

ALL ABOARD!

Photo By: The Polar Express™

The POLAR EXPRESS

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Photos Courtesy Of: City of Grapevine - North Pole Express

A long deep roar winds through frozen mountain tops as children wait below peering out of their bedroom windows with anticipation reserved for only this night each year. They are waiting for the train, of course, The Polar Express that will take them to Santa's home and workshop in the North Pole, a special place where one can hear the precious jingle of the reindeers' bells if one truly believes.

Mystical and magical, the classic children's story, *The Polar Express*, has inspired holiday attractions around the world. While its terrain may be flatter than that in the famous book, Texas too dedicates time each year to bringing this beloved Christmas story to life.

THE STORY

Although most stories widely labeled as classics were written quite some time ago, the author of *The Polar Express*, Chris Van Allsburg, wrote the celebrated story more recently in 1985. A native of Grand Rapids, Michigan, the story begins in Van Allsburg's own hometown. The book quickly began winning awards, including the coveted Caldecott Medal (1986), and has since sold over 7 million copies worldwide. Listed as a *New York Times* Best Seller and Best Illustrated Book, the story remains popular 30 years later.

Van Allsburg is frequently quoted for explaining the story's humble beginnings. "*The Polar Express* began with the idea of a train standing alone in the woods," he said. "I asked myself, 'What if a boy gets on that train? Where does he go?'"

In 2004, *The Polar Express* became a major motion picture, receiving an Oscar nomination as well as winning a Grammy for its soundtrack. A month after the movie release, a related video game also hit the market.

But likely most important is the primary message of the story. Van Allsburg has been known to describe *The Polar Express* as a story about faith, and the imagination required to sustain it. He also sees it as a story about a world where magic can and does happen. Children live in their personal imaginary worlds, but that magic and hope is often lost as they grow into adults. The book is about keeping that sentiment alive for as long as possible.



EXPERIENCE AND TRADITION

There are several locations right here in Texas that will allow little ones to experience the magic found on The Polar Express.

Grapevine

"As the train departs and the anticipation of arriving at the North Pole builds, elves will welcome the guests and sing traditional Christmas songs," Grapevine Marketing Director Leigh Lyons said as she described the city's North Pole Express.

As the train nears its destination, "The North Pole," Mrs. Claus greets the children and hands out special silver bells (thought by the children to belong to one of Santa's reindeer) sporting the popular message from the story, "We Believe."

"Guests then arrive at the North Pole and walk along a snowy Christmas tree trail, where, as they wait for an appearance by Santa, families are entertained with songs and magical Christmas moments," said Lyons.

Residing in Grapevine, also known as the Christmas Capital of Texas, this event is one of nearly 1,500 holiday-themed offerings the area provides during the holiday season. Riders of the North Pole Express have the opportunity to explore a plethora of other Christmas activities without ever leaving the area.

The North Pole Express runs on board the Grapevine Vintage Railroad. Unique from its start, this ride begins at the Historic Cotton Belt Depot platform with beautifully decorated Victorian Rail coaches.

Lyons explains that there are two locomotives that pull the train, either 'Puffy,' one of the oldest steam engines still in operation today, which began its time on the rails back in 1896, or 'Vinny,' a vintage diesel locomotive from 1953. "Passengers step back in time as they ride in the authentic 1920s Victorian-style coaches, either in one of four first-class coaches or two touring."

Palestine & Lubbock

In Palestine, dancing chefs deliver hot chocolate and a cookie to train guests while music from the 2004 film plays en route to the North Pole. A conductor even comes by to punch each child's ticket. As the trip continues, the iconic book is read by the voice of actor Liam Neeson as the cabin's chef turns the pages, so all riders can see the illustrations.



Janet Gregg, Special Events Manager for the Texas State Railroad, which hosts both the Palestine event and a similar one in Lubbock, stressed that a single ride can make for several days' worth of family fun. "Read the book with children and watch the movie together," Gregg said. Taking children shopping to help pick out the pajamas that the family plans to wear for the actual ride can be a memorable activity too.

Gregg explains that for many families, this experience has become a family tradition. "They come every year, all dressed in matching jammies," she said. As the second largest licensed The Polar Express™ event in the nation, Gregg said the Palestine trip (celebrating its ninth year in 2015) truly captures the spirit of the season. She notes that even those without younger ones can experience the excitement, especially through the eyes of the children around them.

After visiting the North Pole, Santa and his helper elf join the guests on the train. Santa personally greets each child and delivers a bell cut from his very own sleigh, his or her first gift of Christmas.

"Last year more than 58,000 people rode The Polar Express™ over a seven-week period," Gregg said. "If your family loves the book and the movie, they will love this event."

Out in West Texas, departing from just outside of Lubbock, in Wolforth, the Texas State Railroad also hosts the West Texas Polar Express™ train ride. Like its counterpart in Palestine, children embark on an unforgettable journey, which includes a special golden ticket, caroling, and a visit with Santa.

In addition to the unforgettable adventure, families can look forward to a bit of history. The Texas State Railroad operates the only consistently run steam engines in the state. "Riding one of our Piney Woods Steam Excursions really does give you an idea of what train travel, as a regular mode of travel, was like for our parents and grandparents back in the golden age of steam when everyone rode trains to get from one place to another," Gregg said.

So if you are looking for a fun treat this holiday season, considering boarding a train to the North Pole. You may just experience the magic and wonder of youth all over again!