

The Forty and Eight Merci Boxcar: A Gift to our Greatest Generation

By Ava Wilkey

Originally designed to haul freight and later converted to transport Allied troops and horses during World War I and II. The present day name of the “Forty and Eight car” was derived from the wartime capacity of the car dictated by the French military of “Hommes 40. Chevaux 8,” meaning it could hold forty men or eight horses. Built in France between 1872 and 1885, the wooden boxcar measures twenty-nine feet long by nine feet wide and it weighs approximately twelve tons. It is about the third of the size of an American boxcar of similar construction. With its small stature, antiquated button type buffers and chain link couplings, it must have appeared to the soldier’s as they disembarked from their cushy Pullman sleepers to be a small wooden box on wheels.

Although the Forty and Eight car (40/8), later renamed the Merci car, has traveled many miles to transport cargo during peacetime, soldier’s during World Wars I and II and later, gifts of gratitude to the American people in 1949, its illustrious travels will end at our museum when it is moved to permanent display in our new education center later this year.



Merci Car

Soldiers often boarded these cars and were given a ration of canned goods for their trip to various locations throughout Europe. Private John J. Fitzmaurice, a radar specialist from St. Louis, was stationed in

Germany during the conflict and rode in a 40/8 car to La Havre France in the spring of 1945. He commented in a letter home to his parents that he did not know how one could fit forty men in one of the cars, “there were 16 of us and the boxcar was about twice as big as the bathroom at home...just enough room for everyone to get on the floor at night.” He described the engine as “something from the Civil War.” He went further to say “the train went so slow we were getting off and jumping from one car to other while it was in route...We were happy all the way...it was the nearest thing to home we’d ever been in 21 months.” He was closer to home than he thought, the war ended while he was aboard the train and he was back in St. Louis by October of 1945.



John F. Fitzmaurice



Photograph of train taken by John F. Fitzmaurice

After the war, efforts were made by the American people to assist areas of Europe that had been reduced to ruins. A Washington Post newspaper columnist, Drew Pearson, began a grassroots effort to gather supplies for the war-ravaged areas in 1947. Americans responded with fervor and the aptly named “American Friendship Train” with \$40 million dollars in supplies filling 700 cars was sent to Europe. A French rail worker and World War II veteran, Andre Picard was so touched by this gesture the he suggested France reciprocate. A French veteran’s organization quickly embraced his idea and developed a committee to collect the gifts. A search was conducted to commandeer boxcars from rail yards and depots throughout France to restore them in preparation for their journey. Over 52,000 gifts totaling 250 tons were collected to fill 49 boxcars bound for all the states in

the U.S. including one car to be shared by the District of Columbia and the territory of Hawaii. Items aboard these cars included everything from a jeweled Legion d’Pionneur medal presented to Napolen, a Louis XV carriage and one of the first motorcycles ever built. One of the more touching gifts was as an eleven year olds stuffed toy dog named LouLou on which she attached a note,

It seems that I was one year old when Meme offered it to me for my father who was a prisoner in Germany. I love Loulou very much, but I offer it to you in gratitude for all that the Americans have done for my country...I thought I would keep it all my life, so it is with sorrow that I embrace Loulou for the last time.

The boxcars arrived in New York harbor on February 3, 1949 aboard the freighter *Magellan* bearing an enormous banner reading “MERCI AMERICA”. While fireboats sprayed in salute and Air force planes roared overhead to celebrate the occasion a thousand miles away across the ocean Louis Brenel, a paralyzed French veteran, wrote from a Parisian hospital:

I feel the need to tell you what the French people want to express to your great country by this symbolic train. To you Americans who have done so much, given so much to our children, the aged and the people of France, it is affectionate thanks, the sincere gratitude of my country. Each one of these cars... will tell those of you who know us that we do not forget.

The cars were split into three groups and loaded aboard flatcars destined for each state in the union. Upon arrival, it was the job of each state government to display its car and distribute its gifts. The Georgia Merci car arrived in Atlanta on February 9, 1949. Governor Herman Talmadge established a “Thank You Train” committee to handle the arduous task to distribute the gifts aboard the car. Items were briefly displayed at the Georgia State capital and evidence suggests the car was exhibited for a time in the rotunda of the capital building.

The care of the boxcar was later placed with an independent veteran’s organization, La Societe des Quarante Hommes at Huit Chevaux, referred to as, “The Forty and Eight” society, which was organized in the 1920s by World War I veterans that rode aboard the cars throughout Europe. The car was exhibited at the American Legion Post in Avondale Estates then moved to the Brook wood Legion. By the 1980s, it was evident that the car was in need of repair and protection from the weather. The Forty and Eight society in 1990 restored the boxcar and installed an awning to protect it from the weather. It remained on display at the Forty and Eight Headquarters on Avondale Avenue until the veterans, concerned with the car’s long-term preservation, found it

a permanent home here at our museum. A loan agreement was arranged and it was moved to our facility on January 7, 2006 where it will be cared for and exhibited in the new education building opening this fall. The current planned exhibit will feature artifacts on loan from the Merci Car collection at the Georgia Capital Museum such as a beautifully carved conch shell sent by Docteur Jean Richard of Seine et Oise, France and a bracelet made from requisitioned coins hidden from the Germans and retrofitted with a “V” for victory clasp.

Today the remaining forty-six Merci cars are scattered throughout the nation, in parks, museums, American Legion posts and fairgrounds. Those in New Jersey and Connecticut were destroyed by fire and the Colorado car has mysteriously disappeared. Others are outside without cover vulnerable to the elements of time and have been all but forgotten. As we break ground on our new building and another chapter of our museum’s history is written, it’s important that we recognize that we are also witnessing world history. This boxcar was given to our Greatest Generation in appreciation for the sacrifices they made to protect our freedoms and we are proud to care for and honor this significant piece of history.

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