

THE MERCI TRAIN

A BIG THANK YOU FROM FRANCE

BY

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NOTE TO THE READER:

This book was written in 1999, and the history reported herein is the best information available to the author at that time. The information reported was found in period newspapers and magazines. Although the history is static, much of it has been "lost" to the general public for many years. Through the efforts of others and myself, more of it is "coming to light" with increasing frequency.

At about the same time that I obtained the copyright for the book from the Library of Congress, I also founded the internet website about the Merci Train. Since 1999, more than 50,000 people have visited the website, and many of them have shared with me knowledge that they knew about the Merci Train's history in the various states.

I have not as yet revised the book, but I have tried to make sure that any new information that comes to me is entered into the website on an appropriate page. As an example, when a visitor to the website reported to me that he remembered seeing a sculpture in the Student Center while he was a student at the University of Indiana, I was able to confirm with the University its presence there, plus information about the art and a photograph of it, which is now displayed on the website

Also during the years since 1999, several "new" collections of Merci Train gifts have been reported to me and confirmed, and several of the Merci boxcars have been renovated or restored, and some of them relocated, for various reasons. Some of those relocated are the Alabama, California, Georgia, Montana, Utah, and Wisconsin. Please visit the website to learn of the new home sites of those boxcars. Although this book contains an appendix citing information about the boxcar, please always check the appropriate page of my website www.mercitrain.org for current location information of any of the boxcars or collections of that boxcar's gifts before making the trip to view it.

I would hate to have anyone spend hours of travel to visit one of the boxcars or collections, only to find out when arriving that it had been moved to a new location. I know that to be a frustrating experience. If you do not have access to the internet, please call me at 813-715-0612 and I will give you the information that you desire.

It is my sincere hope that your reading of this book will bring you much enjoyment and help you to better understand the circumstances and values that resulted in the unselfish acts of the peoples of both America and France during the years following World War Two. I believe the attitudes of compassion and gratitude are sadly lacking in the world in which we live today. It is my hope that my reporting of the exercise of those qualities by people of the middle 20th century will inspire people of today to look for opportunities to promote the welfare of others.

Signed:

Earl R. Bennett Sr.

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CHAPTER 1

A GRAND DISPLAY OF FRIENDSHIP

In the world of today, where the word "American" is spit out in disgust by many people around the globe, it is hard to imagine that in 1949, only 50 years ago, tens of thousands of grateful French citizens lavished some of their most prized possessions upon us Americans. It was a monumental effort to "thank the Americans for their help" during and after World War Two. They gave so much, in fact, that it took forty nine railroad cars to contain it all. Most of those gifts of "Merci" came directly from the hearts of individuals. This book is an attempt to relate and revive the history of the event, and to tell some of the many touching stories that evolved in the giving and receiving of the gifts.

During World War Two the German Nazis defeated the French military forces and raped and pillaged the resources of France, as well as its citizens. The Nazis took most of the food that the French had and used it to feed their own army of occupation. They also took any machinery that was of any value and shipped it back to Germany to be used in the war effort against the allies. When the Nazis were finally driven out by the Allies they stole everything that they could carry. What they could not take with them they tried to destroy. France and its citizens had indeed been raped, ravaged, and had seen almost everything they owned reduced to rubble.

The shocked survivors had very little food left to them and almost no machinery to enable them to grow more. To make a bad situation worse there were no factories left to build new farm machines. They struggled along with aid from foreign governments, primarily The United States. The Russian Communists were sending some wheat and money to the French Communist Party with instructions to work to install a communist government there in France. The French Communists were also under orders to disrupt the ruling government by stirring up dissatisfaction and starting labor strikes which would further weaken the economy and the government. By 1947 conditions there were deplorable.

The U.S. government, greatly concerned that France might be taken over by the Communists and become a puppet state of the Soviet Bloc, had initiated the Marshall Plan, an aid program to assist the war torn countries of Europe through grain shipments to France and Italy (the same forces were rampant in the latter country, as well).

Our government's relief agencies were shipping millions of tons of food with very little fanfare or publicity, compared to "a mere dribble from the Russians" according to Drew Pearson, famed American newspaper columnist and radio commentator. Perhaps even worse the Communists would often whisper to the people that the American relief goods had come from the Russians, and also that the "rich, fat, Americans" were doing nothing to help. The communists were building sympathy and support for themselves at American expense. All of our

government's effort were not enough, though, people were still hungry and lacked other basic necessities such as medical supplies, and sufficient clothing needs.

Upon hearing the facts of the Communist's subversive activities, many Americans wrote letters to elected officials and to newspaper "Letters" editors. One example was a letter Pearson had received from Dabney R. Yarborough Sr. of Columbia, SC, which Pearson published in his October 25, 1947 syndicated column: "As a rule the people of European countries where our food is sent hardly know where it comes from, and often are made to believe it is coming from Russia. It seems to me we should educate the people and tell them that the food is coming from a democratic country. Is it not possible to have the information printed in their language and have booklets in the sacks of flour and grain?"

When Pearson learned of the situation over there, he started asking audiences of his daily radio broadcasts and pleaded in his "Washington Merry-Go-Round" column for donations of food supplies to be sent to the destitute people of those countries. He believed so strongly in his idea that he donated \$10,000 of his own money to get the drive started. His theory was that such an act of friendship from the heart of America would help relieve the suffering, and play an important role in building new democracies in Europe.

His estimated 60 million radio listeners and an even larger newspaper audience responded with an outpouring of compassion that I am sure far exceeded Mr. Pearson's wildest expectations. Americans around the country opened their hearts, their pantries, and their purses. There even developed competition between states and cities within some states. It seemed that everyone was trying to outgive one another. People in Hawaii, which had not yet even become a state, donated at least two railroad cars filled with sugar.

On or about November 1st 1947, a special train pulling 11 freight cars of food, clothing, and medical supplies left Los Angeles headed for New York. It began picking up other cars as it traveled East and soon had so many cars that another train had to be generated, and then another, and another. The state of Texas alone donated 29 railroad cars full of supplies. Wealthy Ft. Worth newspaper magnate Amon G. Carter directed his City Editors to stir up competition by intimating that other cities, states, and districts were getting ahead of their cities efforts.

His Amon G. Carter Foundation alone donated 15 of those cars (holding a million pounds of foodstuffs) to, as his newspaper quoted him, "assuage the hunger and warm the hearts of Europeans in need." Each of the 100 pound sacks of wheat were stamped with the message (in English, French, Italian, and German) "100 lbs. net wheat flour, Ft. Worth, Texas, U.S.A. A Star Telegram & Amon G. Carter Foundation European Friendship Relief Fund."

But it wasn't only wealthy businessmen or large organizations that caught the spirit of the movement. Twenty two year old Betty Jane Holder, a college student in Montgomery, Alabama, heard of the plight of the French and solicited funds from her friends and classmates which enabled her to donate 7200 pounds of relief items to the Friendship Train. It was truly a "from the people of America" movement.

When the effort was completed, there were more than 700 railroad freight cars filled with

what had been donated. It had an estimated (1947) value of \$40 million. As Kathryn Doty, of Challis, Idaho, who wrote a paper in the 1980s about the two trains, said "What the (U.S.) government couldn't do in the two years after the war ended, the American people accomplished in just over two months--with the approval of, but absolutely no help from, congress."

It seems ironic that "The Berlin Airlift", a U.S. Government operation to provide sustenance to the cut-off people of the communist blockaded city, is well remembered by people who lived through the era and is well documented in history texts (and which took place only one year after The Friendship Train went to France and Italy), but The Friendship Train is all but unknown by the vast majority of people today.

Someone, perhaps Mr. Pearson, had dubbed the train "The Friendship Train". The first wave of the railroad cars were unloaded into the U.S. ship S.S. American Leader, whose name was changed to S.S. Friendship just for that single voyage to France. The goods continued to flow in to New York for months, and other ships followed the Friendship to Europe. It has been reported that, in all, the goods reached 14 European nations. All that I have read about the project leads me to believe that all of the labor and even the use of the ships was contributed at the expense of the owners of the companies doing the job.

Some Americans also accompanied the goods to France and helped to distribute it so that there could be no doubt that it all came from America. One of those Americans was the aforementioned Miss Holder. Added Note: During the Spring of 2000 I came into possession of a video of copied movie newsreel footage which showed a few of the American box cars being loaded onto a ship (presumably the S.S. Friendship). The video also showed the Friendship goods arriving in an unidentified city in France aboard trucks in convoy fashion. Leading the convoy however was a truck which had a special cover built over it to make it look like a railroad locomotive, and it had stars and stripes streamers draped over it to show (again I presume) that it was American. The few box cars on the S.S. Friendship may have been just a token for the French to see. Jean Trocome, Attache of the French consulate in San Francisco, is quoted in a Reno, Nevada Feb. 24, 1949 newspaper as saying that the Friendship Train was "without precedent in the history of the world. The French people were deeply touched."

The French people were indeed deeply moved by the generosity of the Americans. Not only had America sent her sons and machines of war to drive out the hated Nazis, but now, in 1947 they were providing the sustenance that would give them strength and time that they so desperately needed to nurse their own devastated agricultural system back to health.

The French consul to the city of Chicago was later trying to explain to a crowd gathered for a Merci Train reception in Huron, S.D. how deeply the French people felt about The Friendship Train and is quoted as saying "This train meant so much, particularly to the children of France, some of whom for the first time in their lives were able to taste cake and chocolate and have a little bit of extra sugar." In affluent America (and France) of the 21st Century it may be difficult to imagine the destitution that the people of Europe existed in after the war, but it did happen, and when the Friendship goods arrived many surely must have thought "How can we ever express the gratitude we feel?"

I had read that, in 1950, the Italian government responded by sending a pair of golden stallion statues which were placed at the Washington, D.C. end of the bridge across the Potomac River. In 1999 I viewed and photographed the statues, but found that there were not one pair of statues, but two. One pair is located at the end of The Arlington Memorial Bridge, the second pair is a few yards away at the end of the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Bridge.

In France a railway worker and Army Veteran, Andre Picard, had the idea of sending a "Merci" (Thank You) box car full of gifts to the people of America. A committee was formed and word began to be passed to the people of France. A French national radio commentator, a peer of Pearsons, heard of the idea and he began to talking it up on his radio programs. An article in the Nevada State Journal, published in Reno on the 24th of Feb. 1949, relates that a Mlle. Anne Marie Max who was visiting Nevada and "who is employed by the magazine 'Realities' in Paris, spent several months working on the 'Thank You Train' idea and did most of the publicity for it in France."

The idea from the very beginning was that the gifts which were to be sent should be something precious to the donors. They were to be gifts of sacrifice, things that were dear, and/or had special meaning to the donor. Another requirement the committee insisted upon was that the gifts must be something "of France." Perhaps that would explain why some people sent packages of French soil, and there were many seedling trees and plants that were native to France. It may have been their way of saying "Here, I want you, American friend, to have something that is a part of the France that you have helped us to save."

They may also have thought "Here is a way that we can do a small thing to show our appreciation for the Friendship goods." In fact, General Jean Joseph Viala (the consul quoted above) said that many of the gifts collected were from those same children who were the beneficiaries of food items from the Friendship Train. This will perhaps explain to the reader why the Merci Train contained so many toy items as we will see later on in this book.

The members of many trade unions used their talents to fashion special gift items, such as a seamstresses group which made and donated 49 silk wedding gowns. A group of fashion designers made 49 mannequin dolls, whose attire showed the fashion trends in France from 1700 to 1906. The dolls each stood 2 1/2 feet tall, were beautifully and masterfully crafted by the Syndicat de la Couture de Paris. A recent report says that the dolls were sent to the Brooklyn Museum, a division of The Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences.

To the surprise of the Merci Train Committee, tens of thousands of common citizens, as well as current and former dignitaries, clamored to have "their gift to The Americans" included in what was to be sent. In all the gifts numbered more than 52,000 and included items that ranged from a pair of worn wooden shoes to a jeweled Legion of Honor medal that had belonged to Napoleon.

The committee had special gift tags printed which had the Merci Train's symbol on it: a floral bouquet with a frontal view of a steam driven locomotive in the background. One of those tags were attached to, or accompanied, each gift and written on the tag was the name and address

of the donor of the gift. Some of the gifts were also accompanied by messages from the donors and efforts were made in several states to have the recipients of the gifts write thank you notes to the donors.

I don't know if a thank you note ever reached ten year old Helen Petit of Lyon, France, or not. According to one article I read, Helen sent a tan colored stuffed toy dog, and attached to the dog was a note from Helen which read "I am sending you one of my preferred children, my big Loulou. It seems that I was one year old when Meme offered it to me for my father who was a prisoner of war in Germany. I love my Loulou very much, but I offer it to you in gratitude for all that the Americans have done for my country and also because the dog represents fidelity. I thought that I would keep it all my life, so it is with sorrow that I embrace loulou for the last time. You will take good care of him and speak to him sometimes of his little French mistress. I am also sending you a picture of myself so that you can see me and show me to my Loulou. I know that you will take my place near him. Without knowing you, I love you and embrace you with all my heart. Helen Petit, 10 years - 71 Rue Massena - Lyon (Rhone) France." I have yet to see "Loulou" in any of the collections that I have viewed, so perhaps some American girl did indeed receive it, and may have even written to Helen.

There were also many valuable works of art as well as simple handmade gifts. The latter were made from what little the people had been able to hide from the Nazis or make with their bare hands. Some people evidently gave money while others volunteered their labor to help with the expense of refurbishing and decorating the box cars. Several accounts state that six million French people donated to the project. Since there weren't that many gifts it seems that many must have contributed however they could: money, labor, packing materials, etc.

Another indication of how deeply the cargo of "The Friend ship" was appreciated is a letter that accompanied France's Merci gifts. Ms. Janet Speery, Registrar at The Montana State Historical Society's museum, wrote an article for The Helena Independent Record newspaper in 1997 whose subject was the two trains. In the story, she quoted a letter written (in 1948) by Frenchman Marcel Henri Gounot addressed : "People of The United States of America, Receive here the expression of my gratitude and my very deepest thanks, for your courage to defend France and the liberty of the world. Know as in the past, that in the future, no matter what will happen, our friendship (in peace as in the war) and our solidarity will always be assured. If one day you need me, don't hesitate, I shall be at your entire service until my death. Long live America, Long live Liberty, and Long live France."

The resulting accumulation of artifacts, and the crating necessary to protect them during shipment, was of course more than enough to fill several box cars. Someone then had the idea of sending a box car to each of the American states from which the help came and to include Washington D.C. and Hawaii. It was also decided that they would use box cars of a special type that were nearly antiques by 1948 and something that many American veterans of both world wars would remember.

In 1949 there were many thousands of World War One veterans still living and many of

them had memories of being transported to the fighting fronts in the French box cars, so the sight of those "side door pullmans" after so many years was especially meaningful to them and they undoubtedly told their grandchildren many interesting stories that they remembered about riding in them. According to the U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs there are no more than 1600 of the "Doughboys" still living in 1998, and they are each close to 100 years old.

I have read that the "Forty and Eight" boxcars (as they are now known) were built between 1872 and 1885 and were designated to transport 40 Hommes (men) or 8 Chevaux (horses) as a sign on each car proclaimed. The American reader may or may not realize that European boxcars are much shorter than the freight cars of our own country and 40 men, or eight horses, would not have had such spacious accommodations as one might first think.

A description of the Texas Merci car, found in a booklet written by Andrew Dolak of the South Carolina La Societe des Quarante Hommes et Huit Chevaux (a group associated with The American Legion) describes the boxcar as follows: "It is 20 1/2 feet long, 8 1/2 feet wide, and 8 feet high inside. It runs on a 63 inch gauge track, which is standard for French railways. Its carrying capacity is 5 to 8 tons, as compared to 40 to 50 tons of the American WW I boxcars. The body is built of heavy (thick) wood planks attached to the inside of the angle iron frame cage. There is a six foot sliding door in the middle on each side. Four 21 inch openings at the top on each side, each fitted with hinged solid shutters that swing outward, allowed the "chevaux" to look out and watch the landscape go by." Inside the box car there are eight tie rings for the horses, four forward of the doors and four rearward.

Each box car had its own serial number which may have been assigned by the manufacturer or it may have been given the number by The French National Railroad Authority. I was told in 2000 that the PLM numbers on the box cars shows that they were used on the Paris, Lyon, Marseilles line of the FNRA.

I have found evidence that the French Merci Train Committee gave each car a number (1 to 49) that indicated its position in the train as it traveled from Paris to LeHavre and perhaps noted what U.S. state it was destined for as well. Washington State, in the extreme Northwestern U.S., received #49. Maine received Merci car #32.

The brake system consists of two brake shoes and, in the box cars' early history, were only used as a parking brake or emergency brake. The reader may have noticed that some of the box cars have a covered platform attached to one end of them. A brakeman rode in each of those compartments and was able to operate the brakes only on the car on which he was riding. French train masters made sure that every fourth or fifth car of a train was one of these "Brake Cars". This enabled the brakemen to help stop the train when given a signal from the engineer/driver.

Again quoting from Mr. Dolak's book, "All the cars were equipped with a coupling device on each end consisting of a hook with five 6 inch chain links. There is also a tightening device for drawing the cars closer together until the mushroom heads of the bumper snubbers come in contact. The mushroom head snubber is spring loaded, with the spring being inside the

snubber housing and permanently attached to the car frame. Each car carried two snubbers on each end."

I believe that sometime (probably in the interim of time between WWI and WW2) the box cars were outfitted with vacuum powered brakes and new coupling devices. Many of the cars that we have viewed still have the vacuum pipe lines for the brakes intact, and the newer couplings. The new vacuum brakes could be operated from the engine of the train and thus would have done away with the need for a person to ride on the brakeman's platform.

The railroad company evidently never bothered to remove those platforms from the cars that had them, nor did they remove the chains (described below) when new coupling devices were installed. I also believe that the above description of the bumpers was flawed, because when I looked at the under side of the Merci car in Maryland (and others since) I found that the two bumpers on one end of the boxcar were connected to a leaf spring (similar to those that are used on many automobiles) mounted horizontally under the floor of the boxcar. The right bumper was connected to one end of the spring, and the left bumper to the other end.

As I understand it, the hooks on the ends of the chains would be hooked into each other and then the tightening device would pull the cars together until the bumper/snubbers touched. The chains would connect the cars so that they could be pulled in tandem and the bumpers would keep the cars far enough apart that the chain hooks would not become disengaged. As the cars bumped together, such as when the train was stopping, the bumpers would flex the leaf spring and absorb some of the shock from the bump. This would of course cause passengers or cargo to tend to be shifted toward the front of the boxcar. At the same time the chains would become somewhat slackened. When the locomotive started pulling again that slack would be taken up and cause the cargo inside the boxcar to tend to be shifted towards the rear of the car. The newer coupling devices replaced the hooks and chains but, other than making the box cars easier to connect together, everything seems to have worked about the same.

Mr. Dolak's narrative continues: "Travel in these "sidedoor pullmans" was rough and the road bed was ill maintained in fighting front areas, as could be expected. But most of the discomfort resulted from the cars bumping together when the train slowed down or stopped and when the slack was taken out again as it started. This sometimes resulted in men or beasts being stacked up in the end of the car. Short trips were not too bad, but on long trips it was hell, even though provisions were made at stops at which the troops would be disembarked, fed, exercised, and enabled to take care of physical (toilet) needs. While en route these latter were limited to the side doors."

Having read his book, I know Mr. Dolak spoke from experience. He served in the U.S. Army in Europe during WW II. The box cars saw much service during World War One too, carrying troops and war horses to and from the fighting fronts. During World War Two they mostly carried men because gasoline powered trucks and tanks had diminished the need for horses.

The Merci Train Committee scoured French railroad yards, and were finally able to locate

the 49 cars they needed. Then they had each of the Forty & Eight cars repaired, repainted, and decorated with diagonal stripes running from the top of the car to the bottom at the other end of it. The stripe's colors were blue, white, and red. Printed over the stripes in black, on one side of the car, were the French words "Train de La Reconnaissance Francaise", which translated to English is roughly "The Train of French Recognition". On the stripe on other side of the car, in English, were the words "Gratitude Train."

The committee also had each car decorated with the colorful provincial seals of France's 40 provinces, twenty on each side. Many of the remaining Merci cars have the restored, or duplicated, plaques remounted on them. They also made sure that each box car had the familiar sign "40 Hommes, 8 Cheveaux" painted on it.

After reading copies of correspondence from France's Merci Train Committee members, which I found in Mississippi and Washington State Archives, it is my understanding that they intended right from the time it was decided to use the Forty & Eight type box cars, that the box cars would go to The American Legion's Forty and Eight Society. In most of the states, if not all, that is what happened.

In New Hampshire for instance, Governor Sherman Adams wrote to Grand Chef De Gare of the Grand Voiture of New Hampshire's Forty and Eight Society saying that the Merci box car would be given to that organization "to become a permanent reminder to the citizens of this state of the bonds of common interest and mutual respect which tie them to the people of France." Mr. Granville Stearns, the Chef de Gare, responded that "the Voiture gladly accepts this responsibility, and will take care of it as a lasting memorial to Franco-American friendship."

Perhaps the society in some states was not prepared to handle that responsibility. That may have been the case in Nebraska, which I will discuss later. The gifts within the box cars, if not designated for a particular individual or group (and some were), were to be distributed as the recipient states decided.

When the gifts were all collected and loaded into their box cars in Paris (one boxcar for each American state and one to be shared by The District of Columbia and The Territory of Hawaii), the Merci Train was moved to Le Havre and the boxcars were all loaded into the French ore carrier "Magellan". A large sign saying "MERCY AMERICA" was painted on its side and then off to America it sailed.

When the ship steamed into New York Harbor on February 3rd, 1949 it was greeted by a flotilla of small boats and tugboats. Also on hand were "fireboats" from New York City spraying streams of water from their fire fighting nozzles high into the air. The U.S. Air Force even sent some of its newly acquired jet fighters to fly in formation over the arriving ship, while thousands of people lined the shores and cheered their enthusiasm for the event.

The Lee Hat Company, the company who had sponsored Drew Pearson's radio programs during the time that he was asking Americans to contribute food and clothing to "The Friendship Train" of 1947, purchased a full page in The N.Y. Times telling the world of the arrival of the Merci Train that day (Thursday Feb. 3, 1949). They also had the same notice placed in a Paris

newspaper. The ad, in part, said that The Merci Train was an "outpouring of thanks and amity....a shipload of gifts for the people of America. The people of France must know how the warm, generous heart of America is touched by their gracious gesture...and how the people of America will eternally cherish these precious symbols of friendship and understanding." (Author's comment: I'm afraid that promise has long been forgotten by most Americans.)

The U.S. Coast Guard reportedly flew Commander Guy de la Vasselais, The Executive Vice President of the French Merci Train Committee, Michel Junot, Special Assistant to The (French) Secretary of State, Mme. Marie Geoffroy, Special Assistant to The French Minister of War Veterans, and other dignitaries and members of The Press out to The Magellan before it entered the Harbor. As the ship made its way into the harbor, and up the river to Weehawken, Comdr. Vasselais told the others the story of the origin of The Gratitude Train and the "all out" efforts of the French people to make it possible.

The Magellan was gingerly guided by harbor tugs (free of charges) to its berth at pier 8 in Weehawken, N.J. It had received salutes from other ships that it met, or passed, all along the way, and a friendly wave of greeting from everyone who was privileged to catch a glimpse of it. It was indeed a happy and festive occasion. Although I have not made a personal trip to New York City to do research, I have yet to find a single person who remembers seeing the ship, or the parade through New York City that took place the following day.

Other officials of The French National Committee of The Gratitude Train, including its president, Louis Cast, crossed The Atlantic aboard the French liner De Grasse, and arrived the following day in time for planned ceremonies in New York City. They brought with them a torch which had been lit on January 20th, at The Eternal Flame of The Tomb of The Unknown Soldier in Paris. It was to be turned over to The American Legion, taken to The U.S. National Cemetery at Arlington, Va, and be united with the Eternal Flame of The Unknown Soldier (now Soldiers) located there.

The New York Times reported that the dignitaries aboard The Magellan, and Georges Icart its Captain, were greeted at the pier by the mayor of Weehawken, John G. Meister, forty members of The American Legion Post of The United States Custom Service, and officials of The Erie Railroad.

Stevedores unloaded the Magellan free of charge, and the boxcar for New York State was the first to be placed on America's shore, and was then ferried across to New York City on a lighter, or barge. Arriving at "The Battery", it was loaded onto a flat bed truck provided by The U.S Army Air Force for a parade through the city in it's honor.

One individual has reported to me that he read that, when they were ready to start the parade, the Air Force truck wouldn't start, and had to be "cranked" (cranking was turning done by inserting a tool into the front of the engine and turning it by hand until it started operating on its own. In the early days of automobiles, before the invention of the electric starters, all autos had to be started by that method).

The parade route through the the city was chosen only after much consideration by (New

York) City Engineers, with input from many other departments (because of subway tunnels beneath the streets, they were concerned about the weight of the truck, and its heavy cargo). The Feb. 4, 1949 issue of The N.Y. Times reported that "200,000 persons roared a tumultuous "Thanks" to the people of France" as the parade made its way through the city.

The mile long parade included members of Mayor O'Dwyer's committee, French government officials, members of N.Y.C.'s French colony, and musical bands from N.Y.C.'s police and fire departments, The Army, The Navy, and The Marine Corps., (The Air Force band may not have been completely separated from The Army Band as yet). There was also a band representing The French War Veterans. American Legion units from N.Y. City, Pennsylvania, Upstate New York, New Jersey, and even Texas, marched in the parade. The Texas Legionnaires may have come to New York to welcome the Texas boxcar, and escort it to its new home.

The parade culminated with the New York box car being placed in City Hall Plaza where Mayor O'Dwyer officially accepted the Merci box car, and the gifts it contained, for the people of New York State. He also welcomed and thanked the French Merci Train Committee, which arrived earlier in the day aboard The De Grasse.

Following the ceremonies, a luncheon was held at The Waldorf Astoria Hotel with many U.S. dignitaries in attendance, including Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt, widow of the late president. Mayor O'Dwyer also presented Mr. Drew Pearson, originator of the "Friendship Train" idea, with The City's "Distinguished and Exceptional Public Service Certificate".

Before it was decided to use the Air Force truck, veteran's groups from as far away as Rome, N.Y. volunteered to drive their (presumably National Guard) heavy equipment to N.Y. City to pull the N.Y. boxcar. I believe it is quite interesting that the restored N.Y. State Merci car's present home is just a few miles from Rome in Whitesboro, N.Y. Members of the local Forty & Eight Post proudly maintain the boxcar, which is displayed to the public at their post, Voiture #92. I will attempt to explain the organizations of The American Legion and The Forty & Eight a little later in this text.

Meanwhile (in Feb. 1949), the rest of the box cars were being unloaded from The Magellan and lifted onto American "flat bed" railroad cars because the French railroad car's couplings would not fit to connect them to the American railroad's equipment. One account that I read reported that "standard French tracks are about 8 inches farther apart than are their American counterparts". I have been told by a French train enthusiast that the statement is not true, and I have personally measured the distance between the wheels of both American and French cars, and found them to be very close, if not exactly, the same distance apart.

The American Association of Railroad Companies, whose individual company's rails reached even the remotest cities of America, volunteered to deliver those other cars free of charge. I have not yet discovered when the decision was made to split the train into segments, or how it was decided which box cars would go into specific segments. I suspect that geography played a major role, and that The U.S. National Merci Train Committee let the railroad schedulers, who had the expertise, figure out all those details.

I read in The Atlanta Journal of Feb. 10, 1949 that five box cars of the train arrived there that day. Those cars were destined for Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Arkansas. The Feb 3rd or 4th, 1949 N.Y. Times newspaper declared that one segment of the train would leave for Washington, D.C. the next day. As I will relate in a later chapter, we found a copy of the schedules for the various segments of the Merci Train during a visit to Mississippi.

When the train left New Jersey it was in three segments, Southern, New England, and Western. I believe the Southern section contained the cars for New Jersey, Washington, D.C., Delaware, Pennsylvania, Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland, North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Arkansas, South Carolina, Florida, Louisiana, and Mississippi.

A photo in Time magazine for the week of February 14th, 1949 shows two of the box cars at a ceremony in Washington, DC. The accompanying caption does not, however, tell the reader to which states the two box cars were destined to be delivered. It is my opinion that they were from the Southern section, and that one of them was the car that was shared by Washington, D.C. and the Territory of Hawaii.

The Kentucky and Tennessee cars had to be included in the Western section of the Merci Train because some railroad underpasses in Kentucky were not high enough to accommodate the height of the Merci box car riding atop of its American flat car. I have also noticed, while viewing a newspaper photo of the Southern section of the train, that all of the brakeman's compartments had been removed from those box cars which had arrived in the U.S. equipped with those adjuncts. I assume to reduce the height of the box cars for the trip.

The Merci Train Committee from France traveled around The U.S. attending ceremonies in the state capitols of many, if not all, the states. Drew Pearson evidently also traveled with the committee, because he reported (in his column) the reactions of committee members to various sights they saw, including The Grand Canyon, with which Mr. Pearson said that they were greatly impressed.

Perhaps the committee split up, as the train did, and some members traveled with one segment while other members traveled with other segments. As the box cars arrived in the state capitols to which they were assigned, they were greeted with festivities similar to but smaller in scale than those which had occurred in New York City.

Someone in Wyoming, probably at the State Museum had put an account of the arrival of the Wyoming box car in Cheyenne on the Internet. It was located for me by Mr. Andy Kulmatiski at the Schenectady, N.Y. Public Library. A family friend, Mr. Harry Jenkins, downloaded the article for me and it reads in part: "When the Wyoming car arrived on Feb. 14, 1949, it was taken to the Capitol building accompanied by The Fort Warren Band (the fort was later called F.E. Warren A.F. Base, and now simply Warren A.F.B.), a police escort, and an honor guard. Governor Crance, along with The Speaker of The House and The President of The Senate, officially received the gifts on behalf of the state. The ceremony was broadcast by local radio and was also recorded for rebroadcast in France at a later date."

The article continues, "The car contained a fantastic range of items including a wedding

dress, sabers, a musket, a powder horn, etchings, a clock, a hand painted platter, and dozens of other objects. After being displayed in The National Guard Headquarters, the objects were distributed among each of Wyoming's twenty three counties. The Forty and Eight boxcar was put on display near The Union Pacific depot in Cheyenne."

The website article also contained photographs of four objects of art that were among Wyoming's gifts: The hand painted platter mentioned above, a wooden sculpture of an elderly woman, a hand colored lithograph by artist Edmond Lejoux titled "Les Diables Bleus" (The Blue Devils) which appears to be a military group, and an enameled bracelet comprised of seven one inch oval floral paintings in gold settings. Author's note: More will be said in a later chapter about the present day collection of Wyoming's Merci gifts.

CHAPTER II

Our First Sighting

I first became aware of the existence of The Merci Train in the Fall of 1994. During a visit to our son, Earl Jr., and his family at Mountain Home A.F. Base in Idaho, we all toured The Old State Historical Museum in Boise. One of the displays was the Idaho allotment of the Merci Train. Beside the little antique box car was a sign which declared: "The Merci Train: A grassroots expression of thanks from the French people to the American people for military aid during World War II. Arrived in New York in February of 1949 with a boxcar for each state. The train had toured war torn France while citizens at each stop loaded it with gifts, some hand made and humble, some very precious. The Tricolor with the words "Gratitude Train" decorated the boxcar along with provincial plaques."

This seems to differ somewhat from the Wyoming account, later found on the internet, in that there is no mention of The Friendship Train. My belief, though I had yet to find any printed material to buttress that belief, is that the French response was triggered by both expressions of American goodwill: Our wartime efforts to deliver them from the Nazis, AND our Friendship Train.

I also noted that the method of collecting the gifts was slightly different from the Wyoming description. A newspaper photo that I came across shows French children bringing their gifts to a "railroad station in Paris", another newspaper report stated that the gifts were crated in Paris for the journey to America.

Since reading those reports, early in my research work, I have come to believe that the Idaho description of the collection is probably also true, the gifts were taken to collection points all over France, then carried to Paris by local train lines. Much the same way American trains collected the goods for the Friendship Train here in America. The gifts probably were all crated in special boxes in Paris, after the Merci Train Committee decided which gifts were to go where (in America), then loaded into the appropriate Merci box cars. Each American state was evidently assigned a number, #1 through #49, and each box car was also assigned one of those numbers. Thus when a particular gift was determined to be for state #16 for instance, it was packed in a crate to be loaded into box car #16. I have read some newspaper accounts that referred to their state's box car by its number in the train, as I will mention in other chapters.

The Idaho box car was just one of many interesting displays at The Old State Historical Museum. After viewing it and (thankfully) taking some pictures, I moved on to view other equally interesting exhibits in the former Idaho State Penitentiary building which houses the museum. When our visit to the museum was over though, and even after our visit to Idaho had ended, the memory of seeing "The Merci Train" box car haunted me.

I was intrigued, and somewhat wonder struck I suppose, because I had grown up in the 1930s and 40s and had no recollection of ever hearing of either the Friendship Train or the Merci

Train. Neither had anyone else that I asked, whether younger or older than I.

That I had never heard of either of the trains was all the more amazing to me, I suppose, because prior to seeing the Merci box car in Idaho, I had already either visited, traveled through, or lived in all 50 American states and Puerto Rico. I had also toured the capitol buildings of Maine, New York, and Utah.

Where were all the rest of the 49 boxcars that had made up The Merci Train, and what had happened to all the gifts that they had contained? There had been no mention of the whereabouts of the gifts that the Idaho box car had delivered. Were they all lost so soon? Was the eternity that "Americans will cherish these precious symbols" (mentioned in the welcoming ad in The N.Y. Times) so short? It hadn't even been 50 years yet!

Anyway, my interest was peaked. Since I am retired, and since my wife and I travel a lot to visit with friends and relatives who are widely spread around our country, I decided to try to locate as many of the box cars as I could. After all, a train of 49 box cars is a pretty big thing to lose, even if it has been split-up into that many segments.

Or so I thought. The more people I asked about it the more blank looks I got. The remainder of this book for the most part is the story of my search, the many interesting people I met, and the many captivating (and sometimes humorous) stories I uncovered about the history of the Merci Train.

My wife and I currently return each summer to my boyhood home of Dexter, Maine, where we stay in a mobile home graciously provided for us by some family friends of long standing. It had been three years since that first sighting when, during the summer of 1996, I asked a cousin of mine, who frequents the Maine State Archives and Library at Augusta in search of genealogical information, to canvas her contacts there to see if they could tell us anything about Maine's Merci box car and its contents. To my delight she soon called to tell me the news that the Maine box car was located in The Railway Village Museum in Boothbay, Maine, a small village "Down East" on Maine's coast that is famous as a summer vacation paradise.

Upon hearing that news, Linda and I promptly took a day trip to Boothbay, and were rewarded with the sight of Maine's Merci box car, which I later found out to be #32 in the Merci train. Maine people are pretty well known for their practical approach to life as it happens and for their severe winter weather, so it was not too much of a surprise to me to find the entire box car covered with a heavy coating of solid "battleship gray" paint.

The museum "village" is arranged somewhat like Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts, but the theme is set in a later time frame, after the advent of the steam locomotive. The village consists of stores, shops, houses, churches, blacksmith shop, train station, and other structures that would have been familiar to most people of the late 1800s and early 1900s.

Completely encircling the village is about a mile of railroad track. A restored German built steam locomotive pulls a train of three or four passenger cars around the track. Admission to the village is included in the price of a train ticket purchased in the restored railroad station house, which was moved to its present location from another Maine town. The ticket entitles the

holder to a ride on the train and entrance to the village. A large metal building near the rear of the village houses a collection of antique automobiles which contains 25 or 30 classic cars.

The Maine Merci box car itself sits on rails in an area directly behind the old station house. A small plaque explains its origin and there is a small brass plate on one end of the car which relates its manufacturer's name and the year it was built. It had one distinct difference from the Idaho car. Built onto one end of the car was what appeared to be a tower in which I thought a guard might have ridden when the train was in operation during wartime. Perhaps, I mused, a machine gun had been mounted on the top of the car so that the guard could return fire at anyone attacking the train." The top of the tower is higher than the top of the car, and would allow the head and shoulders of the guard to operate a gun so mounted; but that was simply a theory.

I have since found that at least five of the 49 Merci cars had the structures on them, and that, in the 40 & 8s early history, the train's brakemen rode in those compartments. Each brakeman had a view of the entire length of whatever train it was a part of. I have also heard that the railroad workers made up the trains so that about every fourth or fifth car would be one having a brakeman on it.

One newspaper photo (taken during WW II) that I have seen shows American soldiers loading into the Forty & Eight cars in France. On one of the box cars the brakeman's structure is plainly visible, as is a metal wheel (much like an old automobile steering wheel) which the brakeman could apparently turn to apply the brakes of the car that he was stationed on.

No one at the village museum could tell us anything about the history of the box car, although, admittedly, the director of the museum was out of town at that time, and during a 1998 visit, he was able to share a little of that history with us. He also told us that the original provincial plaques that adorned the Maine Merci car when it arrived in Maine were in storage with the gifts at the State Museum.

Returning in time to 1996, and after our initial visit to the Railway Village Museum..... Because it was nearly time for us to return to our Florida home for the 1996 Fall and Winter seasons, we didn't get an opportunity that year to visit the Maine State Museum to view the contents of the Maine Merci car, but thankfully we were able to accomplish that deed during the summer of 1997.

On a typically warm August day of 1997, we drove to Augusta and were graciously escorted by Ms. Debbie Smith, of The Maine State Museum's Registrar's Office, to a warehouse near the museum where the artifacts are presently stored. We saw and photographed several shelves of statues, dolls (some were china, and some stuffed), paintings, and glassware. Then we moved to another section where there were walls of drawers. Each drawer would measure about 2 feet by 3 feet. Ms. Smith opened a dozen or more of the drawers for us to see and photograph more dolls, as well as dishes, toys, paintings, medals, war relics, and even a full bottle (in the original package) of "Evening in Paris" perfume.

Although most of the gifts did not have notes from the French donors; there were a few that did have the names of the donors, and a few words written in French. It was truly an

moving experience to at last see a large number of the artifacts that we had read so much about (in 1949 accounts of The Train's arrival), but had previously been denied the privilege of viewing. The collection in Augusta included the provincial plaques which had been removed from the Maine box car soon after its arrival in 1949. That somewhat explained its stark appearance the day that we first viewed it in Boothbay Harbor.

During the time we spent with Ms. Smith looking at the artifacts, she mentioned that The Maine State Archives had a file on the Merci box car, but that afternoon personnel at the archives told us that they knew nothing of such a file. They suggested it might be in the State Library, but we met with the same response there. We were, however, able to find microfilmed 1949 newspaper accounts of Merci's arrival in Portland and of its arrival in Augusta a few days later.

One interesting passage that I read in those articles was a claim that the contents of the Maine Merci car had come from the French Province of Maine. The chapters of Rotary Club International in Le Maine had sent one crate to (then) Governor Payne "filled with Rotary items". If the account was true, I believe the total gifts in any one car coming from any one province was unique.

The February 1949 day that the box car arrived in Augusta, three Maine business companies sponsored a full page tribute to that event in The Kennebec Journal. The top part of the page had a replica of the French Tricolor flag and proclaimed the phrase "MERCIE LE MAINE" in one inch high print. The rest of the page read in part "All of Maine too, is chorusing thanks....Thanks to France, who gave us our symbol of liberty. To the France whose pioneers and explorers helped open our rivers; settle our towns and cities___Whose descendants help carry on our commerce and industry; govern our cities and towns___Whose language has fused with and enriched our own.....Or more properly put, they are re-echoing your own heart-felt expression: "Merci___". Another line on the page reads "each of the box cars also symbolizes France's gratitude for the Doughboys of 1917 and the GI's of 1942__and the sacrifices they made to help her in two of her darkest hours."

Following acceptance ceremonies in Portland, Maine's largest city, the gifts were unpacked and displayed at the city hall for a brief period. They were then repacked and the Merci car was moved to Augusta, the capitol, where more ceremonies were held and the gifts displayed again. The Merci car then was taken on a tour of the state, but the gifts went to The Maine State Historical Society to be held until its planned museum building would be completed.

Going back in time to February of 1997, my wife and I were again visiting our son, Earl Jr., this time in Moore, Oklahoma, close to nearby Tinker A.F.B. to which he was transferred in 1995. One evening during our visit, we (Grandpa and Grandma) stayed home with their 5 year old daughter, Sarah Elizabeth, so that her parents could have an evening out alone and do some shopping. As they were driving around in nearby Norman, looking for a certain store, they drove past The J.D. McCarty Center for Children With Developmental Disabilities.

The Center's exterior was only dimly lighted, but Jodi, our daughter in law, spotted what looked like "one of Dad's Merci box cars" setting near its main building.

We all returned to the center the next day, and to my extreme pleasure Jodi had "found" the Oklahoma Merci car for me. The car sits in a small park and play area adjacent to the McCarthy Center, which is named after a former state legislator who was active in getting state funding for the center. J.D. McCarty was also a member of Norman's Forty & Eight Society.

I took several photos of the box car and its surroundings, and then went inside the center to try to find out more about their box car, and perhaps more about the Merci Train in general. I was referred to Mr. Peter Curtis, Director of the center, by one of his officers, Lisa Brittain, who told me that Mr. Curtis had a listing of the location of the rest of the Merci boxcars. Mr. Curtis was not at the center that day however, which was a Friday, so I did not get to meet him.

My wife and I had to return to our home in Florida early Monday morning, so I asked our daughter-in-law to call Mr. Curtis on Monday to ask if he would share a copy of the list with me. He referred my request to Mr. Joel Mann, a member of the Norman Forty and Eight Voiture (Voiture is the French word equivalent of the word box, or enclosure, but they use it to speak of their group, much the same as the American Legion or the VFW uses the word Post. At least that is the way it was explained to me. The buildings in which the Voitures meet are called Chateaus.)

Mr. Mann did send the list to me. A notation at the top of its first page said the information it contained was "as of 1995-1996." There was no indication of who had compiled the list, but I have since discovered that information and will share it in another chapter.

A thorough examination of the list revealed that 42 of the Merci box cars still survived, but that 4 had disappeared, and couldn't be accounted for at that time. Two others were reported to have been destroyed by fire, and a third suffered a like fate soon after it had been sold to a junk yard in Nebraska, the state it had been delivered to. The two which were reported to be destroyed by fire belonged to New Jersey and Rhode Island, and the five states which reported their box cars lost were Connecticut, Colorado, Illinois, Massachusetts, and New Jersey.

I have since been told that Massachusetts' Merci box car was actually sold for scrap, and that Rhode Island's box car was not destroyed by fire, but had been "found" lounging in a junk yard for many years. It is now in the process of being restored. Connecticut's car has now been reported to me to have burned at Stratford during the 1950s. The total known remaining Merci cars now seems to be forty three. Those still unaccounted for are Colorado and Illinois. I am hopeful that they may yet be found and restored.

The list also didn't give me much hope of ever having an opportunity to view very many of the gifts that the boxcars had contained. State after state had reported (in the list) that the "present location of the contents" of their state's Merci cars was unknown. As I learn more about the history of the individual state's box cars, I understand why that has happened.

In many states, as in the case of Wyoming (see the narration of the arrival of the Wyoming box car quoted earlier in this text), the gifts which the box car contained were distributed to museums, schools, and other organizations throughout the 23 counties of Wyoming. There is no known record of what went where, therefore the distributed gifts cannot be tracked. Even if

there was an effort to track them, I'm sure some people would resist reporting that they had possession of any of the gifts, fearing that the state would reclaim them.

Receipt of the list, however, did open up many avenues of possible sources of information. One thing that I discovered from the list was that many of the box cars were located at, or in the care of, posts of the American Legion and/or Forty and Eight. As I stated earlier in this book, I have read that was the intention of the French military veteran's organization right from the time they decided to use those box cars. This makes sense because many veterans of World War I were still living at the time the Merci Train was delivered, and they were the people who would have the strongest ties to the box cars.

The reader may not realize, as I did not, that The American Legion was the idea of, and formed by, American military men serving in France in 1918 and 1919. It was designed to be an organization to help WW I veterans and their families adjust economically and emotionally to post war living. They have broadened those goals over the years to include community service, and now allow veterans of other conflicts into their ranks.

The Forty and Eight was the brainchild of Mr. Joseph Breen, the first Chef de Chemin de Fer, the title given to the society's national leader, and which I translate to "Chief of The Train." As I understand it the society is a kind of elite group within The American Legion, more of a fraternal group than The Legion itself, but still deeply involved in service to people. Some of their charitable work is in the area of child welfare, and tuition assistance to student nurses. One must be a member of The Legion to be eligible to be selected to become a member of The Forty & Eight.

Mr. Breen evidently was ideating The Forty and Eight at about the same time that others were forming their ideas for the Legion. Sometime around 1940 he wrote "The idea of an organization built around the little French box car came to me in the summer of 1918. It occurred to me that the box car would be a good feature on which to establish a play society, to be part of an organization of soldiers and sailors that was bound to come after the war. I took keen interest in the Chemin de fers of France and marveled at their ability to get men and materials from the ports to the fronts. "I gave much serious thought to the formation of the organization that I believed would always keep green our memories of the" fifth class" mode of travel for soldiers and horses. France maintained three classes of passenger service and I figured that the Forty and Eight car was at least two classes below third class." I found this quote in Andrew Dolak's uncopyrighted "Merci Box Car Memorial Book" written in the 1980s. Andy evidently copied the quote from an issue of The Forty and Eight, the organization's national magazine.

Since we were still in our Florida home at the time I received the list from Mr. Mann of Norman, Ok., and since the list indicated that the Florida Merci box car was located at the city hall in Holly Hill, a city located on Florida's East coast and sandwiched between the cities of Daytona Beach and Ormand Beach, we decided to go see it. We thought we should check to make sure that the list was correct, so we called the Holly Hill Chamber of Commerce. The person who answered the phone said that she thought that there used to be an old box car at City

Hall, "but it is no longer there."

I figured that since the American Legion had been involved with the Oklahoma boxcar perhaps they might be able to tell me where this box car had been moved. I called the phone number for the Holly Hill Legion post and was referred to Mr. Steve Hennard who assured me that The Merci car was indeed still at The City Hall. "In fact" he said " I was just over there working on it last week."

I relate this story, not to demean anyone, but merely to demonstrate how few people there are who actually have knowledge of The Merci Train and it's meaningfulness as an important symbol of America's long friendship with France. One would naturally expect that a member or employee of a city's chamber of commerce would be familiar with attractions within the city. But then, I have become accustomed to blank expressions whenever and wherever I inquire about the Merci Train.

We did visit the box car, and found it a beautifully restored specimen situated in a small Veteran's Memorial Park adjacent to the parking lot for City Hall. There were signs near the box car from which I gleaned some very useful information. For instance, one sign told me that the date of manufacture for the Forty and Eight box cars was between 1875 and 1886. It was from their signboards that I also learned that the box car had arrived in Tallahassee during the month of February 1949. I regretfully report that (in 1997) we have not been successful in finding any information about the whereabouts of any of the Merci gifts that arrived in the Florida box car. Perhaps, if this book ever gets into print, someone who reads it may have or find some information about at least part of them. (It actually happens in a later chapter.)

We also visited the local American Legion Post, and talked with Mr. Hennard, who told me of Mr. Joseph Tarr, the former Chef De Gare of The Florida State Forty and Eight. He said that Mr. Tarr lived in The Jacksonville area, and I was able (later) to obtain his phone number from directory assistance. When I called him, he promised to send me information about The Forty and Eight organization, and some history about the Florida Merci car. He also told me an interesting anecdote.

It seems that Florida's Merci car had been languishing for a number of years in a field in Sarasota. The field belonged to the city, and the boxcar belonged to the state. The American Legion and The Forty and Eight state level organizations were working together to get the state legislature to award them custody of the boxcar, and they finally succeeded. Members of the local Sarasota area American Legion immediately mobilized, and moved the boxcar from the field to a narrow parking lot behind the Gulfport Legion Post. They must have had a chain saw along with them because Mr. Tarr told me that (in 1985, when these events occurred) the box car was in a sad state of repair, and "there was a tree growing right up through the middle of it. There wasn't much of the wood left" he said, "about all that remained was the metal".

The Legionnaires evidently did not intend for anyone else to take it from their parking lot, because they backed two trucks up against the boxcar (one on each end of the car). One side of the box car was close to the back of their building and the other was almost right up against a 6

foot high chain link fence. All of this would prevent it from being moved, so they thought.

The Forty and Eight boys from the Daytona area had different thoughts however. They drove a truck with a derrick, and a flat bed trailer truck, into the vacant lot next door to the Legion building. Then they used the derrick to hoist the boxcar straight up over the fence, sat it down on the trailer, and "away they went". I'm sure there is more to the story than that, and I'd love to hear the other side of it too.

Soon after our trip to Holly Hill we made a previously planned trip up to the northern part of the state to visit a cousin who had recently moved to a retirement community there called Penny Farms. My wife, who was becoming infected with Merci Train Fever too, suggested "As long as we are going that far let's go up to Atlanta to see Georgia's boxcar" (the list indicated that it was located at the Forty and Eight's Voiture #217.) We also had friends there who had been asking us to visit them. I needed no further encouragement, so that excursion was added to the itinerary for that trip.

We arrived at our Atlanta friend's home late one afternoon in May, and after "visiting" and going out for dinner I started searching their phone book for a listing for Forty and Eight. My search proved unfruitful so I decided to try one of the many American Legion posts that did have phone numbers listed. The first one I called responded to my questions about The Merci boxcar and the Forty and Eight by saying "Oh yeah, That's over near the Armory; wait a minute and I'll give you their phone number", Which he did.

He also said "but you're not going to be able to see the box car right now because it's out of town being restored." He went on to say "but you can call them, and they'll be able to tell you when it will be back." I tried calling the phone number several times during the evening and again the next day, but never got an answer, which didn't surprise me too much because the Am. Legion person had told me that " they are there only two or three days a week."

I also called The State Archives office to ask about seeing the "some artifacts" that the list had indicated were there. Ms. Gail DeLoach explained to me that those artifacts were in storage and she did not know where, nor if, she could locate a listing of the items. She said that if I could name some of the items she could probably locate them and have them pulled for viewing. I could not, so that was a dead end also.

Ms. Deloach did say that she would spend an hour looking for some reference to the gifts in old files that had not been computerized yet but she couldn't spare more time than that. I gave her our address so that she could notify me in the event that she found anything. I also wrote her a letter (after we got home) and related to her much of the information that we gleaned from The Atlanta Journal about the gifts. I have not received a reply from her.

Since we planned to spend only one night in Atlanta and had only a few hours to devote to the train research, we decided to concentrate on the Atlanta Public Library and look for old newspaper accounts of the Merci car's arrival in Atlanta in 1949. Our visit to Holly Hill's box car site had enlightened us with the information that Florida's boxcar had arrived there in February of 1949. We reasoned that other state's box cars probably arrived in the same period.

My wife started searching through microfilm copies of The Atlanta Journal for the first half of February, while I looked at the second half of the month. She found it right on the front page of the Feb. 10th edition. That account of the box car's arrival and all the ceremonies in conjunction with it were big news in Atlanta for two or three days.

One of those articles also mentioned that the ship which had brought The Train from France had arrived in New York Harbor on February 2, 1949. The library also maintained microfilm files of The New York Times newspaper. We looked at those and found stories about the train in the Feb. 2nd, 3rd, and 4th editions, which gave us the accounts of the ship's arrival and the ceremonies in N.Y. City (described in the opening chapter of this book.)

We were so elated to have found all that information about the Merci Train that we nearly forgot our disappointment at not being able to see Georgia's box car. We were more than satisfied with the return on our investment of \$8.00 for parking (at a lot near the library), the nearly \$3.00 for copying the articles from the microfilm onto paper, and the nearly four hours of our time spent at the library. We also spent much of our time in the motel, where we stopped on our way home that night, reading and trying to piece it all together in our minds.

I still wanted to talk with the people at The Forty and Eight in Atlanta so on the evening that we returned home I tried the (telephone) number again. This time I was rewarded with hearing a voice which the man said belonged to Mr. C.L. "Red" Roberts, an officer in the organization. When I related to him that I had been told that their Merci car was out of town being restored he replied "I'm sorry, but you were misinformed, the car is right here outside our building where it has been since it was restored several years ago." It seems that they had another item out being restored and the legionnaire that I talked with in Atlanta had confused that item with the Merci box car.

Mr. Roberts welcomed my interest and invited me to return to see the box car anytime that it was possible for me to do that. He also promised to send me a photo of the box car and some printed material about their organization. He also asked me how I had heard about their box car, and I told him about the list that I had received from the Norman, Ok. Forty and Eight. I in turn asked him if he had any knowledge of the origin of that list. He said that he did indeed, that the list had been compiled by "a lady that works at The Arizona State Historical Museum. I have a letter I received from her last year and I will send you a copy of it. It has her name and address.

A few days later I received a note from him with the copy of a July 1996 letter from a Ms. Maxine Edwards attached. In the letter Ms. Edwards thanked Mr. Roberts for his input (presumably information about Georgia's Merci car) which she used in the list. She also told him about an exhibit that was soon opening at the Arizona Historical Museum.

I was very much encouraged by the wealth of information that had resulted from our visit to Atlanta and the contacts that we made. So much so in fact that not only did I write to Ms. Edwards in Arizona to ask for information about their box car and the exhibit she had mentioned in her letter to Mr. Roberts, I also decided that it was time for me to write to The Idaho State

Historical Museum. You will probably recall that theirs was the first box car that we found. During our visit there in 1994, neither of the volunteers on duty could add any information and it made sense to me to think that the museum might have copies of newspaper accounts about their Merci car too.

No more than a week after mailing my inquiry to Idaho I received a large envelope from a Ms. Kate O'Brien Reed at the museum. It contained copies of several newspaper articles that had been written about the Idaho box car over the years (1949 and since). From reading those stories I learned that: 1. the gifts that the Idaho boxcar had contained were (as in many other states) primarily distributed to the counties of their state, and 2. that the box car had been shuffled around the city of Boise for many years before it attained its present home in the old State Prison which I related earlier is now part of The State Historical Museum.

That final move was due in a large part to the efforts of one Max Hanson, a military veteran and a state legislator in Idaho. Ms. O'Brien Reed said in an accompanying letter that some of the artifacts that went to the counties had since been turned back to the state museum, and that those artifacts were stored in their archives. She invited me to return to Boise at my convenience, at which time she promised to retrieve them from the archives for me to view and photograph. She also sent a listing of those items, which are primarily French literary works, although there were a few other items of antiquity.

Ms. O'Brien Reed also included copies of a couple of clippings from a 1981 edition of The Sunday Oregonian whose subject was the Oregon Merci car. It seems that when some residents of that state (as residents in other states probably did too) heard that the people of France had sent the gifts to "The People of Oregon", they assumed that they should be able to take any of it that happened to strike their fancy for their own personal use. Because that's apparently what some of them did.

The 1981 article related that a member of the Astoria American Legion believed that to be true and is quoted in the article as saying to the reporter, Geoff Davidian, "The politicians scrambled for that stuff- the linen, and paintings. You'll find it in their living rooms and on their mantles. It all wound up in private hands."

The 1981 Oregon Secretary of State, Norma Paulus, is quoted in the same article as saying "I'm sure some (presumably retiring) employees took some stuff some elected officials too." Her boss, Governor Vic Atiyeh, told the reporter that he would try "to have these things traced". This was of course 32 years after the arrival of the gifts, so I doubt that he had much success. He also told the reporter that "this should have been done years ago."

The article does relate however that The Horner Museum, on the campus of Oregon State University in Cornvallis, had a few of the gifts including a red, white, and blue dress (with pockets resembling the American flag, and The Union Jack) which a young French woman had made. A note attached to the dress read "accept this simple dress which evokes for me a wonderful memory. I was just finishing it when two fine GIs, who are in the photograph, arrived in our village the 27th of August, 1944, and Mortcerf was freed. With all our gratitude."

The article is accompanied by a photo which shows Lise Grillot, author of the note, wearing the dress and standing with the American soldiers who are not identified.

There are also photos of a couple of other of the Oregon gifts: a marble bust which was part of a sarcophagus from the 5th century A.D. Gallo- Roman Empire, and a water-color by B. Teller, an 18 year old student "at the school in Maurice." The subject of the painting was a French school building in which Dwight D. Eisenhower had his Allied General Headquarters, and where Germany's surrender was signed. It was simply titled "Little Red School".

Another portion of the article in The Oregonian describes some of the other gifts that the Merci Train bore. It doesn't, however, say if they were in the Oregon box car or in the train in general. "As for the cargo itself" it reported, "it ran the gamut from hairnets and underwear (presumably women's antique undergarments), to Houdon's original bust of Benjamin Franklin." "There were glassware and silverware, leather goods and engravings, paintings and ceramics, pieces of lace and a \$49,000. collection of dolls outfitted to represent the past 300 years of the dressmaking art."

"A French girl had donated her doll to the train. It was so old that the hair had long since vanished, so the little girl sacrificed her own hair to make a wig. There also were 49 panes of stained glass, reproductions of the windows in the cathedral at Chartres. The first motorcycle ever built was on board, as was a wooden toy chest, made by deaf and mute children at Chambéry. The pieces of lace came with a message: Souvenir from a poor destitute old lady who is 70 and regrets that she cannot give more."

One other item that Ms. O'Brien Reed had included in the treasure chest of papers that she copied, and sent to me, was a copy of the title page of a booklet printed by the Palmetto Grand Voiture du South Carolina. Its title was: La Societe des Quarante Hommes et Huit Chevaux Merci Box Car Memorial Book Second Edition February 2, 1984. (The French translates to: The Society of Forty Men and Eight Horses [or mules]).

There was also a copy of a page in that booklet listing the (then) known status and/or location of all the 49 Merci Train's boxcars. The South Carolina boxcar was listed as being in Greenville, S.C. The more recent list that I had received from Mr. Mann (of Oklahoma) listed the South Carolina box car's location as the American Legion Post #6 in Columbia.

I again called directory assistance for that area code and obtained a phone number for the Legion Post. When I called that number, the lady that answered said "yes, the Merci box car is here and I will send you a photo of it, and also a copy of the Merci Train Memorial booklet. This is just an example of the helpful attitude of members of The American Legion, and Forty and Eight, that I have met or talked with in my search for information about The Merci Train.

CHAPTER III

A Big Find

In June of 1997 the Bennetts again "hit the road". It was time for our annual pilgrimage to Maine. We had a "little" side trip planned to go to Oklahoma to welcome a new grandchild into our lives. Our first stop was the library in Tallahassee, Fl. where we looked up newspaper accounts of the Florida Merci car's arrival in that city in 1949. About all that we gleaned from that stop was that the contents of the box car were to be sent to Sarasota where shop students at local high schools were to build display cases for the gifts. One newspaper article reported that it was hoped that the gifts would be sent around the state to be viewed by as many citizens as possible.

After spending the night in Gulfport, Miss, we drove on to Baton Rouge, La. and located The Old State Capitol Museum where Louisiana's Merci car makes its home. The box car is housed in an open sided shelter. We found the car in need of paint and minor repairs. The few provincial plaques that were still existent were also in need of brightening up.

The personnel on duty at the museum knew very little about the history of the Merci car and were thrilled to hear what we were able to tell them. One lady had seen one item from the car, a several hundred pound bust (sculpture) of Napoleon. She said that the work of art was in another building in the capitol city, but she believed that it should be with the Merci car.

They made us promise that, if we did get a book published, they would get a copy of it, and said that they would be glad to have copies to sell. We also visited the library in that city and were rewarded with finding that they had a file of articles which had appeared in local newspapers at the time of, and since, the box car's arrival in Louisiana.

We spent most of the remainder of that day traveling from Baton Rouge to Mississippi's capitol city, Jackson. There we found Mississippi's Merci box car sitting down slope from their Old Capitol Museum, and we took some pictures of it in the late afternoon sun. After a pleasant dining experience at Dennery's Restaurant, and a restful night at The Red Roof Inn, we went back to the museum for a second look and some pictures in the morning light.

We also made a visit to The Mississippi State Archives Building, which sets right next door to the Old Capitol Museum. We were rewarded with finding the largest store of documents about the Merci Train we had ever discovered. They have many pieces of original correspondence from the National (as well as Mississippi's) Merci Train Committee, including letters from Drew Pearson who was one of the national committee's chair persons. Mrs Eleanor Roosevelt was another. I have since found out that Harry Warner, of the famed Warner Brothers motion picture studios, was the General Chairman of the committee.

The Archives also had quite a few promotional type photographs which had been sent to the state in advance of the box car's arrival. These included pictures of Mr. Pearson, Mrs.

Roosevelt, and other national dignitaries; and pictures of the parade, and ceremonies that had occurred in New York City

We were thrilled to find that the Archive's collection also included an album of French school children's paintings, about 30 or 40 of them. Each painting was mounted by itself on a page of the album, which had covers. On the front cover of the album were the words "From The Children of France To The Children of Mississippi". (This led us to believe that there may have been one such album for each state, a belief that has since been strengthened, as I will relate in later chapters.)

One of the documents that we were able to view and copy was an advance schedule showing when the sections of The Merci Train would leave New Jersey, and at what cities (and on what date and hour) the trains carrying the Merci boxcars would make stops. The National Merci Committee evidently wanted to enable as many Americans as possible to view them. The find was a real boon to us in our efforts to locate stories about the box cars and the ceremonies accompanying their arrivals.

We now knew, for instance, that the New England section of the train (which consisted of the Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont cars) made stops in six Conn. cities, three R.I. cities, 8 Mass. cities, 2 Vt. cities, 4 N.H. cities, and 3 Maine cities. All we had to do was look at the schedule to select a city in which the train had stopped, note the date that it had stopped there, go to the library in that city, and scan their newspaper files for that date to find the story relating the arrival of The Merci Train.

We reluctantly left Jackson that afternoon and drove to Helena , Arkansas, a small city located beside the Mississippi river about 100 miles south of Memphis, Tenn. According to our list the Arkansas Merci car was situated on the grounds of the American Legion Post #41. All that remained was for us to find that Post. A lady manning a visitor's Center on the outskirts of Helena had no knowledge of the Merci box car, but she was able to find the address of the Legion Post on Porter Street.

We had no trouble locating Porter Street and The American Legion Post, and the Merci car. The car sits to the rear and to one side of the Post building, which is the oldest Legion Post in the state constructed entirely from logs. I have since been told that buildings constructed of logs are fairly common for American Legion Posts in that area of the country. There is also a retired U.S. Air Force jet fighter adorning the grounds of the Post. The boxcar itself is enclosed in a fenced area and is protected by a roof, or canopy, supported by posts at its four corners. We have since found similar structures protecting the Merci cars in several other states.

The Arkansas Merci car appeared to be structurally sound, but could stand some new paint and general trimming. There were no signs at the site explaining the significance of the box car's presence, except a 8 by 10 inch brass sign on the car itself which declares that the car was donated to Arkansas Veterans by The French National Railroad. There was no mention of it being part of The Merci Train, or of the gifts it contained when it arrived in Arkansas. Nor did we find any trace of those gifts in Little Rock, when we visited that city the next day. We did

find accounts of the box car's arrival in Little Rock, in a February 1949 issue of The Little Rock Gazette, and there was a partial listing of the gifts it contained.

An interesting feature of the Arkansas ceremony of acceptance was that 11 French women, who were the wives of local WW2 veterans, were guests of honor at that ceremony. I have since found that this happened in several states. A term commonly used to identify such wives in those days was "War Brides". Making the presentation of The Merci Car and its gifts of gratitude to Arkansas on the day of the ceremony was the French consul from Dallas, Texas, Mnsr. Henri Job.

Since it was late afternoon, and we were tired from traveling most of the day, we retired to The Edwardian Inn, a delightful turn of the century mansion located near downtown Helena. Our spacious room, and generous hostess, helped us to relax and spend a restful night. The lady also was eager to help me find someone who could give me further details about The Merci car (which she had never seen, nor heard about).

She mentioned a couple of people whom she knew to be Legionnaires, and helped me to obtain phone numbers for those individuals. I was referred by one of those gentlemen to Mr. D. Thompson Hargraves, a local insurance agent and Past Chef de Gare of The Arkansas Forty and Eight, who was the director of the box car. I was unable to contact him that night but we visited his office the next morning and was told by his son (and partner) that he was out of town.

He gave me one of his father's business cards and said that I would be able to reach him by phone the following week. He also told me that, as a boy, he and his Boy Scout troop had often cleaned the box car's exterior and/or repainted it. The following week I was able to contact Mr. Hargraves Senior, and he promised to send me details of the Arkansas Merci car's history.

Shortly after our arrival at our summer home in Maine I received a letter from him stating that the box car was outfitted with rubber tired wheels early on, and that The Forty and Eighters would take it on tours throughout the state, and to their annual conferences. It was stored between trips at The Rock Island Railroad yard in North Little Rock.

Some years later it was moved to the Camden (Arkansas) Naval Ammunition Depot, the original wheels were put back on, and it was mounted on rails again. The 40 & 8 members built a canopy over it, a fence around it, and provided night lighting for it. It remained at the depot until that installation closed sometime about 1975. It was then moved, along with it's canopy, fence, and lighting, to it's present location in Helena.

We continued our travel westward and made a stop in Little Rock's Public library where we were able to copy newspaper articles from their files of Little Rock's 1949 local papers. As I mentioned earlier, those articles gave accounts of the Merci car's arrival in Little Rock but left us in the dark about the disposition of the artifacts the car contained at that time. We were able to finish the first leg of our trip that day and arrive at our son's home before bedtime.

While we were in Oklahoma City we made an appointment at The State Museum to see the gifts from the Merci Car that still remain at the state level. Those gifts are not on display, but are kept in the museum's storage area. During my research I have discovered that museums

catalog their artifacts that are not on display by the type of item rather than by their origin. If a visitor wishes to view an item that is not on display, he/she must be able to give a description of the item.

The Oklahoma museum did have a couple of storage shelf units that held about two or three dozen items that had not been catalogued, and we were allowed to view them but not photograph them. No one item stands out in my memory of that viewing, but I do remember that there were quite a few books and some needlework, as well as an array of medals and an assortment of souvenir type ashtrays.

I also drove down to Norman one day to see the Oklahoma Merci car again, and to share some of my new found knowledge about the Merci Train with Mr. Joel Mann, the gentleman who had sent the list of locations of the Merci cars to me in Florida. Mr. Mann works for the J.D. McCarthy Children's Center. He is the computer specialist for the center and is caretaker of the box car which is also at the center. We established an immediate rapport and spent well over an hour getting to know each other and sharing knowledge about The Merci Train.

Our unborn granddaughter exhibited a timetable of her own by delaying her birth by two weeks. Thus it was that when we had been there for 10 days, and it appeared that she wouldn't be making her debut for several more days, Grandpa and Grandma decided to make a quick trip to Texas. We drove to Austin in one day, spent one day there, and returned to Oklahoma City the third day. We were rewarded for our efforts with the finding of the Texas Merci boxcar.

It has a home in a beautiful setting at The American Legion Travis Post #76. We had some difficulty in finding The Legion Post but I called (the next morning) and received very explicit instructions from Linda Rogers, The Post's Building Manager. We were then able to locate it without any trouble. Ms. Rogers graciously related the history of the post to us.

It seems that the original owner of the mansion owned and operated a limestone quarry, and he had the house built for himself and his family in 1858. By 1924 the family had fallen on hard times and the mansion into a state of disrepair. The American Legion was at that time looking for a permanent home for their post and bought the place. Over the years they have done a grand job of restoring the mansion and its grounds to its original grandeur.

On one side of the expansive front lawn the Merci box car majestically commands a splendid view of The Colorado River, as it flows by on its way to The Gulf of Mexico. Ms. Rogers also opened the locked box car to allow me to enter and see for the first time the inside one of the Merci box cars.

Some years ago the inside of the box car was partitioned and paneled to accommodate the storage of La Societe des Quarante Hommes et Huit Chevaux, Grand Voiture du Texas records and artifacts. They even installed electric lighting. The exterior of the box car and the mansion are illuminated during evening hours. Although we were unable to visit at night I am sure that the effect is awesome.

Ms. Rogers was unable to tell me much about the history of the Texas Merci Car and its contents, but fortunately our list told us that The Texas Memorial Museum had some of the con-

tents of Texas' Merci Car. Although we had arrived in Austin only about an hour before closing time for the museum, we decided to see if we could at least locate the people who would be able to show us the artifacts the next day. A museum security guard referred us to Ms. Sally Baulch.

Ms. Baulch said that she would be glad to show us a few of the artifacts "tomorrow morning". She also related that the museum had quite an extensive file on The Merci Train and offered to let me scan through it to see if it contained anything that I would be interested in copying. I found a list of the contents of the Texas car and copies of many of the notes (from the donors) that accompanied some of those gifts. Ms. Baulch even offered to copy the documents for me when she came to work the next morning. She said that she would have them ready for us when we returned at 10 AM to see the artifacts that she would also have ready for us to view.

As it turned out she was only able to locate (from their storage area) two of the Merci gifts. They were beautiful courtiers coats from the time of King Louis the fifteenth and sixteenth (see photos). The coats were well preserved and we were thrilled to have seen them. One of the coats is a silk material, and the other is velvet.

Ms. Baulch revealed that although she knew that The Merci Car was at a local American Legion Post, she had never gone to see it. We told her what a lovely setting that the box car enjoyed, and gave her directions to travel to the site. She said that she thought that she would soon try to do that.

While we were at the museum at Oklahoma City I was given a copy of the booklet put together by Andrew Dolak, of The South Carolina Forty and Eight, from which I included quotes earlier in this book. In this second edition Andy had done quite an extensive "update" on the history of Texas' boxcar. His source for that update was a book published by the late Louis Ambrecht, sent to Andy by his friend L.C. Burgett, Grand Chef de Gare Passe (I presume of Texas).

It seems that Amon Carter, who had done so much to make the "Friendship Train" a success (at least in Texas), felt that he should be entitled to have the box car for his Amon Carter Foundation, and that the car should be displayed at The Will Rogers Museum in Fort Worth, undoubtedly with proper plaques proclaiming his foundation's part in The Friendship Train. But he was a little late in making that desire known. The national offices of The American Legion (and their Forty and Eight Society) had been alerted by the French Veterans Society that the boxcars were forthcoming, as early as the summer of 1948. The Texas Forty & Eight petitioned Governor Jester for the car almost immediately. Members of the Forty & Eight drafted a resolution which was introduced and passed by both legislative bodies of Texas and signed by the governor in August of 1948. The boxcar belonged to Forty and Eight.

After all its contents had been removed and the ceremonies were over it was moved to Camp Mabry, the Texas National Guard Camp, where it stayed until 1950 when the Guard needed the space it was occupying and requested the Forty & Eight to remove it. The Forty and Eight began looking for a new home and soon decided upon the Travis Post of The American

Legion, in Austin, where it remains to this day, and where we found it.

We arrived back in Oklahoma City just two days before our granddaughter, Lauren Marie Bennett, appeared on the scene. Because we had spent so much time there already, we stayed only long enough to make sure that she and Mom could get along without us, and to have some pictures taken with her, then we struck out for Maine. Of course we had to visit some more Merci cars on that leg of the trip too.

Our first stop was in Sedalia, Mo. where Missouri's Merci car is located at the Sedalia State Fairgrounds. We luckily happened to be there the day that a group from the Missouri Forty & Eight were painting and decorating the car in preparation for the 1997 fair. It was through that happy occurrence that we were able to make contact with Mr. "Ike" Eikoff, who promised to send me a letter outlining some of his memories of the history of that car. Although I have written to him, and continue to send him copies of my periodic "newsletters", I have not had the pleasure of receiving a reply from him, or anyone else in Missouri.

Mr. Eikoff also encouraged us to visit the county courthouse where they have a few of Missouri's Merci gifts on display in the lobby. It was there that I found a delightful print of an early Chemin de Fer (French train) exhibited. I was able to get a close up photo of the print, which turned out very well. I am not sure if the print was among the gifts that came in the Merci car or not, but I suspect that it did. There was no one there that I could ask, so I may never be sure of its origin.

Our next stop on The Merci Train Trail, since we were headed East and since Illinois is one of the states that has lost its box car, was Fort Wayne, Indiana. Although the list told us that Indiana's Merci car was at The Veteran's Memorial Shrine in that city, it did not give an address, nor directions to the shrine, nor did it mention that there are two veterans shrines in Fort Wayne. We later (in 1998) discovered that there was a section of the Arizona listing that we did not have at that time in 1997. We spent 2 hours asking people, ended up going to the wrong shrine, but finally connected with people who knew where The National Veteran's Memorial Shrine was located on O'Day road in the outskirts of Fort Wayne.

It seems that the Fort Wayne Forty & Eight has had custody of The Merci Car for quite a few years and kept it on the grounds of their voiture within the city. For some reason which I have been able to discover yet they had to move it from that location and asked the governing board of The National Veteran's Memorial Shrine if it could be moved to the latter's grounds.

The Shrine was founded by a group of Indiana veterans in the early 1970s and is owned and operated by the board of governors, who are all U.S. military veterans. Everything is done by the veterans who volunteer their time and services to build and maintain suitable monuments. They have a large monument dedicated to Veterans of The Korean War and they are raising funds to erect a Veterans Chapel on the grounds.

The Merci car sat out in the open for several years after its arrival at the shrine, but in about 1994 the Indiana Forty & Eight agreed to build a pavilion for the veterans to use for picnics and such, if the veterans would house the Merci car in one end of the structure. Since moving

the car into the pavilion, The Forty & Eight have done extensive maintenance on the car. It makes an attractive exhibit and contributes greatly to the shrines overall appearance.

We had a great time the day that we were at the shrine visiting with a group of the veterans who were having a work day doing grounds maintenance. They were all senior citizens. They were also anxious to hear what we could tell them about The Merci Train.

I promised that I would write about them in this book and also include the information that any and all veterans of the U.S. Military are eligible and encouraged to join them in developing this Shrine (which has been added to the list of national memorials). For a one time fee of \$11.00 veterans can become supporting members, and are eligible to use the facilities there. The group can be contacted by writing to The National Veteran's Memorial Shrine 2122 O'Day Road Fort Wayne, Indiana 46818, Telephone 219-625-4944.

CHAPTER IV

Truly Good Neighbors

Our next stop was Elyria, Ohio to visit with our good friends, and Florida neighbors, Robert (Jack) and Genny Bennett (no known relation to the author) at their northern home in that city. During their sojourn at their winter home they had often heard me speak of The Merci Train and had become interested in it themselves. They had "gone North" quite some time before us and I had told them that the Ohio Merci Car was at Camp Perry. They had invited us to stop and visit them as we passed through Ohio. Even before we let them know that we were coming they had taken a day trip up to Camp Perry to scout the place out for us. Thus it was that, for once, we didn't even have to ask anyone where the car was (a good thing, because the guard at the camp entrance didn't know what Jack was talking about when he told the guard we wanted to see The Merci Car).

Camp Perry is the site of many competitive marksmanship pistol and rifle shooting matches. The 1997 National Sharpshooter Competition was held there. One such meet was in progress the day we visited the camp.

I have not as yet been able to find much historical data on the Ohio Merci box car, but I have found mention of it in a couple of documents I have located. One of them was the results of a late 1950 survey of the other states (I believe by the Ohio Merci Train Committee). It appears that they were trying to formulate plans for final disposition of their Merci car and it's contents, and had asked all the other state's committees what was being done in their states.

A report of the Ohio car was included in the survey results. It was reported that early after the car arrived in Columbus it was mounted on a flat bed trailer, and placed in front of the State Capitol. The contents were removed and a portion of them were displayed in the capitol rotunda for "a week or ten days". Following that the box car was placed in storage until early in 1950 when it was fitted with display cases with adequate lighting to display the gifts. During the Summer and early Fall of that year it was pulled by truck to the principal cities and county seats of the state to allow as many Ohio citizens as possible to view it. It was also an exhibit at The Ohio State Fair that year. All this largely through the efforts of the State Archaeological and Historical Society.

The report went on to say that it was anticipated that at the end of that tour (which was evidently still in progress) the boxcar would be turned over to the Grande Voiture (state level) 40 & 8. A portion of the contents of the car were already on display at the Museum of the Ohio Archaeological and Historical Society in Columbus. It still had not been determined what would be done with the remainder of them. Bob and Genny checked with the museum and were told that some of the artifacts were still there in storage, and could be viewed by appointment. To date we have not had the time to devote to making a drive to Columbus to see them.

While at Camp Perry we met with Mrs. Anna Bovia, The Camp's Official (volunteer) Historian. Our time was limited with this delightful lady author and we didn't learn a great deal about the rest of the history of the car since it had reached Ohio. It appeared that her knowledge of it was mostly restricted to its tenure at Camp Perry.

Mrs. Bovia did provide us with a couple of interesting papers though. One was a two page report of the story of The Friendship and Merci Trains. It may have been written for a news-paper story. Someone had handwritten the name and address of Kathryn Doty of Challis, Idaho on one of the pages. I later sent a letter to Ms. Doty at that address, but my letter was returned as unforwardable.

The other paper was more exciting to me. It was a photocopy of an Associated Press news release from Providence, RI telling the story of the reporter's discovery of that state's Merci box car in a junk yard in Charleston, RI. Andy Dolak had reported that box car as being destroyed by fire many years ago. According to the release, sometime in the 1950s the box car was moved to an American Legion Camp for boys in Charleston, R.I.. The camp had belonged to The Civilian Conservation Corps prior to WW2, and was converted for U.S. Army use during the war. Sometime after the war it was given to The American Legion.

Mr. Irving Crandall, the owner of the junk yard, is quoted by the author of the release, Mr. John Hill, as saying "In the late 1950s or early 1960s the old Army barracks were ordered demolished, and I got the job." The reporter says "the boxcar wound up in his (Crandall's) junk yard", with other items salvaged from the campground.

Crandall evidently had a soft spot in his heart for the historical value of the car. Instead of cutting it up for scrap, he kept the old box car in a corner of his junk yard. All during those many years, he was hoping that someone would come along and buy it to be restored. Someone had written the date of 08-18-1995 in the margin of the photocopy that Mrs. Bovia had given to me.

I don't know where the story that the box car was destroyed by fire originated but it appears that someone got their wires crossed. Or someone made up the story in an attempt to cover the fact that they didn't know where the box car was anymore. I have never discovered the origin of the misleading report. I was very happy to hear that it was still in existence.

To add credence to the reporter's story: while we were later visiting the New Hampshire Merci car, Mr. Don Still, a Forty and Eighter and the Custodian of that state's boxcar, told me that there had recently been a 40 & 8er from Rhode Island "up to see our car, and was taking pictures, and asking questions about how we restored it."

I wrote to the reporter, Mr. Hill, in care of The Providence Journal to see if he could update me on what had happened with the box car since his article had been written. I also asked if he could identify persons or groups trying to get a restoration project started. I strongly suspected that it would be the Rhode Island Grande Voiture of the Forty and Eight. I have never received a reply from Mr. Hill. I have since found out that the Forty et Eight were seeking to find a way to restore the box car, but could not come up with the necessary funds.

Getting back to Ohio, before we left "The Other Bennetts" home in Elyria they told us that they were soon taking a trip to South Dakota to visit Mt. Rushmore and The Badlands. They also said that, if we would give them a copy of our list of Merci Boxcar locations, they would try to look up the South Dakota car for us.

Our own next stop was in the Binghamton, NY area, which we had called home for about twenty five years before moving to Florida. We stopped there to visit with our honorary granddaughters, Rebecca and Amanda Cooke, and their parents. While we were there, we added to their education (history wise) by taking them to see New York's Merci box car.

As I mentioned earlier in the book, the home of the New York Merci box car is at Forty and Eight Voiture #92 located at the junction of Judd and Halsey Roads in Whitesboro, NY. Whitesboro is located just a few miles West of Utica, not far from the New York State Thruway. It is also ironic to me that my wife and I met, and were married, less than ten miles from the site, at Griffiss A.F.B. in Rome (NY) in 1964.

Mr. Sam Reeder, a railroad enthusiast who lives in upstate New York, wrote an article for the enthusiasts' magazine Key, Lock, and Lantern featuring historical information of New York's Merci car. He sent me a copy of the magazine, and in the article he reports that the Onandaga County (NY) Voiture of the Forty and Eight Society was awarded custody of the box car. He doesn't say what year that custody was granted, but says that "in the Fall of 1955 they sent the car to the Rail City Museum of Dr. Stanley Groman" which was located near Lake Ontario. Mr. Reeder's account goes on to say "Years later the Museum closed, and in the mid 1970s the car reverted to the custody of (The Forty and Eight Society) Voiture #92 at Whitesboro, NY."

So far, I have been unable to determine how long The New York car remained in New York City. I don't know if that car joined the Western section of The Merci Train, as it traveled to Binghamton, Albany, Syracuse, Rochester, Buffalo, and on to Ohio, or not. It may have been dropped off the Western section in Albany, or it may have made the trip by itself at a later date.

During my visit to the box car, its custodian, a Mr. Blaich told me that (in 1949) the box car was given a home in Poughkeepsie, in Dutchess County, where it remained for several years before it was moved "upstate." It was also in the custody of The Forty and Eight while in Poughkeepsie. I have been unable to locate anyone with knowledge of the disposition of the New York Merci gifts.

The Whitesboro Voiture have restored their Merci car grandly; it's appearance was equaled only, out of all that I had seen at that time, by that of the Florida Merci car. They have also kept, or amassed, an impressive collection of photos of the early days of that car's history in New York. I was promised that I could copy any of the photos that I wish for inclusion in this book.

I am somewhat concerned that they keep those photos in the box car on a permanent basis though. It would be all too easy for vandals to destroy the box car, and the photos. Mr. Ray Blaich, caretaker of the box car, did tell me that the Voiture is in the process of raising money to build a building to enclose the box car.

The next stop on The Merci Train Trail was Manchester, N.H., the home of that state's box car. According to Arizona's list, the box car was located in Gilbert City Park, Reed and Beamer Streets in Manchester. When we were led to the park (see paragraph below) we discovered that it was actually located at Reed and Bremer Streets, not Beamer street. There is no Beamer Street in Manchester.

We checked into a motel in the city, but no one we asked knew of Gilbert Park, or the Merci car. I was able to contact an American Legion Post and they referred me to Mr. Don Still, who was Merci's custodian. Mr. Still said "unless you are familiar with the city, I don't think that you will be able to locate it. You stay there and I'll come on over and lead you to it." Gilbert Park is a house lot, and former site of the home of a Catholic Priest (whose name was Gilbert). He donated the property to The 40 & 8 to make a home for The Merci Box Car.

We learned from Mr. Still that the box car had remained in the capitol city of Concord until 1953. That was the year that the state gave custody of the box car to the Forty & Eight Society of New Hampshire. The Society moved it to Manchester where it remains to this day. As part of their commitment make a permanent memorial of the box car, they agreed to hold Memorial Day services at the site each year, and have kept that commitment.

The Forty & Eight have completely enclosed the box car within a building that they erected on their donated property, which is located about 100 feet from the intersection of Reed and Bremer Streets. The current building, which is faced with brick, is a replacement for their original wooden frame structure, which had deteriorated from weather and vandals to the point that it was too costly to maintain. The vandals were breaking in, and having drug and alcohol parties in the box car. The new brick building, with steel doors, has lowered the incidence of vandalism to a minimum.

There is only enough room inside the building for the box car and about a four feet wide walkway all around it. The building is kept locked, but most of the front side of the building is plate glass windows. The inside of the building is rather dark because of its being closed on three sides. But if one is up near the windows, he is provided with a good view of the front side of the box car.

Although the list stated that some contents were in the box car, there were none there. The N.H. Grand Voiture does have a booklet that they distribute to visitors. It is basically the text of an article Lt. Col. Manuel A. Conley wrote about The Merci Train for American Heritage Magazine in about 1980. Conley was an officer in The U.S. Army, and author of several military and historical books.

An addendum that the 40 & 8 have put in the booklet says that "the whereabouts of most of the gifts are unknown, but at least two paintings from the train are hanging at the library of the Association Canado-Americaine in Manchester. A prominent Queen City (Manchester) French family was given one of the china vases from the train."

Not only did Mr. Still come to our motel, to act as our guide, he very graciously led us back to our motel so that we wouldn't get lost and wander around Manchester half the night.

Late in August, after we had arrived in Maine, I was pleasantly surprised to receive a large manila envelope from our friends, the Ohio Bennetts. When I examined the contents of the envelope I was flabbergasted to find that, not only did they visit The South Dakota Car, they had also located, taken pictures of, and tracked down newspaper accounts about the Wisconsin and the Minnesota Merci Cars.

According to written accounts found by Genny and Bob (or Jack, as some people know him), the Wisconsin box car arrived in the capitol city of Madison on February 13th, 1949, and was treated to a warm reception despite the cold weather. The affair was much the same as those I have described in other states. The box car was originally presented to The Wisconsin Historical Society, but members of The Forty and Eight convinced The Historical Society to turn it over to them. For nineteen years the box car made the State Fair Grounds its home, and was maintained by The Forty and Eight.

It is not clear to me whether they grew tired of that chore, or if there was some other motivation for their action of turning the box car over to the MidContinent Railway Historical Society in North Freedom. The society is a nonprofit group that operates a steam railway train which visitors to the center may purchase a ride on. The train makes scheduled trips (in season) along a seven mile former branch of Chicago & Northwestern railroad track which was built in 1903.

The Merci Car sits under shelter, along with two other unrestored old box cars, and does not really "fit" in this setting. Mr. Don Meyer, the current manager of The Society's Museum, says that he would like to find a new home for Merci. Perhaps someplace more in keeping with its connection to military veterans.

Mr. Meyer did share some of his knowledge of the car's history with Jack and Genny by telling them that records he has indicate that the Wisconsin Merci Car was used to haul freight between Paris and Lyons when it was in active service with the French National Railroad system.

Early in the year 2000, I was contacted by Mr. Michael Meeker, of The National Railroad Museum in Green Bay, Wisconsin with the news that they were acquiring the Merci car, and soon hoped to move it to Green Bay and have it restored to its 1949 splendor. Mr. Meeker also said that they hoped to file an application with the Wisconsin, and The National, Historical Society, to find out if their car would be eligible for inclusion on the National Historical Register. A move I applaud and support.

Minnesota's Merci Box Car, along with Indiana's, has a home nicely fitted to its connection to military veterans. Our friends, the "Other Bennetts", found Minnesota's Merci box car at The Minnesota Military Museum at Camp Ripley, near Little Falls, MN. "The museum's mission" as stated in a brochure they were given there, "is to document, preserve, and explain military history as experienced by Minnesotans".

Again quoting from the brochure, "Camp Ripley is a 53,000 acre National Guard training site. State owned, but primarily federally funded, it is the largest such state installation in the nation. Approximately 50,000 troops come here annually from throughout the U.S. for short

term training. By happy coincidence the site encompasses the greater part of what was old Fort Ripley, a frontier Army post occupied from 1849 to 1877. The fort's prominent role in Minnesota's military history makes it a highly appropriate location for the state's military museum." And for the Merci car this writer wishes to add. Linda and I were able to visit the site personally during our Spring 2000 trek.

According to a report titled The Story of The French Merci Train done by Forty & Eighter Richard H. Pursley of St. Paul Voiture #39, this box car also did a stint at it's state fairgrounds before being placed in its current home. He reports (I believe soon after the arrival of the car) nothing unusual about Minnesota's box car and its reception, except that he said that personal letters of thanks were being sent to each of the French citizens who sent gifts to the people of Minnesota. Newspaper articles about recipients sending acknowledgment letters to French donors have been found in other states also.

South Dakota's 1949 governor, George Mickelson, had appointed a Thank You Train committee and, by the 10th of February, 1949, they were all set to welcome the train at Pierre, So. Dakota's capitol. But remember, it was the middle of February and, as I have learned while searching 1949 newspapers for Merci stories in other cities, the weather in the Mid West was making headlines all across the country, and making life miserable for man and beast alike in the Plains States.

Blizzards were normal fare that year, as were the sub zero temperatures and blowing gales that usually accompany such storms. On Feb. 10th The Huron, S.D. Plainsman reported that Pierre was buried in snow, and that Gov. Mickelson and his committee had decided not to try to have the welcoming ceremony for Merci in that city. Instead they would officially welcome the Merci Car in Huron on Feb. 15th, the day after the train's arrival in that city. Huron had escaped the worst of the blizzards and was thus more accessible to groups who would be coming from other cities to welcome Merci. Many roads into Pierre were closed because of blowing and drifting snow.

Ray Nolan, Grand Chef de Gare du South Dakota at the time, acted as chairman and spokesperson of the governor's committee. In the Feb. 10th issue of The Huron Plainsman, he is quoted as saying that the gifts in the box car would be sorted, and that The State and Custer Museum would get the larger and more expensive gifts. The remainder would be split among the nine Voitures of The Forty & Eight in So. Dakota. Presumably they would be able to distribute the gifts further if they wished. The box car itself was given a home at the State Fair Grounds where it still resides today.

By 1980 the car's appearance seems to have diminished to a point that the Forty & Eight, its custodian organization, felt the need to strip off all the paint that had been put on it over the years. Volunteers within that organization scraped it all off, replaced the missing provincial plaques (most of which had been stolen by souvenir hunters or vandals), and generally restored it to its 1949 splendor. The car is now painted a dark green color which looks quite nice even though that color is not one of the original colors I have been told was brick red or light gray.

CHAPTER V

Dedicated People

In mid September of 1997 we decided to again make like the birds and start our migration South. I sat down with our box car location list and my Rand McNally Atlas, and planned a route that would take us through cities that were home to some of the Merci box cars. We tried to avoid going an unreasonable amount of distance out of our general line of travel however. We also wanted to visit friends and family in Eastern New York State, so we left Maine and headed West through Vermont.

The list had reported that Vermont's Merci was in the city of St Albans, so we planned to make that city our first night's stopping place. After stopping at The Vermont State Library and Archives in Montpelier, where we found newspaper accounts of Merci's arrival in 1949, we arrived in St. Albans and found lodging. The list had reported that the box car was located at The Downtown Railroad Mall. It turned out that we had dinner right across the street from that mall but no one at the restaurant knew anything about the box car.

Once again I turned to The American Legion to see if they could help me. After a few calls I was able to determine that the box car had indeed been at the mall from about 1982 until 1995. It was then moved to The Vermont Military Museum at Vermont's National Guard Training Center at Camp Johnson. The Camp is located in Colechester, a town near The City of Burlington. It seems that members of The Forty and Eight, who had done so much to "save the Old Lady" from extinction, were no longer able to keep it maintained and welcomed an offer from the military museum to take it at Camp Johnson.

Following a night's rest in St. Albans we drove down to Colechester and found the camp and the museum. Almost as soon as we drove through the gate we spotted the boxcar sitting near a couple of large buildings that we found to house the museum. We started looking it over and taking photographs and were soon joined by a small group of volunteers who were giving the car a badly needed paint job. We were introduced to (retired) Warrant Officer Andrew Laramee, the museum's Director. Andy is the person who has been most instrumental in getting the museum established and stocked with exhibits.

The array of "antique" military hardware at the museum is very impressive, and no small amount of it was collected by "Andy" during his years of active duty. Wanting to share his private collection with others was undoubtedly what motivated him to work to get the museum started. At the time of our visit a building project was underway which will provide a "house" for the Merci car inside a runway that will connect the museum's two buildings.

I am including here an edited narrative of the history of Vermont's Boxcar, written by Forty and Eighter John R. Finn in 1984 just before the (then) newly restored boxcar was

rededicated at The Railroad Mall in St. Albans. Mr. Laramée made a copy of it for me. It is typical of what many of the box cars went through as the years passed, and of the obstacles the veterans (to whom the boxcars meant so much) faced as those veterans grew older and fewer.

The Vermont Side of The Merci Car Story

1948-1984

By John R. Finn

France's demonstration of appreciation to the people of Vermont arrived in Montpelier, Vermont in February of 1949. It was a "Merci Car" filled to the brim with gifts from the homes of the French people in an effort to say thank you to Vermonters who sent donations to relieve the starving citizens of post WW II France in 1947.

The Merci or 40 & 8 car was set in a place of honor just East of the State House and at the rear of the State Library and Supreme Court Building on a hillside where visitors to The Capitol could see it. By 1951 the wooden car had begun to deteriorate. The coats of arms representing each province of France were disappearing. The Vermont Legislature would not vote the \$10,000 asked to refurbish it and put a roof over it. The contents of the car had disappeared, no one knew where. Soon it was moved to the Vermont State Police Headquarters, Redstone, Montpelier where it served as a storage building, and continued to deteriorate.

In the late sixties the 40 & 8 car was moved to Steamtown in Bellows Falls, Vt., (Steamtown is) an historic display of steam engines, coal tenders, passenger trains, boxcars, and cabooses which had all been replaced by the diesel engine. It was hoped there would be enough funds available to restore the Merci Car; but restoration never happened, and again it became a storage bin, rotting where it stood.

In the summer of 1982, American Legionnaire and Forty and Eight member of Voiture 243 of St. Albans, Melvin Hilliker stumbled on the Merci Car in the backyard of Steamtown. He reported his find to fellow members at the next meeting of the Voiture. Efforts were immediately put in effect to rescue this dying old lady. The task was eventually referred to 40 & 8 member of Voiture Local 243, John Finn, district representative for St. Albans.

After three months of negotiations with Steamtown officials, the 40 & 8 boxcar was released. Finn had help from many people and organizations along the way; Steamtown officials said they needed a box car for storage. Central Vermont Railway General Manager Phillip Larson and his aide James Fitzgerald of St. Albans found a satisfactory replacement among their rolling stock, donated it to the cause, and transported it to Steamtown as a swap.

The Merci Car was in such tough shape movement over railroad tracks was asking for trouble, then Steamtown began to drag its feet; finally Finn threatened to sue Steamtown and within hours all claims were released. Now there was a question of ownership. Who really holds title? The State of Vermont? And if so, which agency, or department? Eric Gilbertson of the Historic Preservation Division established the ownership for his division.

Next came the question "how will we move it from Steamtown to St. Albans?" The Vt. National Guard did not have available at the time a flat-bed capable of carrying the load; neither did the Vermont Transportation Agency. Voiture #243 did not have the money to pay for commercial transportation. Secretary of the Agency for Transportation came to the rescue. His Maintenance Director, Frank E. Aldrich, found a construction contractor who had a truck deadheading North to pick up a crane, and who agreed to carry the Merci Car to the CVR roundhouse in St. Albans (as a donation) in mid-June of 1983.

Arrangements had been made to store the boxcar in the roundhouse where it remained while Voiture 243 members completely refurbished the old car and worked for the cash to do it with. The 131st Engineering Battalion did the moving job from the roundhouse to the dedication site at The Switchyard Shopping Center, Lake Street, St. Albans, Vt. On Saturday, July 7, 1984 the Merci Car, dressed up to look like it did when it arrived in Vermont thirty six years ago, will be rededicated and honored at a new location.

That ends Mr Finn's rededication paper. I am sure that the men of Voiture 243 have experienced disappointment and frustration many times over the years, as they tried to recruit resources and personnel to maintain the box car in a fitting manner.

Our next Merci stop was Fort IndianTown Gap Military Reservation near Harrisburg, in Pennsylvania. The Pa. Merci Boxcar has a home at a prominent fork in the main road through the camp. The car is in good condition and is somewhat protected from the elements in the same manner that many of its counterparts are, with a canopy over it. We photographed it from many different angles and then returned to nearby Interstate 81.

We then drove into Harrisburg to visit The William Penn State Museum and Archives Building. We were not able to make contact with anyone there who could help us in our search for historical data on the Pa box car, but we were more successful at the Harrisburg Library where we found 1949 newspaper accounts of the box car's arrival in that city.

The next day we were able to find The Baltimore & Ohio Railroad Museum in downtown Baltimore, and for the price of two senior citizens tickets we were directed to the museum's Roundhouse which houses the Maryland Merci Car. The car is well preserved since it has been kept inside since 1953 when the museum acquired it. It probably needed a minimum amount of restoration at that time, and little maintenance since then. The car is another of those which still has the Brakeman's shelter on it. As with most of the Merci boxcars the brake "shoes" are missing but everything else is pretty much intact.

I would say that in such a friendly environment the car should last indefinitely. Of course I would wish that it was displayed more prominently. In its current location it is obscured and overshadowed by other B&O equipment, but in all honesty, so are many of their other exhibits. I'm sure that the museum directors are trying to maximize the limited amount of space available to display the grand assortment of train memorabilia contained in their inventory. It was difficult to get photos of the whole box car, because the proximity of other exhibits made it nearly impossible to get far enough away from the box car to include all of it in a single picture.

As with most city libraries, finding a place to park was a challenge but we were finally able to secure a place only about a block from Baltimore's City Library, where we obtained several accounts of the box car's 1949 arrival.

The next city on "The Merci Train Trail" was Columbia, South Carolina. I mentioned earlier in the book that I had been in contact with the people at American Legion Post #6 in that city. I still had their phone number. I stopped just North of Columbia and called the post to get directions. The gentleman whom I talked with told me that the post is located at the intersection of Pickens and Whaley Streets. He also gave me excellent instructions of how to get there from I-77, the road we were arriving in the area on. We had no difficulty at all in following his directions.

The S.Carolina Merci box car has a nice home at the edge of one of the post's parking lots. A plaque nearby relates that the car serves as a memorial to all who have served in this country's military in all wars. Although it was a cloudy day, and a drizzle of rain was falling during our visit there, our photos came out well. The car is in quite good condition having been restored in the early 1980s, thanks in no small measure to the efforts of Andy Dolak.

Andy was Grande Chef de Gare (State level Commander of The Forty et Eight) at that time. I have quoted from and referred to Mr. Dolak's book in other sections of this work. As I write this portion of the text I have not as yet met Andy in person, but his unpublished booklet which was printed and distributed by The S.C. Forty et Eight has been of great help to me in my research for this book. Also as I write this text Andy is working on a "third and final" edition of his booklet. The first edition was printed in 1982, the second in 1984.

I have seen copies of both of them in several museums around the country; evidently donated by other Forty et Eighters who received the booklets directly from Andy himself. To the best of my knowledge, the first two editions of his booklet have never been sold in bookstores, but copies have been sold by the author himself and the S.C. Forty et Eight.

The history of the S. Carolina Merci is not much different than that of other states. Dolak reports in his Merci Boxcar Memorial Book that the box car was displayed at McPherson Park in Greenville, S.C. from 1949 until 1973. Then a group of American Legion Auxiliary ladies (and others) got the car moved to Cleveland Park, also in Greenville. They apparently did some "fixing" on the car and maintained it until the mid 1980s when it was moved to its present location in Columbia.

Dolak relates in his booklet that he was not aware of the Merci Train until 1981 while attending a Grande Promenade (state convention of The Forty and Eight). Like I was a decade later, he was "hooked" and began researching the history of it. It was largely through his efforts that the S.C. Merci Car has been restored and moved to its present location in Columbia.

One other point of interest about S.Carolina's Merci Car is that, when it arrived in S. C. in 1949, the well known Senator J. Strom Thurmond was governor of that state, and officiated in the car's presentation and acceptance ceremonies in Greenville.

From Columbia we traveled west to Atlanta. Armed with the address of The Forty Et

Eight's Voiture #217, and an Atlanta city street map, we were this time able to locate their chateau with no trouble whatsoever. There was no one "home" at the Chateau, but of course that did not matter too much because we had already obtained much history about Georgia's box car on our previous trip to Atlanta, reported on earlier in this story. I had also been in contact with Mr. "Red" Roberts of that Voiture, so I could call him again if I came up with more questions about their box car.

We also had one more important stop to make on this journey. Our son, Earl Jr., was on temporary duty at Maxwell Air Force Base, in Montgomery, Alabama. We had decided that we couldn't pass up the opportunity to be that close without stopping to spend the weekend with him.

We had a very nice visit, and he accompanied us to The State Museum and Archives Building where we were able to locate some newspaper accounts of Merci's arrival in that state. One of the articles related that the car would be given to American Legion Post #2, and that it would be given a place of honor at the post's Madison Ave. home.

One particularly interesting Associated Press article which we found in the Feb. 15, 1949 edition of The Montgomery Advertiser is worthy of mention here. The release sheds a little more light on the subject of the Friendship Train of relief supplies sent from America to France. The reader will recall that the Friendship Train was one of the factors that motivated the French to send The Merci Train. The by-line reads:

"Ex-Alabama Student Honored By France For Her Help."

and I quote the story in its entirety:

"New Orleans, Feb. 15 (1949) The government of France said "Thank You" to a slim, beautiful 22 year old girl who "adopted" a French village. The medalle de la Reconnaissance Francaise was presented to Miss Betty Jane Holder, whose efforts resulted in sending 7,200 pounds of food, clothing, and other needed supplies to the village of Mouleydier. The medal was presented by French Consul General Lionel Vasse.

Miss Holder, now a society reporter for the Jackson (Miss) Clarion Ledger, began her efforts while a student at the University of Alabama in 1947. She was inspired to help the village when she read an account of how it was almost wiped out by the Germans when its men rose in armed resistance to help the American invasion forces. She raised about \$500 from her fellow students and bought packages of food and other supplies for the needy French villagers. She continued her campaign after reaching her home in New Orleans and her efforts were credited with raising the 7200 pounds of gifts for the inhabitants of Mouleydier. Last June she visited the village where she was given the title of "Mother of 700", the villages population. A public square was named in her honor and she was godmother to a child who was given her name and used her bassinet. It had been among the items she shipped to the village."

A picture of the young lady accompanied the article.

We also met a lady at the museum who remembered that one of the gifts in The Alabama Merci box car, a bridal gown, had been given to a young lady of that city to be married in. That bride and her groom honeymooned in France and in later years gave the dress to the State Museum. I believed for several months that Betty Jane Holder was that young woman.

But in July of 1998 Mr. Ken Tilley of The Alabama Dept. of Archives sent me a number of documents about the distribution of Alabama's Merci gifts. We met Mr. Tilley during our visit in 1997. He had helped us search for information about Alabama's Merci car then, and I had maintained contact with him.

Among the documents he sent to me in 1998 were two separate papers that showed that a Miss Ann Day was the recipient of the Alabama Merci wedding dress. Another of those documents was a copy of a resolution passed by The Alabama House of Representatives, and concurred to by The Alabama Senate and (then) Governor James E. Folsom. I quote the resolution in full:

WHEREAS, among the things that came to Alabama from France on the "Thank You" train, there was a wedding dress given by the City of Lyon, with the request that a photograph of the bride wearing it be sent to that city, and
WHEREAS, Miss Ann Day, of Montgomery, who will be married Saturday, May 28th, 1949, to Myron Turner (G.I.), also of Montgomery, has been chosen as the bride to wear the dress, and
WHEREAS, the merchants of Montgomery and the Zonta Club, International, have showered the prospective bride with trousseau gifts, and
WHEREAS, the Waterman Steamship Corporation, with headquarters in Mobile, has presented the prospective bride and groom with a complimentary passage to and from France,
THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, that the House of Representatives of the Alabama Legislature, the Senate concurring, hereby designate Mr. and Mrs. Myron Turner, as Good Will Ambassadors from the State of Alabama to France on the occasion of their wedding journey.

Another of the documents that Mr. Tilley sent to me was a copy of a letter written by the 1949 Director of the Alabama Archives, Dr. Marie Bankhead Owens, to a Mrs. Wefel of Mobile. In that letter Mrs. Owens reported that the Turners were still in Europe enjoying the trip to France and that they had been given a "very fine reception" in Lyon by French officials who reported to the Turners that Alabama was the only state that had acknowledged their bridal dress and sent Good Will Ambassadors to thank them for it. That was in November of 1949; there may well have been others that went later on such as Miss Holder who received the wedding dress from Mississippi's Merci box car.

Mr. Tilley also told me that he had found that the Turners still lived in Montgomery, and sent me their address. I immediately wrote to ask their permission to visit and interview them as we made our way back to Florida in September of 1998. Just a few days later, while I was out on an errand, my wife received a phone call from Mrs. Turner telling us that her husband had passed away a few years ago, but that she would be happy for us to visit her so that we could hear her story firsthand.

Going back in time to the Fall of 1997, we ended our visit with our son in Montgomery, completed the last leg of our trip home, and settled in for the Winter season of 1997-1998.

Upon arriving home, I was pleased to find letters from several Merci Friends. Being somewhat daunted by the prospect of answering them individually, I decided to start sending "newsletters" which would update anyone who had indicated an interest in my project. I would also send newsletters to others whose interest in the train had preceded mine. One of the people I sent a copy of my first newsletter to was "Andy" Dolak.

Andy is the South Carolina Forty & Eighter who wrote a booklet about the Merci Train in the early 1980s. Copies of that booklet were sent to Forty & Eight groups all over the United States. I believe the booklets generated a lot of interest among those groups to restore their own box cars. At least it appears to have happened that way because I have found that, in state after state, restoration projects took place in the 1980s.

Just a few days after mailing my newsletter to Andy I received a reply from him saying that he was working on another edition of his book, and that he was expanding it to include more of the history of the beginnings of the Merci Train. It seems that he had met Drew Pearson's stepson back in 1988 and had obtained permission to access Mr. Pearson's archived personal papers, something I attempted to do myself early in 1997. I was never able to obtain an address for the gentleman, nor for his step sister, Mr. Pearson's daughter.

Mr. Dolak wrote that he too hoped to have his book released in conjunction with the fiftieth anniversary of Merci's arrival in 1949, and he wanted to hear more about how I planned to report the train's history. I immediately sent him a copy of what I had written to that time and asked for his opinion of it. I also told him that I would like to meet him and we tentatively agreed that I would stop to visit with him on my return trip to Florida in the Fall of 1998.

Another reply to my newsletter brought news that saddened us. The wife of Mr. Donald Still, the N.H. Forty & Eighter who so kindly received us and guided us around Manchester in July, wrote to say that Don had died of a massive heart attack in September. His devotion to caring for the N.H. Merci car should long be remembered by members of that community, and act as an example for others who will follow in that duty.

CHAPTER VI

Thanksgiving Excursion

In the Fall of 1997 our friends, Ann and Dan Jenkins, graciously invited Linda and me to spend Thanksgiving with them at their Knoxville, Tn. home. It was almost automatic to me by that time to pull out my Rand-McNally road map atlas and my copy of Arizona's 1996 listing of the Merci box car locations to aid me in planning our route. I noted that the Alabama box car was located in Huntsville which wouldn't be far off our normal route to Knoxville. The list also indicated that the Kentucky Merci car was located in New Haven, a town not too far from Bowling Green, and close to Interstate #65. I calculated that by adding one day to our normal travel time we could stop and see both of the box cars.

We stopped at a motel just north of Birmingham that first night on the road, and found a pamphlet in the motel's tourist attractions rack which gave us directions to reach the Huntsville Depot Museum, where the Alabama box car is located. From I-65 we took I-565 East to exit #19 in Huntsville. Signs near the exit directed us to the nearby Depot Museum.

The Huntsville Depot Museum is owned and operated by the City of Huntsville. The city fathers there have evidently made a commitment to use the museum to it's maximum potential to assist in the education of not only Huntsville's school children, but children from many of the communities around the area, even as far away as Memphis, Tn.

Huntsville is rich in Ante Bellum, and Civil War, history, and museum staff conduct on site classes in history for visiting school groups. Much of the insides of their buildings, which include the original Huntsville Depot, are set up to be used for classrooms/workshops. However, with the Christmas season approaching, museum volunteers had the old railroad roundhouse/maintenance building filled with christmas trees beautifully decorated in many different ethnic styles. In another building we found a class room that was being used as a workshop for a group learning the art of Paper Mache.

The Merci box car is displayed in a prominent location which is visible from almost any entrance. It is in fair condition, but in need of some restoration. There are no signs to enlighten an uninformed visitor to the museum what he/she is viewing. Such a visitor would quite likely dismiss it as "just an old railroad boxcar", though they might wonder at the plaques with the obviously French names on them.

We met and chatted with the museum's director, Mr. Jan Williams, who knew a little of the Merci Train story. He did not, however, know a lot about the history of the Alabama car since its arrival in that state. It interested him to learn that some of the artifacts that the box car had contained were reported to be stored at the state archives in Montgomery. I would have liked to spend the day there seeing the many other exhibits and learning more about the museum's history and operation, but as usual our time was limited because our visit was a side trip.

We drove back west to I-65 and continued north through Nashville, Tn. and on into Kentucky. We arrived in New Haven at dusk that day and easily found The Kentucky Railway Museum. The museum was closing however and there was not enough light for photographs. We decided to spend the night in Bardstown just a few miles north of New Haven and awoke the next morning to find the weather had turned cold and rainy.

After breakfast we braved the heavy downpour and made our way back to New Haven where we located Errol and Cecelia Johnson. The Johnsons are in their seventies and are both involved with the museum. They also operate a bed and breakfast hotel and tavern right next door to the museum. Mr. Johnson is a WW II veteran who has very vivid memories of riding in a "Forty and Eight" box car. He was taken prisoner while fighting the Nazis in West Africa and was transported by rail through Africa, Italy, Germany, and Poland to a P.O.W. camp.

The Johnsons also introduced us to the museum's director, Mr. Jeri Burks, who was quite knowledgeable about the history of both the Merci Train, and Kentucky's component of that train. One does not have to talk with Jeri too long to be able to discern that he is an ardent fan of railroads. Because of the heavy rain that morning we were unable to tour the museum, but Jeri very kindly showed us some of the museum's extensive model railroad lay outs which I suspect he played a large part in putting together. He also eagerly swapped "Merci" information with us.

He reported that La Societie de Fortie Hommes et Huit Chevaux du Kentucky, and more specifically the (Forty & Eight) Voiture in Elizabethtown had raised and presented The Kentucky Railway Museum with enough money to finance the restoration of their state's Merci car. However, due to restoration projects being conducted on other pieces of the museum's railroad equipment, he had been unable to start work on that project.

Kentucky's Merci car was indeed badly in need of restoration, as can be hastily determined from even a cursory glance at the less than excellent photographs that the adverse weather that day allowed me to get. The roof is badly deteriorated and was covered with plastic to reduce leaking. Evidence showed that some effort had been made several years ago to make rudimentary repairs to the box car. The roof had been removed and replaced with little or no thought seemingly given to maintaining it's originality. The same was true of planks in one side of the car that appeared to have rotted out. They had been replaced with whatever was readily available to the repairers, as can be seen in my photographs.

My suggestion that Mr. Burks try to put a higher priority on the restoration project, so that it would be completed in time for the 50th anniversary of the Kentucky box car's arrival, was well received by him. He indicated that he was already interested in seeing the car restored to its exact 1949 appearance, and would insist on authenticity in the projected restoration.

Mr. Burks also showed great interest in viewing our photos of the other Merci cars, especially those that have already been restored. I think I remember him also saying that he hoped to have a building in which to house and exhibit the restored box car.

In the Spring of 2000, I was invited to return to Bardstown to speak to a Junior Historical Society whose members were involved in a search for the history of their state's Merci car.

While we were there we also visited The Nelson County Vocational High School where teacher Chris Verdow's shop students were in the process of restoring the Kentucky car, and doing a wonderful job of it.

Going back to our 1997 Thanksgiving trip. We arrived in Knoxville late the same afternoon that we had visited The Kentucky Railway Museum, and I then revealed to my friend, Dan Jenkins, my plan to take a two day circuit from Knoxville up to Charleston, W. Va., then South and West to Bristol, Tn., and back again to Knoxville. The Arizona list had reported that Charleston and Bristol were the host cities to the West Virginia and Tennessee Merci box cars.

Our wives decided to opt out of the trip, so the Monday following Thanksgiving Dan and I headed for Charleston. The trip took a little longer than we had planned, so we didn't arrive in that city until late afternoon. By the time that we located The Daniel Boone Roadside Park it was 4 P.M. We were disappointed to find that the box car was no longer at the park and that no one at the site knew where it had been moved to.

After finding lodging for the night, I got on the phone to try to find someone who could tell me where the car had been moved. One person said that it had been moved to The Roadside Park in St. Albans, a city just west of Charleston. We decided to drive over to St. Albans to see if it was indeed there, even though it was dark by the time we had eaten our dinner. I reasoned that if we saw it there I would take the time to go back there again the following morning to take photos. If not, then we would give up on it for the present and head for Bristol and hope to have better luck there.

When we located the park that night we could find no sign of the box car, so we swallowed our disappointment and early the next morning we headed south through Virginia towards Bristol. To add to the frustration of the trip, I didn't notice that the speed limit, which was 70 MPH on I-77 in W. Va., dropped to 65 MPH when we crossed the border into Virginia, and was soon rewarded for that oversight by receiving a citation for speeding.

Fortunately Bristol was a much better experience. We arrived there around noon and had only a little difficulty locating American Legion Post #145 (where the list indicated Tennessee's Merci car was located). We were very pleased to see it sitting in front of The Legion building.

It was a first for both Dan and me. He had never seen one of the Forty and Eight cars before, and Tennessee's was the first one that I had seen with truck wheels rather than railroad wheels. It seems to be the only one left with the truck tires still on it. Others have had truck wheels in the past but they have put the railroad carriage back on. Still others have no wheels left at all. Texas' box car is an example of the former, and Michigan's and Rhode Island's are two of the latter.

The Forty and Eight Society of Bristol had the railroad wheels removed and the truck trailer undercarriage installed soon after it's arrival in that city sometime in 1949. They wanted to be able to take the box car with them to their state conventions without the trouble of having to load it onto a flat bed trailer every time that they went. Besides that reason there was the fact

that, loaded onto such a trailer, its height would undoubtedly make it impossible to pass under many highway underpasses. The sad part is that its railroad undercarriage is also lost. No one today knows exactly what happened to it. Those who have responsibility for the car today would like to have the railroad undercarriage back on the box car for its historical value.

However, I'm sure they won't have an easy time trying to find the correct type railroad wheels for a one hundred plus year old railroad car from Europe. Perhaps they should talk to someone in New Jersey; I have recently been told that the metal undercarriage of that state's car is all of it that still exists. New Jersey's Merci car was reportedly destroyed by fire in the 1960s.

Upon arriving at Post #145 in Bristol (515 Marion St. at the corner of Edgemont Ave.) we were greeted by Post Commander Charles (Chuck) Commerton. Chuck graciously spent nearly an hour of his time telling us what he knew about the Tennessee box car. He searched through many of the Post's historical records trying to locate copies of newspaper articles that had been published about the box car since its arrival in Bristol in 1949.

From his narrative and from copies of newspaper articles that he gave me I was able to glean that Mr. Wesley Davis, who was Commander of Post 145 in 1949 (and also a local politician who would later be mayor of Bristol) got a copy of the 1948 advance notice of Merci's coming, which was sent out by the national office of The Forty & Eight. Upon learning that the box car was forthcoming, Davis immediately petitioned Tennessee's governor, in behalf of Tennessee's Forty and Eight Society, for ownership of the Merci car.

Soon after the box car's arrival in Nashville in Feb. of 1949, Tennessee's Governor Browning summoned Mr. Davis to come to the capitol to take the Merci car home to Bristol. The box car and its contents were then taken on a state wide tour. Most of the French gifts it contained were presented to various persons along the route. Commander Davis kept one of the gifts though, a six inch high doll, and presented it to his young daughter when he returned to Bristol. Many years later the daughter donated the doll to Post 145, and they still have it on exhibit in their restored Merci Car.

We talked with several men at Bristol's Post #145 that day in 1997 and among them was "Pete" Booher, who told me that he had seen the Delaware Merci car in 1996 and that he would send me a picture of it. Sure enough, a short time after I arrived back home in Florida I received an envelope from him containing a copy of a photograph that he had taken during his visit to American Legion Post #6, in Seaford, Delaware. I called the Post and talked with Mr. Harold Harley of Forty & Eight Voiture #1320 (which also makes it's home at The Post). Mr. Harley assured me that the Merci box car was still located at the Post and that he would try to send me information about it's Delaware history. I never received anything from him, and when I visited the Post in the Fall of 1998 I learned the probable "why". I was told that Mr. Harley had died in 1997.

I am inserting a report here that in the Spring of 1999 we were finally able to arrange a visit to the elusive West Virginia box car. The circumstances of my discovering its location are narrated elsewhere in this book. Mr. Russell Burge of Welch, W. Va. was the State Grande

Chef de Gare in the early 1990s and he had a desire to see the Merci box car restored to its 1949 splendor. He hoped for all veterans of W. Va. to be able to see it again as a memorial to the sacrifices they made while fighting to maintain freedom around the world.

Like myself he had a difficult time locating the box car. By 1993 it had deteriorated so badly that few who had viewed it in 1949 would have even recognized it. Mr. Burge was finally able to locate the car in St. Albans, W. Va. on the grounds of the Union Carbide Co. It had been stored there after it narrowly missed being pushed into a river and used as a base for a boat dock.

Mr. Burge and his Forty and Eight members went to work proving that, though some members had lost interest in the box car over the years since 1949, it was still Forty and Eight property. After some haggling and arm twisting they were finally successful in regaining custody of the box car and obtaining permission to move it to Welch, W. Va., Mr. Burge's hometown. He was also successful in obtaining the help of a vocational high school to assist in the restoration of the box car. Many others donated time, materials, and labor to that project, and to the construction of a shelter to protect the restored box car.

Mr. Burge spent many hours in research and corresponding with others who had worked on restoration projects in other states. He wanted the restored box car to look exactly as it had when it arrived in Charleston in February of 1949. As he unearthed detail after detail he carefully passed on the knowledge to those doing the restoration work. The fruits of that effort are clearly visible to any who are fortunate enough to see the restored box car today.

The city of Welch provided space to exhibit the box car at a small roadside park within the city. The park has been dedicated to the memory of Welch's military veterans. Four granite stele list the names of Welch citizens who served in WW II, and in Korea. I don't recall if there were lists of WW I and Vietnam veterans, but there probably were. Overall it is an impressive display.

An interesting bit of information that I learned from Mr. Burge is that trees grown from French Oak seedlings that were part of the gifts in the W. Va. Merci car are still living in that state at a park near the city of Point Pleasant. Russell has been to the park and gathered acorns from those trees, and is sharing them with others. He has promised me some of them after he next visits the site. He has set out two of the trees in the veterans park in Welch, near the restored box car which brought their ancestor to America in 1949. He grew the two trees from acorns he gleaned at the Point Pleasant Park. They were each about two feet tall.

Still one other item of interest: In the Spring of 1999 Russell drafted a letter which he mailed to the president of France. I believe that it was a great idea and I commend Russell for thinking of it, and for following through on it. The letter is short and to the point and it is with pleasure that I quote it in full on the next page.

May 15 1999

Honorable Jacques Chirac
President de La Republique France

Dear Mr. President

On the fiftieth anniversary of the "Gratitude Train" I would like to take this opportunity on behalf of the American Legion and La Societie des Quarante Hommes et Huit Chevaux to thank you and the people of your great nation for the thought and effort exhibited by your gift to our people.

During the past 50 years those 49 boxcars have suffered some. Some were lost completely through neglect and accident but the thought behind the idea lives on in the hearts of our veterans.

West Virginia's Boxcar was neglected for 45 years. In 1994 an effort was made by those concerned and the boxcar was finally located in a vacant field in South Charleston, West Virginia. It was brought to Welch on D-Day June 6th 1996 and completely overhauled by November 10th 1997 and rededicated as part of our Veteran's Day Ceremony.

Our Boxcar is proudly displayed with cover to protect it from the weather, lights to illuminate it at night, and all forty of the French Department plaques in place.

Thank you and your people again for your kindness. Maybe some of you can visit our state someday. You will be welcomed warmly.

Sincerely,

Shields R. Burge

When I visited Russell and the Merci car in early June of 1999 he had not yet received a reply to his letter. Not surprising because of the small amount of time that has passed since he mailed the letter. If a response arrives and is shared with me before this text is published I will definitely consider quoting it in this book.

Going back in time to the winter of 1997-1998, my wife and I remained pretty much "home bound" for the rest of that season, but there was one other interesting development. We live close enough to Tampa that we receive broadcasts from all the television stations there.

During February of 1998, we started noticing TV spots for the opening of the new Tampa Bay Holocaust Memorial Museum and Educational Center in St. Petersburg. We also noticed that the promotionals mentioned the exhibits included a box car from Poland which had been used to transport Jewish prisoners to the Nazi killing centers. There was a picture of the box car in the promo and I noticed that it looked similar to the 40 & 8 box cars from France. We drove over

to St. Petersburg, the home city of the new museum, one day and viewed the Polish box car #113 0695-5. It had been obtained for the museum primarily through the efforts of Mr. Walter Loebenberg, the founder of the museum and its major benefactor. Mr. Loebenberg lost several family members in the Holocaust.

The box car does very much resemble the 40 & 8s but it's about 50 years newer, 10 feet longer, and more heavily constructed. It weighs 15 tons and had a greater carrying capacity than the 40 & 8s. It does have many of the same features of the French box cars including the "button" bumpers that absorbed some of the shock of the cars bumping together.

A pamphlet that the museum distributes to visitors reports that up to 100 (or more) prisoners were often crammed into the little box cars for that awful final destination. They would be locked in for days without food or water, nor were they allowed out for exercise or toilet use. I would not be surprised to learn that some of France's box cars were used for the same inhumane purpose since France too was occupied by the Nazis.

The pamphlet also reported that the Holocaust Museum's box car was one of only three presently located in The U.S. No one I talked with at the museum had any knowledge of the Merci box cars and were surprised to hear that there are 43 of them existing in America. One other fact that the pamphlet reported was that the other two Holocaust box cars were located at Holocaust museums in Dallas, Tx. and Washington, DC.

CHAPTER VII

A Trip of Jubilance And Frustration

Spring of 1998 finally arrived, and on april 21st Linda and I loaded our minivan with what we thought that we would need during our summer in Maine. But it was not to be a direct run for that northern "Vacationland." We first headed west toward Oklahoma City for another visit with our son and his family. We spent an enjoyable ten days with them.

A second part of the trip was to visit Linda's aunt in California, and to locate and visit as many of the west coast state's box cars as possible. Our first stop was Albuquerque, NM. Our list told us that New Mexico's Merci car was at The New Mexico State Fairgrounds in Albuquerque. We had stopped at a NM State Welcome Center soon after entering the state and picked up a state road map which included a map of the city. The fairgrounds were shown on the map so it was relatively easy to find.

We finally found an entrance that was not gated. After I parked the car, I went in to ask where on the fairground the box car was located. I was surprised to find that it was right near the gate that I had just walked through, and that there was not one, but two of the box cars. It seems that New Mexico is the only state to have two of the 40 & 8 box cars.

Sometime during the mid 1980s someone decided that their original box car, which was badly deteriorated and missing it's undercarriage (wheels, axles, etc.), should be restored. A committee was formed and it was decided that they would try to buy another 40 and 8 box car from France. If they were successful, they planned to take parts from it to restore the original. As hoped, another box car was located in France. They bought it and had it shipped to Houston, Tx. From there it was transported overland to Albuquerque.

As near as I can tell, when committee members saw it they decided that it would be much more practical to restore that box car and decorate it as the original had been when it arrived in Albuquerque in 1949. They also decided that they would keep the original and display it (unrestored) alongside the restored replacement box car. Thus it is that today they sit in close proximity to each other under a nylon canopy at the fairgrounds.

The original has been mounted on pillars at a height equal to the other box car's, which has it's wheels on a short section of track or rails. Adjacent to the box cars is an informational kiosk which houses an impressive array of documents, photographs, and even a few of the artifacts that came in the original box car. The committee has designated the original box car as #1, and the purchased car as #2. All things considered it makes an impressive display, and I am sure that it attracts many people to view it during fair time.

The next day we continued our trip westward and arrived in Phoenix the day after that. We found that Arizona's box car is owned by The Arizona State Museum and is currently on loan to, and located at, McCormick-Stillman Railroad Park, 7301 E. Indian Bend Road, in Scottsdale. The ZIP code is 85250, Telephone 602-994-2312.

The Capitol Museum has more than 3000 of the Merci gifts that arrived in their box car. The majority of the artifacts are kept in storage in their archives, but they do have a continuous display of some of the artifacts. They change the display periodically so that different gifts will be seen by visitors on subsequent visits. The Capitol Museum is located in the capitol area of downtown Phoenix. The reader may recall that I had previously corresponded with the museum in an attempt to determine how they had gathered the information that had enabled them to put together their list of Merci box car locations. I had obtained my copy from Mr. Joel Mann of Norman, OK.

We had called ahead (the day before) and made a 1 P.M. appointment with Mr. Michael Carman, the director of The Capitol Museum. We arrived in the Phoenix area at about 11:30 A.M. and decided to view the box car first. It took us a little longer than we had anticipated and we didn't have time to stop at a restaurant for lunch. We thought that we would surely drive by a fast food restaurant as we made our way to downtown Phoenix, but we didn't see a one. We arrived at the parking lot for the capitol area with about 20 minutes until our appointment. Since we always carry snacks in the car when we are traveling, we were able to make a lunch of two cans of vienna sausage, some Wheat Thins, and a few cookies.

Mr. Carman received us, and after a few minutes of chatting about The Train and our trip, he introduced us to Ms. Mindi C. Love, who was Curator of Collections at the museum. Although she was unable to show us the items that were in storage she did show us their current exhibit which has a few of the artifacts on display. She also let us view photographs of all the items that they have and would have shown us any items that we were specifically interested in seeing, had we been able to return the next day.

Ms. Love also took us to the museum's gift shop where she showed us a tie-tac that someone in Arizona had designed and manufactured in the likeness of the (French) Merci Train Committee's symbolic plaque which had adorned all of the 49 box cars of the train. She also made copies of a few of their original documents that I had not previously seen. We allowed her to copy several of our own documents that they did not have including the 1949 schedule of delivery for the box cars. We really would have liked to spend another day at the museum but didn't feel that our budget or our schedule would stand it. So we headed west toward Ocean-side, Ca., where we would visit Linda's aunt for a few days.

Another part of the plan for our trip was that our friends the Bennetts, who are our winter neighbors and who had investigated the Wisconsin, Minnesota, and So. Dakota box cars for me in the summer of 1997, were to fly out to meet us in San Diego. Upon leaving San Diego we planned to spend about three weeks with them sightseeing in California, Oregon, and Washington. They were also with us when we visited the California Merci car in Fresno, and the Oregon box car in Astoria, Or.

We had hoped to see the giant Sequoia trees in Sequoia National Park, just a short drive from Fresno. It was a lovely day in Fresno on the day that we decided to try to visit Sequoia, but when we arrived at the park's gate we were asked if we had tire chains for the van. When I

responded that we didn't, we were told that we could not go up to see the trees because they had had "11 inches of new snow up there last night, and at Yosemite too."

Thwarted in that part of our plan, we returned to Fresno and located the Merci box car in Roeding Park. Roeding Park is a city recreation center and the site of the city zoo. The box car sits just inside the park adjacent to Belmont St. Although the box car is not in bad condition the roof appears to need restoration and all the plaques are gone from it. A brass plaque which explains a little about the history of the box car has been mounted in cement next to the car. I inquired at the park office but couldn't find anyone there who could help us with more information. They did give us the phone number of the city park commission office however.

After a couple of days of sightseeing in Monterey and San Francisco we headed East toward Carson City, Nevada. We decided to stay overnight near Sacramento and then drive up there the next day. Before we left the motel in the morning we checked the television for weather conditions. Much to our dismay we found that it was snowing on I-80, which was the route that we would have to take to get there. We reluctantly gave up on that portion of our trip even though it meant we would miss two of the sites we most wanted to see. One was Lake Tahoe. I was the only one who had ever seen it before. The other was the Nevada Merci car.

Because I served in the U.S. military for 20 years I am eligible to stay in military quarters on a space available basis. At some facilities I can make reservations up to a month in advance. I had taken advantage of that benefit and made reservations (before we left home) at two facilities in Oregon and Washington. Because of those reservations we couldn't lay over for a day or two in Calif. hopefully waiting to see if the weather would improve in the Tahoe area.

Our list (from Arizona) told us that the Oregon Merci car was located at Flavel House in Astoria, Oregon, a city in Northwest corner of that state on the Columbia River. Flavel House is a grand old restored mansion that was built by a successful merchant named Flavel, around the turn of the 20th century. We left Sacramento and began our trek to Astoria.

As we traveled along US Route 30 between Portland and Astoria we spotted a Oregon State Fish Hatchery. The other Bennetts had never visited a fish hatchery so we decided to stop for a few minutes. While there we chatted with the director of the hatchery and in the course of conversation we told him that we were on our way to Astoria to see Oregon's Merci box car. He surprised us by saying "Oh yes I've seen that, it's out at Fort Stevens." Sure enough, we later found that it had been moved soon after the time our Merci box car list from Arizona had been compiled. My surprise came because he was one of only a very few people that I had ever met who had heard of The Merci Train or its box cars. If it were not for that coincidental stop we may have missed the Oregon box car also. When we visited The Flavel House Museum the next day the volunteer on duty didn't know anything about the Merci car.

It was also at the fish hatchery that we learned the name of a beautiful flowering bush that we had been seeing all along the roadsides as we traveled through Oregon and later Washington. The flowers are a bright yellow and the bush is called "Scotch Broom". It evidently is quite prolific, sometimes taking over whole tracts of uncultivated fields.

The Oregon 40 et 8 Grand Society has done a great job of restoring their Merci car even going so far as to commission an artist in France to reproduce the provincial plaques. The originals were lost to vandals in Salem many years ago. The box car's custodian (or Director), Mr. Richard Paul, a retired military man, does a great job of keeping Merci looking just as it did when it arrived in Salem in 1949. In fact he was in the process of installing the last two plaques on the box car while we were there on our second visit (more about that visit later.) Those two plaques were the seal of The U.S. and the symbol of The French Merci Train Committee.

Rich and I had a great time sharing knowledge of the box cars. We did disagree on one point. Information that had been passed on to him indicated that their Merci car arrived in Salem on December 12th, 1949, whereas the copy of the original schedule of delivery that I had found in The Mississippi State Archives, in Jackson, had indicated that the Oregon car would be delivered to Salem on February 18th, 1949. I tend to think the original schedule is more believable, because all the rest of the cars in that area were delivered in February. I encouraged Rich to go to the library in Salem to look for stories of Merci's arrival in 1949 newspapers. We just didn't have time to do that chore ourselves.

I was beginning to realize that I would never have time to find and see all that had ever been written (and is still out there) about Merci. I had begun to see myself as a revivalist for the story. I hoped that I would be able to light a spark of "Merci" interest in many people that I met and that they would want to continue searching for more of its history themselves.

Old Fort Stevens is a relic from the days of the American Civil War although it was put into service during World War II to guard against Japanese naval intrusion into the mouth of the Columbia River. In fact, the few remaining structures at the old fort were built during WWII. During my visit there I was told that the federal government still owns the property but the state of Oregon has a lease agreement allowing the state to use it for a park.

The park is beautifully landscaped with trees and gardens. That fact and the presence of the old gun emplacements make it a pleasant and interesting place to tour. The addition of the Merci car fits in well and adds to the enchantment of the site. The park is actually made up of two parts, the historical military part, where the box car is, and a second part (which we did not visit) is designed for recreation. Both parts of the park are located in the town of Hammond, across the Young River from Astoria. The Astoria area is a thoroughly interesting and picturesque area and I would love to have an opportunity to go back to visit again.

One of the attractions is Flavel Tower which looks somewhat like a lighthouse. It has a 200 step steel spiral staircase inside the tower, which one may climb to gain access to an observation deck at its top. The exterior is decorated with ascending painted murals depicting the different eras of Astoria's history. The lowest painting depicts something of the way of life of the native American tribe, The Clatsops, who lived in the area before the white men came.

Another attraction is the reconstructed Old Fort Clatsop, which was the site of Lewis and Clark's headquarters during their stay in the West at the conclusion of their exploration journey on which they founded The Oregon Trail. We thought it a very interesting place despite the damp rainy weather on the day of our visit.

While we toured the Astoria area we stayed at Camp Rilea, a Oregon National Guard training facility. I also want to mention that while we were there, someone mentioned that the battleship USS Missouri was coming to Astoria the following week and would be open for tours. This was of particular interest to me since I had been in The Navy from 1950 to 1953 and spent most of those three years on "The Mighty Mo".

Some of you will realize that it was during that period of history that the U.S. was involved in the Korean Civil War. I was a seaman and "deckhand" on the famous old battleship which owes so much of its prominence in history to the fact that the gentleman from Missouri, Harry Truman, was president at the end of World War Two. During my tour of duty on the ship I was a member of one of the ships anti-aircraft gun crews, and also a lookout.

My job as a lookout was to watch for anything which might be a threat to the ship. While a member of the gun crew it was my duty to aim and pull the trigger which fired the 5 inch diameter guns. I also spent many hours scrubbing dirt from the hardwood decks of the ship, and painting its exterior "bulkheads". Despite all the hard work and hardships of being in a "War Zone" I have many cherished memories of those three years.

Linda and I had decided before we left Astoria that we would see Jack and Genny off on their return flight to Ohio and the two of us would then return to Astoria to see my old "Home away from home". I had not laid eyes on The Missouri in 45 years.

I will add here that when we did return we were not able to get on the ship because of the large crowds that came to Astoria to see it. We were able, however, to get fairly close to it and we managed to take a couple of photographs of myself with the ship in the background. The Missouri was then in the process of being towed to Hawaii where it will be moored alongside the USS Arizona monument. The Missouri will also become a permanent monument and the two great ships will symbolize the beginning and the end of World War II.

After the two days of our first visit to Astoria we moved on up into Washington state and spent two days in the secluded little town of Pacific Beach. Pacific Beach is home to a U.S. Navy conference and recreation base. It is a vacationer's paradise, if one is associated with the military and likes seclusion. After that relaxing hiatus the four of us moved into the Seattle area and enjoyed another four days sightseeing there.

A couple of highlights of our Seattle sojourn were having brunch atop the famous Space Needle and going into Mt. Rainier National Park. We found plenty of snow at the Mt. Rainier Visitor's Center, which is located at the 5400 foot level of the mountain, but the road up to it was clear and dry. We couldn't see the peak though even from that high vantage point because it was shrouded in clouds. That was slightly disappointing, but the many lovely vistas we were able to see on the drive up the mountain tempered that disappointment greatly.

On one of the four days we spent in the Seattle area, we left our "Base of Operations" near Tacoma and drove the 25 or 30 miles down to Olympia to visit The Washington State Capitol Building. Linda and I make it a practice to try visit the capitol area of any state that we spend time in. After an interesting tour of the capitol building, and lunch in it's cafeteria, we

found the state archives building and were rewarded with meeting Ms Pat Hopkins. As soon as Pat heard what we were looking for she said "Oh yes, we have a file on the Merci box car" and proceeded to get it out for us to view.

The file proved to be quite extensive and contained a lot of copies of correspondence to and from 1949 Governor, Arthur B. Langlie, Drew Pearson, and others. Ms. Hopkins allowed us to copy any of the papers that we wished to. Examination of the files told us much about preparations for Merci's arrival and the reception it was given in Washington as well as a little bit about the distribution of its cargo.

A couple of the letters that we copied were from a Betty J. Holder, of Jackson, Miss., to Gov. Langlie (and evidently went to many other states too) didn't catch my attention until after we had arrived in Maine and I began to study them closer in preparation for writing about our trip. Miss Holder's 1949 letters were written seeking information about the disposition of the artifacts which had been in The Washington Merci Car. Evidently she had wanted to write an article about that subject in The (Jackson) Clarion-Ledger. Miss Holder was a society page reporter for that newspaper. As I read her name a sense of recognition struck me.

I checked my file items from Alabama, and sure enough, there in an Associated Press article that had been published in The Montgomery Advertiser on Feb 15th, 1949 was the name of the 22 year old girl who had been honored in France for her efforts involved with The Friendship Train. Miss Holder had gone on to become a journalist but she was evidently still very much interested in her ties with France, which evolved throughout this whole era of The Friendship and Merci Trains. My coincidental discovery of those letters was like finding an old friend. Here was someone of nearly 50 years ago that I had connected with the Merci Train at least two times. It would really be exciting if I could contact the lady today, but at the time of the completion of my research I have to report that I have not been successful in accomplishing that feat.

The time that we had allocated to spend in Washington was nearly over. Early one May morning we sadly bid goodbye to our friends (and traveling companions for nearly three weeks), The Bennetts, and they boarded their flight back to Ohio. We in turn headed East to Yakima where we located the Washington State Merci box car right where "the list" had said that it was, in Sarge Hubbard Park. The park is named for a local WWI war hero and has a monument dedicated to all the Yakima area residents who served in the U.S. military in all wars.

The Washington Merci box car, #49 of the Merci Train, arrived in Olympia on February 22nd of 1949. After the gifts were unloaded and sent on a tour around the state the box car was placed on display in Olympia. The damp weather was hard on the wooden parts of the box car, the plaques were stolen, and the car was severely vandalized. In not too many years it had become badly deteriorated.

According to a paper written in about 1989 by a Dr. A. "Bud" Langan, a dean at Yakima Valley Community College, "in 1970 M. A. Tanase, Mayor of Moxee Cityand a committee made up of Legionnaires and 40 et 8ers committed themselves to restore the box car. They moved the box car to the Frontier Museum in Yakima, and still later to American Legion Post

#36 where it remained for a number of years." Mr. Langan goes on to relate that the restoration was finalized in 1989. The box car was then moved to Sarg Hubbard Park where The Legion had constructed a shelter for it. As noted above, it is still there today.

When Linda and I left Yakima we headed back to Astoria, Oregon to see The USS Missouri, as recorded above. When we left Astoria the second time we headed for Helena, Montana to see the Merci car in that State. It is located on the grounds of The Montana Historical Society at 225 N Roberts Street in Helena. Attendants in the historical society's museum had little knowledge of the box car. However they were helpful in giving me a copy of a recent article about the Merci Train. The article had been published in the magazine titled "A Journal of the Midwest Streams, Trails, & Tales." Since we were there on a Sunday the museum director was not in but one of the attendants on duty gave me a telephone number so that I could call him later.

By the 1980s the Montana Merci car had become very deteriorated, and when it was restored, it was decided to use plywood panels to replace the old overlapping siding boards of the original French construction. The sliding doors must not have been so badly weather worn because they still contained the original boards. We took photographs of the box car, then continued making our way East.

Because of time and financial considerations (we had already been "on the road" for 6 weeks) we had to make a choice on whether to go to North Dakota, or Wyoming. We decided that if we went to Wyoming we would be able to see Kansas' Merci car, but if we chose North Dakota, Wyoming and Kansas would both have to be missed. The prospect of seeing two instead of one seemed much more satisfying.

Following I-90 East and then I-25 South, we arrived at the exit ramp for Warren Air Force Base, which is located right in the city of Cheyenne. I had called the base earlier in the day and was assured that we would be able to spend the night there. The building that our quarters were in that night was a renovated Visiting Officers Quarters built in 1906. The building is listed on The National Historical Register. The rates were much less than what we were used to paying at motels.

We found the Wyoming Merci car located at the American Legion Post #6 at 2201 Lincoln Way. US Route #30 follows Lincoln Way through The City. The Post is a large one, and they have a large parking lot. The box car is located within a fenced area on the east side of that parking lot. The Merci car is decorated much like it was in 1949, and isn't in bad condition, although even the casual observer can tell that the harsh "High Plains" weather is taking it's toll on the old veteran.

No one answered my knocks on the door of The Legion building that evening, but when we returned to get photographs in the morning light, the Post Adjutant was there and he referred me to Mr. Dale Helengreen, who is the Grande Box Car Director. I tried to contact Mr. Helengreen by phone, both while we were there in Cheyenne, and also after we reached our home in Maine, but only got his answering machine.

The next leg of our journey took us from Cheyenne to Hays, Kansas, the home of that state's Merci car. Hays is a town which I am sure owes its growing economy to the fact that it is right next to I-70, and about a comfortable days drive east of Denver. Most all of the major motel and restaurant chains have units there, but much more noteworthy here I believe is that the city has a treasure called Ralph Walters.

Ralph is a retired veteran and has taken it upon himself to be the unofficial tour director of the city. He has posted signs in all of the cities motels offering free bus tours of the city. With help (I assume) from his local Legion Post #173 and 40 et 8 Voiture #1543 he drives the bus around to all those motels to pick up interested persons and give them a tour. He includes a stop at "his" Merci box car. I say "his" because Ralph (whom I judge to be close to, or into, his eighties) is also The Merci Box Car Director for Kansas. But his talent and dedication doesn't stop there.

Ralph has turned the Merci car into a "mini museum" filling it with many military relics. He also displays many old photographs of the 40 & 8 box cars and of people who have been associated with those box cars. Ralph is also somewhat of a craftsman. He saved some of the original boards which were removed from the box car during its restoration. He has used the wood to make frames for several of his old photos that are on display in the restored box car.

A very good job of restoration has been done on The Kansas Car, and I would have to say that its present condition equals that of Florida's, New York's, and Oregon's Merci cars, which were about the best that I had viewed at that time. I think that if the city of Hays has not done so already, they ought to have a "Ralph Walter's Day" to honor that gentleman who has done so much to promote culture and good will in their city.

The Legion Post and 40 et 8 Voiture building is located on the south side of the city at the intersection of East 13th Street and Canterbury Drive. The mailing address for La Societe des 40 Hommes et 8 Chevaux -High Plains Voiture #1543 is: PO Box 1233 Hays, Kansas 67601-1233.

Leaving Hays, we went "cross country" to get back to I-80, which we accomplished with little difficulty. Late that afternoon we arrived in Des Moines, picked up I-35, and headed north toward Cedar Falls. We finally stopped for the night at a Best Western Motel in the city of Ankeney. I enjoyed one of the best steaks that I have ever eaten at the restaurant associated with the motel.

The next morning we headed out again. Arriving in Cedar Falls, we found Iowa route 218 to Janesville. Our Arizona list said that we would find Antique Acres and the Iowa Merci car on that road. Once again though we had fallen victims to change. We found Route 218 to be a brand new divided highway. After a few inquiries we were told that what used to be route 218 is now simply called Waverly Road. Antique Acres' street address may be, or is close to, 7500 Waverly Road. The park is home to a number of antique farm tractors as well as being the site of many tractor pulling contests.

The Iowa Merci Car was not in the best of shape although we have surely seen worse. It certainly needed "sprucing up". A couple of men in a pickup truck drove by to see why we were

there. They couldn't tell us much about the box car. There was a small bulletin board positioned in front of the box car, and a paper on it told a little about La Societie de 40 et 8, but nothing about the box car itself.

We left Antique Acres, drove into Cedar Falls, and stopped for lunch. While at the restaurant I called two of the American Legion Posts listed in the phone directory. A man who answered at one of them referred me to a Mrs. Chapin. Mrs. Chapin he said, along with her late husband, had been very much involved with the box cars. I called her and she very graciously invited us to come to her home to see the pictures she and "Jim" had taken of Merci box cars all over the midwest. In fact we found that they had seen and photographed 23 Merci cars, including the North Dakota and Nevada cars which we had been forced to miss. Mrs. Chapin is a delightful "eightyish" lady who said that she liked to travel and that she would love to get in the van and go to Maine with us if she were able.

She didn't know who was responsible for the Merci car but vowed that she would find out and let us know. True to her word, soon after I sent her a copy of my newsletter and my address I received a nice letter from her in which she told me that the custodian of Merci in Iowa is now a Mr. Junior Grimm who lives in Waterloo. I was finally successful in contacting Mr. Grimm just the week before we started our return trip to Florida in the Fall of 1998. It was a good thing that I got through to him when I did, because by the time I got home to Florida he would have been in Arizona, where he spends the winter months, and I might never have made contact with him.

After I identified myself to Mr. Grimm, and he became satisfied that even though I did not belong to The Forty and Eight that I did have good intentions toward the box cars, he shared quite a bit of information with me. Not the least exciting was the news that The Iowa State Historical Society has 127 of the Merci gifts in their museum in Des Moines. He also said that there are a few others (of the gifts) kept in the box car at Antique Acres.

It appears that the fact of the large cache in Des Moines had been unknown to most people for many years, except for some within The Historical Society. Mr. Grimm had not reported the existence of the gifts in the survey he completed for the Arizona Museum in 1995. This welcome news meant that Iowa now joins the few others who are included in my list of "Elite" states that have kept a large number of their Merci gifts intact in a single location.

When Mr. Grimm heard that I had been at Antique Acres in June, and had photographed the box car, he said "you should see it now. I have been working on it all summer, and have painted it, and put all new plaques on it." Before we ended our conversation, he promised to send me a photo of Merci with it's new "sprucing up" that I mentioned it could use. Mr. Grimm's name, address, and telephone numbers, are included in my updated version of the list of the box cars. Remember that he will be in Arizona during the Fall and Winter months.

I plan to suggest to him that La Societie de Fortie et Eight, who own the Iowa Merci car, place a plaque at the site telling a little about Merci's history so that visitors can learn something of it's meaningful past. I am sure that the many people who come to Antique Acres for the

tractor pull contests that are held there wonder what that "Funny looking little railroad car" is there for.

Returning in time to June 1998 and our "western trip", my wife and I ended our visit with Mrs. Chapin and drove south to Iowa City where we got back on I-80 and continued our journey East. After stopping overnight in western Illinois we traveled through the Chicago area and picked up I-94 which we followed up into Michigan. I have not been able to find anyone who can tell me for sure what happened to the Illinois Merci car.

We arrived in Lansing on I-69, took I-496 to South Waverly Road, and soon we were at #2949, the home of Voiture #946 of the Michigan 40 & 8 and the Michigan Merci box car. I find it quite a coincidence that both the Michigan and the Iowa box cars have addresses that are on a Waverly Road.

We were met at the Lansing Post by Mr. William Harper, the Chef de Gare, who happened to be there because they were about to convene a special ceremony of dedication for a ball park that the voiture had constructed for little league baseball games on their property. Mr. Harper and I only had about ten minutes to share before he had to go in to speak at the ceremony.

But he did tell me that Michigan has just recently started on a restoration project for its box car. I noted that they certainly have a job in front of them.

The car had sat off in a corner of their property deteriorating for many years. "In fact," Mr. Harper told me, "it had trees growing right up through it." The railroad wheels and under carriage is all gone (nobody has any idea where). It was removed many years ago to put truck wheels under the box car.

When we visited the site we saw that all of the old rotten wood had been stripped from its angle iron frame in preparation for the restoration work. All that remained was the metal skeleton of the box. One end had no bumpers, or snubbers, and the other end had two "sawed off" or much shortened bumpers. I theorize that they were probably shortened to accommodate a shorter towing tongue on the box car in the days when it was towed with a truck. The bumpers have been hard mounted (welded) to the frame of the box car. Mr. Harper said that he is hoping to be able to buy another undercarriage for the box car somewhere. I wish him great success with the project, and have asked that he send me a photograph of it when it is completed.

After more stops to visit with friends and relatives in Michigan, New York, and New Hampshire, we finally arrived at our summer home in Maine. It had been 8 weeks to the day since we had left our home in Florida. We had traveled more than 11,500 miles, spent more than 30 nights in motels, ate more restaurant meals than we can remember, burned a lot of gasoline, and even had one flat tire (discovered while parked in my brothers driveway in West Seneca, NY) from a small nail that we had picked up somewhere along the way.

We had traveled in/through 24 states and Ontario, Canada, made the acquaintance of many of "Merci" friends and hopefully inspired a few more to become its supporters. We had seen 10 more of the 40 & 8 cars (at this point our total viewed had risen to thirty four), taken about 100 photos and slides, viewed a lot more of our great country, become more impressed

with its vastness, and gotten tired of El Nino's cool, rainy weather which had seemed to follow us throughout most of the trip. Now we were content to settle down for a few weeks, but it was not to be an idle time, I much work to do.

CHAPTER VIII

A BUSY SUMMER

One of my first projects for the summer of 1998 was to write another of my newsletters updating all my Merci friends on the progress I was making with my research. I sent out seventy five letters and, as before, within a week responses began arriving. Some came from new friends, and some from other people whom I had met on earlier trips. Several sent me materials that had come into their possession since we had seen each other last. I received materials from Alabama, Mississippi, Montana and West Virginia. I also got a call from Andy Dolak in S. Carolina, advising me that he had made contact with a man in Rhode Island who knew where the R.I. Merci car was located. I immediately wrote a letter to the gentleman.

After I had written my newsletter, I also wrote a letter to a member of the West Virginia 40 & 8 whom my son had obtained an address for on the internet. I asked if he could tell me where that states Merci box car was. I soon received a letter from his wife saying that he had passed away but that she could tell me that the car had been moved to Welch, W. Va. She also sent the name and address of the man who now had responsibility for it, Mr. Russell Burge.

I wrote to Mr. Burge, and as soon as he received my letter he called me and invited me to come to see the box car. He also told me that he would send me photographs of the box car and copies of historical articles which had been printed about it in the past.

By that time, in the summer of 1998, I had gathered or been given such a mountain of copies of newspaper clippings, magazine articles, letters, photographs, and more, that I could not remember it all and in some cases where I had found it. More was arriving in the mail almost daily. I am sure that our mail carrier was wondering, as he saw manila envelopes arrive from museums and historical societies all around the nation, just what kind of operation I was conducting here anyway. Almost every letter that I wrote asking for information about the box cars, their history, or the gifts brought some kind of response. I began to wonder what I should do with it all when I was finished with writing this book. I certainly couldn't archive it all, our small retirement home just didn't make that a possibility. Of course some of it was duplicates and those could be eliminated.

Most people rightly think that documents regarding historical objects belong in museums and archives, and whenever they come into possession of such articles they send them there and to friends and acquaintances who might have similar interests. Such has been the case with South Carolina's Andy Dolak's books. He is a member of The Forty and Eight of the S. Carolina Grande (state level) Societie, fellow members helped him print and distribute the booklets to friends and to other 40 and 8ers all over the country, and even overseas. Those people donated copies to museums within their own states and thus when I requested information from those museums, copies of his book were included in what I received. I have no doubt that many copies of my book will, at least in the future, similarly be archived.

It isn't a matter of information about the Merci and Friendship trains not being available, but of there being no central collection point for it all. It is scattered throughout the country in newspaper libraries, state archives, historical societies, educational institutions, and private collections. It also can be found in radio and television archives (yes, young readers, we had television in those ancient days of the late 1940s, at least in its early stages). Some of my elderly readers will remember the weekly "News In Review" film segments that we used to be shown each time that we went to the "movies". Theater operators always ran those news reels, and previews of coming feature films, before showing the feature for that day. I am sure that if one were able to view the reels for February 1949 at least some would contain footage of the welcoming parade for Merci in New York City. Similarly, if one searched the archives of NBC, CBS, and ABC (if indeed all three existed at that time) they would find reports about the train there. I believe that one would have to search late 1947 records for reports of the Friendship Train.

Undoubtedly there are national institutions that could act as a clearing house and/or national center for such a collection of Merci Train related documents. Perhaps The Library of Congress, or The Smithsonian Institution. I wrote to The Smithsonian during the winter of 1996-97, just prior to our trip to Oklahoma and the coincidental finding of the list of box car locations. I was seeking any information that they might have about Merci. Of course at that time I did not know exactly when the train had arrived in the U.S., only that it was in 1949. After several weeks I received a reply saying that they were sorry, but "we can't find anything about it in our records, nor can we locate anyone who has any recollection of hearing about it."

I have since seen 1949 news articles that said that some of the gifts from the box car designated for Hawaii and Washington D.C. were destined to go to the Smithsonian. I am sure that there were accounts of that box car's arrival in The Washington Post, and other local newspapers of 1949. Perhaps if I searched through those accounts, was able to find a listing of those artifacts, and sent descriptions of the artifacts to The Smithsonian, they might locate some of them. Perhaps I will some day have an opportunity to do that.

Another thought that has occurred to me about archiving my collection of information is that, in this computer age we live in, perhaps someone will establish a web site for Merci. I don't have any idea how that is done nor how costly it is. Perhaps it is something that the Forty and Eight might be able to somehow manage.

Soon after I had mailed out my June of 1998 newsletter I received a phone call from Andy Dolak. He wanted to make sure that I would visit with him during our trip back to Florida in September of that year. During our conversation I mentioned that another stop that I hoped to make was to see the newly rediscovered Rhode Island Merci car but that I still hadn't found an exact address for it. Andy suggested that I write to Mr. Robert Hisey and gave me the gentleman's address. I soon mailed a letter to him asking for that address. A short time later I received a phone call from a lady in Rhode Island who said that she and her husband were the owners of the box car. They had purchased it for \$800. from Crandall's Junkyard in

Charleston, RI. Their motivation for purchasing the box car was the desire to see it restored and put in a public park for all to enjoy. I hope that wherever it is placed that sufficient accounts of its story are displayed, because just seeing one of the box cars without discovering the story associated with its being there will mean very little to anyone.

Fred and Betty Tanner wished to remain anonymous at the time, but have since given me permission to reveal their identity. When Mrs. Tanner called me, she gave me the address of their home, and said that they would be pleased to have me visit to see the box car. She also told me about a lady in Westerly, R.I. who had won a 1949 contest to receive the French wedding dress that had come in the R. I. car, and subsequently worn it at her wedding

Still a few days later I received an envelope from the box car owner, which contained copies of newspaper stories about the box car being sold, and about the lady who had received the wedding dress. Those articles were authored by John Hill, a reporter for The Providence Journal-Bulletin. The reader may remember that Mr. Hill wrote the article telling of the discovery of that box car. I had received a copy of that article from Anna Bovia of Ohio's Camp Perry.

Mr. Hill's 1997 report stated that Mrs. Lillian Weimar Caulfield was 25 years old in 1949, and met the conditions set down by the committee in charge of the contest to select a winner of the wedding dress. She had fit into the dress easily, and had plans for a wedding in September of 1949. Lillian's mother had been a French war bride from World War One, and she was determined that Lillian would enter the contest.

The proud mother was sure that her beautiful 58 inch tall, 24 inch waist daughter could win the contest and be married in an equally beautiful hand crafted gown which had come from her own homeland. The dress actually had to be shortened, and taken in a bit to make it fit "snugger." The gown was "beautifully made" she said, "the seams were all hand-overstitched, and had this shiny finish, and buttons up the back."

I am beginning to get the idea that The French are a sentimental people. Note that the mother of the bride (above paragraph) was a native of France. The teacher who was saddened by the deterioration of the Mississippi box car, and was moved to restore it, was of French descent. Mr. Hill's account of the anonymous purchase of the R.I. box car discloses that those purchasers are also of French descent. Perhaps it is because the box cars represent something from "home" and/or their heritage. Whatever their motivation, I am sure that the rest of us owe these individuals and others like them, a great debt for their roles in preserving these important symbols of a historical event.

Soon after receiving Mrs. Caulfield's name and address, I wrote a letter asking permission to visit and hear her account of the events surrounding her marriage. Again, while I was out on an errand, my wife received a phone call. This time the call came from Mrs. Caulfield's daughter, she wanted to advise us that her mother had passed away two years ago. The daughter still has the wedding dress, and said that she had been contacted by "people who want to restore it". I was saddened by the news of Mrs. Caulfield's death because it means that

precious memories that she could have shared with us are gone forever from this world, and it accentuates the need to find others who have similar memories before they too are gone.

Jumping ahead in time a bit to January of 1999, and some three months after we had visited the Rhode Island Merci box car and our return home to Florida, I checked my email one morning to find a note from an exuberant Betty Kennedy-Tanner. Mrs. Tanner and her husband Fred were the couple who purchased the RI Merci car from the junkyard where it had sat decaying for many years. She had written to report to me that a Mr. Jacques Staelen, who is a volunteer who makes things happen at the Museum of Work and Culture in Woonsocket, RI, had agreed to take and restore the Merci car for his museum. She also gave me permission to release their names publicly, now that they had officially donated the box car to the museum.

I too was thrilled with the news. The box car was not a pretty thing in the condition that I found it when I visited it in the Tanner's yard. I had wondered how long that they would put up with the thing making an eyesore in their yard. The museum's acceptance of it means that it will now be available, in its restored splendor, for the public to see. I think that Mr. Staelen will see to it that there is enough information about the box car posted nearby to make certain that visitors won't go away asking themselves "Why is that strange looking box car there."

Another bit of welcome mail arrived just a few days before our Fall 1998 scheduled departure from Maine. The reader may have realized that during our trip to The West we had not only missed the states of Nevada and North Dakota but we also missed visiting the state of Utah. Early in 1998, I asked my daughter in law's brother, Bob Brueckner, who lives in Ogden, Utah, if he would try to visit Utah's Merci car for me.

The list compiled by the Arizona State Museum said that Utah's box car was located at United Veteran's Memorial Grove in Salt Lake City. Bob did not recognize the park by that name but he suspected that it might be a park known to many locals as "Memory Grove".

On the day that he made the trip to Salt Lake City he decided to go to the headquarters of the Utah Travel and Information Council, located in the capitol district of the city, to seek confirmation of his suspicion. He was quite taken aback by the discovery that no one there had any knowledge of the box car whatsoever. His insistence that he intended to find the box car, and that they ought to have knowledge of its existence, evidently motivated personnel working at the center. They started canvassing acquaintances within the Salt Lake City park systems, by telephone, and finally found someone who said "there's something which appears to be some sort of a miniature box car over in Memory Grove that might be what he is looking for." That person had no idea why the box car was there or what significance might be attached to it.

One of the items that my son found on the internet for me was (evidently) a web page for Memory Grove. There was a brief description of the park, which I am quoting in it's entirety: "Memory Grove is dedicated to Utah veterans and to the memory of those who died while serving in various wars, from World War I to the Vietnam War. All kinds of monuments have been erected to honor these soldiers, including a tank and a meditation chapel. City Creek runs through the park and there are trails on either side of the watercourse. On the east bank you'll

find the Freedom Trail, which is not paved. On the west, you can follow the narrow road all the way up to City Creek Canyon. The road is definitely more suitable for strollers and those who wish to protect their shoes on wet days. Most of the large monuments are concentrated at the southern end of the park, along with benches, a small pool, and placards identifying trees and shrubs. There is plenty to see if you don't feel like walking very far. As you proceed toward the mouth of the canyon, the monuments get smaller and the vegetation loses its landscaped look. It's a fine place to rent for a wedding, but be sure to pack change with you to give to a homeless person here or there to get through the ceremony. The memorial building located just inside the park can also be rented for weddings and other events.--Tanya Jarvik."

I'm sure that you will have noticed that there is no mention of the presence of the box car. You may also have noted that it is said that there are placards identifying trees and shrubs, but Bob told me that there was no placard near the box car telling of its origin or of its significance as an object of history. Not a word of the antiquity of it, nor of the sacrifices made by tens of thousands of French citizens as they filled it with the gifts of gratitude to be sent to the people of Utah.

Bob also reported that the entire box car was painted with a forest green paint, but "under the recent paint one could see, not only the ravages of time, but also the flagrant vandalism of initials carved throughout the body of this historic antique." He goes on to say "It is obvious to me that the lack of respect shown to it, i.e. the box cars obvious run down appearance and lack of any written explanation of its meaning, promotes a similar lack of respect for the box car among visitors who might be prone to be involved in vandalism". In closing his letter he said "my experience in searching for and visiting the box car has led me to conclude that there are less than ten people in the entire state of Utah who know anything at all about the little green Merci box car of Utah and its significant contribution to the history of our state. Not even the State Historical Society has any knowledge of this forgotten symbol of gratitude from the people of France to the compassionate people of Utah who helped them in 1947."

As is almost always the case with governmental agencies, someone, somewhere, in the agency can usually answer your question about a given subject. The job is to find that "right Person." My daughter in law, Jodi, obtained the address of Utah's Governor Leavitt for me while she was visiting there in the Fall of 1998. That bit of information allowed me to direct a query directly to his office, along with a plea for The State to restore the little box car in time for the Olympic games that will be held there in the year 2002. I noted that there would be many Europeans there during that time, and it would be good to show those visitors that Utah's citizens appreciate acts of friendship, such as the French gift of the Merci Train.

While I did not receive a reply from Governor Leavitt, his office did locate a lady named Linda Thatcher at the State Historical Society who had extensive knowledge of Merci. She had even written an informative article about it for The Society's periodical magazine (The copy of the article that she sent to me was undated.) Her article related the fact that, because of blizzards in The Rocky Mountains, Utah's Merci car was routed via a southern route that took it through

California and Nevada. I assume it must have come in across the Salt Flats of Utah. Its arrival on Feb. 18, 1949, three days later than scheduled, was still celebrated much the same as other Merci cars had been.

Ms. Thatcher reported that there was no knowledge today, at the state level, of the whereabouts of any of the Merci gifts. She also noted that the State Historical Society is not responsible for the box car, but "passed the buck" by telling me that the Salt Lake City Parks and Recreation Division has responsibility for it today, and gave me their address. Admittedly, that address is different than one I got from Utah's Bureau of Tourism when I called their 800 telephone number in July of 1998.

I can't help, though, but agree with Bob's assessment of the general lack of knowledge and respect for the Merci car and its history. I also mailed a letter to the Division of Parks and Recreation, in Salt Lake City, reminding them too that the city will be host to many thousands of international visitors during the olympic games to be held there in the near future. I have never received a response.

I also suggested, in my letter, that the restoration of the box car to its 1949 condition and displaying it in a more prominent setting, at least for the duration of the Olympics, would be a good opportunity to show that the people of Utah appreciate such an act of gratitude, goodwill, and peace that the Merci car was.

During a year 2000 trip to the West, Linda and I visited with Bob Brueckner and his family, and Bob took me to the Union Station Museum in Ogden, where I met a local forty and eight leader who is involved with getting the Merci car moved from its Memory Grove site to the Museum, where it will be restored and become an exhibit under a special shelter to be built for it there at the museum.

Mr. Byron Lewis, the Forty and Eighter, told us that the box car had been damaged by the unusual tornado that tore through the capitol area of Salt Lake City in 1999. When we visited the Grove after talking with Mr. Lewis, we saw the evidence of the havoc that the tornado had left in Memory Grove. Although the park had been heavily populated by trees, there was not a tree left. Only stumps remained after cleanup had been completed sometime after the tornado's destructive visit. The roof of the Merci car had been damaged by the storm and it is a wonder that it wasn't completely destroyed. Members of the Forty and Eight have repaired and replaced the roof.

Returning in time to the Summer of 1998, one other interesting event happened shortly before we left to go South for the Winter. I had been thinking about trying to gain some exposure for the subject of the Merci Train through television. I decided to write to WLBZ in Bangor, an NBC affiliate and one of Maine's most watched television stations. Their programming is also broadcast through stations in Waterville and Portland.

Soon I had a date to do an interview to talk and answer questions about the history of the train, and of my experiences in locating it. That interview was taped and later played on their Six O'Clock news broadcast. I was highly pleased with the results of my effort, and with the

broadcast. I have since written to some of the network news and human interest programs in hopes of gaining attention for Merci on national television.

CHAPTER IX

THE EAST COAST RUN

September in central Maine is a lovely time of the year. The hot days of Summer are usually over, most of the tourists have gone, the vegetable gardens are about through producing, the days are getting shorter, and the leaves are beginning to show their colors. But one begins to notice that just a sheet over you at night doesn't keep you quite warm enough. You need to put a blanket on the bed too. Especially if you live in a nearly uninsulated older manufactured home as we do. Even with the blanket, it is often quite chilly in the place when we crawl out of our beds in the morning, and it is necessary to fire up the old oil furnace in order to remove that chill from the house.

When the inside temperature dips below 60 degrees in the morning, I have turned up the furnace, and I am watching Al Roker report that "the temperature in Tampa will be 80 today", I begin to think "it's time that we go back to Zephyrhills, I guess".

Thus it was that on the 21st of September Linda and I again packed our van and headed in that direction. My cousin and her husband had invited us to stop to visit with them in their Waterbury, Ct home, and while doing that the four of us took a day trip to nearby Rhode Island to visit that state's Merci car. I have related in the previous chapter that I had been given the name and address of the owner of the box car, who had given me permission to visit it at the site of their home.

We found the box car with very little difficulty, and was able to photograph and inspect it. It was set up on blocks because the wheels and undercarriage are missing. My examination of the car revealed that the steel beams, upon which the box car was built, had been partially cut away on both ends of the car to allow truck wheels to be fitted onto it. The truck wheels were no longer attached however. The railroad wheels were probably removed sometime soon after the box car was turned over to The Forty & Eight, so that they could haul it around easily.

I theorized that they stored it somewhere, and for unknown reasons, they lost track of it. I have since found out that my theory was partially correct. It had been displayed for several years at a former National Guard camp. The camp was used by the Army during WW II, and was given to the National Guard after the War. It served The Guard's uses for several years then they turned it over to The American Legion.

It was during the time that The Legion operated the camp as a boys summer camp that the box car was installed there. When The Legion closed the camp and Mr. Crandall got the job of razing all the buildings on it he also got the box car. He realized that it had historical significance and he kept in his junk yard for many years, until the Tanners discovered and purchased it from him.

The box car had undoubtedly seen better days, but at least some of it's original wooden parts appeared that they could be saved by careful restorers. The metal can be cleaned and covered with rust inhibiting paints. It won't be easy, or cheap, but it is "doable".

Mrs. Tanner had told me that they hoped that, after the box car was restored, that it would be possible to have it housed in a Rhode Island museum.

We also made a stop in Westerly, RI and located Mr. Caulfield and his daughter Jackie. Mr. Caulfield is the husband of the late Lillian Weimar Caulfield, the lady who received the French made wedding gown which was one of the Merci gifts that arrived in the R.I. Merci box car. The Caulfields very graciously allowed us to look at the scrapbook and wedding album that Lillian had put together nearly 50 years ago.

In the scrapbook were newspaper clippings with stories announcing the contest to select a recipient for the wedding gown from France, of Miss Wiemar's selection, and of course an account of their wedding. That account included a description of the dress. The photo album contained pictures of the bride wearing the dress, photos of the couple, and of the entire wedding party. Then the big moment I had been waiting for..... they took the dress from it's special storage bag and allowed me to see and photograph it.

I also took photographs of pictures in their album and snapped a couple of a stunning portrait of Lillian that hung on their living room wall. Mr. Caulfield himself had painted the portrait of her wearing the Merci gown. He had used one of their wedding pictures of her as his model. I can't thank him, and daughters Jackie and Janet, enough for their help in answering my letters and phone calls, and for arranging their schedule to fit in with my traveling plans. It was very kind of them to meet with me and to tell me what they could about the dress. I also am grateful for the many wedding pictures that they allowed me to copy photographically.

When Linda and I left Waterbury we traveled down to Seaford, Delaware where that state's Merci car is domiciled. As we drove through Seaford, kind of looking the town over, Linda soon spotted the box car sitting on the front lawn of the American Legion Post, just where the Arizona listing had reported it to be. We stopped and visited with the Post Commander, who admitted that he knew very little of the box car's history. But he did know that it had been in its present location since he had become a member of the post twelve years earlier. He was very much interested in what we could tell him about the Merci Train, and asked that we let him know when my book becomes available so that he could purchase a copy of it.

From Seaford we continued down the Delaware Peninsula on U.S. route #13, across the Chesapeake Bay tunnels and bridges of that route, and on into Norfolk, Va. Then we continued up to Newport News, home of the Virginia War Memorial Museum, which is where the Virginia Merci car is exhibited. The Forty and Eight Merci box car sits among dozens of other exhibits which contain hundreds of relics from past wars which Virginians have fought in.

One has to hunt somewhat to find the box car. Space limitations have forced the museum personnel to wall in the car on three sides. They have removed the mushroom bumpers from the car to enable them to also conserve space. It does still have some of the original provincial plaques on it. But only one side of it is visible to visitors. Nothing is said about the gifts that it contained.

The museum has had a platform placed in front of the box car's open door, so that visitors

can walk up a few steps and on into the box car. Inside they may view World War Two era photographs which are hung on the box car's interior walls. It has also been wired to accommodate electrical lighting. It is generally well preserved, for which I commend the museum, but I would like to have seen more of its history posted nearby.

Leaving Newport News we traveled west to connect with I-85, and then South into North Carolina. After stopping overnight near Durham, we continued on down to Spencer and visited The North Carolina Transportation Museum, the home of North Carolina's Merci car. From what I have been able to determine, the box car has been there for many years. I suspect that it must have sat outside for some number of years though, since the provincial plaques have been duplicated on plywood. The originals were probably stolen by vandals, or were too weather beaten to be fit to be displayed.

The car sits among dozens of American railroad cars of the past in the museum's roundhouse. The museum covers several acres of ground, and was once the site of Southern Railways largest steam locomotive repair facilities. It features a locomotive turntable which was used to direct the locomotives into any of at least two dozen different repair shops.

There is a small billboard near the box car which notes that it was part of "The Friendship Train from France." Also displayed were three small leather brooch pins, a cigarette ash tray, and a candle holder shaped like the French Legion of Honor medal, all of which were gifts which came in the box car.

None of the people working at the museum that day (a Sunday) could tell us anything else about the Merci car. They did, however, give me the name of the museum's historian, Julie Bledsoe. I later wrote to Ms. Bledsoe requesting any information that she might be able to share. She kindly responded by sending copies of a few documents which she had in her file on the Merci Train. I was able to glean some information from them, including the fact that North Carolina's Merci was number 17 in the train. In later correspondence, Ms. Bledsoe revealed that The North Carolina Museum of History held a collection of the Merci gifts. More will be said about that later.

The visit to North Carolina's Merci car raised our total located to 43; we had personally seen 36. Three others were seen and photographed for us by our friends Bob (Jack) and Genny Bennett. We also had photographs of North Dakota's Merci, compliments of Richard Whitney's mother. Bob Brueckner, our daughter-in-law's brother, had photographed the Utah Merci for us. We were still waiting to receive photographs of Hawaii's and Nevada's cars from friends who were kind enough to do that chore for us.

From Spencer, NC, we traveled South on I-85 and I-77 to Lamar, South Carolina, the home of "Mr. Forty and Eight" Andrew Dolak. "Andy" has done more to preserve the history of the Forty and Eight box cars than any other person in America. He has spent fourteen of his 78 years in pursuit of that goal. The reader will probably remember that I mentioned earlier that "Andy" has written (in 1982) a book whose subject is the box cars. He revised the book in 1984 and is working on a third edition at present, as I have also noted earlier.

It was a great pleasure to finally meet Mr. Dolak and to view some of the vast collection of photographs and documents that he has collected during his years of involvement with the box cars. He and I spent an entire evening together sharing experiences and information and strengthened the rapport that had existed between us since we first learned of each others interest in the Merci Train.

Andy made a career of the military as did I. He retired from the U.S. Army, whereas I retired from the U.S. Air Force. Being about twelve years older than I, he was eligible for service during World War Two and stayed in after the war was over. Sometime after his separation from the Army he joined the American Legion and Forty and Eight Society, and it was through that association that he first learned of The Merci Train and its 49 box cars.

I will not attempt to tell you Andy's story in this book. He is much more qualified to do that himself and will undoubtedly do so in his own work. I do wish to say that I feel proud and privileged to call him "friend" and to know that we share the common goal of preserving the story of the Merci Train. I am also happy to report that he has agreed to donate his extensive collection of documents about The Merci Train, as well as many original photographs, to the office of The Military Archives at The Carlisle Military Reservation in Annsville, Pa. near Harrisburg.

Readers who wish to know more about the subject in years to come may want to contact that institution to gain access to his papers. Andy has been granted access to Drew Pearson's archived papers and has copies of many of Mr. Pearson's letters, notes, and articles regarding Merci. Those documents reveal much about the work involved in getting the box cars delivered to their myriad destinations in the 48 states and Hawaii.

Just to let you know a little about Andy's determination to know all he can about the Merci box cars: While I was visiting with him I mentioned that I was disappointed that only one side of Virginia's Merci car, at the War Memorial Museum, could be viewed. "I know" he replied, "I just had to crawl under it to see the other side." And he had!

After spending the night at a motel near Lamar, Linda and I traveled west via I-20 to Atlanta and got onto I-85 to continue making our way to Montgomery, Alabama, much the same as we had the year before when we went there to visit our son who had been temporarily stationed at Maxwell AFB. Our purpose for this visit to Montgomery was not to visit Earl Jr., but to visit and interview Mrs. Myron Turner, nee Clara Ann Day.

Although we arrived there somewhat earlier that we had expected because Andy Dolak and I had to move our appointment twelve hours ahead, Mrs. Turner graciously received us, told us her story, and allowed me to take photographs. Her graciousness allowed us to work in another hour's travel before we stopped for that night and also made it possible for us to easily make it home to Zephyrhills the next day.

The wedding dress that the former Miss Day received from Alabama's Merci Train Committee (who were charged with the responsibility of distributing the French gifts from their Merci box car) was a size 9. Ladies among my readers will know that a size 9 is quite petite, but it fit her "perfectly" she told us. Although I didn't ask her, I am quite sure that Mrs. Turner would still fit into the dress quite nicely today.

In 1948 and 1949 Clara Ann Day was working as an administrative clerk for the Veteran's Administration in Montgomery. Her married sister also worked there, in another department. One of her sister's coworkers was a particularly good looking young veteran named Myron Turner, and "Sis was anxious for me to meet him." At the same time, a married friend of Myron's was after him to try to meet "this attractive young woman who rides the same bus as I do traveling back and forth to work." Clara Ann and Myron finally met one day at work, and it wasn't long before they were dating and had fallen in love. I believe that she told me that they already had plans to be married in the month of June, when Ann (she was evidently known by her middle name) spotted an article in the newspaper about a contest to select a bride to wear the Merci wedding dress.

The newspaper article said that ladies who were interested should contact Mrs. Marie Bankhead Owens (a niece of the famed Tallulah Bankhead) of Montgomery's Zonta Club, and a member of the Alabama Merci Train Committee. Almost as soon as Mrs. Owens saw Ann, she had decided that Ann would be the one to wear the dress, and indeed she was.

Mrs. Owens had recently learned that Connecticut had held a similar contest to select a winner to wear the wedding gown which came in their Merci car, and that the merchants of Hartford and other nearby communities were paying for the cost of the wedding. She was determined that the cost of Ann's wedding should likewise be picked up by the merchants of Montgomery.

The city's merchants did indeed provide for the wedding. They also paid for the honeymoon and helped furnish their first apartment for them. Then came word that the Waterman Steamship Company, headquartered in Mobile, would provide free passage for the couple to France and back. The local, and even national, press soon began talking of the modern "Cinderella" who had won the privilege of wearing the French wedding gown. Miss Day invited Drew Pearson to attend the wedding and she still has his letter of regret letting her know of his desire to be there, but because of other commitments it was impossible for him to attend the event.

Not only did the governor sign the resolution naming Ann and Myron Goodwill Ambassadors (as I mentioned earlier he also contributed \$150. to the fund to pay for their honeymoon. He went farther still and had his chauffeured limousine carry the bride from her parents home to the church and then later deliver the bride and groom to the wedding reception.

Mrs. Turner has a collection of newspaper clippings relating the stories of the contest, the wedding, the honeymoon trip, and much more. She was gracious enough to give us extra copies that she had of some of the clippings, and even loaned us her letter from Drew Pearson to allow us to have copies made of it. I wanted to send a copy of it to Andy Dolak to be included with the other documents that he is giving to the military archives. She also kindly allowed me to photograph several portrait photos of her on her wedding day. The reader will find copies of those pictures in the photograph section of this book.

A note attached to the wedding dress, when it arrived in the Merci car, identified its

donors. Someone, probably Mrs. Bankhead, wrote to advise them that a bride had been selected to wear their dress. Upon hearing that news the donors requested that photos of the happy couple be sent for them to see. As Drew Pearson said in one of his daily radio broadcasts, "not only will the donors get their pictures, the happy couple will hand the pictures to them." Pearson sent a copy of his script for that broadcast to the Turners, which Ann still has. She also graciously allowed us to borrow that so that we could make copies of it.

A couple of weeks after our arrival home in Zephyrhills I received a letter from Mrs. Turner advising me that our visit to her home had prompted her to draft an account of the honeymoon trip to France. She still has a diary that she had written during the trip to France. She related that she had been meaning to transcribe it into story form for the benefit of her children and grandson, and that our visit was the catalyst that she needed to get started on the project. Her letter was accompanied by a draft of her account of the historic honeymoon.

The ship on which they were given passage to France was a cargo ship, and Ann and Myron were two of fourteen passengers that the S.S. Jean Lafitte carried on the voyage. It also carried a cargo of grain that it was delivering to Germany. The grain may have been part of what was being taken to the communist blockaded city of Berlin via the famous "Berlin Airlift".

The Turners left the ship in Rotterdam, Holland and took a train to Paris. They remained in Paris for a few days before traveling to Lyon to meet with the dressmakers who had donated her wedding gown. One of the dressmakers made two more dresses for Ann during the time that they remained in France.

Mrs. Turner's draft also reviews highlights of the trip. The couple made visits to the Eifel Tower, King Louis the XIV palace at Versailles, the tomb of Napoleon, and a side excursion to Geneva, Switzerland. She related that everywhere that they were recognized they were treated like royalty. Mrs. Turner said that all of the sites that they visited were interesting, "but it was cold there." One must remember that the months of their visit were October through early December, and that France is located in much more northern latitudes than is Alabama.

She closed the narration with an account of how she and Myron nearly had a tragic ending to their "fairy tale" trip. Three days after their departure from Europe, the SS Arizpa, on which they had been given return passage to the U.S., was sailing through very rough seas, and it was causing the ship to pitch and roll quite severely. Myron and Ann were sitting out on deck when one particularly severe roll of the ship caused them to be looking straight down into the sea. They hung on for all they were worth, and as soon as the ship righted itself, they made a dive for the door into their cabin. Ann said that "We thanked God many times that we didn't fall in the ocean that night." They arrived in Tampa, Florida on December 6th, 1949, only one week short of three months since their departure.

She went on to say that they had spent \$1023.79 on the trip, not much by today's standards, but a considerable amount of money in those days. I remember that I was working in a Dexter, Maine woolen mill that year, earning a salary of \$1.00 per hour. \$1000. would have represented six month's salary for me.

Ann's Cinderella story is indeed almost as touching as the fictional Cinderella story was, and the fact that real people lived through it makes it even more appealing. Mrs. Turner said that the dressmakers told them that she and Myron were the only wedding dress recipients who "came to France to thank us". The reader must keep in mind however that many women (as many as forty nine?) received similar gowns and there may be more Merci "Cinderella" stories besides the two that I have tracked down (Mrs. Turner, and Mrs. Caulfield of Rhode Island.) Perhaps some of my readers will be motivated to search 1949 newspapers in their state's capitol to try to locate accounts of similar romantic events. There is of course the story of the elusive Betty Jane Holder whom I know made at least one trip to France, and I would not be surprised to find out that she made a second trip after she was married in Mississippi's Merci dress. She was very much taken with the people of France in their time of need.

Although 1999 was a year in which Linda and I didn't do a lot of traveling in connection with the Merci story, we still managed to get our traveling in. I have reported on our 1999 visit to the West Virginia Merci box car location in an earlier chapter. During our same Spring 1999 nomadic trek to Maine, we made a slight detour (in Atlanta) by hopping on an international flight to Amsterdam for a three week visit to Earl Jr. and his family. They had transferred to a NATO base in The Netherlands in the Fall of 1998.

I had spent the last months of 1998 and early months of 1999 watching the 50th anniversary date of the Merci Train come and go. During that same period of time, a second publisher read and rejected my manuscript, which motivated me to finish it during the Summer of 1999. By the time that we left Maine in late August the work was done, or so I thought. Soon after we arrived back in Zephyrhills that Fall, my wife started talking about going to visit her aunt in California again and seeing the rest of the Merci box cars. So it was that a plan for a Spring 2000 trip was conceived.

The reader will perhaps remember my musing, in an earlier chapter that it would be nice if someone would build a website for information about the Merci Train. I also mentioned that "wish" to a friend in Texas, in a Fall 1999 email letter. A reply soon came back saying that her daughter was in the business of designing internet websites and might be able to help me out.

Soon the daughter and I were corresponding and had agreed to my paying her a sum of \$300 to design the site and input the information and photographs that I provided for her. During the month of November 1999 the new site opened on pages of the Geocities computers. Leslie Maxwell, its designer, also put a counter in the website to keep track of the number of people who visited the site, and I was soon watching it climb past the 100 mark.

Also, during the early Fall of 1999, I had contacted the editor of The Forty & Eight Magazine, who also had the responsibility of managing La Societie's national website on the internet. Bob Foster invited me to send him information about the location of all of the state's Merci box cars and also current photos of them. He promised to build a page in their site using that information and giving me credit for it, which I agreed to do. I soon started receiving email from visitors to one site or the other.

Several of those who visited "my site" at Geocities were members of The Railroad Preservation Network, a group of railroad enthusiasts who have banded together to share information about anything related to preserving the history of railroads in America. Members of the group maintain an internet website which they use as a medium for sharing such information. Hume Kading, a member of the group who is very knowledgeable about computers and who had also developed an interest in the Merci Train story, soon heard about my website and contacted me.

Hume, too, had decided to open a website about the Merci Train, and had already put pages in the RYPN site with bits of information about the Merci Train. He had not had the time to spend researching the story as I had, and had found only the rudiments. He only knew the location of a few of the box cars and gifts. All of his work with RYPN is done as a volunteer. In other words, it is a work of passion for him.

Ms. Maxwell, on the other hand earned her living by helping people set up websites, just as she had helped me. I soon began to realize that the Merci Train website would be a growing thing, which would be in constant need of data input skills, skills that I do not possess. I also began to realize that I could not continue to ask Ms. Maxwell to do that for me without further remuneration. Thus it was that when Hume suggested that we pool our efforts, and volunteered to move the information to new dedicated pages in the RYPN site, as well as to handle all future data input duties, that I saw the answer to that problem.

I am very grateful to Ms Maxwell for all the work that she did in the original site, for a fee that was much less than I expected to pay. She did a great service to me, and all Merci Train fans. Without her offering to do the initial work, I probably would not have been able to get started, and her work also made it possible for me to meet the people at RYPN.

So much progress has been made in my efforts to educate people about the Merci Train, and I have learned so much more of the history of the Merci Train story, through the website, that I am just amazed. Hundreds and hundreds of people have visited the site to see the photographs of the 43 box cars and the collections of Merci gifts that we have put there.

When Hume Kading redesigned and moved the website, he set it up with separate pages for each state. Recent photographs of a particular state's Merci car and Merci gifts are featured on that state's page. Other information that we know about the location (address, phone numbers, etc.) of the state's Merci car, and its gifts, can also be viewed simply by clicking one's computer mouse on the name of the state on the "Home" page of the site. Each state's page also tells visitors who to contact in that state (if we have found persons with Merci Train knowledge) to learn more about the state's Merci history.

Visitors to the site have written to tell me about single pieces and whole collections of the Merci gifts that had previously been reported as lost. Others have sent photos that they took of one of the box cars many years ago. Still others have written to say that they had seen one of the box cars years ago, but didn't know the story behind their presence, or of their importance to military veterans. Some veterans have written to say that they knew of the use of the box cars during the world wars, but had never heard the story of the Friendship Train, nor of the gifts that

came in the Merci box cars. Even a few people from France have discovered the site, and written to tell me that they too were unaware of the existence of either of the two trains.

I expect that the website will continue to grow and serve long after I am dead and buried. I also believe that, as more people discover the site, more people will become touched by the story, and more information will come to light revealing more of the history of the Friendship and Merci Trains.

Another important development that arose from the founding of the website was when I was contacted by Todd Schannuth, a young man who has an interest in railroads, and also produces documentary films of a historical nature. He told me that he was working on a film about the Freedom Trains, and that when he finished with that, he wanted to do one about the Friendship and Merci Trains.

CHAPTER X

A BAD TRIP?

I mentioned previously that Linda and I had decided to take another of our cross country jaunts to visit her aunt in California in the Spring of 2000. The weather across the Southern part of our country is much more conducive to travel in the early Spring that is the case in the North. If we leave Florida in mid April, by the time we get to California and complete our visiting there, we begin to feel that it will be safe to take the more Northerly route from Calif. to Maine.

Thus it was that we left San Diego one morning in mid May and headed towards Carson City, Nevada. It was a beautiful drive up through the Sierra foothills, and lower mountains, although we did climb to over 11,000 feet elevation, and we did encounter light snow. We did not experience driving on snow covered roads though, thankfully.

We arrived in Carson City to find the weather quite cool and rainy, and the rain occasionally turned to wet snow. As we drove into town, we spotted the Nevada Railroad Museum, and the Nevada Merci box car, but decided to wait until the next day to visit and photograph it. I already had a plethora of photos of that box car, anyway. Several friends had stopped there to take pictures of it for me, after they heard how we had been thwarted in our first attempt to visit Carson City.

As soon as we had checked into a motel, I called Mr. Tod Jennings in Reno. Tod had "discovered" me through the material that I had put in the Forty and Eight internet site, and was anxious to meet me to swap Merci information. Tod is a member of the Forty and Eight Society of Nevada, and a recent retiree from the U.S. Air Force. He is very dedicated to preserving the Nevada Merci car, and making its story known to all of Nevada's population. He is also going to college full time to get his teaching credentials, so that he will be able to teach in Nevada's public schools.

We made an appointment to meet with Tod the next morning. Early the next morning he and I met at the railroad museum, and he showed me the box car, and told me what he knew of its history. We also made a date for dinner that night at a restaurant near his home in Reno. Tod even arranged for his mother, who lives in Carson, to pick us up at our motel and drive us to his home in Reno. After an enjoyable evening of getting acquainted, and sharing with his family about our experiences in traveling to see the various Merci cars, Tod's Mother, Mary Ann Jennings, graciously drove us back to our motel.

Although Tod had final exams scheduled at his college, he had been able to arrange for me to visit the Nevada State Museum, also in Carson City, to view and photograph the collection of Nevada Merci gifts stored there. I was pleasantly surprised to find a collection of approximately 50 items, which I did take group photos of in their museum storage drawers. Those photos may

be viewed on the Nevada page of the Merci Train website at www.rypn.org/Merci.. Because the museum could not grant me the time needed to photograph individual items, Tod has asked for another appointment for himself to visit the museum and take those kind of pictures during the Summer of 2000. Hopefully we will be able to install a selection of those in the website also.

We left Carson City that afternoon, and stopped overnight in Elko. The following day we traversed the Great Salt Flats of Eastern Nevada and Utah, and arrived at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Bob Brueckner and family. I related in a previous chapter that Bob is the brother of our daughter-in-law, and recounted some of his experience of "finding" the Utah Merci car at Memorial Park in Salt Lake City.

Moving ever eastward we left the home of our gracious hosts, The Brueckners, and traveled to Cheyenne, Wy. I had been corresponding with personnel at the State Museum there and had made advance arrangements to view their collection of Merci gifts. Having spent the night in a local motel, we arrived at the museum soon after its doors had been unlocked in the morning.

I was soon ushered to the offices of Jennifer Alexander, and Dominique Shultes. They soon had a half dozen or more of their gifts laid out for me to photograph, including the wedding dress that had been sent to Wyoming from the dressmakers of Lyon. Those photos are also in the website, on the Wyoming page.

As we drove through Cheyenne, on our way back to I-90, we drove past the American Legion Post where the Wyoming Merci car is on display. Although we didn't stop to examine it, its appearance did not seem to be altered much from when we had visited it in 1998. We made it to Pierre, SD that day, and stopped overnight in the capitol city before driving the rest of the way to Huron, the home of South Dakota's Merci car.

The reader will perhaps remember that this car was visited in 1998 by our good friends, Jack and Genny Bennett. Armed with the information that they had given us, we were able to locate the box car site with little effort. Like them, though, we were unable to find anyone there who could tell us anything about the box car. A sign at the site did identify the owners of the box car as the S.D. Forty & Eight Society. When I have a spare moment, I shall try to find an address and contact them.

I took a few photos with my slide camera, and looked the box car over for any unusual features. The only thing that I found different as I recall, was that the P.L.M. number that they had painted on the side of the car was different from the number that had been stamped into a metal plate on its undercarriage by the French National Railroad Authority when the car had been in service on the Paris, Lyon, Marseilles railroad line many years ago in France. I later found the same difference on the North Dakota Merci car.

Just before we left Florida, a man I had been corresponding with in France had told me the meaning of the P.L.M. letters. To the best of my knowledge each of the Merci box cars have one of those numbers, which I assume means that they all hauled freight on the Paris, Lyon, Marseilles railroad line, sometime prior to being drafted for the noble use which they are (or should be) honored for in America.

Linda and I only spent a few minutes visiting the S. Dakota merci car, then we were back on the road again with a destination of Bismarck, ND, and the North Dakota Heritage Center, the home of that state's Merci box car. We arrived at that site just a handfull of minutes before 5 PM on a Saturday afternoon. I went immediately to the front door of the Center, but could not locate anyone at the information desk. I guess that they must have been in the process of closing, since a sign on the door said the hours ended at 5 PM.

Again, we had previously received photographs of this Merci car through the efforts of an acquaintance. Richard Whitney is the Director of The Dexter (Maine) Historical Museum, and his Mother has family in Bismarck. When he told me that his Mother was going there for a visit (in the Summer of 1999) I asked him about the possibility of her taking pictures of the N.D. Merci car. Rick said that he and his Mother had both been to the Heritage Center on a previous visit, and that she would gladly return to take the requested photos. She did indeed do that, and her photos are the ones that you will see in the Merci Train website.

I was disappointed to not make a contact there, but again, I wanted to take slide pictures of the box car, and look it over. The box car sits downslope from the Heritage Center, on an adjacent lawn. The location is part of the N.D. Capitol grounds, and is a beautiful setting for the old veteran from France. The box car itself sits on a pair of railroad rails, which in turn sit on a bed of crushed stone. The stone bed is surrounded by foot high stone posts which support a heavy iron decorative chain. All of this is surrounded by a cement sidewalk.

I took several slide pictures and a few "print" photos too, from various points on the sidewalk. Then I stepped over the chain (on one side of the car) to get close enough to inspect the box car, then stepped back to the sidewalk and walked around to the other side of the car. It was then that I noticed that the car had a five digit PLM number on its sign, just as I had seen in South Dakota. I wanted to see if it too had the plate with the six digit number, so I again stepped over the chain and walked up to inspect the undercarriage. Finding it I then started back for the sidewalk. As I lifted my foot to step over the chain, I didn't get it quite high enough and tripped. I automatically stuck out my hands to try to cushion my fall to the cement sidewalk, which action I believe saved my head from serious injury. The chain scraped my shins quite badly, and both of my hands were scraped, and my forearms were both swelling and painful.

Linda had sat in the car, which was parked so that she was facing towards the box car, so she had witnessed the whole event. She saw me get up and start walking towards the car, just as two men came up to the car that was parked beside us. Neither of us can remember how a conversation started between her and them, but as I reached the car, she was telling them about our quest. One of the men (who was the Father of the other) said that he worked at the Heritage Center, but had nothing to do with the Merci car or the extensive collection of Merci gifts that the Center holds. He did however give me his card and said that, when I sent him a letter requesting information, he would direct it to the individual who did have that responsibility.

I knew that I needed to get medical attention for my injuries, but because of the lateness of the hour, I told Linda that we had better find a place to spend the night before we looked for

the local hospital emergency room. I drove the car to a motel and we registered for the night. My injuries were becoming more painful by the minute, so we asked the desk clerk for directions to the hospital. By that time I was glad to relinquish the steering wheel to Linda.

To condense the story, we found and entered the hospital, and were seen by the E.R. doctor, who had my right wrist xrayed and announced that it was broken. The pain in the other arm was the result of a bad sprain of the thumb muscle. Because the wrist area was still swelling, they could not put a cast on it, but decided, upon learning that we were traveling, to splint it until we reached Maine. By that time the swelling would be gone, and a cast could be installed.

Although Linda is a good driver, I have done most of the driving during our travels. With my right arm splinted from above the elbow to the middle of my fingers, she was forced to do all the driving as we hurriedly made our way to Maine. With me manning the map, and God smoothing traffic flow around us, she did a marvelous job, even in the Chicago area, which many people know can be a nightmare.

Since our best route from Bismarck to Maine was I-94, which runs from North Dakota, down through Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Illinois and connects with I-90 near Chicago, and (we reasoned) since I-94 passes within no more than 50 miles of both the Minnesota and Wisconsin Merci cars, we should take the time to make those visits. Other factors were that those two cars were the last on the continent that we had not personally visited, and that we didn't want to make another trip out there to visit them.

As they had the South Dakota car, our friends Jack and Genny Bennett visited both of these cars on their 1998 journey to Rapid City to attend a wedding. We had the pictures that they had taken, but didn't have slides, so I took slide pictures of both of them. Suffice it to say that both visits were uneventful, and that we made no new contacts in either location.

Perhaps by this time, my readers will have figured out that the title of this chapter is my attempt to make a pun (I had a bad trip). I wish to tell you that I wore the cast for five weeks, and my wrist, thumb, and shins have all healed well. I did doctor recommended exercise therapy for the wrist, and 8 or 9 weeks after the accident, I have regained almost full range of motion of the wrist, and the spasms of pain that I experienced in the left thumb have long since ceased.

I do wish to report here though, that during the Winter of 1999-2000 I received some correspondence from Michael Meeker, a retired teacher who reside in the Green Bay, Ws area and serves on the board of directors of The National Railroad Museum in Green Bay. Mike told me that he and coworkers at the museum were negotiating to obtain ownership of the Wisc. Merci car, and to submit paperwork to see if the car could be added to the Wisconsin Historical Register, and act that if approved would place the car under the protection of that organization. As of mid Summer 2000, the car has not been moved, nor has the desired approval been granted. Mike assures me, though, that such things require long periods of time to complete.

CHAPTER XI

THE END OF THE ROAD

In the Fall of 1998, with the 50th anniversary year of Merci fast approaching, I had to admit to myself that I wouldn't be able to visit all of the box cars in person, at least not in time to include accounts of such visits in this book. I did not realize then that we would be embarking on another round the country trip in the Spring of 2000, which trip I have recounted parts of in earlier chapters. In mid Summer of the year 2000, I don't know when, or if, this book will be published, but Linda and I have personally visited all but one of the 43 known remaining Merci cars. That 43rd car is in Hawaii.

After surveying all the printed material and photographs that I had amassed in those four years between 1994 and 1998, and considering the memories of the many sights we had seen while traveling in search of the box cars and their history, I could not even consider feeling disappointed or unfulfilled. Add to that the many many interesting, dedicated, and generally nice people that we have met, and the visits to all the places that we would probably otherwise never have seen and I had to say that our lives had been greatly enriched in the process. Now, two years later, and after the founding of the website, I am more than happy with all that has happened, I am amazed.

Several other people who have known something of the Merci Train, but had never pursued it before I came along, have gotten serious about it. A man in New York state has written an article about the Merci Train for a train enthusiasts magazine, and a woman in Illinois (after reading a copy of my manuscript) made a presentation to her state's DAR convention. Even a man in France, a member of the European Train Enthusiasts, read my manuscript and wrote an article for his group's periodical. Still another writer, a reporter for the Billings (Montana) Gazette, got interested in the Merci Train story when it was reported to her that the Montana Merci box car was being moved to the Montana Military Museum. Never having heard about the box car before, she started searching for information on the internet and found my website, and called me. Her paper soon featured an article that she had written about the Merci Train.

I have found probably a dozen or more such articles that have been written about the train in the years since 1949. They are authored mostly by people in museums, written for periodicals that their museums published. I have learned quite a bit of information about individual state's box car history from reading those articles.

The research of the Merci Train story has been very educational, not only for Linda and I, but for no small number of our friends, relatives, and acquaintances who, to a person, had no recollection of ever hearing of The Friendship Train, or The Merci Train, before they heard it from us.

When I discovered the Idaho Merci car in 1994, I had no idea of the project that my inquisitiveness about the subject would lead to. Nor did I think that I would ever try to write a book, it just became a natural thing to do as the amount of information that I gleaned from my research piled up. Adding to the decision to write this book was the discovery that our lack of knowledge about the subject was not unique, but almost universal. It was such a touching story whom so few knew that I simply felt compelled to share it.

I feel the same compulsion to share with those who may read this book, more of the highlights that have occurred in the past two years, especially since the website has become a reality.

One such highlight came to my attention via a response to my October 1998 newsletter, sent out shortly after we arrived back in Florida that Fall. Mr. and Mrs. Errol Johnson, who are on the board of the Kentucky Railroad Museum, sent me a note of encouragement and a clipped newspaper article written by Bryan Crawford from The Louisville Courier Journal.

I was thrilled to read that Mr. Crawford was reporting on restoration work being done on Kentucky's Merci box car, which I mentioned earlier is being accomplished by students at the Nelson County Area Technology Center, a vocational high school. Mr. Crawford reported that the museum has agreed to pay for the cost of materials used in the project, and that the labor is all being donated by the students and teachers at the school system.

Mr. Crawford also wrote a "thumbnail sketch" account of the history of the Merci car, and some of its contents (he said that the Kentucky Merci gifts are almost all lost and forgotten). He also mentioned that the Merci car will be returned to the Kentucky Railway Museum in New Haven when the work is finished.

I think that it is wonderful that the Kentucky Merci car will be restored to look like it did when it arrived in 1949. But I think that it is even more important and exciting that, to quote Mr. Verdow, "several hundred students will have their hands in this by the time that it is done". He also said that not only were his construction class students involved in the work, but there were also students from welding, drafting, art, carpentry, and tech-ed classes. "Even some history and English classes have gotten interested in the project".

Soon after the website was up, I received a letter from Dr. Mary Ann Chamberlain, the director of the Bardstown Junior Historical Society. She wrote to tell me that she and her 4th grade students were researching the history of Kentucky's Merci car. Still a little later, as Linda and I prepared for our Spring 2000 trip, Mrs. Chamberlain wrote to ask if I would come and tell her students some of the Merci Train story. Linda and I decided that we could make that stopover.

It just happened that, again just before the day of our departure from Florida, I received an email note from Todd Schannuth, the man who makes documentary films. He said that he was sending me a video cassette which contained copied footage from newsreel films of the Friendship Train in 1947 and the Merci Train in 1949. The cassette arrived as promised and I was thrilled to at last see actual images of the two trains. I started showing the film to friends,

and I also showed it to the Junior Historical Society in Bardstown. I don't know how well 9 and 10 years old children of the year 2000 understood what they saw and what I told them, but they certainly asked some questions that indicated that they were trying to understand why there was a war, and why the people of France were so destitute after the war.

I hope and am quite sure that most of those students, both the grade school and the high school students, will remember the project and the history of the box car for many many years. I also hope that some will continue to be interested in Merci throughout the rest of their lives, even if it involves no more than taking their children and grandchildren to see the box car and telling them its story.

Leaving the report from Kentucky, it is my hope that perhaps in a few years, if God allows me the time and the finances, I will be able to make a trip to Hawaii, and visit that Merci car, and also the USS Missouri at its new home in Pearl Harbor. Andy Dolak told me that Hawaii's Forty and Eight were working to raise funds needed to accomplish Merci's restoration.

Thanks to Cheryl Langlais, a friend from my home town of Dexter, Me, who is a teacher and who was teaching school in Honolulu in 1998, I can attest to the box car's need of restoration. While Cheryl was vacationing in Dexter I told her where the Hawaii box car was domiciled and asked her if she would try to photograph it for me. She was able to get the photographs, and spoke with a man there who told her that they would like to restore their Merci car, "but right now there is no money available for the project". Hopefully in a few years money will become available and their Merci will also look like it did in 1949.

Another contact made through the Merci Train website was with members of the Hawaiian Railway Society. In march of 2000 they wrote to tell me that the car was now the property of that group, and that they were trying to obtain a grant from their parent organization, The National Railway Society, to be used to restore their Merci car.

Another significant bit of news came to me during the early months of 2000. A new curator at the Old Capitol Museum in Baton Rouge, Louisiana discovered the Merci Train website and wrote to tell me of a new development in Louisiana. The museum in partnership with the State Education Department had developed a curriculum for teachers within the state to use in teaching their students the history of the Merci Train.

The museum personnel were spreading the news about my website to teachers all over the state. Soon I was receiving email letters from teachers and students alike wanting to know if I could help them with more information. A ten year old boy in New Orleans wrote saying "My 4th grade class is learning about the Merci Train. Would you please tell me something of its history that I may share with them.

The museum also had some minor repairs made to its Merci box car, and had it repainted and redecorated with replicas of the French provincial plaques. They also asked classes studying the history of the train to make gifts that would be sent to schoolchildren in Baton Rouge's sister city in France. They named the project "The Merci Train, The Friendship Continues".

Administrators of the project also decided to have the schools (statewide) study the

history of the involvement of Louisianans in World War Two, and to collect money to be given to the National Committee For the Establishment of a WW Two Veterans Monument. The students have pledged to donate \$1 for every Louisianan who served in the military during WW Two, a sum of \$248,000.

Officials of the project decided to bring it all together in one big festive occasion. They planned a rededication ceremony for the newly refurbished box car, a parade in which thousands of students and dozens of WW Two Veterans would take part, a presenting of all the gifts that the students were sending to France, and a presenting of the pledge to the veterans. They invited Linda and I to attend.

We arrived in Baton Rouge the night before the big event, and presented ourselves to the museum's coordinator of the event. We were given a big welcome and assigned seats right in front of the speakers platform, along with the many veterans who were attending. We discovered that one of them was even a veteran of WW One. I think that I remember that he was 101 years old, and he stood by himself when our national anthem was played.

The whole event was "kicked off" by the parade through the streets of the Capitol district. Participants included dozens of students drill teams, marching bands, floats, and state dignitaries in open cars. It had marched past the capitol building and the museum, and terminated in a mall near the museum. More than 2000 students participated in the parade. Many of the old veterans rode on a special truck pulled open trailer, and were cheered by thousands of viewers along the route of the parade.

About a half hour after the parade, the ceremony commenced. Among those addressing the assembled crowd, were a representative of the Governor, the Mayor of Baton Rouge, Commanders of all of the state's military branches, and representatives of the students. It was thrilling to hear one of the young students tell how they had interviewed WW Two veterans, and that they had found them to be not just ex soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines. Nor were they just heroes of the past. They were husbands, fathers, and grandfathers who had made great sacrifices to bring peace to millions of people in war torn Europe and Asia. He said that the students found that not only did these men and women join the fight to restore peace in the world, but the more fortunate ones had returned home to become the muscle and bones that forged America into the richest and powerful nation on the Earth. He went on to say that events like the Friendship Train, and the Berlin Airlift proved that they were not only strong people who were determined to succeed, but they were a caring compassionate people who were always ready to help friends in need.

That ceremony ended with the presenting by the students of a large "check", representing the students pledge for the WW II memorial. It was immediately followed by a ceremony rededicating the Merci box car, and the presenting of the gifts which would be sent to France. Members of the project committee accepted them on a special platform set up right in front of the Merci box car at its permanent location on the lawn in front of the museum.

The committee chairman then announced a complimentary luncheon would be served on

the side lawn to all who wished to partake of, what else, hot dogs, pink lemonade, and apple pies! And in perhaps the most significant show of respect of the day, thousands of students waited until the veterans were served before they got theirs.

Our hearts were warmed by all that we witnessed that day. How I wish that the program could be repeated in every state in America. It was a show of patriotism and understanding between generations that badly needs to be duplicated all over our country today. Our children need to learn to appreciate the values that motivated their ancestors to fight for the downtrodden, and to help those beaten souls back to health and prosperity after the fight was over, even those whom they had to defeat to gain that victory. My wife and I were filled with elation as we headed back to Zephyrhills.

As anyone can tell by looking at the photos of the various Merci cars, they are not all in as good condition as they were in 1949. A very few are relatively well preserved because they have been kept inside buildings that protected them from the harsher elements of nature. Some have suffered the full brunt of the ravages of those elements and are the worse for it. Still others have spent many years forgotten and rusting away, but recently have been "found" and hope is raised for their restoration. Some however are lost forever.

For the surviving box cars, it must be remembered, in all fairness, that the box cars were already antiques (more than 60 years old) when the French "dolled" them up, filled them with gifts of gratitude, and sent them to us in 1949. They are now well over 100 years old, and have been through the ravages of two wars which resulted in their home country twice being reduced to rubble. Is it any wonder that they look worn?

I for one think that they deserve the privilege of looking like relics of the past, that's exactly what they are! They also deserve to be honored now, and for as long as free men walk upon the Earth, as reminders of the brave men and women who fought and made many sacrifices to preserve the freedoms that we enjoy today. They also remind us of a time when international friendship overcame the forces of division and callousness.

The Merci gifts too are reminders of how a compassionate American citizenry recognized and responded to far away friends in need, and of how a grateful French people showed their appreciation for that help. The gifts too need to be seen and appreciated by folks today as symbols of what friendship, sympathy, and caring should be like.

The box cars are most conspicuous by the fact of their size, and very susceptible to being destroyed by unthinking vandals whose only concern is perhaps the thrill of doing something rebellious, and wrong. So I believe that the greatest consideration should be given to their safety. The Merci gifts that still remain are kept in museums where security mostly protects them from such acts of violence. But in many instances the gifts are stored in warehouse areas and are seldom or never seen by the public. I do hope that more will be done to afford a greater number of people an opportunity to see the gifts and be reminded of the deep feelings of gratitude that resulted in their being sent.

It was the desire to enable more people an opportunity to see the gifts that made me

decide, during the Summer of 2000, to photograph as many of the Merci gifts as I could find and to display those photos in the Merci Train web pages. I am currently contacting as many museums as I know to have collections of the gifts, to get permission to obtain and exhibit such photographs. We already have a good number of such photos installed in the site. Readers with access to the internet can view them and pictures of all of the box cars at the internet address www.rypn.org/Merci. All letters in the address are lower case, except the M in Merci.

Very often lately, I will get a message in my Email from someone who has discovered the Merci Train web pages, and who are writing to tell me the current location of one or more of the Merci gifts. These are artifacts that had previously been reported as lost. Sometimes those messages even come from museums who have happened upon previously uncatelogued Merci gifts, thus no one knew that they were there in the museum's storage area. Only a very few museums have any kind of Merci gifts exhibit. A few more did have an exhibit to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Train.

Most museums will make an effort to allow persons who request it an opportunity to view items in their collection. That is, if the requester can tell the museum personnel what items that they wish to view. At least that has been my experience. But many of the larger museums, such as state level museums, have a large number of items from many eras, and many sources. They really don't have room to display more than a small portion of their collections, and all museums, state funded or not, have financial restrictions limiting how much they can do toward obtaining larger facilities. So we should not put too much of a burden of guilt on them simply because we would like to see them do more. In many cases they are probably understaffed, overextended, and frustrated, and they too would like to be able to do more than they currently are.

Of course neither the box cars, nor the gifts, have any magical powers which would enable them to tell the story of their presence themselves, they are only symbols of the story. It is my hope that custodians of all those artifacts, including the box cars, will make a greater effort to ensure that visitors can leave their display sites knowing why the box cars or the Merci gifts are there, and what a significant part those artifacts have had in Franco-American history.

Observances of the fiftieth anniversary of Merci's arrival were held by some groups; Louisiana is notable among them. The Maine State Museum in Augusta displayed some of the artifacts in a 1997 exhibit commemorating WW II, but had no exhibit for Merci's anniversary. Mr. Ryan, the Director of the Boothbay Railway Village, where Maine's Merci car is kept, told me in 1998 that he would like to do something special in honor of the occasion. He hoped to get replicas of the provincial plaques made and installed on the box car. He would also like to get it redecorated as it was in 1949.

Just about everywhere that I was able to locate anyone with authority to do something to observe the anniversary I urged them to do that. Unless more people show an interest in these important historical symbols, I am afraid that the cars may one day all suffer the fate of Nebraska's and Massachusetts' Merci cars. Perhaps even worse, the memories of the sacrifices of those to whom the box cars meant so much may also be lost.

There is a core of dedicated paid professionals working in our historical institutions and a few at least equally dedicated volunteers, like South Carolina's late Andy Dolak, Kansas' Ralph Walters, Oregon's Richard Paul, West Va.'s Russell Burge, and others all across America doing what they can to preserve the artifacts of our heritage, but many (especially among the volunteers) are getting old and cannot carry on alone much longer. They need help and replacements. Unless more young people "pick up the torch" and get involved in the preservation of these wonderful historical artifacts (the Merci cars, and gifts) it will all deteriorate and disappear, and soon be gone forever. History can teach us so much, let's not let it all end up on the junk pile turning into rust and dust. Long Live The Merci Train!!!!

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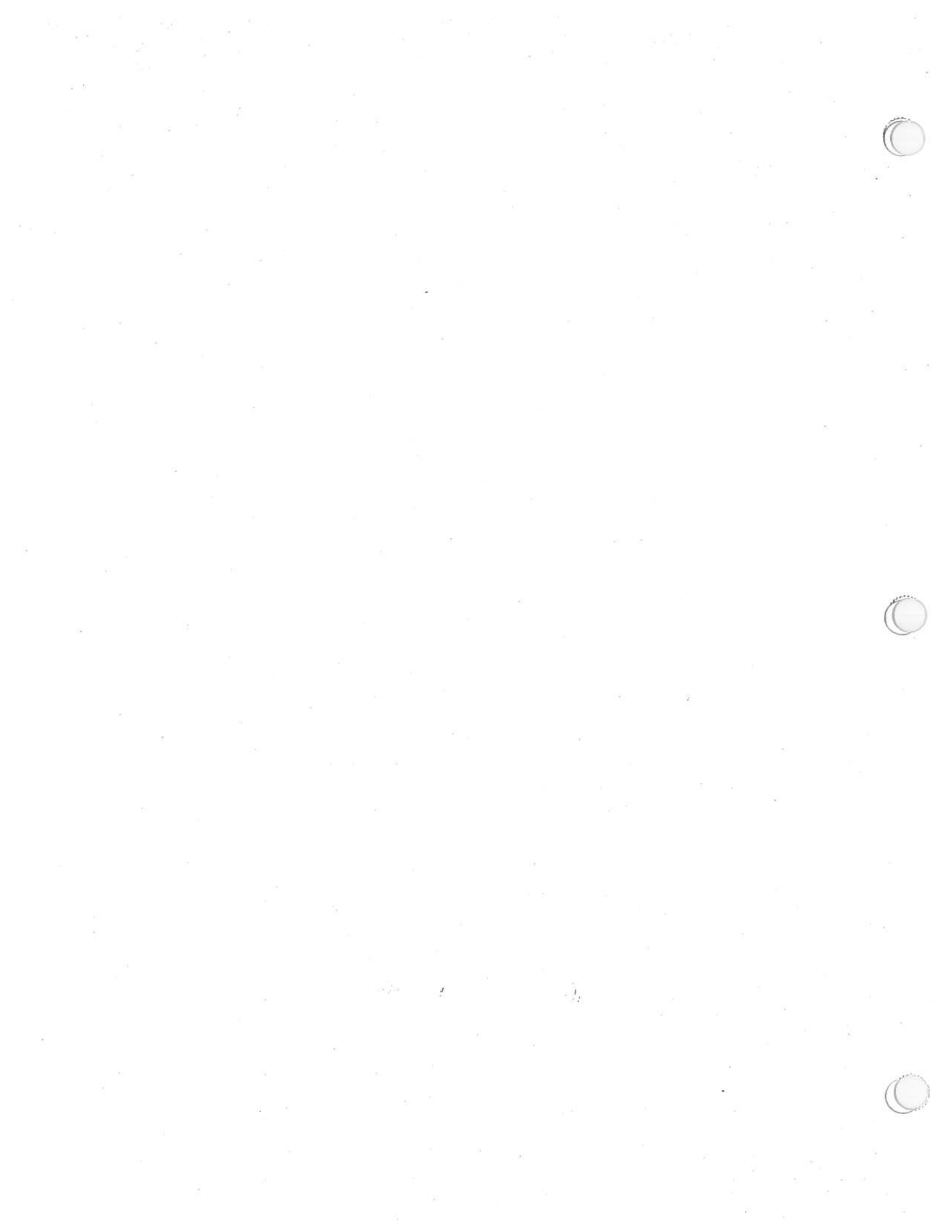
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A listing of all the known remaining Merci box cars as of 2000, including addresses of their locations and people who have at least some knowledge of their history. For updated or more extensive information contact the author of this list, or visit his website at www.rypn.org/Merci.

STATE	LOCATION	CONTACT
Alabama	The Historic Huntsville Depot 320 Church Street Zip 35801	Mr. Jan Williams - Director Telephone 205-535-6526
MOVED See Merci Train website	A small collection of gifts, including the wedding dress, are held by the State Dept. of Archives and History at its museum in Montgomery at 624 Washington Ave.	
Arkansas	American Legion Post #41 Porter Street Helena, Ark	Mr. D.T. Hargraves 312 Cherry St., Helena Telephone 870-338-3425
	A painting that was a part of the Ark. Merci gifts is at the Arkansas Arts Center.	
Arizona	McCormick Railroad Park 7301 E. Indian Bend Road Scottsdale, Az. 85250 Tel. 602-994-2312	Mr. Michael Carman - Director State Capitol Museum- Phoenix Telephone 602-542-4675
	The State Capitol Museum has an extensive collection of its gifts at 1700 W. Washington in Phoenix.	
California	MOVED rk See Merci Train website 21 Tel 209-498-4239	Not able to locate a knowledgeable contact at this time.
	I have no knowledge of the existance of any of Calif.'s gifts, although I have heard a report that a Merci Train time capsule is to be opened on Veteran's Day of the year 2000.	
Deleware	American Legion Post #6 Front Street Seaford, Del. 19973 Tel 302-629-9915	Mr. Gregory Hill 26 North St. Extension Seaford, Del.
	No knowledge of any of Deleware's Merci gifts at this time.	

II

Florida Veteran's Memorial Park Mr. Steve Hennard
Beside City Hall 461 Walker St., Holly Hill
Holly Hill, FL 32117 Telephone 904-673-1381
A lady in Montgomery, Alabama has recently reported that she has some
paintings/sketches that were among the Florida Merci gifts. They were
given to her parents by the Ringling Museum during the 1950s.

Georgia 11. **MOVED** re. S.E.
Atl **See Merci**
40 **Train website** :17
The ~~Georgia State~~ Archives believes that they have a few of the gifts, but
they cannot identify or locate them at this time.

Hawaii Hawaii Railway Society Mr. Glen Houlton
P.O. Box 1208 Telephone 808-681-5461
Ewa Beach, Hawaii 96706
All the gifts from the Wash. D.C.-Hawaii box car are reported to have been
removed in Washington, and I have found no knowledge of their existence
today.

Idaho State Penitentiary Museum Ms. Kate O'Brien Reed
2445 E. Old Penitentiary Rd. Idaho Historical Museum
Boise, Id 83706 Telephone 208-334-2120
It has been reported to me that the State Museum and Library in Boise
have a large collection of their Merci car's gifts.

Indiana National Veteran's Memorial Shrine Mr. James Mitchell
2122 O'Day Road 7301 Decatur Road
Fort Wayne, Ind. 46818 Fort Wayne, In 46816
Telephone 219-625-4944
I know of no knowledge of a collection of Indiana's Merci gifts.

Iowa Antique Acres Mr. Junior H. Grimm
Waverly Rd. (old hiway 219) 420 Hanna Blvd
Cedar Falls, Iowa 50613 Waterloo, Iowa 50701
Telephone 319-233-4142
It has been reported to me that The State Museum in Des Moines has a
collection of more than 100 of its gifts.

III.

Kansas	American Legion Post #173 East 13th St. and Canterbury Dr. Hays, Kan. 67601	Mr. Ralph Walters 100 Ash Hays Telephone 913-625-3952
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I have no knowledge of the existance of any of Kansas' Merci gifts.

Kentucky	Kentucky Railway Museum 136 So. Main Street New Haven, Ky 40051	J.J. Burks P.O. Box 861, New Haven Telephone 800-272-0152
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It has been reported to me that there are two of Kentucky's Merci gifts, plus one of the plaques that decorated the box car, at The Frankfort Historical Society .

Louisiana	Old State Capitol Museum 100 North Blvd. Baton Rouge, La 70801	Mary L. Prudhomme Director Telephone 504-324-0500
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I have no knowledge of the existance of any of Louisiana's Merci gifts except a one sculptured bust somewhere in Baton Rouge.

Maine	Railway Village Museum P.O. Box 123 Boothbay, Me. 04537	Mr. Robert Ryan-Director Telephone 207-633-4727
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Maine has an an extensive collection of its Merci gifts at the Maine State Museum in Augusta, near the capitol building.

Maryland	The Balt. & Ohio Museum 901 W. Pratt Street Baltimore, Md. 21223	No contact located at this time. Telephone 410-752-2490
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I have found no knowledge of the whereabouts of any of MD's gifts.

Michigan	The Forty & Eight Society 2949 S. Waverly Hiway Lansing, Mich. 48911	Mr. William Harper Telephone 517-882-2602
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I have found no knowledge of the whereabouts of Mich.'s Merci gifts.

IV.

Minnesota	Minnesota Military Museum Camp Ripley Nat. Guard Post Little Falls, Mn. Telephone 612-632-7374	No contact located
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I have found no knowledge of the existance of any of Minn.'s Merci gifts.

Mississippi <i>MOVED SEE WEBSITE</i>	Old Capitol Museum Behind the museum building Jackson, Ms Telephone 601-359-3920	Jo Laird Grand Correspondent Miss. Forty & Eight Society Tel. 601-664-9811
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The Old Capitol Museum has a small collection of Merci gifts, and the Miss. Dept. of Archives has an album of French childrens drawings. Contact Ms. Cindy Cable at the archives for more information about the gifts. Her email address is ccable@mdah.state.ms.us.

Missouri	Mo. State Fairgrounds Sedalia, Mo 65301 816-826-1314	Mr. Paul Bennett 623 E. 18th St. Sedalia, Mo. 65301 Telephone 816-668-4423
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I saw a few of the gifts from Missouri's Merci car on display in the lobby of a court house in Sedalia, Mo. Contact Paul Bennett

Montana	Montana Military Museum Fort Harrison Nat. Guard Camp Route 12 West Helena, Montana	Mr. Wendall Runkel 5880 Ferry Drive Helena, MT 59602 406-458-3819
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There is a small collection at the Montana Historical Society Museum at 225 N.Roberts St. in Helena. I have also been told of two county museums that aslo have small collections, for more information about the gifts contact Ms. Janet Sperry at the Hist. Museum 1-800-243-9900, or jsperry@state.mt.us.

Nevada	Nev. State Railroad Museum Capitol Complex Carson City, Nev. 89710 Telephone 702-687-4811	Dan Thielen At the museum
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The Nev. State Museum in Carson City has a 50 to 75 piece collection of Nevada's Merci gifts.

V.

New Hampshire	Gilbert Park Reed and Bremer Streets Manchester, N.H. 03109	Mr. Frederick Teague 24A Cross Road Sandown, NH 03873-2008
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There is a collection of six pieces of art (paintings and sculpture) at the Franco-Amercain Centre (A fraternal Insurance Company) located at 53 Concord Street in Mancgester, NH. Photos of those artifacts are on the N.H. page of the RYPN/ Merci Train website. For more info contact the company at 603-669-1214.

New Mexico	State Fairgrounds 300 San Pedro Dr. N.E. Albuquerque, NM 87111 Telephone 505-265-1791	Mr. Blaine Bachman Albuquerque, NM
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A few items are on display in a kiosk near the box cars.

New York	40 & 8 Voiture #92 Corner of Judd & Halsey Roads Whitesboro, NY 13492	Ray Blaich-Caretaker Telephone 315-736-9774
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I have found no knowledge of the existance of any of N Y's gifts.

North Carolina	No. Carolina Transportation Museum 411 S. Salsbury Ave. Spencer, NC 28159 Exit #79 off of I-85	Julie Bledsoe At The Museum Telephone 704-636-2889
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It was reported to me that there is a collection of No. Carolina's Merci gifts at a museum in Raliegh. Check with Ms. Bledsoe for more details.

North Dakota	No. Dakota Heritage Center 612 East Blvd. Ave Bismark, ND 585005-0830 Telephone 701-224-2666	No cantact located
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I have been told that there is an extensive collection of No. Dak.'s Merci gifts at The Heritage Center.

VI

Ohio	Camp Perry Nat. Guard Camp Near Port Clinton, Ohio	Mrs. Anna Bovia P.O. Box 225 Lacarne, Ohio 43439 Telephone - 635-2561
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I have been told that a small collection of Ohio's gifts are housed in the State Historical Museum in Columbus.

Oklahoma	J.D. McCarthy Center For Children With Developmental Disabilities. 1125 E. Alameda Norman, Oklahoma	Mr. Joel Mann Communication Director Telephone 405-321-4830
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The Oklahoma State Archives Museum has a collection of perhaps 50 of it's Merci gifts.

Oregon MOVED See Merci Train website	Old Fort Stevens Historical Park Hammond, Oregon To contact Mr. Paul Telephone 503-861-3678	Mr. Richard L. Paul Merci Boxcar Director 500 Pacific Dr. #52 Hammond, OR 97121
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I have found no knowledge of the existance of any of OR.'s gifts.

Pennsylvania	Fort Indiantown Gap National Guard Post (near I-81 exit 29) Annville, Pa. 17003-5002	Joseph W. Holt Dept. of Military Affairs Tel. 800-654-8924
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I have a report of an album of drawings at the Pa. State Museum & Archives in Harrisburg.

Rhode Island	Museum of Work & History 42 S. Main St. (Market Square) Woonsocket, RI 02895-4274	Mr. Jaccques Staelen 60 White Parkway North Smithfield, RI 02895
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The only remaining RI Merci gift that I am aware of is in private hands. It may be donated to the Woonsocket museum at some later date.

South Carolina	American Legion Post #6 200 Pickens Street Columbia, SC 29205	No contact at this time.
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I have found no one with knowledge of the S. C. gifts whereabouts.

VII

South Dakota	Dakotaland Museum State Fairgrounds, 1616 1st Street Huron, SD 57350	No contact located
	I have found no one with knowledge of the S.Dak. gifts whereabouts.	
Tennessee	American Legion Post #145 722 Edgemont Street Bristol, TN 37620	Charles Commerton 515 Marion St. Bristol, TN 37620 Telephone 423-968-7632
	One small doll is the only Tenn. Merci gift known to exist. It is with the box car in Bristol.	
Texas	American Legion Post #76 2201 Veteran's Drive Austin, TX Telephone 512-472-3344	Mr. Larry Miller P.O. Box 1214 Austin, TX 78767
	Some of Tx.'s Merci gifts are at The Texas Memorial Museum in Austin.	
Utah MOVED See Merci Train website	Veteran's War Memorial Memory Grove 233 N. Canyon Road Salt Lake City, Utah Telephone 801-596-1730	Ms. Linda Thatcher Utah State Hist. Society 300 Rio Grande Salt Lake City, UT 84101-1182
	I have found no one with knowledge of the whereabouts of Utah's gifts.	
Vermont	Vermont Military Museum Camp Johnson Nat. Guard Camp Colechester, VT Telephone 802-654-0360	Mr. Andrew Laramée 32 O'Brien Drive So. Burlington, VT 05403
	I have found no one with knowledge of the whereabouts of Vt.'s gifts.	
Virginia	9285 Warwick Blvd. Newport News, VA 23607 Telephone 804-247-2632	Mr. William Barker at The War Museum
	I have found no one with knowledge of the whereabouts of Va.'s gifts	



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