitzer Prize-winning tale and its legendary author, travel to Monroeville, Ala., where you can enter the county courthouse and expect to find Atticus Finch sitting for the defense or hear Tom Robinson's plea for justice. The 1903 courthouse in the center of town was the basis for both Lee's famous courthouse scene and the Hollywood set used in the 1962 Oscar-winning film.

Monroeville is Lee's hometown and residence and much of her book loosely reflects her personal experiences growing up as well as racial incidences that happened in the area. Lee lived along South Alabama Avenue, next door to the Faulks, cousins of writer Truman Capote, who visited often and considered Monroeville one of the highlights of his youth. Lee and Capote played in her backyard tree house, and the child character of "Dill" in *Mockingbird* is said to have been based on Capote.

The courthouse today houses the Monroe County Heritage Museums, offering rotating exhibits, a history of the area and comprehensive displays on both Lee and Capote. Every spring, a play version of *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Christopher Sergel is performed on the courthouse lawn to an audience of about 250. Act I occurs outside in three sets, then moves inside the courthouse for Act II, which is the trial of Tom Robinson. The audience follows, watching the trial as if they are participants.

From April 23 to May 22, 2010, Monroeville celebrates the 20th anniversary of the town play and the 50th anniversary of the novel's publication. In addition, there will be a "Day In Maycomb" historical tour of the Old Courthouse Museum and downtown square and Mary Badham, the actress who played Scout in the film version, will speak on "Sharing Scout's Secrets." For more information or to order tickets when they become available March 1, go to www.tokillamockingbird.com.

Other literary reasons to visit Monroeville include the Alabama Writers Symposium at Alabama Southern Community College, held about the same time as the play, and Beehive Coffee and Books, a quaint independent bookstore off the square that features local authors and specialty coffees in a restored 1930s building.

Visitors can pick up a walking tour that explains Monroeville of the 1930s, when Lee and Capote were children. Many of the historic sites are gone, including both authors' childhood homes, but there are still sites to take in, such as the Monroe County Library, once the LaSalle Hotel where Gregory Park stayed gathering information for his character of Atticus Finch.

For information on Monroeville, go to www.monroecountyal.com