



UNIQUELY MURRIETA

BY JOHN HUNNEMAN

Each December Santa travels the streets of Murrieta, spreading holiday cheer, collecting Christmas wishes and accepting donations to fill the shelves of the local food bank.

This month, for nearly two weeks, an armada of Santas will leave most weeknights-- not from the North Pole -- from the Murrieta Community Center, and fan out across the city making more than 130 stops in neighborhoods across the community.

At each stop Santa will climb down from his sleigh to hear the hopes of small children and pose for pictures, while a high school choir sings holiday favorites and Frosty and Rudolph entertain the crowds.

It is a tradition unique to Murrieta and one that started much smaller, soon after the city incorporated.

Murrieta became a city on July 1, 1991.

That winter, looking to establish holiday traditions in the community, officials developed the concept of the “Santa Run”

That year, on chilly night close to Christmas, Murrieta’s first mayor, Jerry Allen – who was also a Murrieta fire captain – climbed on the back of a vintage firetruck and began a one night journey up and down every street in the small city of just over 23,000.

Dressed in a Santa suit, Allen clung to the back of the firetruck with one hand and waved to residents, many of whom had no idea what was going on, with the other.



Residents, once they figured out what was happening, embraced the tradition. For many families the “Santa Runs” have become an important part of holiday season.

As Murrieta grew, more nights and more Santas were required to make the rounds.

Santa road on antique firetrucks, including a 1923 Seagrave, for more than a decade. At first the trucks would stop whenever they saw a crowd of children. Soon after, signs were put up designating where Santa would be stopping. Eventually large white stars were painted on the streets to show where families should gather to await the Jolly Elf.

The vintage firetrucks used in the early days would sometimes break down on the route. Even when they were running, the engine fumes were not something Santa and the crowd of children and parents wanted to inhale. City officials looked around for an alternative and eventually borrowed an idea from the city of Paramount, which had a train-like vehicle that pulled a couple of trailers behind it to various shopping centers in that community.

Murrieta used a trailer—and eventually trailers – decked out as a sleigh and pulled by a pick-up truck to make the “Santa Run.”

The “sleigh” allowed room for a choir and more volunteers to help collect food and hand out candy-canes.

This year two or three trailers will be used on weeknights between December 10th and 19th to bring Santa and his entourage – all of them volunteers – around the city of nearly 115,000 residents, helping to make the holiday season bright for thousands of children of all ages.