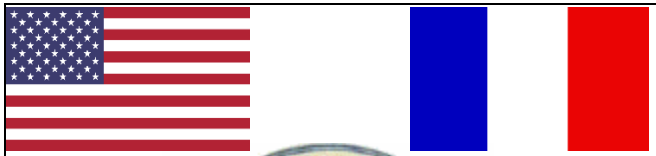


THE FRENCH GRATITUDE TRAIN

TEXAS "MERCI" BOXCAR

This boxcar, which came filled with gifts from the people of France, is one of the 49 boxcars given to the United States in February 1949. The boxcars, referred to as "Forty & Eights", were primarily used during WWI to transport soldiers and horses throughout France.

The symbol of the Merci Train above is a frontal view of a steam engine with flowers on the pilot which are symbolic of Flanders Field, where many American "Doughboys" from WWI are buried. The drawing was adopted as the official symbol of the French Merci Train Committee, and a plaque of the drawing was placed on each of the Merci boxcars. The committee also had gift tags made bearing the symbol, and one accompanied each of the more than 52,000 gifts sent in the 49 boxcars.

The American Friendship Train of 1947 In 1947 the people of France and Italy were still struggling to recover from the devastation of World War II. After seeing this firsthand, noted columnist and journalist Drew Pearson spearheaded a fundraising campaign to provide them with food, clothing, and other necessities. Americans contributed generously to the purely grass-roots effort, filling the "**American Friendship Train**" with an estimated $40 million in relief supplies.

The Italians sent a ***'Thank You'*** in the form of four statues that now grace the ends of the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Bridge and the Arlington Memorial Bridge in Washington, DC. They also produced a short film expressing their gratitude called "Thanks, America!" to be played in US movie theaters ahead of any given feature.

The French Gratitude Train of 1949

Touched by this response to their need, the French answered with a program of their own. The idea originated with André Picard, a veteran and railroad employee, who suggested that a boxcar be filled with gifts from every part of France and sent to the United States as a gesture of gratitude.

Picard's idea led to the creation of a committee to solicit enough gifts to fill one boxcar. France's response exceeded all expectations and it soon became obvious that a single boxcar could not hold all the items. The French War Veterans Association assumed control of the project and decided to try to fill 49 boxcars, one for every state then in the union and one boxcar for the District of Columbia and territory of Hawaii.

In all, 52,000 gifts, weighing 250 tons were collected during 1948 and loaded into the 49 boxcars, which were then loaded aboard the freighter ***Magellan*** at Le Havre France for their transatlantic journey.

The ship, with **"*Merci America*"** adorning its sides, received a royal welcome in New York Harbor on February 3, 1949. Congress had passed a resolution allowing the gifts to enter the country duty-free and longshoremen volunteered their services to bring the cars ashore. The French boxcars, being of too narrow a gauge for American rails, were loaded onto flatcars and delivered to state capitals across the country, at no charge.

Upon reaching their destinations, the cars were greeted by dignitaries at special ceremonies. Their contents, after being displayed for a time, were distributed in a variety of ways. Many were sold at auction, with the proceeds going to charity, while some especially significant items went to various public institutions.

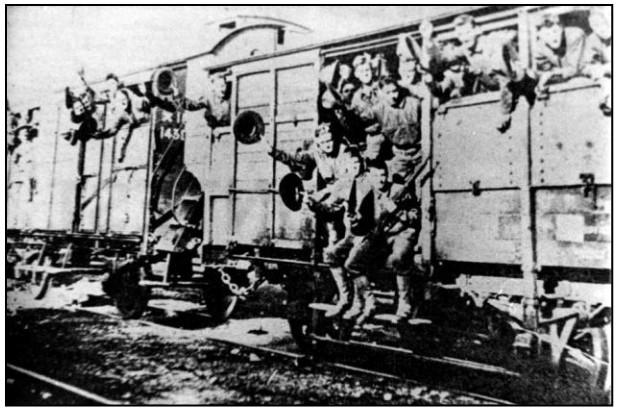
Unfortunately, few of the gifts lovingly placed in the cars by the citizens of France can be traced today. But those cars that have survived vandalism and the ravages of time testify to a great expression of friendship and caring between two nations and their peoples who fought side by side for a common goal more than half a century ago.

The Forty & Eight

OUR 1920 FOUNDERS WERE VETERANS OF W.W.I. FRANCE. Our organization's formal title is La Societe des Quarante Hommes et Huit Chevaux or the Society of Forty Men and Eight Horses.

During the First World War, French boxcars carried American Doughboys to the front. These wartime boxcars, which held either 40 men or 8 horses, were emblazoned with "40/8"; a symbol readily understood by American veterans of that era. Today our organization's titles are in French and we meet in symbolic W.W.I. train depots, in grateful homage to the sacrifices of our Doughboy founders and indeed to honor all Americans who yet serve. -- We are most commonly known as "La Societe" or simply "The Forty & Eight".

HOMMES 40
CHEVAUX 8

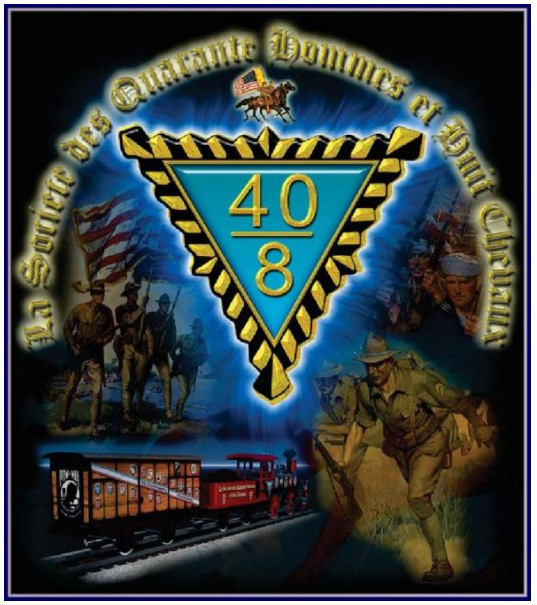


GIFTS FROM THE TEXAS MERCI BOXCAR

Many gifts from the Texas Merci Boxcar were distributed to cities throughout Texas. Some of the gifts remain in the Briscoe Center for American History at University of Texas at Austin but are not on display. Photos of some of the items are on the Grande du Texas website or can be seen with the Texas Merci Boxcar at the Interactive Exhibit at the Texas Military Forces Museum, Camp Mabry, Austin, TX.

For More Information Go To:

Merci Train
(Links to all boxcars in the USA)
www.mercitrain.org

Grande Voiture du Texas
www.texasboxcar.org

Forty and Eight Nationale
www.fortyandeight.org