

All aboard the Santa train

The Santa train keeps a rollin'.

Now in its seventh year, the Via Rail Santa Train is still going strong - out through the snow to pick up Santa and bring him back to Prince George.

Hilary Leighton - the brains behind the trains - describes the family experience as "quite wonderful."

Depending on clearance, the 20-minute train ride heads either west towards Miworth or east towards Upper Fraser, when - by happy chance of fate - the train encounters St. Nicholas at a railway crossing.

"The kids all look out the window and there's Santa - at a crossing - and he's waving," Leighton said. "He gets on the train and he's got candy canes. The kids go nuts."

Back in the decorated dome car the Salvation Army has treats, caroling and twanging guitars.

Everybody involved - Via employees, the car cleaners, Salvation Army personnel - donates their time. And Leighton says that is part of the reason the event works so well.

"It's a beautiful event because nobody does too much and nobody gets

burnt out by it."

On Friday and Sunday nights, the passenger trains from Jasper and Prince Rupert sit overnight at the station.

"Because they're passenger trains," Leighton said, "we have to make sure that if they get way-laid on their way to us, we still have time to get them cleaned up and get them going."

The trains are cleaned and decorated and leave to find Santa at 7:45 p.m., 8:45 p.m. and 9:45 p.m. This year however, the trains will be leaving the station at a much earlier date. Due to scheduling difficulties, the trains will depart Friday November 28 and Sunday November 30, several weeks earlier than in years past.

Tickets for the popular event go on sale at 11 a.m. Sunday at Hewlett's Excel Tire on Central and Leighton predicts the line-up will around the block. There is a limit of six tickets per person. Tickets cost \$5 and are limited to 75 per departure. The event helps raise between \$3,000 and \$4,000 for the Salvation Army.


"Usually we sell out in 20 to 30 minutes," Leighton said.



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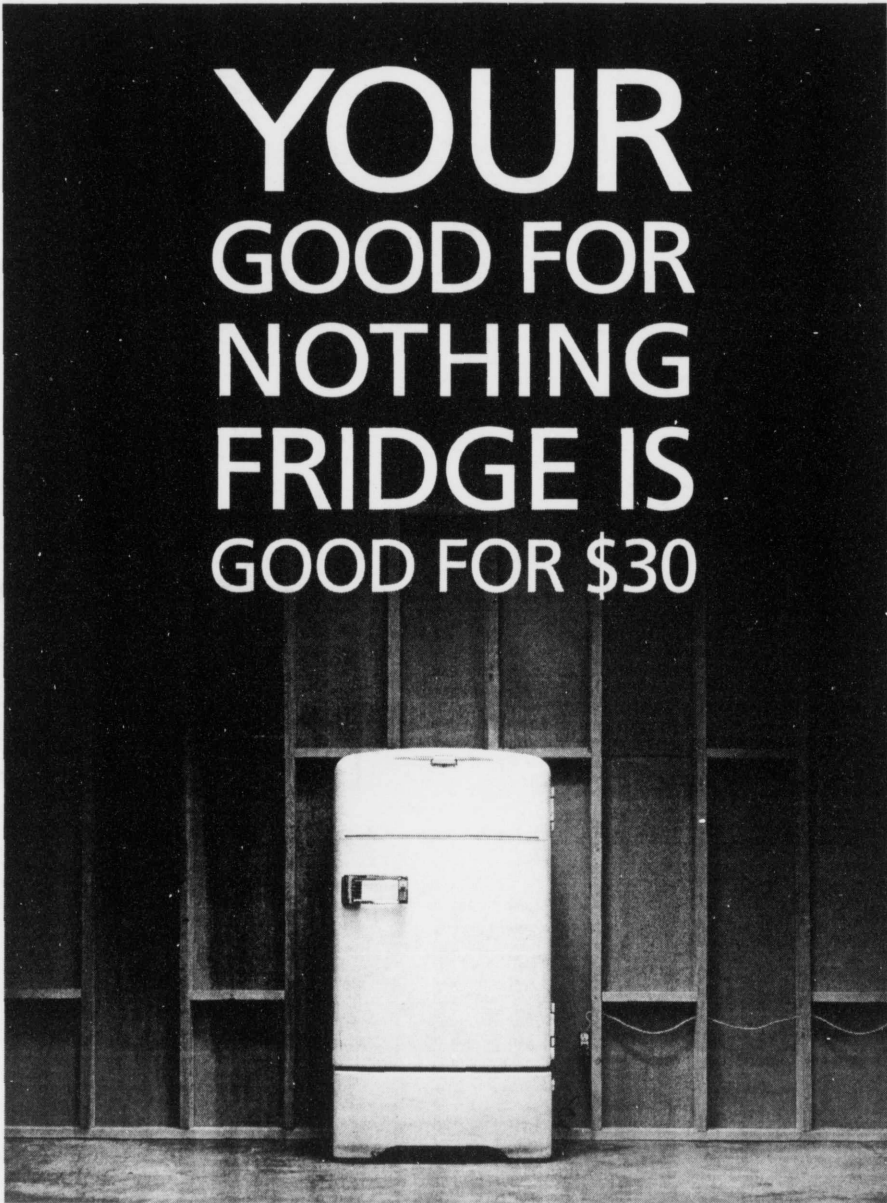
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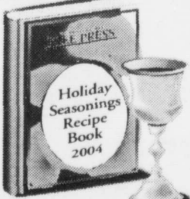
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