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**March 25, 2015**

**THIS WEEK:**

## **Iowa's 'Merci' Boxcar Arrives in 1949**

**BACKGROUND:**

In World War I and World War II narrow gauge boxcars were used to move American troops to and from the fighting fronts in France. At the end of WWII, they were also used to move American POWs from Germany to France. These narrow cars, about half the capacity of American boxcars, measured 20.5 feet long and 8.5 feet wide. They were commonly known in France as "40 and eights." They would hold 40 men or eight horses.

## **Iowa's 'Merci' Boxcar Arrives in 1949**



At Antique Acres Campground on Waverly Road in Cedar Falls, you will find an old boxcar tucked under a protective cover. Many in Iowa know nothing of the amazing history behind this narrow gauge boxcar, one of the 49 "Merci" boxcars.

At the end of WWII, France was destitute. Drew Pearson, a columnist and radio announcer in the U.S. at the time, inspired Americans to help the people of France. Friendship Trains were organized throughout the U.S., gathering fruits, medicines, sugar, and wheat. There were 700 carloads equaling \$40 million in food and relief supplies. The trains gathered at New York harbor, and the cargo was delivered to France in December 1947.

The American Friendship Trains inspired a veteran and rail worker in France to suggest France reciprocate with “40 and eight” boxcars loaded with gifts of gratitude. Each car was adorned with the Coats of Arms of each province in France. There was one boxcar for each of the 48 states, and a 49th car for the District of Columbia and the Territory of Hawaii to share. The people of France had little to offer, but six million French families filled these cars with hand-made items and gifts. There were also gifts of great value: a Louis XV carriage, the first motorcycle ever built, 50 rare paintings, and the President of France donated 49 Sèvres vases. In 1948, these 49 boxcars were loaded on the ship *Magellan*. The ship sailed into New York harbor with the huge inscription “Merci America.” Normal customs procedures were waived and the precious cargo was unloaded duty free. The “Merci” cars did not fit on American gauge rails, so they were put on flat cars and distributed about the nation.

Iowa’s “Merci” boxcar arrived in February 1949 and made stops in the eastern part of the state. It is unclear how this famous boxcar ended up at Antique Acres campground in Cedar Falls, but Iowa is fortunate that it did. These boxcars were built between 1872 and 1885. They are well over 100 years old today. The State Historical Museum holds in its collection 158 items from the Iowa “Merci” boxcar.

The items in the collection include: books, booklets, calendars, cards, a crucifix, drawings, letters, magazines, music, notes, paintings, pamphlets, photographs, postcards, a purse, stamps, and tickets.



The symbol of the “Merci Train” 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 that came in the boxcars.

## French Offering Welcomed

### Merci Train Gets Warm Welcome Entering Iowa

Clinton, Ia.—The French Merci train crossed the Mississippi into Iowa on the Chicago & North Western railroad at 10:40 a. m. Saturday and was welcomed by thousands of Clintonians and people of surrounding communities in a program at the foot of Fifth avenue. American flags and the tri-colors of France were mingled in the decorative plan, a fleet of planes circled overhead, a community chorus sang the "Marseillaise" and "God of Our Fathers" and color guards of all Clinton veterans organizations were grouped on the platform at which the Iowa car of the train was halted.

H. A. Sino, Clinton, named by Gov. William S. Beardsley, as state chairman for the train, and Harold D. Barnes, chairman of the Clinton welcoming committee and master of ceremonies, had charge of the welcome here. The train pulled out for the west shortly after noon.

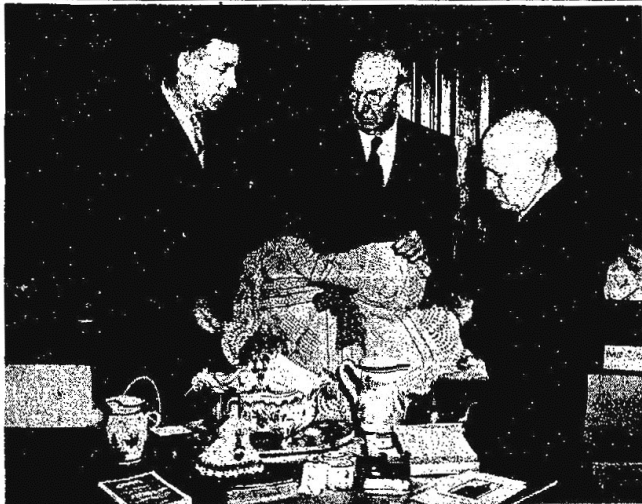
#### SELECT "MISS IOWA MERCI"

A group of members of Clinton county voiture of the 40 & 8 was given the honor of selecting, from half a dozen French women now living in this community, one of their number to represent "Miss Iowa Merci" to christen the train. The women were called one by one to the microphone by the master of ceremonies. Some spoke briefly, others only bowed. Veterans went into a huddle on the stage and selected Mrs. Natalie Waters, who scattered grain from a large cellophane ear of corn on top of the Iowa car. Chairman Barnes spoke of the train as a project of amateur diplomacy straight from the heart of the French people, and declared it fitting that it should cross into Iowa on the anniversary of the birth of the great Civil war president.

A delegation from Davenport was headed by Frank Nichols, president of the Chamber of Commerce. He was introduced by Chairman Barnes, and responded with a short address in French.

Louis Cast, a soldier of France, who accompanies the train across the country, delivered a French oration of gratitude to the people of America, on behalf of his people, and presented Clinton with a lighted lantern, typical he said, of the flame of gratitude which burns for America in the hearts of his people. It was received by Frank Harvey, chief de gare of the county voiture. Three little French girls sang folk songs. Mayor George Still, in a short address, expressed the hope that the Friendship of France and America will always be as strong as it has in the past, and as it is today.

William Heinrichs, national chairman on the train, took over part of the program and was warm in his praise of Clinton and Iowa for their part in the French friendship movement last year when trainloads of gifts were sent to the French people. He introduced several of the French travelers, including Anna Marie Max, a noted woman journalist who spoke on her own behalf, and who interpreted some of the French addresses for the benefit of the thousands gathered in the park.



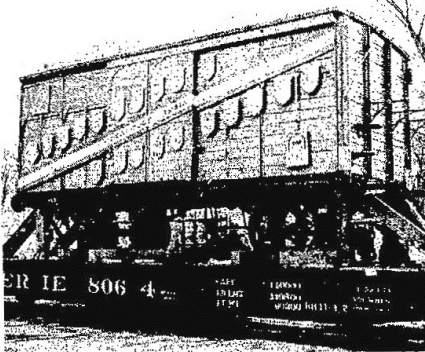
**INSPECT GIFTS FROM FRENCH PEOPLE**—Pictured above as they were inspecting gifts from the Merci train received by Scott county for display in the Davenport Public Museum are (left to right) Fred Hall, director of the museum, and Harry Lytle and Walter Whittlesey, trustees of the museum. Among the gifts was a hand-made baby blanket, being inspected by the three men, and articles of porcelain ware, books music and paintings, as well as many other articles.



**SCOTT COUNTY "MERCI TRAIN" DELEGATION**—Pictured above are members of the delegation which was on hand to welcome the Merci train at Clinton Saturday morning, as they were talking with Miss Anna Marie Metz, French journalist, who accompanied the train. In the foreground talking to Miss Metz are (left) Jimmy Turnbull, son of Mr. and Mrs. L. M. Turnbull, and Polly Nichols, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Frank Nichols. In the back row are (left to right) Walter Whittlesey, J. R. Underwood, Frank Nichols, Harry Lytle, Fred Hall, L. M. Turnbull, partly hidden by Miss Nichols, and H. A. Sino, Clinton, chairman of the state Merci train committee.



**READY TO CHRISTEN TRAIN**—Mrs. Natalie Waters, (right) a native of France, but now a resident of Clinton, is shown above as she was ready to christen the Merci train during welcoming ceremonies in Clinton Saturday. She is holding a sack containing shelled corn which was broken over the Iowa car. At the left is H. A. Sino, Clinton, state chairman, and Frank Harvey, chief de gare of the Clinton voiture 40 and 8.



**IOWA CAR ON TRACKS AT CLINTON**—The Iowa car, shown above contains gifts for the people of Iowa in appreciation for gifts of food which they sent to the French on the Friendship train a short time ago. The car, one used during World war I, is of the type from which the 40 and 8 organization derived its name.



**RECEIVES LIGHT FROM TOMB OF SOLDIER**—A light, which had been lit from the flame burning at the tomb of the French unknown soldier, and kept burning as the train crossed the ocean, is being presented to Frank Harvey, chief de gare of the Clinton 40 and 8, by a representative of the French government (right) who accompanied the train. At the left is a U. S. marine who served as guard of honor for the light.

#### HONOR WAR DEAD.

Closing features of the program were observance of a minute of silence in memory of the war dead, benediction by the Rev. Vincent Morrissey of St. Mary's church, and the singing of the national anthem by the chorus and assemblage.

James Graham conducted the community choir, with James Winn accompanist. Lyons high school band, conducted by C. W. Coon, played before and thruout the program. Thousands of little French flags were distributed to the crowd. Clinton police, firemen and Boy Scouts assisted in handling traffic.

H. A. Sino, chairman of the Iowa "Merci train" committee, Saturday, presented to Frank Nichols, president of the Davenport Chamber of Commerce, four cases of gifts from the French people.

Articles in the cases will be put on display in the Davenport public museum and the Davenport municipal art gallery.

In his acceptance talk, which was given in French, Nichols said: "This French Merci train is a beautiful gesture. All Americans know of the fine reputation of the French for doing things correctly and graciously. We are delighted by your expression of good will. You are friends of ours, and we of yours."

"My brother lives in France, and he has told me that general conditions there are better than they were at the time of the dispatch of our Friendship train. We are happy that this is true, and we sincerely hope that your greatest troubles are behind you."

#### SCOTT GROUP PRESENT.

Scott county's delegation, on hand for the welcome of the train

to town at the North Western tracks in Clinton, included J. R. Underwood, Scott county extension director, who was chairman of the campaign to raise funds for the Friendship train; Frank Nichols, president of the Davenport Chamber of Commerce; L. M. Turnbull, publisher of The Davenport Democrat; Harry Lytle and Walter Whittlesey, trustees of the Davenport public museum, and Fred Hall, director of the museum.

Gifts in the four cases received by Davenport included a pitcher, hand-made baby blanket, railroad posters, a book, hand-made lace napkin, sheet music and an inkpot, a doll and porcelain ware from the people of Paris; a reed basket from Montreuil's Bois, an engraving from Pezenas; a set of porcelain ware from Rennes; and nine paintings from Villenoble, Puisseal en Bray, Paris and Sepes.

The articles will be on display in the museum beginning next Sunday during the annual open house. A permanent display of the articles will be set up later.