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a kind of post-holiday respite. While there are elves working all day long, no one gets snappy or rude; they smile and move forward with the festivities.

I believe that one of the best things about this endeavor is that Christmas dinners are delivered to anyone in the county who requests one. From the far reaches of the up-country hill-tops to the western hills of Wallace and Copperopolis, volunteer drivers load up their sleighs with all the fixin's and head over the rivers and through the woods to drop off the goodies. Many drivers do this every year; you will frequently hear tales of brightened faces as folks who might not be able to get out of their homes open their doors to greet the givers. Those givers humbly share the spirit of this blessed season; the receivers instantly feel like they're part of a community again, even if they're still eating at home. Anyone can call 728-2633 to request a delivery, but don't wait till Christmas Eve to call; do it now.

It's a misty-eyed event for me; I can never get over the number of enthusiastic people who show up to assist in preparing, serving and

cleaning up after this memorable meal. It's like popping into the last 10 minutes of a production of "A Christmas Carol," except that everyone is already filled to the brim with a wonderful feeling, that warm glow cast from people sharing and coming together. Whether it's the tight-knit kitchen crew carving the turkeys – the birds are cooked all over the county and transported to the hall – the smiling hosts and hostesses helping folks find what they need or the singers grinning as they sing "Sleigh Ride," one cannot leave the event without a lump in your throat.

The whole affair is presented free of charge, but another incredible beauty of this event is that those who can always manage to contribute heartily so that another feast can be presented next year. I've talked with entire families that arrive – complete with stunned out-of-town guests in tow – and donate at least what they might have spent at a restaurant to the cause. It's truly paying it forward.

I know you're loosening your belt already, but I just got word of another foody event coming in the New Year, and since it's the first to come across my desk – and because you

might consider tickets to be a worthwhile Christmas gift – I'll alert you to the San Andreas Firefighters Association's crab feed, set for Feb. 2 at the San Andreas Town Hall. There seem to be 101 crab feeds staged as the Dungeness season peaks early each new year and every one of them leaves crustacean cravers full of their favorite. This one helps the association purchase much-needed new equipment to keep the volunteer firefighters safe and capable of protecting their friends and neighbors.

I've crawled into burning buildings with firefighters during training exercises and I'll say those adventures were pretty fun for this guy with a notepad. But these men and women don't take their responsibilities lightly; they do this to save lives and protect property. Considering the vast majority of the staff at the San Andreas Fire Protection District serves as volunteers merely drives the point home



Courtesy photo

Most members of the San Andreas Fire Protection District help protect their fellow residents' homes as volunteers.

that this is a crab feed to support. It's a nice way to say thanks.

Tickets to the all-you-can eat feast are \$35 at 754-4693; there are no tickets sold at the door, so you'd better call before all the seats are filled.

Until February, we can rest assured that there are neighbors willing to help present a feast for the Christmas holiday. I say we all join hands to thank these people for

doing their darnedest to load a day with cheer. Then, when we get to the crab feed in February, we can join hands again to congratulate and appreciate those who work so we're all safe and snug in our beds every night of the year. We're lucky; God bless us, every one.

Reach Mike Taylor at mtaylor@sierralodestar.com.

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Santa's ready for wishes in Sonora

A group of carolers from New Hope Community Church of the Nazarene greeted me as I left Dorthea's Christmas store last week. Their joy clearly exhibited the Christmas cheer you can find any day in downtown Sonora.

In addition to Santa Claus' visits to the Junction Shopping Center every weekend through Sunday, he will visit with children and adults alike at Courthouse Park from 3 to 5:30 p.m. every day through Saturday, from 11 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Sunday and 11:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Monday so that last-minute requests can get in on time.

"Families love it," said Sheala Wilkinson, special programs coordinator for the city of Sonora. "We've been doing it for 14-plus years. We get people from out of the area coming up to see him. It's a downtown tradition and he does other festive things like milk and cookies with the kids at the Heart Rock Café."

Milk and cookies with the big guy can be shared from 1 to 2 p.m. Saturday at 1 S. Washington St.

Tuolumne Talk

Harmony Wheeler



"Santa brings the festivities downtown to spread the cheer to everybody downtown," Wilkinson said.

There's plenty more to see downtown, too. The Best Dressed Window or Holiday Display contest for downtown shops just ended, leaving behind a host of beautiful displays to enjoy on an afternoon shopping trip. The year-round Christmas wonderland, Dorthea's Christmas, has plenty to offer. The ornament, trinket and décor shop fills with customers this time of year.

"I buy all my ornaments here for my themed tree," said shopper Annette Penrod. "Every year I come

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here and buy three or four fishing ornaments. And I come back all year long to look around. Everything is unique to me. You can't find it anywhere else. I've never seen another store like it."

Penrod brought friend and first-timer Lisa Craig in to check the place out. Craig had similar reactions to her friend's recommendation of the shop.

"It's pretty incredible," said Craig, who was looking for owl-themed ornaments. "I've never seen so many ornaments before."

Another customer commented that she brings her kids to the store every year to let each one choose their own ornament. The quaint



Dorthea's Christmas is a year-round destination in Sonora.

Photos by Harmony Wheeler



Myriad ornaments with characters from everything from "South Park" to "Family Guy" wait to perch upon customers' trees.

that store. The Sonora store came about approximately 25 years ago, around 1987. Both stores are family operated. The family has a German background. According to Bennet, Christmas is a big deal in Germany and, consequently, played a large role in his own home growing up.

"It was a natural thing to open a Christmas store," Bennet said. "It's a happy place to come. At a grocery store, you don't want to be there, but this is a wonderful place to work and a happier, friendlier place you want to be."

Send your Tuolumne County events to Harmony Wheeler at hwheeler@sierralodestar.com and mtaylor@sierralodestar.com.



Dan Bennett's family has operated Dorthea's Christmas since about 1987.

Santa Claus at Courthouse Park

WHEN: 3 to 5:30 p.m. through Saturday, 11 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Sunday and 11:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Monday

WHERE: Courthouse Park, Washington Street, Sonora

COST: Free

MORE INFO: sonoraca.com or call Sheala Wilkinson at 532-7725

shop sells other items to go with other holidays at other times of the year – like Halloween or Easter – but Christmas is when everything really comes to life at Dorthea's. The shop boasts ornaments of every kind, color, theme and shape, from sports to specialty ornaments. It even has Angry Birds and "Family Guy" ornaments.

Store owner Dan Bennet said his mother, Dorthea, founded the store in Folsom in 1967. His sister now owns

Tackle your gear at this Sutter Creek shop



William Heinselman

Solid Gold Fishing

I recently had a routine exam with my doctor in Jackson. After the exam, he told me he read my article on fly fishing and that he bought a fly rod and reel. I asked him where he made the purchase and he told me he bought everything in the city of Sutter Creek. Suddenly, I had to investigate another fishing store for readers.

I made the drive from Valley Springs to the quaint and very much historical city of Sutter Creek. Having not gotten the name or location of the store where my medicine man bought his gear, I wasn't really sure where I was going. Having not visited Sutter Creek in quite some time (the lakes aren't as close to the

city as I'd like), I could see that this busy town hadn't changed much at all, save for the bypass shuttling cars away from downtown. The streets were lined with the parked cars of people who were out and about, enjoying the many small shops that line

both sides of old Highway 49. The first place I went into was a gift shop and the owner greeted me with a bright smile.

"Do you know of a store that sells fly rods?" I asked. After a very nice conversation, she pointed me to a place about a half-block away – a store named Sierra Mountain Outdoors.

Upon entering the store, owner Mike Anderson greeted me. I immediately noticed some fly rods standing vertically behind the counter and began to look around Mike's store. I saw everything an outdoorsman or woman could want: fly-fishing tackle, hiking

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