

EAST SACRAMENTO NEWS

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IT'S CHRISTMAS IN EAST SAC AND THE PONIES ARE BACK

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East Sacramento
Christmas Bird
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It's Christmas in East Sac and the ponies are back

By Ellen Cochrane

Lo, about five o'clock a crowd starts to gather in the Rite Aid parking lot at 48th and J streets. Hats are pulled snug to heads and children chase each other. High pitched squeals spin through the air. It's Christmas time in East Sacramento and the ponies are back.

Except they're not exactly ponies. Angel, Rosebud, Dash, Moose and their buddies are 2,000-pound draft horses who are gentle as kittens. These calm giants are well acquainted with sloppy kisses, love hugs, whispered secrets and tugs from little hands. They will lean in for selfies and pick up ears for portraits. For 15 years they've been jingling bells up and down the streets of East Sac during December, ferrying holiday merry-makers.

Seasoned horsewoman Crystal Newborn of Top Hand Ranch thinks the Christmas light gig is a breeze. "The horses rest all day and only work at night. They like to pull and the only challenge here is the traffic on the popular streets." In fact, the biggest danger she faces is the love. "I've had to stop the kids from trying to give the horses chocolate, gum, cookies and all kinds of weird treats."

Newborn is part of the family business at Top Hand, which also runs the concession in Old Sacramento. They have clydesdales and percherons that pull the hand crafted and restored wagons festooned with decorative lights. She's at ease hefting harness collars and can hold in hand a team of four or more.

These horses are loved creatures. After December, the equine employees get all of January off. The Top Hand team shoes them with barium padded horseshoes to prevent slipping and stress from the asphalt. They are a relaxed and mellow herd. The night I visited a bitter wind blew through the neighborhood. A clattering trailer door evicted not a tail swish or cocked ear. Rosebud shifted on her feet and closed her eyes.

Orion Sievers had been on a horse before, but the toddler looked surprised at the size of Angel. "We booked a year in advance to get a place this year on the wagon rides," said Meredith Sievers. They were part of the more than forty parents, kids and friends who queued up to take a ride on a very cold night. All murmured in agreement when I asked about the need to book early. "I've heard the bells for years and I'm finally getting to go," someone said. This brought smiles and nods.

The wagons head down 48th towards the Fabulous Forties. Winking blue and white lights on the wagons twinkle smaller and smaller, disappearing down the long tree-lined streets. A chorus of Joy to the World spills out of the wagon. The revelers laugh and sing and another holiday season in East Sacramento rings true.

The East Sac rides are completely closed for 2017. Call first thing in January 2018 to get on board for next Christmas.

For more information, visit Top Hand Ranch online at tophandranch.com, email tophandranch@aol.com or call 496-0102.



Loading the wagon



Crystal Newborn harnesses Dash.

Photos by Ellen Cochrane