

A CHRISTMAS MEMORY – FEATURE STORY

On Thursday, November 19, the Madison County Historical Society (MCHS) and Alumni Players! (AP!), will offer up an evening of entertainment they hope will set the tone for the coming holiday season.

The centerpiece of the evening will be a performance of “A Christmas Memory,” a short story by Truman Capote, staged by members of Alumni Players! The program will also include holiday caroling, vintage Christmas stories from the pages of the Edwardsville Intelligencer, a Christmas quilt raffle, fruit cake and more.

The event is a fund-raiser for MCHS, a 501(c)3 charitable organization, that has been preserving the artifacts and stories of Madison County for more than a century.

Organized in 2011, AP! is an award-winning NFP that partners with other local civic groups to produce Community Partnership Events which raise funds to support a common goal. Through music and storytelling, Alumni Players! continues to be true to its mission: Building Community Through Creativity.

Both Edwardsville organizations are dedicated to sharing and celebrating the legacies of our community,

“A Christmas Memory” is a lovingly crafted autobiographical valentine to a remarkable friendship between two kindred spirits: 66-year-old Sook and seven-year-old Buddy. The time is 1931, the place is Monroeville, Alabama.

Born in New Orleans, Louisiana, Capote was an only child who taught himself to read and write. His parents divorced when he was two years old, and at age six he was sent to live at the family home in Monroeville.

For the next four years he was raised by his mother's relatives. Chief among them was Nanny Rumbly “Sook” Falk, who was considered an ‘old maid’ by the family and with whom he formed an intimate bond. Together, they lead a sheltered life, but one fueled by Sook’s indomitable spirit and Capote’s insatiable appetite for her attention, approval, and affection.

The story offers an intimate look at their relationships and holiday traditions including that most important ritual, baking fruitcake. As their story unfolds, we meet relatives, townsfolk, a bootlegger named HaHa, and Queenie, a feisty orange and white rat-terrier.

Through Capote's artistry we, too, learn the value of the life lessons they teach each other along the way.

Fruitcake is, indeed, the cornerstone of the story, and the recipe referred to in “A Christmas Memory” was found in the dresser drawer of Bud Faulk (Sook’s brother) folded up inside his copy of “A Life of Robert E. Lee” by Josh Estes Cook.

At that time, ingredients were both scarce and expensive, and measuring methods were colloquial at best: Salt – “as much as would lie on a nickel.” Butter – “as much as the size of a walnut, or the size of an egg;” Molasses – “measure by gobs.”

The actual baking was difficult work. The oven of the big wood stove had to be heated with a fire made from certain wood - white oak, hickory or sassafras - depending on what was to be baked. Cooks had to know just what would produce the desired heat. Once the stove was hot, the fire-ash had to be brushed out of the oven before cakes or bread could be baked. This was done with a large turkey feather and no matter how quickly it was swiped across the hot surfaces, the feathers always singed a bit creating a powerful stink. Baking instructions for temperature and time varied from oven-to-oven. Most fruitcake recipes suggested “bake in a very slow oven - 250°F for five hours.” Only experienced bakers could tell by feel when the oven was ready for the cakes and when the cakes were ready to come out of the oven.

Sook was, undoubtedly, one of those skilled and sensitive bakers. Guests at this performance will leave with a slice of her fruitcake to remember the occasion.

The event will be held at the First Christian Church, 310 South Main Street, Edwardsville.

Doors open at 6:30 p.m.

Performance at 7:00 p.m.

Tickets are available in advance @madcohistory.org.

This performance of “A Christmas Memory” seems a perfect fit with the Madison County Historical Society. There were likely many similarities to Monroeville and Edwardsville in the 1930’s. To ensure that memories like these are preserved, MCHS relies on members and donations from the community to fund operations, produce educational materials, and create quality programming throughout the year. Artifacts, documents, photographs and more are preserved at the society’s complex on North Main Street, Edwardsville, which includes the 1836 Weir House, a modern library building and the Helms Collection Center, where the public is invited to explore the story of Madison County.