



# France sends train full of treasure

**Dawn Mitchell**  
Indianapolis Star  
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At the end of World War II, most of Europe lay in ruins, food and fuel was rationed, and France was starving. To help, syndicated Washington columnist Drew Pearson proposed an idea: the Friendship Train, a goodwill effort to load a train with food and other provisions.

It started in Los Angeles on Nov. 7, 1947, traversed its way through the United States and 11 days later arrived in New York with nearly 300 boxcars.

South Bend, Elkhart and Fort Wayne welcomed the Friendship Train with parades and fanfare. And they helped, too: Cars were added to the train in each community.

Cans of evaporated milk were loaded into a car on the Monon Line at Bloomington. Fifty tons of food were piled into a boxcar in Indianapolis. A carload of milk, flour and sugar was added in Crawfordsville as it made its way to Chicago where the cars were added to the train.

All across Indiana, American Legion organizations and local service organizations, churches and schools donated dried peas and beans, sugar, packaged spaghetti, macaroni and soap.

The fruits of all this combined effort were realized when the supplies were shipped from New York City and arrived in France on Dec. 18, 1947.

## Gratitude of 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



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

remembrances which would last forever."

The train of gratitude was loaded with dolls and dishes, historical documents, a Rodin statue, busts of Benjamin Franklin and Franklin Roosevelt, silk dresses, and battle-torn flags.

It even included the flag that flew from the Eiffel Tower when Gen. George Patton entered in 1944.

The walls of Gare D'Orsay, the former Paris railway station, were lined with signs of each U.S. state.

Boxcars were decorated with a Gratitude train ribbon and 40 coat-of-arms representing each province in France. The boxcars also were labeled "40 Hommes, 8 Chevaux," a nod to American soldiers in WWI who rode the stubby boxcars in France that carried 40 men or 8 horses.

The cars were filled with piles of carefully selected gifts of historic and sentimental value — the French gave things they cherished.

The boxcars were then loaded aboard the French freighter SS Magellan, which made its way to the New York Harbor. Forty-nine boxcars were distributed to all 48 states.

## Thanks to Indiana

Once in Indianapolis, the boxcar was removed from the tracks, placed on the back of a semi-truck and paraded through the city with great fanfare. The parade ended at the Indiana War Memorial, where the gifts were unloaded, put on display and eventually distributed to schools and museums throughout Indiana.

The Indiana boxcar contained the bugle that ended World War I, sent by a French sergeant as his most valuable possession. That artifact is on display at the Indiana War Memorial.

Other gifts received included dolls, art, books, wooden shoes, hats and small seedling trees. Each state received a handmade wedding gown, "for a happy American bride." Crocheted baby booties, figurines, dainty fans, needlework and sequined caps for children were some of the cherished gifts donated.

Almost every gift came with a handwritten note in French that expressed the donor's gratitude. One touching gift came from an orphan in a French coal mining area. She gave her only possession, a doll, to an Amer-

ican orphan. The doll had lost its curls, so the donor had used her own locks to cover the bald spots.

According to the May 25, 1949, Logansport Pharos-Tribune, among the items that reached Cass County was a plate from the young Drillhon brothers of Narbonne, France. They enclosed a letter, reading:

"My name is Michael Drillhon. I am eight and one-half years old. My little brother, Claude, is five and a half years old. We live at 18 Lion Street in Narbonne. Both of us have taken all the money in our little bank in order to offer to the French "thank you" train. Mother had to give us a little money in order to be able to buy the plate that we have chose. We hope that it will give you pleasure and that it will not arrive broken. We wish it for a good voyage."

While originally on display at the Cass County Historical Society, the plate and other items are no longer in its collection.

The Wrightman Memorial Art Gallery, now the Snite Museum of Art at the University of Notre Dame, received a 5-by-7-inch, full-color likeness of Christ. It was made from bits of canceled French postage stamps donated by Abbe Pierre

Desvois, the pastor of a small parish in Normandy.

Indiana University received a plaster cast of "Ugolino and his Sons," which was completed by Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux in 1861. The original is in the Louvre.

The French presented the American Legion National Headquarters in Indianapolis with the last flag left flying in Le Havre after the city's destruction during WWII.

The Children's Museum of Indianapolis was gifted many children's items that are still in their collection, such as sabot or wooden shoes worn by French peasants, a miniature spinning wheel, handmade children's caps and classic children's books: *Babar et ce Coquin d'Arthur* (*Babar and that rascal Arthur*) by Jean de Brunhoff and *Jeannot Lapin* (*Peter Rabbit*) by Beatrix Potter.

The Fort Wayne History Center has an extensive collection of items that the city received. The 40 or 8 boxcar is on display at the Veteran's National Memorial Shrine at 2122 O'Day Road in Fort Wayne.

Follow IndyStar photo coordinator and RetroIndy writer Dawn Mitchell on Twitter: @dawn\_mitchell61.