



# MERCI BOXCAR ADORNMENTS AND MARKING RESTORATION GUIDE



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## PREFACE

The website [www.mercitrain.org](http://www.mercitrain.org) was created to help others learn about the great story of the French Gratitude Train of 1949, commonly referred to as the Merci Train and the 49 Merci Boxcars gifted from France. This movement began with Voyageur Militaire Andy Dolak who traveled to see most of the boxcars and published two Merci Box Car Memorial Books on his work in 1983 and 1984. This research continued with Earl Bennett, Sr., who visited the remaining 43 of our treasured boxcars. They shared their love for the story of the Forty and Eight boxcars and the story behind the Merci Train. Their dedication inspired others to visit each of the existing boxcars in the US and to continue to learn and share information about these treasures.

Proprietorship of [www.mercitrain.org](http://www.mercitrain.org) was passed to John Stevens who also worked with Earl Bennett. He is assisted by Roxanne Godsey and they continue Earl's legacy via the website. A small group of volunteer researchers conducted extensive research into the original boxcar shields and other plaques on each of the boxcars from the Merci Train. This information is based on that research and is supported by documentation from a variety of sources.

Over the years some states have undergone projects to restore these antique treasures. There are many variations of our boxcars out there today. Some cars are missing some of the coat of arm shields, some boxcars have been repainted and some have improperly placed shields. It is the goal of [www.mercitrain.org](http://www.mercitrain.org) to provide guidance to help restore these boxcars to their original look based on historical research.

These researchers are not directly affiliated with La Societe des Quarante Hommes et Huit Chevaux (The Society of Forty Men and Eight Horses), but their dedication to the story of the Merci Train and Merci Boxcars is refreshing. They have done extensive work to research the Merci Boxcars to obtain the most accurate information possible about them to provide information and guidance for restorations to be done correctly.

Heritage Printing in Charlotte, North Carolina, has been approved to use the copyrighted vector files created by one of the researchers for the reproduction of the shields for the Merci Boxcars. A price sheet is available on the [www.mercitrain.org](http://www.mercitrain.org) website for those interested in obtaining reproduction shields from them. Most visitors will not know if a restored boxcar is historically correct or not, but the information provided is there for those who wish to properly restore their boxcar.

In great appreciation to these researchers for their hard work and dedication.

David J. Knutson, Grand Publiciste  
La Societe des Quarante Hommes et Huit Chevaux  
Grande Voiture du Texas





## INTRODUCTION: THE MERCI TRAIN

Known as the Merci Train, Gratitude Train, Thank You Train, etc. I believe many of us today we would appreciate the fanfare given the arrival of these gifts from France. You can find some information on the internet, but the most reliable information comes from the Merci Boxcars themselves in the form of records, photos stories and gifts from each of them.

As Drew Pearson was a good friend of President Lyndon Johnson his personal records are also stored in the LBJ Presidential Library in Austin, Texas. Part of these records have been unsealed and some of the researchers have reviewed the available files to help gather information about the Merci Train.

### THE "MERCİ" TRAIN

#### France sends 49 boxcars full of gifts to the U.S.

On Feb. 2 the French freighter *Magellan* steamed into New York carrying 49 antique, narrow-gauge boxcars in her hold. These were the cars of the Gratitude Train, France's reply to the American Friendship Train which in 1947 toured the U.S. and collected \$40 million worth of food and clothing for the hard-pressed people of France. Each boxcar was packed with 5 tons of gifts, and each was addressed to a separate state. (The contents of the 49th car will be divided between the District of Columbia and Hawaii.) The gifts (*next page*) were of all varieties and value and they came, as the American gifts had come, from private citizens. Soon they will be distributed by governors' committees, largely to museums and other institutions, where they will remain as souvenirs of what New York's Mayor William O'Dwyer called "the most heart-warming event in recent international history."



FRENCH AMBASSADOR BONNET (RIGHT) WELCOMES TRAIN IN NEW YORK

*Article left and photo below from*

*Life Magazine*

*February 28, 1949*

## With gratitude from France

France wanted to give back.

Andre Picard, a French veteran and railroad worker, organized the Merci Train to do just that. He said its contents were a gesture of his country's sincere affection for "our American friends."

"We found ourselves unable to reply in the same manner as you aided us," Picard said when explaining the plight of France following the war. "We did wish to send you remembrances which would last forever."

*Photos taken by Joseph E. Craven  
Indianapolis Star  
Feb. 13, 1949*



Andre Picard, (center) the man behind the Merci Train, talks with Drew Pearson, Washington columnist who initiated the Friendship Train (right) at the Indianapolis welcome parade for the Friendship Train boxcar on Feb. 13, 1949. Joseph E. Craven/Indianapolis Star.



Small seedling trees, carefully packed in French soil and straw, were in the first box unloaded from the 40 & 8 car of the Merci Train at the Indiana World War Memorial on Feb. 13, 1949. Indianapolis Star Photo.



## BOXCAR SHIELDS (COAT OF ARMS)

The most significant adornments to the Merci Boxcar are the shields. One of the most famous heraldists in France in the mid-20th century was Robert Louis. He crafted many designs and was renowned for his heraldic art of French historical regions, towns and provinces.



Monsieur Robert Louis is shown here with the design of the Eagle escutcheon, which was on each Merci Boxcar.

Some have been incorrectly replaced with the American Bald Eagle. If you review this photo more closely, the eagle is NOT a bald eagle.

Robert Louis created this Eagle escutcheon with some differences from the official seal of the United States adopted after the American Revolution.

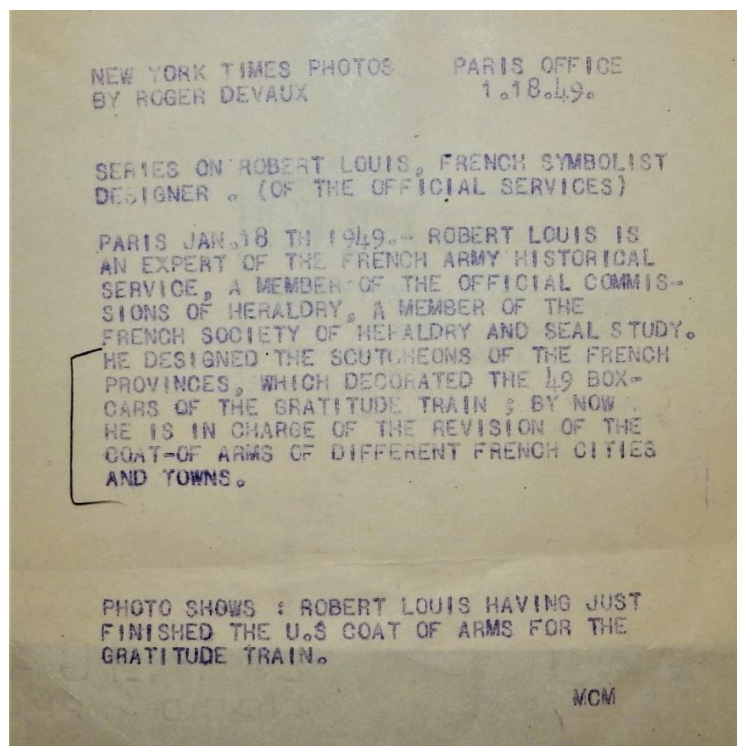
Research done by Brian Austin from the North Dakota Historical Society helped provide detailed information on the specific boxcar shields on the Merci Boxcars. Although we commonly refer to the shields as “coat of arms” the shields were not official coat of arms for specific regions and are described as “*Symboles de France*” by Robert Louis.

No doubt Robert Louis was directly involved in the selection of the symbols for the boxcar shields used on the Merci Boxcars.

*Photo/Document*

*Drew Pearson Collection*

*LBJ Library, Austin, Texas*



[https://www.heraldry-wiki.com/heraldrywiki/index.php?title=Category:Robert\\_Louis\\_Postcards](https://www.heraldry-wiki.com/heraldrywiki/index.php?title=Category:Robert_Louis_Postcards)

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## PLACEMENT OF BOXCAR SHIELDS

The previous section explains how these specific shields were selected and if you look up these regions today you will find many changes. Again, it is the goal of [www.mercitrain.org](http://www.mercitrain.org) to provide information to allow you to restore your Merci Boxcar to its original state.

If we had the original shields which were marked on the back showing their position number this would be easy, however few states have their original shields and even in 1949 shields were put in the wrong spot as they were removed and reapplied. Some of the shields are very similar to each other and it can be confusing at first glance. The [www.mercitrain.org](http://www.mercitrain.org) researchers spent many hours and worked very hard to obtain the data needed to make reproductions of each shield as accurately as possible to the original shields. Errors have been made in many of the reproductions or restorations done prior to this guide being written. The stripe or banner, colors on the shields themselves, spelling of the region represented on the shield, placement of the shields on the boxcars and even the color of the boxcars themselves were all researched and a consensus of what is believed to be the most accurate information determined by the [www.mercitrain.org](http://www.mercitrain.org) research group.

The Texas Merci Boxcar was found to have 18 shields that were different from the standard shields identified in the Drew Pearson files. In 2016 photos of the Texas Merci Boxcar taken in 1949 were discovered and the shields in that photo did in fact match the standard shields and placement from the Drew Pearson files. Consequently, the boxcar shields and their placement on the Texas Merci Boxcar were corrected and updated.



Close up of a 1949 photo of Texas Merci Boxcar showing the shields in standard placement matching Drew Pearson files.

*Photo Above: Fort Worth Star Telegram 1949*

However, just because you have a 1949 photo of your Merci Boxcar does not mean it is accurate. Since many of the boxcars researched show to all be the same when they arrived and documentation from the Drew Pearson files show standard adornments the logical conclusion is that all the boxcars decorated the same. Photos also show some damage to the adornments on the boxcars and some shields may have been damaged or lost.

A 1949 photo of the Kansas Merci Boxcar showing most the shields in standard placement matching Drew Pearson files. A closer look shows shields #6, #8 and #9 are improperly placed.



*Photo above: Drew Pearson Collection LBJ Library, Austin, Texas*

A 1949 photo of Indiana Merci Boxcar showing the shields in standard placement matching Drew Pearson files.

*Photo right by  
Joseph E. Craven  
Indianapolis Star  
Feb 13, 1949*

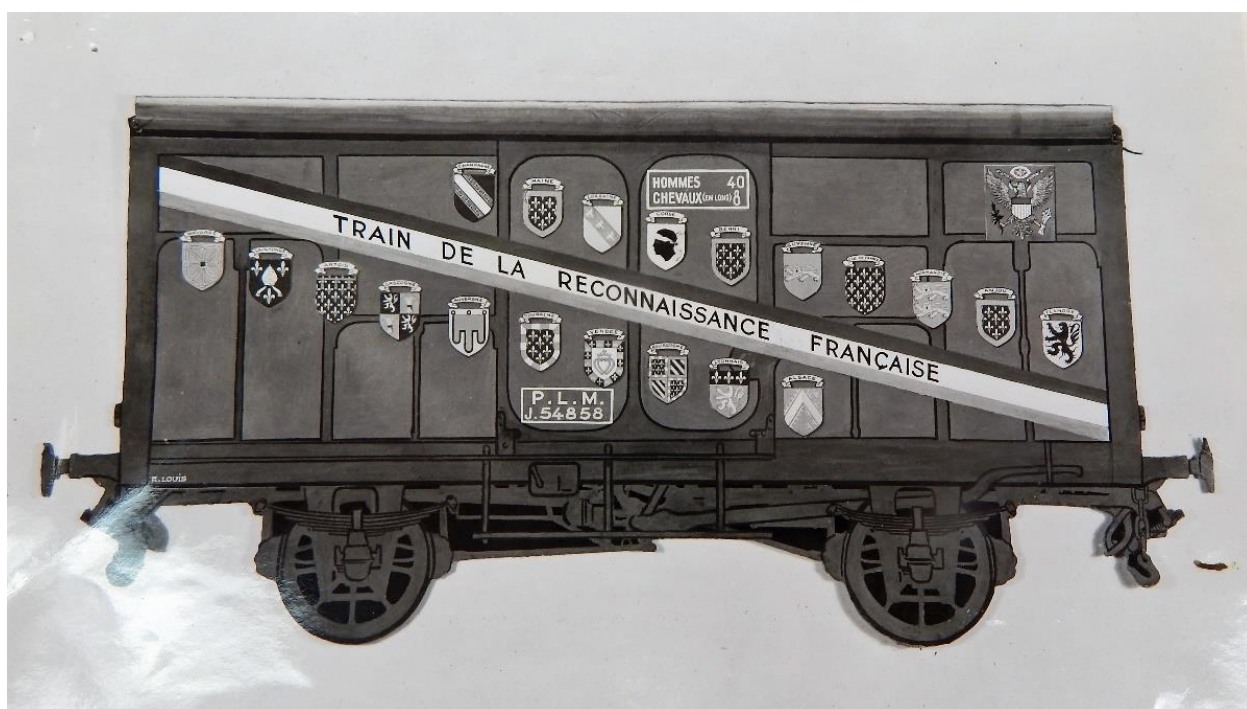
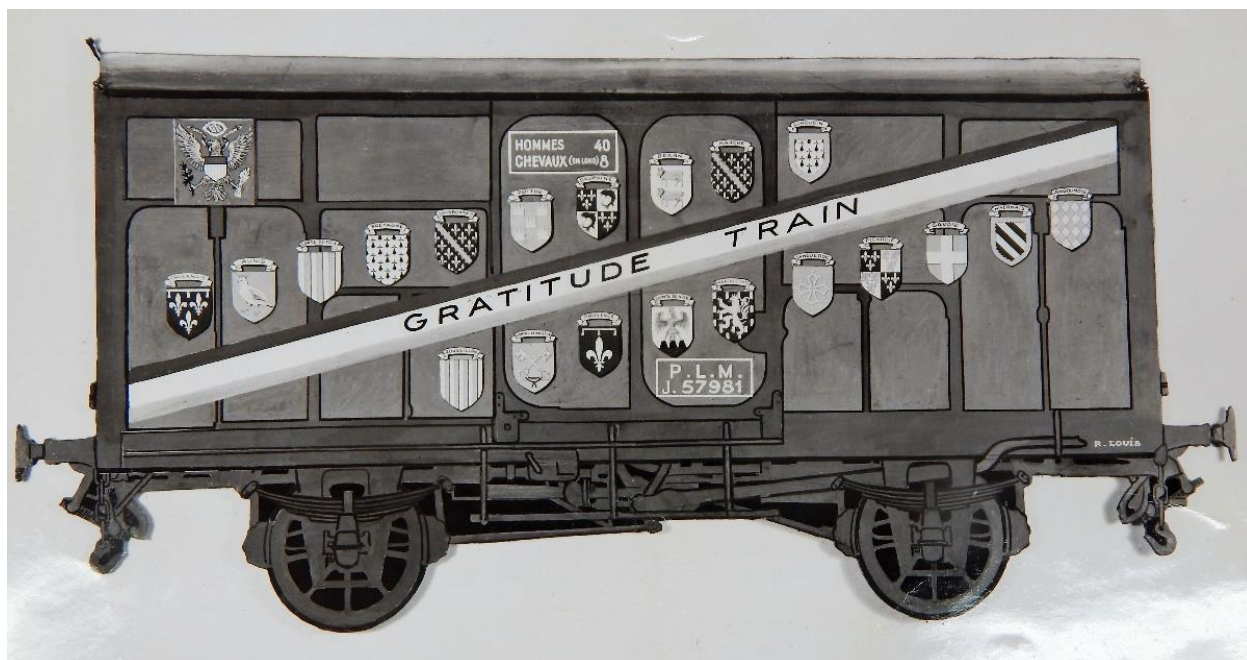


Small seedling trees, carefully packed in French soil and straw, were in the first box unloaded from the 40 & 8 car of the Merci Train at the Indiana World War Memorial on Feb. 13, 1949. Indianapolis Star Photo,



## STANDARD PLACEMENT OF MERCI BOXCAR ADORNMENTS

The below photos show the placement of the shields and eagle. It also shows the banners on each side, location of the P.L.M. number and Hommes/Chevaux decoration which were painted directly onto the boxcars themselves. The location of the Merci Train plaque is shown on the next page with each shield numbered with their proper placement.



*Photos Above: Drew Pearson Collection LBJ Library, Austin, Texas*

# SHIELD PLACEMENT / ENGLISH SIDE



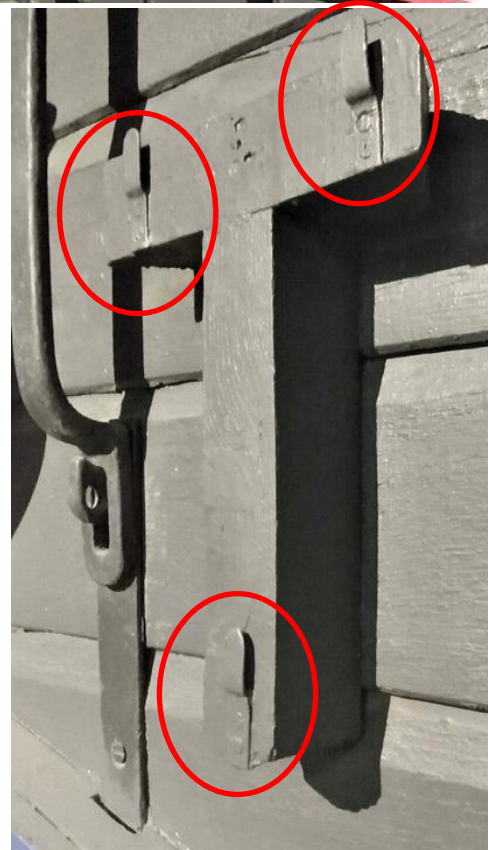


## SHIELD PLACEMENT / FRENCH SIDE



## MOUNTING SHIELDS AND PLAQUES

Restoration of the boxcars can create problems on how to mount the replacement shields and plaques. The original boxcar shields hung on shield-shaped or T-shaped wood mounts that had three metal tabs (2 top and 1 bottom) for each shield. The boxcar shields had corresponding brackets that would slide over the metal tabs. The eagle and Merci Train adornments were mounted in opposite corners on “H” shaped mounts as shown in the photo below.



Photos showing two different mounting styles of base for shields with tabs for the shield. Photos left show the brackets on back of shield.



## BANNER AND OTHER ADORNMENTS

The banner or stripe is believed to be based upon the colors of the flag of France with blue on top, white in the middle and red on the bottom.

Other adornments included on the Merci Boxcars are the Eagle and Merci Train logo:



Each Merci Boxcar had one of each on both the French and English sides as demonstrated in the placement guides.



**YELLOW OR RED?** Research on paint colors of the era revealed a very unstable red that turned yellow in a short period of time. This explains why the only known unaltered official Merci Train Logo plaques from three different states (Maryland, Virginia, and Kansas) all display a yellow rather than red-colored poppy on the right and wave on the bottom. The correct blue, white and red colors of the flowers and waves represent the colors of both countries' flags, and the waves are thought to represent the ocean separating the two countries. The photo below is from the Maryland Merci Boxcar, which is believed to be the only existing Merci Boxcar that has not been altered or restored.



A gift tag was attached to each gift showing the Merci Train Logo with its proper coloring.



*Photo above courtesy [www.mercitrain.org](http://www.mercitrain.org)*

*Photo left from Arizona Merci Boxcar collection.*

## HOMMES / CHEVAUX MARKING

The Hommes 40 / Chevaux 8 marking became the nick name for the boxcars as 40 & 8ers holding either 40 men (Hommes) or 8 horses (Chevaux). En Long meaning lengthwise. These markings were painted directly onto the boxcars as shown in the figures below.



Fig. 1: French Side



Fig 2: English Side

The photo right shows the 40/8 marking on the Texas Merci Boxcar taken shortly after its arrival in 1949.

*Photo: Fort Worth Star Telegram*



## P.L.M. “J” NUMBER

Just as the 40 & 8 markings were painted on the P.L.M. number was also painted on the doors of both sides of each boxcar as shown in the figures below:



In addition to the doors the P.L.M. number was also on the upper left of the end of the boxcar as seen in the photo below.



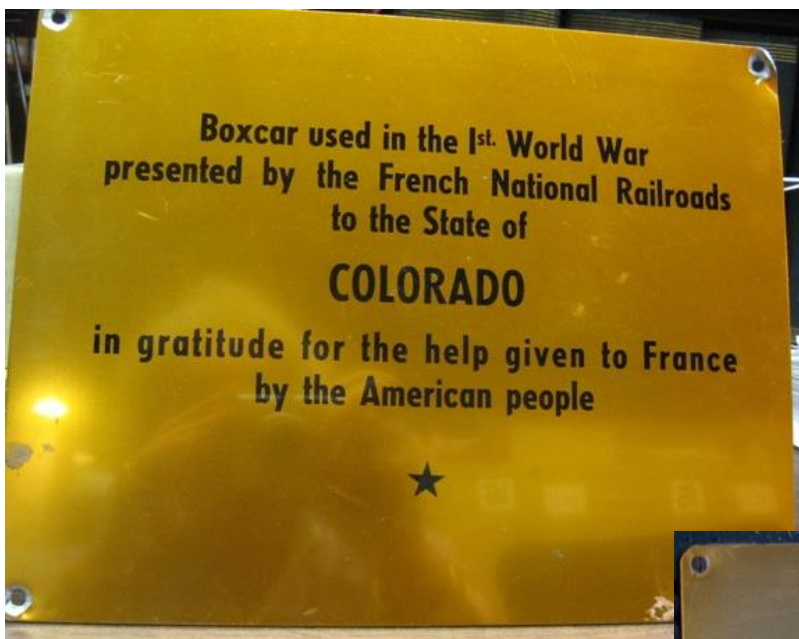
*Photo left: Fort Worth  
Star Telegram.*

*Photo below: Drew  
Pearson Collection LBJ  
Library, Austin, Texas*



## BRASS PLAQUE

Each boxcar had a brass plaque near the bottom to the left of the door. The size of this plaque appears to be 8" x 10". Example of this is shown below. There is a good photo of the plaque from the Colorado Merci Boxcar below. You may also refer to [www.mercitrain.org](http://www.mercitrain.org) and look at photos of the Maryland Boxcar.



## BOXCAR COLOR

As all photos found from 1949 have been black and white this was a significant challenge. Many of the boxcars today are a gun metal gray, but photos and video of the day appear to show all boxcars were the same color which is much darker than the light gray seen in some states.

Study results by [www.mercitrain.org](http://www.mercitrain.org) researcher Dr. Wayne Wingfield are shown below with suggested color codes for restoration.

March 25, 2018

### Possible Background Color of Merci Boxcars\*

French	R	G	B	O
Count	90	90	90	90
Min	31	31	31	255
Max	81	81	81	255
Mean	51.7	51.7	51.9	255
SD	11.4	11.2	12.2	0

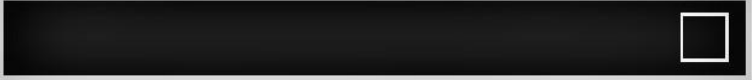
  

Gratitude	R	G	B	O
Count	75	75	75	75
Min	20	19	21	255
Max	83	84	88	255
Mean	48.4	47.3	48.9	255
SD	14.4	15.2	15.6	0


  

Both Sides	R	G	B	O
Count	165	165	165	165
Min	20	19	21	255
Max	83	84	88	255
Mean	50.2	49.7	50.5	255
SD	12.9	13.3	13.8	0


  

Mine Shaft approx.	Select a Color: ▼
	
Your Color: #343434	RGB: 52, 52, 52

Baltic Sea approx.	Select a Color: ▼
	
Your Color: #302F31	RGB: 48, 47, 49

Tuna approx.	Select a Color: ▼
	
Your Color: #323233	RGB: 50, 50, 51

Colors samples were taken from digital images taken from the Maryland boxcar. These images were taken by Pam Todd in February of 2014. The camera used was the same for all, the time of day was within one hour of each other, and there was no flash enhancement. Only images with a focused image of one of the shields were used and care was taken to avoid shadowed areas or areas of obvious wear. There were 33 shield images used in this assessment. A total of five random samples were taken from each image with the sampling site appearing the darkest (and thus the least worn). The French and Gratitude sides were separately assessed in case ambient light was different from one side to the next, but this does not appear to be the case as all RGB values are nearly identical.

Conclusion: When choosing the most likely background color, use the hexadecimal color #323233 (RGB: 50, 50, 51).

## BOXCAR SHIELDS AND PLAQUE REPRODUCTIONS

Reproductions are typically made on 3mm black PVC for indoor use or Aluminum Composite for outdoor use. Shields can be mounted with hooks and brackets as described above, adhesive or by drilling small holes in the shield and using dark colored screws.

As the cost to replace the banners or stripes can be high, you may consider repainting them and only replacing the shields and other plaques. The price list at [www.mercitrain.org](http://www.mercitrain.org) is set up for those who do not need everything available. Please contact the vendor directly for quotes on partial orders.

## DISCLAIMER

**PLEASE DO NOT MAKE CHANGES SUGGESTED IN THIS GUIDE TO ANYTHING YOU BELIEVE TO BE INCORRECT.**

This guide is as it states – a guide! Caretakers of the boxcars in the 50s, 60s and 70s did not have the luxury of the Internet to research restoration work, and mistakes were made in earlier restorations. We do not claim to have all the answers, and there has never been a coordinated effort to provide information in this manner on a national level. Your feedback is welcome!

This guide is created to assist in the restoration of the boxcars of the Merci Train and recommendations are made in good faith that the information provided is accurate. Volunteers and/or researchers affiliated with [www.mercitrain.org](http://www.mercitrain.org) are not responsible for any disputes with the vendor or tribulations with the restoration process.

Please direct any feedback, questions, etc. to:

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Earl R. Bennett, Sr., (July 10, 1932 – Nov. 14, 2013) founder of [www.mercitrain.org](http://www.mercitrain.org), represented the driving force behind research on the Merci Boxcars in the United States. His interest, enthusiasm and sharing attitude influenced many others to jump onto his movement and keep this important, yet rarely spoken of, snapshot in history.

With the support and willingness to continue research on the Merci boxcars, we are slowly discovering their contents, history, and physical appearance. A number of years ago we decided it was important to authenticate the physical appearance of the original boxcars. Individuals including Sue Ann and John Irving (Hillsboro, OR), Sharon and Bob McElroy (Hillsboro, OR) and Sue and John Stevens (Georgia) visited all the existing boxcars. Their careful documentation included many images of each car. As these visits were made around the United States, it soon became quite apparent that colors, provincial shields, logos, and even the USA seal varied from one car to the next. This set into motion the visitation, documentation, examination of historic media, and analysis of the boxcars.

The one individual with the most knowledge of the physical appearance of the cars is Pamela Todd (Red Lodge, MT). As we collected more and more data, we eventually were led to the North Dakota Historical Society and Mr. Brian R. Austin who had painstakingly digitally reproduced the appropriate provincial shields, logos, USA shield and both English and French banners displayed on the original boxcars. This original artwork formed the basis for additional research with numerous corrections and color changes being made in order to again reproduce the appearance of the original shields.

It is our hope you will enjoy the beauty of these historical boxcars and their contents. We invite you to visit our webpage (<http://mercitrain.org>) to learn more and enjoy this important part of history.

On behalf of [www.mercitrain.org](http://www.mercitrain.org)

Suzanne and Wayne Wingfield  
Estes Park, Colorado