

## Special Delivery: Southern States' Customer delivers to the White House

By Laura Scaletti

Each year after Thanksgiving, tourists flock to Washington, DC, to see the Nation's capital dressed up for the Christmas season. Southern States customer Midge Harmon of Harmon's Hayrides and Carriages in Brandy Station, VA plays a unique role in "sprucing" up the White House. For the past three years, the Harmons have had the honor of delivering the Christmas tree to the most famous house in the country. Although much fanfare is made about the growers of the official White House Christmas Tree each year, the tree's final journey to the Blue Room is equally as noteworthy.

Not to be confused with the National Christmas Tree, which the President lights on the White House ellipse every year, the White House Christmas Tree is the First Family's official tree. It's typically positioned in the Blue Room, a public space for all White House visitors to see.



On November 27, 2009, First Lady Michelle Obama and daughters Sasha and Malia celebrated a White House tradition as they accepted delivery of the official White House Christmas Tree. Midge's son, Scott Harmon proudly delivered the tree to the Obamas via horse-drawn carriage. The 18.5 foot Douglas Fir, from Shepherdstown, WV, made an impressive entrance as it made its way onto the White House grounds and to the North Portico pulled by Harmon's Belgian Draft Horses Wall Street and Karry.

"Tree Delivery Day" began early for Midge and Scott at their 125-acre farm in Culpeper County, VA. Prior to loading Wall Street and Karry onto the trailer to DC, the Belgians were fully prepped and pampered during a "spa" morning. The Washington metropolitan area and its suburbs had experienced an unusually mild Thanksgiving week, which enabled the team to be bathed earlier in the week.

With their coats gleaming from the morning grooming session, Midge then began the process of braiding each horse for the event. Attention to detail is a must when getting the horses ready for any event, but when it comes to White House prep there is a special pride that comes with the

preparation. The manes were braided with red "flags" that rise above a French braid along the crest of the neck, and the tails were done in a "Scotch knot" complete with festive red bow.

The next step for Wall Street and Karry was to have their harnesses put on in preparation for the work they faced once they got to the White House. Each black harness was immaculate for the event, fully polished and shined. Sleigh bells and red bows on their harnesses completed the holiday motif.

After the horses were loaded onto the trailer, it took approximately an hour for the Harmons to make the journey north to Washington, DC.

According to Midge, "It's once you get to DC that this event becomes more than just our ordinary work."

As with any function at the White House, security is a top priority. According to Midge, everyone involved in the Christmas tree delivery must pre-send their information to the White House. This enables the secret service to run background checks on all individuals who would need access to the White House grounds for the ceremony. Karry and Wall Street also were part of the security inspection as the entire truck and trailer was inspected by bomb sniffing dogs prior to being allowed through the White House gates.

After going through the security checkpoint, the Belgians were unloaded and hitched to a wagon unique to this special event. The wagon, owned by the National Parks Service's Oxon Hill Farm, in Oxon Hill, MD, has been modified to meet the special needs of carrying the large trees that are displayed in the Blue Room each year. Before the team was hitched to the wagon, it was adorned with "White House Christmas Tree 2009" signs and preloaded with the Christmas tree. Christmas wreaths, sleigh bells and red bows had also been added to the wagon to provide finishing touches.

Once hitched up to the wagon, Scott and his team were ready to make their delivery. As Scott drove his team towards the North Portico, he was dressed in his Dickensian best in top hat and coachman's cape. The team looked like an image from an old fashioned Christmas card.

As the First Lady and her daughters accepted the tree, Karry and Wall Street waited patiently unbothered by the constant flashing from photographer's cameras and noise from the television crews. "They're used to all the excitement," said Midge Harmon. "Our business provides wedding carriages and hayrides, so all our horses are quiet, even with the excitement at the White House," Midge added.



WV for donating the tree, the couple joined the First Lady for a tea

reception in the White House. The Sunbacks, both in their eighties, have won the honor of presenting a tree to the White House four times, the most of any member of the National Christmas Tree Association. Unfortunately for the Harmons, there is no time for cookies and tea with the First Lady as they must continue to tend to their horses as the event wraps up.

As soon as all the photographs have been taken and the dignitaries have been ushered into the White House, Scott unhitched the team. Scott then ground drove Karry and Wall Street back to the truck and trailer. While they were making their way back to the trailer, the White House grounds crew unloaded the tree from with wagon with a cherry picker. Once off the wagon, the tree was carried into the Blue Room where florists and decorators eagerly awaited its arrival.

The theme for the tree was "Reflect, Rejoice and Renew." The tree featured over 800 silver and gold ornaments that had been previously used as decorations in past White House Christmases. The ornaments were sent to community groups to be redecorated. Once completed the ornaments celebrated landmarks, monuments and institutions across America.

Although the ceremonial Christmas Tree delivery to the White House is business as usual for Karry and Wall Street, it has a special meaning to the Harmon family. Delivering a Christmas Tree to the First Lady had long been a dream of Midge's late husband Jack. Midge said, " This is probably the biggest thing for a team of horses to be invited to do. I'm really proud, and it was always a dream of Jack's". The Harmons first received the invitation to deliver the White House Christmas Tree after they provided two carriages to the 2007 White House Congressional picnic. After successfully taking Congressional families for rides along Circle Drive, the White House grounds crew knew the Harmons were ready to be the tree delivery team.

In addition to their involvement with the White House Christmas Tree delivery and the Congressional picnic, the Harmons typically have 500 jobs a year at various venues. Services offered by the Harmons include horse drawn hayrides, vis-à-vis carriages, driving lessons, wedding carriages, South Asian Baraats, funeral carriages and more.



A family owned and operated business, Harmon's Hayrides and Carriages has been going strong for 38 years. The family has always been passionate about horses and wanted to share their love of horses with others through their business. When the family resided in Centerville, VA, their daughter was a student at Virginia Tech looking for a way to make extra money. The family decided a creative way to bring in additional money was to have hayrides through Bull Run Regional Park. The popularity of these hayrides at the park showed the Harmons that they could bring the business home to accommodate the increase in demand. Once the rides were brought to the family's farm in Brandy

Station the business started to grow to the booming business it is today.

The Harmon family owns a total of 24 horses ranging from Belgians, to white Percheron mares to a Miniature Horse that drives and has performed at the Kennedy Center. All of these horses are powered by Southern States horse feed. Customers of the Calverton, VA Southern States store, the Harmon horses eat Legends Show and Pleasure Pellets. Midge talked to Southern States nutritionist Dr. Marty Adams who recommended the Legends® Show and Pleasure Pelleted Horse Feed to meet the unique needs of her draft horses. Midge commented, "With the higher fat content in Southern States' pellets, my draft horses are no longer having problems tying up".

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