

# Magical Mooresville

With a population of only 53 folks, this is a place where everybody knows everybody.



**above, left:** Young mothers and babies are a common sight in tiny Mooresville, a good omen for the town's future. **above:** The Post Office, which opened in 1840, still serves the community and uses an original wooden bin (left) to hold the mail.

Two neighborhood kids showed up on Dee Green's doorstep. "Is Mayor Green here?" they asked.

"Yes, but he's asleep," the former mayor's wife replied.

"Can we see him?" the eager children queried.

"Why don't you come back later when he's awake?" she countered.

"We won't touch him," the kids persisted. "We can just go in there and look at him."

"Why do y'all need to look at Mayor Green?" the bewildered woman questioned.

"We're on a scavenger hunt," the children replied, "and he's on it."

The kids settled for two of the mayor's minnows, figuring everybody in town, including the scavenger hunt's judges, knew of Jeff Green's penchant for fishing.

essence of Mooresville, a place where children romp and roam as freely as Opie Taylor and his buddies. Here, kids saunter down streets lined with legacy trees. They frolic in the water and woods of the neighboring Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge. They set up competing lemonade stands near ancient buildings on ground once trodden by historical figures such as Andrew Johnson and James Garfield. And they know that every adult in the community watches out for them. In short, children in this tiny North Alabama town of 53 people enjoy a freedom and friendship that's sweetly enviable.

## Postal Duties

The hub of the "town older than the state," incorporated in 1818 (a year before Alabama became a state), re-

mains the Post Office. The weathered wood structure, circa 1840, still receives parcel and post. Patrons enter through a screened door, pick up their mail, and check in with postmistress Loretta Clark.

When she first took the position four years ago, Loretta asked one of the old-timers, "Where do I draw the line between gossip and news?" The woman replied, "Honey, don't draw it; just tell it!"

Kathryn Price categorizes this pass-it-on practice as old-fashioned friendliness. "How many places do you go where you really know what's going on with your neighbors and not only know, but care what's going on?" she asks. "When somebody is sick, you bring food. When somebody has a baby, you make sure they get a present."

For her part, Loretta loves her job—especially when she compares it with her previous work as an



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**above:** Neighbors visit at a Post Office party. **right:** "The challenges of living here are more than worth it," says resident Kevin Crumlish.

administrative assistant. "I feel like this is God's reward to me for some of the stuff I've had to listen to," the postmistress says.

About once every six weeks, the community hosts a Post Office party. Even in a town this size, where the entire phone book fits nicely on a single index card, the gatherings help neighbors to keep up with one another. Those who aren't retired hold jobs mostly in nearby Decatur and Huntsville, and the majority of children attend school in Huntsville.

#### Mix of Past And Present

The town, located south of I-565 and east of I-65, includes descendants of the original founders and newcomers attracted to the bucolic setting.

All work to preserve Mooresville's three prized facilities: The Old Brick Church (1839), the Church of Christ (1854), and the Original Stagecoach Inn and Tavern (built prior to 1825). Some residents live in new homes, while others reside



in old structures, including the house where Andrew Johnson lived while apprenticing as a tailor.

Newly elected mayor Jerri McLain, a resident for about 18 years, moved here with her husband, who was a state representative and senator.

"No other place has this particular flavor," she says with pride.

That flavor isn't to everyone's taste. "Not everybody can love a town like this," admits

**"I just like small country. At times, even Mooresville gets too large."**

*Bud Peebles, resident*

George "Mac" McCrary. "We're 20 minutes from a grocery store. The fire station is a fairly long way up the road, as is the sheriff. But the rest of it makes up for it."

For Sylvia Wilmer, the rest of it includes the towering trees that



dominate the town's landscape. "The first time I saw the trees," she recalls, "it was kind of like I was in the middle of a forest in *The Wizard of Oz*."

Jim and Nancy Payne moved to Mooresville to provide a small-town atmosphere for their children, Peggy, 10, and Gracie, 5. "My husband does not like subdivisions," Nancy explains. "He didn't want a place where we would just go home at night and eat and sleep. It's like a big family here." As for the Payne children, "This whole town is their backyard," their mother says with a laugh.

### A Little Rain in Paradise

A while back, zoning issues stirred up town meetings. Residents voted on some city limit measures, such as requiring two lots for each house, but bypassed points proposed for the outskirts of town by Auburn University's Urban Studio of the School of Architecture.

"We made a master plan for both maintaining the quality of life in the community and showing how there could be some growth consistent with the patterns that were the historical patterns of the community," explains Cheryl Morgan, center director. In order to pre-empt encroachment from Huntsville, the plan called for the development of a village and residential area across I-565. "It would be a place where you'd have

## Tour The Town

Visit during the annual Mooresville Walking Tour May 14, 2005, from 11 a.m. until 5 p.m. Features include period crafts, music, and great glimpses of this town listed on the National Register of Historic Places. For more information call (256) 350-2028.

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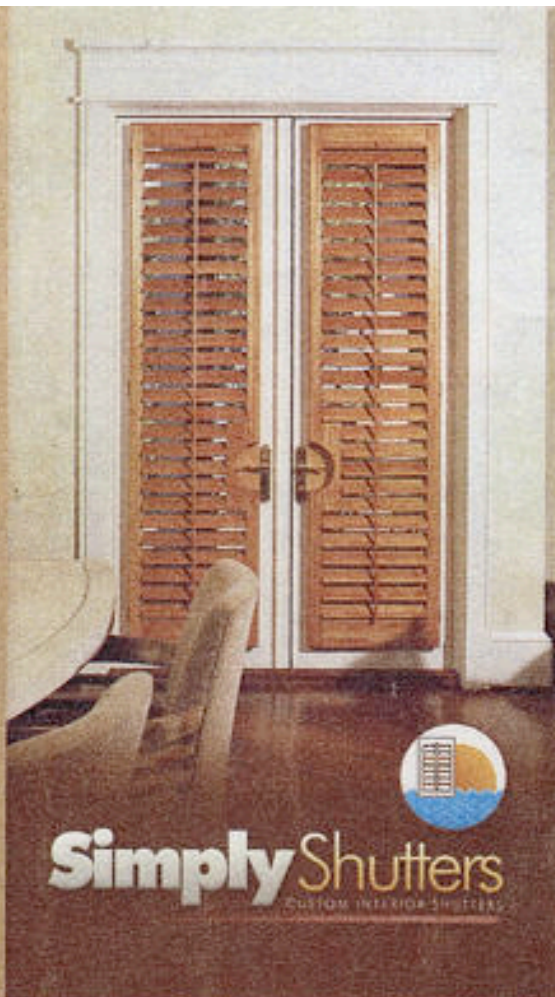
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the things for which you typically get off the interstate—fast food, gas, a convenience store—but not in typical freeway-style buildings.”

Some loved the idea, but others, primarily large property owners whose land the proposal encompassed, balked at what they perceived as restrictions on the sale and use of their land. “We’ve kind of accepted that there is encroachment that we can’t do anything about,” says Sylvia. “Then there’s the issue of protecting and encapsulating what we have.”

The zoning that did pass addresses in-town issues. “We don’t want hamburger and hot dog stands in town,” says Kathryn Price. “We don’t want metal buildings.”

“Some zoning we need, no doubt,” says Mac, one of the large landowners. “But lack of restrictions is one of the things that have kept the town like it is.” Periodically, he says, “There are going to be some contentious things that come up. You usually get beyond them. Even when we go through the bad times, we know if something happens to one of us, the other one will be there.”

#### Working It Out

“When we put our personal opinions aside, we really accomplish a lot,” says Kathryn. “We can all roll up our sleeves and work.” The community makes up in sweat equity what it lacks in funding.

The town budget “runs be-

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above: The Old Brick Church serves as a town meeting place. Weddings and other events are held inside.





**above:** Callie (left), Sylvia, and Sydney Wilmer, along with their dog, Zelda, enjoy the serenity of their town.

tween \$4,000 and \$5,000 a year," says Jeff Green. "The mayor and council members are not paid." To help with preservation efforts, Mooresville hosts a biennial festival in May. Last year, Kathryn says, "100% of the families and businesses participated."

That's typical of the town, says Al "Pop" Rainey, who has lived here for

## Where To Eat

Jeff and Dee Green recently converted the Bedingfield General Merchandise store into a restaurant and renamed it the Limestone Bay Trading Company. Dee and daughter Jaime serve as chefs, offering a set menu of sandwiches, soups, salads, and desserts, along with an ever-changing daily special. 24950 Old Highway 20, Mooresville, AL 35649 (256) 353-6326. Hours: 11 a.m.-2 p.m. Monday-Friday.

43 of his 49 years. "Everybody is kind of like family. Everybody looks out for each other," he says. His family is one of only two African American households in Mooresville. Al is president of the Decatur chapter of the NAACP and this year became the first African American elected to the city council. He fondly recalls when the entire community turned out to honor his grandfather.

"He was a World War I veteran," Al explains. For the 75th anniversary of the war's conclusion, the French government honored the Mooresville man with an award ceremony. "It was

at The Old Brick Church," Al recalls. "Everybody in town—and out of town—showed up."

Bud and Classicie Peebles, who've lived in Mooresville since 1960, agree the community is a mighty nice place to call home. A retired farmer, Bud spends his senior years sitting on his front porch enjoying the view. He has only one complaint. "I am not a city man," says Bud, who once took a job in Michigan but then changed his mind. "I just like small country. At times," he says with a broad smile, "even Mooresville gets too large."

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