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# Santa Claus leads hayride through wintry wonderland in Lee

By DEREK CUNNINGHAM  
Democrat Staff Writer

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LEE — Granted, there are many ways to hitch a ride to the North Pole with perhaps the easiest being a dozen reindeer strapped to a flying sleigh.

But for those kids, moms and dads without magical reindeer at their disposal, the Demeritt Hill Farm in Lee provided a surefire alternative on Sunday to the real thing by offering a local, family-oriented tour of Santa's backyard.

For the past four years, the 126-acre farm off Route 155 has convinced Santa to journey to the Seacoast and lead a hayride through his wintry wonderland.

The hayride is part of a package called the Christmas Experience, where, for \$95, families get a Christmas tree, a wreath, an ornament, storytime with Mrs. Claus and a hayride through the farm's orchard and nature trails.

The jolly ol' elf, Santa himself, drove the tractor pulling the haywagon.

The experience offered families a little break from the hustle and bustle of the season, according to the farm's manager Mike Lynch. They can get away from the malls and the commercial aspect of the holidays, he added, and "enjoy a nice hayride."



**Following a reading of "T'was The Night Before Christmas" to those attending the fourth annual Christmas Experience, Mrs. Claus offered candy canes and an ornament off a tree to children, including 2-year-old Brooklyn Northcutt. Sunday's hayrides concluded the three-week event at the DeMeritt Hill Farm in Lee.**

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The fourth annual Christmas Experience ran the first three weekends in December. Sunday's event represented the last hayride of the year for Santa, who likely needed to begin preparations for the ultimate sleighride on Christmas Eve.

**(Steve Drozell/Staff  
photographer)**

Two families reserved seats for the final ride, including Ben and Kelly Northcutt, of Lee, who brought their two-year-old daughter Brooklyn.

"We thought it would be something new and interesting," Kelly said.

"[Brooklyn] has had a fascination with talking about Santa," added her grandmother, Jan O'Brien.

During the ride, the children kept a look out for reindeer as Santa steered his tractor through the woods and a snow-covered orchard, joking all the way.

"We were looking for Christmas trees, and there are apple trees," he quipped at one point. "Santa is lost."

Shane Fahey, 2 1/2, accompanied by his father Jeff and his brother Collin, 8, believed he caught a glimpse of a reindeer in the forest.

"I want to go again," he said after the ride.

The Christmas Experience is part of Demeritt Hill Farm's ongoing effort to add agri-tainment alongside its annual fruit harvests, Lynch said.

They offer a Halloween hayride in the fall, and horse-drawn carriage trips during the peach and apple harvest.

Currently, the farm sells pre-cut Christmas trees, but they are developing a crop of choose-and-cut trees that Lynch hopes will be ready in three seasons.

The farm, owned by Meg and Roy Wilson of Long Island, N.Y., also maintains a number of educational nature trails, which are open to the public year-round.

Along the trails are wooden cutouts of dinosaurs, an enchanted forest depicting fairy-tale characters and 24 signposts describing various aspects of wildlife and forest management.

Lynch said turnout for the Christmas Experience is always excellent and the event is a fun way to wrap up the season.

Once Santa heads back north, the farm will begin to prepare for next fall. On Jan 2, they will start pruning the orchard, Lynch said, and they will plant and fertilize their crops when the snow melts in the spring.

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