

JAKE AND THE MERCI TRAIN
By Lou Bernard

To the right of my desk, up on a shelf, sits a clay buffalo sculpture. He is about a foot long, about six inches high, and covered with fading green paint. He is overlooking me as I write this column. I happen to know that he is French, and his name is Jake.

Surprisingly, I didn't make up any of that. A retired library employee once told me that they'd named him Jake, after Jake Kohlberger, who owned the Buffalo Inn in Wayne Township. It makes a certain amount of sense. After all, I have a small toy alligator that goes with me on paranormal investigations, and I named him Brutus after Brutus DeVilleroi, who designed a submarine called the Alligator. So I can see the logic there.

As for the French part, I had to do a little digging.

Turns out, Jake came in on the Merci Train. You've never heard of the Merci Train, I'm sure. I hadn't, until I started digging into the buffalo. But this is part of Lock Haven's history, and it goes back to the 1940s.

In 1948, relief goods were sent to France by the Americans. Mostly contributed by individual citizens, there were over seven hundred train cars with food and supplies. Clinton County chipped in on this, sending a carload of flour donated mostly by people from Lock Haven and Renovo. This was called the Friendship Train.

In response, the French sent gifts in gratitude. Forty-nine railroad cars were packed with gifts, and shipped to America. I am assuming that a portion of this train was also done by boat, because on February 3, 1949, the shipments arrived in New York Harbor. The individual boxcars were shared among the forty-eight states at the time, and the last one was split between Washington DC and Hawaii, who had to share. So Pennsylvania got a boxcar full of thank-you gifts from the French.

Lock Haven, it seems, shared in that.

Jack the buffalo came in on the Merci Train. He seems to have been made in Paris by an artist named E. Borgia in 1948, because that's what's scribbled on the bottom in pencil. None of this has exactly taken any research genius; I found out most of it by turning Jake over and discovering the newspaper article taped underneath. It was from the Lock Haven Express on April 1, 1949, and a photo shows the unpacking of the Merci Train gifts at the Express office. The picture shows Express employees Patricia Bacon (whom I knew personally to be a sweet woman), Martha Zeigler (whom I know by reputation, and she was awesome), and Collette Haag (whom I've never heard of, but if she was hanging out with the other two, she had to be really cool too.) The three of them were unpacking the gifts sent from France.

Yes, gifts---Plural. In addition to Jake the buffalo, the shipment included a photo of the capitulation signing of Germany in World War II, a figurine of a French couple, and a set of booklets describing French life. I have no idea what happened to the rest of that stuff; the article says it all would be located in schools and libraries within Clinton County. So this stuff is out there, somewhere, if I could track it down.

Huh. A quest. Challenge accepted, past French people.

Interestingly, while looking up the Merci Train, I realized that there is an official effort to track down the location of these items. The boxcar itself is displayed in Fort Indiantown Gap, and some of the artifacts have been traced to Blair and Lycoming Counties. But the majority of them haven't been located; there is speculation that many of the artifacts are stored, unknown, in garages and attics.

Jake the buffalo seems to be one of the missing ones. I e-mailed the organization, and caused something of an international incident. A few hours after I sent the initial e-mail, I was getting responses from all over America and France, excited about this new information. They are delighted to know that we have a confirmed location, and are cheerfully investigating further information on the Merci Train.

I'm happy to have supplied them with at least one answer they seek---Six feet from my desk. Thanks,
Jake