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Polar Express train sparkles with holiday cheer at Blackberry Farm



What a doubly good weekend *it was*. The four-day respite that accompanies Thanksgiving is always welcome, especially since it involves the celebration of family, friends and all those other things we cherish most, like food and naps.

The holiday season has officially begun, as Black Friday's door-busting hysteria confirmed. This seasonal segue always happens quickly, as fall foliage is replaced by the glittering lights of Christmas.

Thousands of twinkling strings are being hung throughout our communities this weekend. Soon, neighborhoods and towns will be aglow.

As magical as the transformation is, we're three weeks behind Cori Buis. She's the maintenance coordinator at the Fox Valley Park District's Blackberry Farm, where a dazzling display of holiday cheer will be unveiled during the first two weekends in December (5-6 and 12-13) when the Polar Express train makes its rounds.

Shortly after Halloween, Buis began swapping pumpkin decorations for Yuletide lights. "Lots and lots and lots of lights," she says, having lost count. "They run along the pathway from the park entrance all the way to the train depot. It's an amazing sight when everything is lit up."

Those thousands of tiny, glittering lights coalesce to create the sparkling views that turn Blackberry Farm into a winter wonderland.

The Polar Express train is awash in Christmas lights as well, each rail car adorned with a swash of bright holiday spirit as passengers ride to the virtual North Pole. Like old times, their ticket is punched as they board the train, and off they go into another world.

In a heartwarming parallel to the little boy in the famous book and film, children will hear the screeching metal wheels of the train ... and then they'll actually witness Santa in person – and his sleigh – in the Early Streets Museum.

"Santa's sleigh is set up in the blacksmith shop," Buis said. "It's always a surreal experience for the kids. The expression on their faces ... they're so wide-eyed and awestruck. And they always ask 'Is that really Santa's sleigh?'"

For the first time, the magical journey around the periphery of Lake Gregory won't be a plunge into total darkness, thanks to a mystical network of spotlights. Christmas music will reverberate throughout the park and on the train serenading passengers with holiday melodies.

Per tradition, the old favorites remain, including the storyteller in the one-room schoolhouse who will regale guests with readings from "The Polar Express." A pair of holiday toy train displays will be featured – one a village layout and the other made of Legos.

"We've been preparing Blackberry Farm over three weeks for this," Buis said. "But the best part is seeing how much people enjoy it – kids and adults alike."

You *will* believe in Santa after a ride on the Polar Express train. The timeless charm this classic story exudes is based on the power of belief – something that resonates across generations and cultures. The show of lights – and holiday spirit – is positively enlightening.

Catch the Polar Express train at Blackberry Farm from 4 to 7 p.m. on Dec. 5-6 and Dec. 12-13. For information, call (630) 892-1550.

ABOUT THE AACVB:

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