



75TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE MONTANA MERCI CAR 1949- 2024

During the years 1946-1947 the people of France and Italy were still struggling to recover from the devastation of World War II, and 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 many rail cars known as the **American Friendship Train** to Europe by ship with an estimated \$40 million in relief supplies, sent to the People of France and Italy 1947. Touched by this response to their needs, the French answered with a program of their own, The French Gratitude Train of 1949, the idea originating with Andre Picard, a veterans 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, and Picard's idea led in the creation of a committee to solicit enough gifts to fill one boxcar and France's response exceeded all expectations, and it soon became obvious that the single boxcar could not hold all the items.



The French War Veterans Association assumed control of the Project and filled 49 40 & 8 Box cars, one for each state then in the Union, and one boxcar to be shared by the District of Columbia and territory of Hawaii, and in all 52,000 gifts, weighing 250 tons were collected during 1948, filling the 40 & 8 French Box Cars which were then loaded on the freighter MAGELLAN at Le Harve, 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, and the U.S. Congress had passed a resolution allowing the gifts to enter the country duty-free and longshoremen volunteered their services to bring the cars to shore, and; 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.

THE "MERCI" TRAIN

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

On Feb. 2 the French freighter *Mageellan* 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."



MARTIAL SOUVENIRS turned up in great number among grfs. German soldier's helmet was picked up on battlefield by Frenchman in World War I.

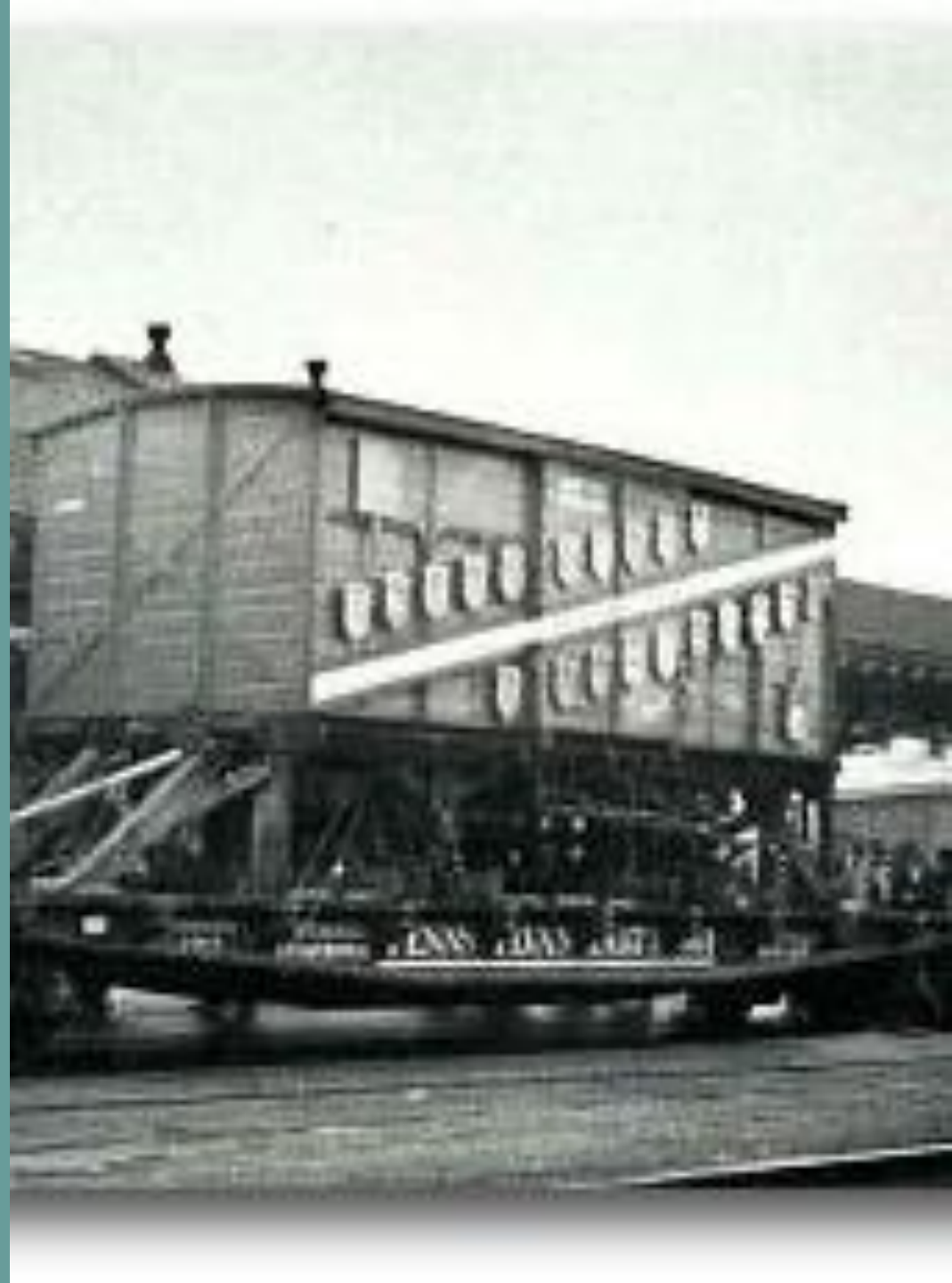
OFF LOADING
MERCI CARS ON
THE PORT OF
NEW YORK



A "40 AND 8" CAR, adorned with the shields of France's provinces, is unloaded in New York Harbor. Its gauge is too narrow to fit railways in the U.S.

Montana's 40 & 8 Car was presented to the people of Montana on February 16, 1949, at a ceremony in the State of Montana Capital House of Representatives in front of a Joint session of the legislative assembly. The Car and its contents were presented to Governor John Bonner, representing the people of Montana by Paul Lenier, French Vice-Counsel, on behalf of the French people.

Upon being received by Governor Bonner in a ceremony, the French 40 & 8 Box Car has had a long and sometimes tepid history. After the Ceremony and ultimate distribution of the contents to the various counties of Montana as well as the Montana Historical Library, Montana's Merci Car set unceremoniously in the North Pacific railway yards for ten years forgotten and rusting away.



40 & 8 CARS
KNOWN AS MERCI
CARS IN TRANSIT
THROUGHOUT THE
U.S.

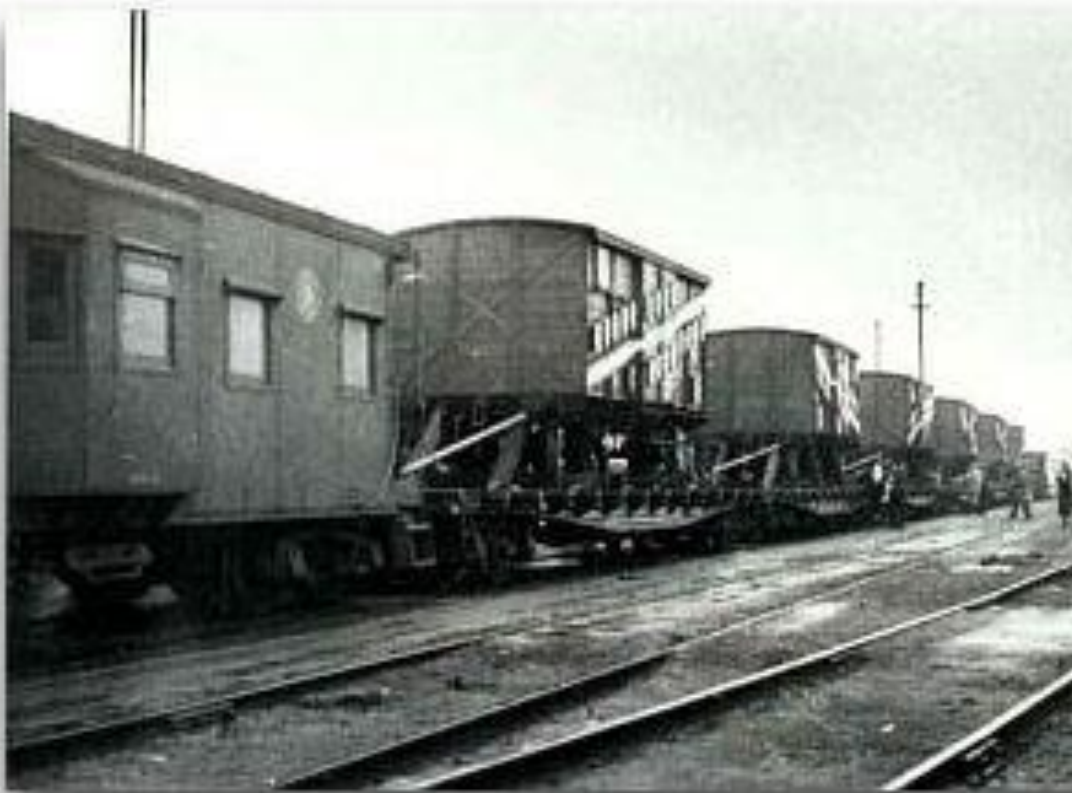




MERCI Cars were then delivered the 48 State & District of Columbia to shared with the Territory of Hawaii

EXHIBITS ON THE 1949 GRATITUDE TRAINS





. Montana's La Société des 40 Homes et 8 Chevaux or the 40 & 8 Society, established in 1922, became the advocate for the Montana's Merci Car in the early 1950's. In 1956 after working on generating interest among the membership the 40 & 8 Society leadership approached then Governor Hugo Aronson, asking to have the Car donated to the State's 40 & 8 Society and further to have the Car placed on display in the State Capital area as a tribute to the veterans and people of Montana.

In 1957 a verbal contract was struck with Governor Aronson turning the Car over to the 40 & 8. The State Board of Examiners, caretakers of the Capital complex and State property, authorized the Car to be set behind the Veterans and Pioneers Building in a park for all to see, and after necessary repairs were done at Ft Harrison by volunteers and private donations Montana MERCI Car was returned to a place behind the Veterans and Pioneers Building.

In 1976 as a result the Bicentennial of the United States the area was re-designated as the Veterans Plaza and flags and symbols were added to the area by the veterans of Montana under the direction of Mr. Chet Shore, American Legion Adjutant. Shore who also finished the Trophy Room known as Chet Governor Room on the third floor furnishing it with numerous donations of Montana veterans of all the Wars.



Montana MERCI Car as it looked in 1953 when transferred Montana Grand Du Montana 40 & 8



In 2001 Montana's MERCI Car was moved to its present site at the Montana Military Museum, at Fort William Henry Harrison where it is now a premiere exhibit at the Museum's outdoors Veterans Plaza, and, because the Montana MERCI CAR continues to be a resolute symbol of the Patriotism, Dedication and Sacrifice of many Montana Veterans of World War I and World War II and has stood the ultimate test of surviving and being relevant to their memory; the Montana Military Museum strives to recognize the efforts of the Greatest Generations and the caring people of Montana and ask all to recognize the year 2024, as the 75 Anniversary of this French gift in gratitude for the joint recognition of Freedom. Formally rededicated on October 24, 2024.