



































81st Santa Train set for its annual trek through Appalachia

DAVID MCGEE BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

PIKEVILLE, Ky. — Forget the sleigh, Santa Train Saturday is finally here.

For children and adults alike across Appalachia, that means getting up early to catch a glimpse of the Jolly Old Elf riding the rails. Or maybe get his attention and catch a stuffed toy or other gift during the dozen stops along the 110-mile route.

The 81st annual CSX Santa Train will begin rolling in the pre-dawn darkness from the southeastern-most corner of Kentucky, aimed at spreading some holiday joy across Southwest Virginia before stopping in Kingsport, Tenn., on this Saturday before Thanksgiving.

This will mark the second consecutive

year the train returns to the rails after a two-year hiatus due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Saturday's schedule

The train staged overnight in the CSX Shelby yard, just south of Pikeville, Kentucky, and Santa's most bleary-eyed fans will be those who venture out before the train rolls away at 6 a.m.

There are two stops in Kentucky, the first at Marrowbone at 6:20 a.m., is scheduled to last 15 minutes and then a 20-minute stop at Elkhorn City starting at 7:05 a.m., or about the time the sun is expected to rise.

The train will roll out of Elkhorn City at

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Train

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7:25 a.m., and pass into Virginia through the Breaks Interstate Park.

Ten stops are planned in Southwest Virginia with the first being a brief 10 minutes at Toms Bottom in Dickenson County at 7:45 a.m. The second, also in Dickenson County, will be for 15 minutes in Haysi, at 8:07 a.m.

From there the train will make the short jaunt to Clincheo, arriving about 8:40 a.m., then on to Fremont at 9:08 a.m., for a planned 25-minute stop. Both are in Dickenson County.

Next on the list is the former coal hub community Dante at 10:08 a.m., near the Dickenson-Russell county line, After a 20-minute stop there the train heads to St. Paul along the Wise and Russell county border - for typically one of the largest crowds of the day gather. Arrival is expected at 10:53 a.m.

After 20 minutes at St. Paul, Santa's elves get a short break as the train heads southwest to Dungannon in the northeast corner of Scott County - with arrival expected at 12:03 p.m.

The three final Virginia stops are also in Scott County at Fort Blackmore at 12:48 p.m., Kermit at 1:48 p.m. and Waycross, on the Virginia/Tennessee state line, at 2:20 p.m.

The CSX Santa Train's final stop will be in Kingsport, where, instead of items thrown from the train, there will be a free community event. Santa's Depot will feature holiday activities for children of all ages at Centennial Park in downtown Kingsport from 1 p.m. until 3:30 p.m.

What it takes

Every year children of all ages cluster around the Santa Train at each stop along its

numbering in the hundreds the train. and sometimes a thousand or more.

and its all its presents back to Appalachia each fall. From the CSX volunteer packing party City store on Eastman Road party Wednesday night many hands are involved in stuffing the train full of its 15 tons of toys, clothing, backholiday gift items.

That doesn't include the work with Food City each year to make sure their products are part of the magic.

Once Food City's packing party was completed Wednesday night, a semi transported the hundreds of plastic tubs filled with car, goodies a short distance to train Thursday morning be-Pike County Kentucky.

Before any of this can ocprepare and assemble the backpacks," Tucker said. combination of cars and locomotives which will comprise the train. Once ready, the train crew then shepherds the machinery north each year. Pulled by CSX-2 and its Monday afternoon.

people comprise safety teams Tucker said. on the ground making sure ble, plus local law enforcement who aid with traffic.

volunteers from CSX and there are employees across the train's partners are ready to hop off at each stop and north and east to west - that 110-mile route - with crowds hand-deliver items alongside are able to participate in the itself. It takes a lot," she said.

"It's really a year-round undertaking. We complete Behind the scenes, another the Santa Train on a Satursignificant number of people day then a lot of work goes are needed to bring the train into getting the train back to Jacksonville," CSX Vice President of Corporate Commu-180 who participated in the nications Brian Tucker said Wednesday, "Then we start in Jacksonville, Florida, to the in February or March with 150 or so who volunteered to our partners and do a postconvert the porch of the Food mortem on the event. We identify any improvements into Santa's workshop during that need to be made, do a and start immediately planning for the next year.

"Planning occurs throughout the year. We determine packs, handmade and other the types of toys we're going to procure; the types of winter garments we're going to two dozen or so vendors who procure from our partners and all those logistical pieces that go into the Santa Train every year," he said. "That starts to take shape in the spring and summer."

This year's haul includes trailer - cleverly disguised 5,600 backpacks, 12,000 as a Food City delivery truck toys, 7,000 plush items that will be tossed from the Santa

"Our team in Waycross, last cargo was loaded onto the rest of the year tuning up the cars used for the Santa Train. fore it rolled out of Kingsport making renovations and repbound for the Shelby yard in arations. We had our packing party here recently in Jacksonville that packed those cur, an array CSX personnel 12,000 toys into those 5,600

Last year that year-long time frame was compressed into a weeks because the decision to run the train occurred late in the year, after a two-year COVID break. This 3,000 horsepower engine, the year, everyone involved had train arrived in Kingsport on the "peace of mind" knowing the train would roll as it had Along the day's route, 102 every year prior since 1943, ton. "We've got a lot of people

"This has been more of a really good shape." each stop is as safe as possi- normal year and that means so many more people could be a part of it. Even though Onboard, a cadre of 100 they're not riding on the train our network - from south to

Santa Train in a small enough ways but that mean so much to them. They know they're a part of this really special tradition."

Aboard this year's train will be members of the CSX senior operations leadership team who will be experiencing the Santa Train for the first time.

"To me the Santa Train is what makes it so special is the tradition. Its been around for so long and its stayed true the annual Food City packing full review of the Santa Train to its original intent, which was to show appreciation and provide support to communities in an area of the country that really need it and are oftentimes forgotten," Tucker said. "We're so proud to be able to do it because we understand the role we play in the community. We're privileged to do what we do and give back to that community. It's my favorite thing I get to do every year. There is really nothing like it."

Kingsport packing party

temperatures the Kingsport railyard. The Georgia, then spends the hovered in the upper 60s Wednesday evening, Christmas spirit permeated the atmosphere in Kingsport as about 150 volunteers rolled up their sleeves and loaded hundreds of plastic tubs for this year's Santa Train.

> An assembly line was rolling off about 10 tubs per minute - with toys and snack food items designated for each stop along Saturday's 110-mile route.

> "I think this is probably the smoothest setup for the packing party I've ever had," said Food City's Jamie Horout here and I think we're in

> Horton said Food City works with about 25 sponsors who help support the train each year.

> "There are a lot of details to get the donations, the prep work for the actual packing



EMILY BALL, BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

Volunteers fill crates with plush toys in an assembly line for the Santa Train packing party at the Food City in Kingsport, Tenn., on Wednesday evening,

Among the volunteers, unteer Don Royston offered Shirley Cox of Kingsport was dressed in a Santa suit augmented with a strand of flashing Christmas lights as she helped stuff toys into the said. "And watch the many stacks and stacks of plastic

love it," she said. "I just love to something the whole famto do this for the children and there's so much excitement so much Christmas spirit."

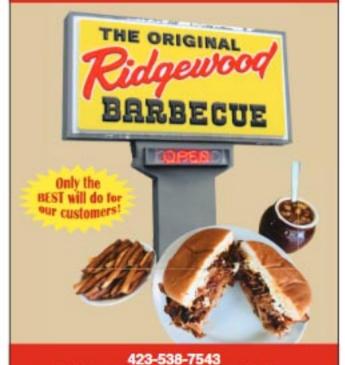
Longtime Santa Train vol-

some advice to anyone who's never come out for the Santa

"Come experience it," he generations - four and five generations - of people "I volunteer every year. I bringing their children back ily can enjoy."

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Carrying on the Tradition of Hickory Smoked BBQ



900 Elizabethton Hwy, Bluff City, TN 37618 Mon-Thur 11 am-7:30 pm • Frl & Sal 11 am-2:30 pm & 4:30 pm-8:30 pm Closed, Larry Proffitt says, "On The Lord's Day."

'THIS GOES TO THE HEART OF AMERICA'

ON TRACK TO CHRISTMAS

Santa Train makes an impression on all who experience it

DAVID MCGEE BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

the 81-year-old tradition of the CSX Santa Train returned to the rails Saturday, providing a unique experience for all who encounteredit, whether for the first time or the long-term followers.

Large crowds braved chilly, wet weather during the morning trek through the mountains of east Kentucky and Southwest Virginia before the sun finally broke through by mid-afternoon. Through it all, Kris Kringle and a devoted group of over 100 volunteers dispensed items at pre-determined stops along the

CSX brought a significant number of people from its different this." divisions to experience the train which distributes 15 tons of toys, clothing items, backpacks, handmade items and wrapping paper at stops along a 110-mile route from Pikeville, Kentucky, to Kingsport, Tennessee.

my first time to be here," CSX CEO Joe Hinrichs said during a break from distributing gifts. "This year I get to enjoy it a bit more watching everybody else enjoy it ... These people are so appreciative and so thankful and so kind; this means so help make nearly 30 fleece blankets much to so many people."

"We brought more people on the train this year. We wanted more people to feel this same feeling. ... We wanted as many people as possible to be part of giving back and to feel what this connection means to CSX and all the other sponsors. It is a very special day ... Mostly it's about the CSX family giving back to a blanket and you go out into the the community."

At the Dante stop Hinrichs spoke to a woman who recalled coming to the very first Santa Train - in 1943.

"She said, when she was a child in 1943 she remembered walking five my face," she said. miles to get a piece of candy and to



EMILY BALL. BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

A young child stretches their arms while yelling for Santa Claus during the Santa Train stop in Dante, Virginia.

because it means so much to these communities; multiple generations of people who have been a part of

He pointed with pride to an allnew Santa car with some special features to improve distribution as evidence he and the company are committed to continuing this tradition.

"We wouldn't go to all that trou-"Last year was very emotional; ble for just one time," Hinrichs said. "That was this year's special surprise and we may have a surprise

> His wife Maria Hinrichs was so inspired during last year's trip that she recruited family members to

"This year I'm going to take it bit further. I'm going to start going to CSX headquarters about once a month and get some CSX employees involved," Maria Hinrichs said.

"One of my favorite parts of the Santa Train is when I can get off and I have a backpack or a bag of toys or crowd and these people are just genuine. This is their Christmas and it warms my heart to be able to do this. It's giving. And when I see the children's faces, it brings a smile to

Lisa Johnson of Bristol, Tenn., a see Santa," he said. It's emotional 35-year-Food City employee and a clue who Santais."

its special events manager, fulfilled a lifelong goal Saturday to ride the train, which is co-sponsored by the grocery chain.

"I didn't really know what to expect," she said. "That first stop said it all. You see all these families and all these children just hoping to get something, it makes everything so worthwhile to be able to give back them smile. When I was handing child a toy and watch that child's more involved. She rode for the first eyes light up."

She called the entire experience emotional.

"I'm humbled to be here. I'm very grateful for the Santa Train and for this opportunity. What a blessing it is to give something back to these families because, at the end of the day, Christmas is about the children," Johnson said.

Among those children were twins Maddox and Maverick Winslow of Coeburn, who experienced the train for the very first time with grandparents Phil and Gail Rasnick.

"They love trains anyway and they saw that train and they just lit up," Gail Rasnick said. "This has been a tradition in our family for about 70 years. I lived by the tracks and we always did the stop at Hanging Rock...I don't know if they have

former Dante train station rather had the biggest smile. And her mom than wade into the considerable started crying and she started crying crowd which formed a semi-circle around the Santa car.

One of the events that has grown from the Santa Train is a party, attended by Santa and hosted Friday by Appalachian Power for over 50 special needs children in Dickenson County. Linda Dixon, of Clincheo, who works at Ridgeview High School, also attended the Dante

"I come and I get stuff so that I a big impression. can take it back to school for them. We have a Christmas party. It is awesome, just awesome," she said. "They [kids] enjoy it tremendously and it's a blessing. They look so forward to it every year.

Desteny Clemons has been involved in the Santa Train for 16 years, starting when she worked at Food City as a teen. Now she is the lead Santa Train coordinator for the - to see a child get a toy; to watch Kingsport Chamber of Commerce.

"I fell in love with it and, when I off toys, it was so special to hand a went to work for the chamber, I got time in 2019 and was immediately "hooked."

> "As soon as you get off the train and see that crowd of people it's an adrenaline rush. When you get to the crowd and see the kids that want these items, its a second adrenaline rush. When you're able to hand that toy to that child, it's heartfelt, amazing experience," she said.

> One memory stands out above the others.

In 2018, I was in one of the follow behind box trucks the first year I traveled to Pikeville. We got to a stop were handing out coats that year from [train partner] Soles4Souls," Clemons said. "This little girl came up, pajamas with short sleeves and house slippers on - and it was cold and rainy that year - and she looked so cold. We found this perfect red fur coat with a matching hat that

They opted to stand back near the fit her oh so good. She put it on and and I started crying. She allowed us to take a picture and I show that picture to everyone I'm involved with to say that was my first 'aha' moment that said I will always do this."

> During the week, Tianne Doyle is president of retailer Bealls, Inc. She also serves as finance chair and on the board of directors for Soles-4Souls, and Saturday made her first trek on the Santa Train. And it made

> "This goes to the heart of America. The Appalachia region is one that's always on my mind," Doyle said. "There are a lot of people who are in great need. It feels very good to see smiles on the kids' faces when they're getting gloves kids' books. That was awesome. So many beautiful children of all ages here today."

> Food City's Raymond Stockard spent his fifth trip on the Santa Train working the Santa car.

> "I think the crowds have been a little bigger than normal, Stockard said. "I think the children have been excited and I think the communities have been great.

> "We saw it at the packing party at the Eastman Road store Wednesday and we had a lot bigger turnout than what we had in the past and I think that's carried over to the train. I think people are still hungering to get back to normal and I think this is just another example of that," he

> The star of the show - who never left the rear platform all day agreed the crowds were bigger.

> "We thank everyone for coming," Claus said. "The children have been well behaved. It's been an exceptional crowd today. I know naughty and nice, and this has been a nice crowd."

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Behind the scenes, the CSX Santa Train work never ends

DAVID MCGEE BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

Walking slowly through empty rail cars Saturday while disembarking the CSX Santa Train it seemed almost incomprehensible that earlier that morning, each was packed to the brim before a beehive of humanity worked nonstop to empty the contents into the waiting hands of children of all ages.

The Santa Train journey is a blur. Leaving the Shelby yard at Pikeville, Kentucky, before sunrise, early stops were shrouded in darkness and, this year, drizzle and cold temperatures. Its succession of stops attracts masses of humanity to map dots along the railroad tracks because, on the Saturday before Thanksgiving since 1943, Santa arrives on a train.

On the ground during a dozen stops in a dizzying nine-hour jaunt, it appears to be organized chaos. As soon as the train stops, Santa and a host of volunteers began tossing stuffed animals toward waiting hands from the rear of the train while dozens more volunteers — ranging from seven-figure corporate executives to rank-and-file employees of the event's sponsors — fan out to distribute gifts.

photos from the 2023
photos from the 2023
running of the CSX
Santa Train. Point
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Onboard, with Christmas music blaring, a similar small army works before, during and after each stop readying the next wave to GI Joes, Barbie dolls, Hot Wheels, balls, books and backpacks — pre-stuffed with jackets and gloves — to go out the doors as promptly as possible.

Each step in this process has been carefully evaluated, evolving over time, while obtaining the items is a nearly year-round effort.

There are custom-made carrying sacks for toys and another for wrapping paper, to make each easier to carry and distribute. Backpacks used to go out on the arms of volunteers. Now, at each stop, massive cartons are dropped to the ground and handed out so

Train

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volunteers can continuously carry backpacks into the crowds.

The stops are momentary — 10, 15 or 20 minutes apiece. And when the first whistle sounds, those volunteers scurry back aboard the train because the second horn means the train is moving on. Once aboard, they smile, take a deep breath and prepare for the next stop down the line.

Santa received a new [train] car this year. It was a gift from CSX President and CEO Joe Hinrichs, properly adorned to identify the train's most important occupant and engineered to house more gifts. While the crowd sees Santa, Food City's Jamie Horton or Raymond Stockard and a host of others tossing items — inside the Santa car — it is a continuous ballet as full plastic tubs are pushed out to the platform, while empty ones are removed and stacked neatly.

On the ground, at every stop, are box trucks with more gifts, food and snack items. As crowds dissipate, the trucks pack up and head to their next assigned destination.

Amazingly, organizers say this year's Santa Train carried and distributed the most products in its history, while still keeping a tight schedule that began with 3 a.m. wakeup calls at hotels in Pikeville, Ky.

Twelve hours later the train chugs into Kingsport where it was greeted, yet again, by a massive gathering. Another Santa Train goes into the books. Stopped briefly in the rail yard, bright, afternoon sunlight poured through windows once obscured by mountains of gifts. In their place are stacks and stacks of empty plastic tubs that will be stored away until next year when organizers intend to do this all over again.

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