"Food for Hungry Europe Is Given Warm Sendoff"
- Johnstown Tribune

Pittsburgh's 5 Cars of Food Added to Friendship Train
- Pittsburgh Press

The Pennsylvania boxcar of the Merci Train is displayed at Fort Indiantown Gap, a National Guard training site in Annville, Pa., Lebanon County. The small "40 & 8" cars, made between 1872–85, were specifically chosen by the French for their familiarity to veterans of both World Wars.
On Saturday, November 15, 1947, Pittsburgh witnessed a ceremony at the Pennsylvania Railroad Station which marked the beginning of an extraordinary episode: the journey of the Friendship Train across Pennsylvania. The cars were filled with food destined for the hungry people of Europe. It took three days and seven stops to cross the state, but by then, an additional 51 boxcars had been added to its length. The people of Pennsylvania had voluntarily, and with heart-warming generosity, donated the food which filled those cars to their 100,000-pound capacity.

Train! Let’s All Do Our Part.” A Pittsburgh paper printed a picture of actress Eve Arden’s daughter Liza, holding a toy replica of the Friendship Train. Most likely, many children owned such a replica.

The Friendship Train was, quite possibly, the greatest humanitarian movement in recorded history. The American people, not the United States government, gave $40 million worth of food to the hungry people of France and Italy. They gave from their own kitchens, grain fields, and dairy farms. Unlike the Marshall Plan, which was then just being formulated in Congress, this was a down-home, genuine present from a people who genuinely cared. Moreover, it led to something equally as precious, and obscure, in the annals of American history — the Merci Train, when France said thank you.

The Train

World War II had stripped Europeans of many of life’s ordinary comforts, the most serious a grave shortage of food. A severe drought in 1947 compounded the misery of a continent already chaotic and bereft after the war. Flour to bake bread, foremost in a European’s diet, was restricted to six ounces daily. If a family wanted a few more ounces to bake something else, it was taken off their bread ration. Personal accounts of those who visited Europe confirmed the need for food. Conference of Mayors president George Welsh, returning from a conference in Paris, described conditions as serious. Twenty Iowa farmers who traveled to Europe at their own expense to assess the situation corroborated his observation.

It was Drew Pearson, internationally known columnist, broadcaster, and humanitarian, and a graduate of Swarthmore College in Philadelphia, who had the idea which resulted in the Friendship Train. When Pearson broadcast the dire plight of the European people, Americans responded. With an astonishing rapidity of organization, the first boxcars left Los Angeles on November 7, 1947, just five weeks after he announced his idea. The train crossed the country, collecting cars as it went, and by November 18, it had reached waiting ships in New York. The train totaled about 270 boxcars; determining the precise number is nearly impossible because of variables such as unscheduled stops, last-minute changes in cars added, and differences in reporting deadlines.

Many personal stories about the Friendship Train were reported, and thousands must still be fresh in many a person over 60. In one Pennsylvania town, a 6-year old boy wrapped two pennies in a note: “Please buy some cakes for a little boy or girl in Europe.” In Carlisle, Pa., 10-year-old Ronald Ludwig spent his day off from school collecting food; when his wagon was filled, he took it to one of the collection
points and then went to collect more. A citizens committee in tiny Barnesboro, Pa., near Altoona, raised $1,000 in two days. In Spencer, Iowa, an engineer stopped his freight train and trudged through the snow to donate his money to a radio station's fund-raiser. One cab driver collected $10 from his passengers. At football games and in movie theaters, spectators donated when the collection box came around.

A Johnstown businessman, I. Klatzkin, head of Penn Furniture Company, offered to match each dollar with one dime. *The [Philadelphia] Evening Bulletin* of November 17 reported that a Sioux Indian tribe in Nebraska, while making its contribution, held up a sign saying, "Tell Europe we want peace."

Companies contributed with equal generosity: none of the railroads on which the Friendship Train traveled charged for the use of their men, rails, and boxcars. Because some food arrived too late to be loaded on the train, California Eastern Airways announced it would fly Friendship planes east to New York without charge. Goodyear Tire and Rubber supplied pliofilm for waterproofing all packages. Both the United States Lines and American Export line shipped all of the food to Europe without charge.

### Pennsylvania's Friendship

On that chilly and drizzling November 1947 evening in Pittsburgh, the Friendship Train rolled into the East Liberty freight yard at Penn Avenue and Dahlem Street. Railroad workmen had prepared the yard for the welcoming ceremony and the attachment of the cars. Although between 3,000 and 5,000 people were expected, according to *The Pittsburgh Press*, only about 500 were there, deterred most likely by the weather. The City Police and Firemen's Band launched the entertainment and local radio personalities and nightclub acts performed. There were speeches by Mayor David H. Lawrence and J.S. Crutchfield, chairman of Pittsburgh Citizens Food Committee. Radio station WWSW recorded the activities for later rebroadcast in Europe.

The Steel City added five cars to the food train, each bearing a sign in French and Italian, "Pittsburgh — Food For Friends." Two of the boxcars were filled with wheat, the others with assorted staples requested by the organizing committee such as condensed milk and pasta. The Italian Sons and Daughters, the Independent Order of the Sons of Italy, and the Sons of Columbus donated 1,600 cases of assorted foods. Manufacturer Salvatore Viviano added 300 more, and M. Rom Sons, Inc., contributed more than 200 cases of canned vegetables and flour. The Western Pennsylvania Brewers Association and the United Steel Workers each donated a carload of flour. Food bins were set out at 1,800 stores for people to deposit donations, which were collected by firemen under the direction of Fire Chief William H. Davis.

Because of the brief time period between the inception of the food drive and the date of the train's arrival, outlying communities were asked to contribute cash to be used later to purchase food wholesale in New York. At least $1,000 was collected.

West Virginia's donation to the food train was sent to Pittsburgh; Parkersburg sent an entire carload, and Fairmont and Charleston each contributed quarter carloads.

The train left Pittsburgh at 9 a.m., November 16, for Johnstown, 70 miles east. The fact that Johnstown was not a scheduled stop reflects the unbridled enthusiasm for the Friendship Train; when Johnstowners demanded to be among the contributors, Congressman Harve Tibbott and the Pennsylvania Railroad arranged for the stop. Even though the area's first snow had fallen the previous day, thousands of enthusiastic citizens waved, cheered, and applauded as the diesel-powered Friendship Train roared into the P.R.R. station at 12:01 p.m. According to the *Johnstown Tribune*, thousands more were watching from Iron Street and the Prospect viaduct. The Blue Devils Trumpet and Drum Corps of American Legion Post No. 294 added to the occasion.
Mayor Arthur L. Schwing and members of the city council greeted the train. Drew Pearson was on the train almost its entire journey, and spoke to the crowd at Johnstown. Others addressing the crowd were M.M. Chudy, who headed the local food drive; Daniel L. Wertz, President of the Pennsylvania Junior Chamber of Commerce (and a Johnstown native); and W.N. Lockard, representing the contributors of Windber, Pa. Mrs. John Chiodo of Johnstown, originally from Florence, Italy, thanked the crowd for their contribution to her native country. Her husband, and she, had returned from Army duty in Italy just three weeks before. Mr. Niccola Guilli, a representative of the Italian Embassy, also spoke.

Johnstown had purchased an entire boxcar of milk which, for reason unclear, had been added to the train in Chicago; hence, it was already with the train when it arrived in Johnstown. With the help of people from Cambria County, Johnstown raised another $7,000 to buy food which would be added in New York, bringing the town’s contribution to two cars. Nearby Windber contributed one carload of milk, its car bearing the banner “To Our Friends in Italy & France From Windber, PA.” Nicholas Bruno of Central City headed a delegation seeking $4,000 which would be sent to New York to purchase food.

While the train was at the station, Johnstown residents signed their names to one of the posters on the side of the car. An hour after its arrival, the train was on its way. After a quick stop in Huntingdon, where a boxcar of flour was added, the train headed for Altoona, where it arrived at 3 p.m.

Altoona had a personal connection with the train: Drew Pearson’s secretary, Marian Canty, was an Altoona native, and was with the train when it stopped there. (Pearson left the train in Altoona, and delivered his weekly Sunday night program from WRTA in Allentown, then rejoined the train in Harrisburg.) Altoona mayor H. Atlee Brumbaugh and other officials — including Roy F. Thompson, George P. Gable, Police Chief Rouzer, and Judge Matthew D. Patterson — had boarded the train in Johnstown and ridden it to Altoona.

The town was extremely conscientious about its food drive, which was headed by Lee J. Buechele. The November 12 Altoona Tribune printed a two-page ad about the Friendship Train under the headline, “The Friendship Train! Let’s All Do Our Part.” Everyone did: Altoona bakers alone contributed a boxcar of flour, one of the two cars from Altoona proper. Bedford and Lewistown also each contributed a boxcar of flour; Bellefonte contributed a car of
wheat and flour; and Bellwood, Barnesboro, Claysburg, Roaring Spring, Tyrone, and Williamsburg all contributed.

The fund-raising drive, led by Mrs. Julia Homer, resulted in nearly $7,500. The miners of Clearfield County donated $1,341; Johnstown Automobile Dealers Association donated $330; Barnesboro Lions over $1,000; and county school children donated an amazing $1,100.

France says "merci"

On February 2, 1949, the ship Magellan steamed into New York harbor. Air Force F-80s and F-82s swooped overhead; fireboats sprayed plumes of water into the air; small and large boats blasted their whistles; and people cheered. The ship from France, with "Merci America" on its sides, was carrying one million gifts — 250 tons of items in 49 railroad boxcars. With the same intensity and sincerity displayed by Americans 15 months earlier, 6 million deeply appreciative French families said thank you.

The 49 boxcars made up the Merci Train. One car was assigned to each of the 48 states, and one was to be shared by Washington, D.C. and Hawaii. Within two days after its arrival, the cars were on various railroads heading for the state capitals.

Andre Picard, a French railroad worker, originated the idea of the Merci Train, also known as the Gratitude Train. His thought was simple and genuine: "Let's thank America." He and other railroad men presented the plan to officials, and the thank
Some of the articles sent were reminders of darker days. The magazine cover proclaims, "Under the boot of the Nazis." The notice, in Dutch and German, provides rules for food rationing, and the consequences for disobeying.

you drive took off. Picard, serving as a representative of the French railroads, accompanied the train to America. In Columbus, Ohio, (The Columbus Citizen, Feb. 12, 1949) he presented the car to the governor and also spoke at the ceremony, with a professor translating his comments.

The 49 boxcars were known as 40 & 8s, the name derived from the original intention to carry either 40 men or eight horses. American Doughboys of World War I and servicemen of World War II had ridden in them during both wars. (A branch of the American Legion, known as the 40 & 8s, still exists and is responsible for many of the restorations of the Merci cars). Flatbed railcars and trucks transported the boxcars because their small gauge prevented their traveling on standard rails.

The gifts to America ranged from simple to wonderful; an original bust of Benjamin Franklin, the bugle which sounded the end of World War I, 49 Sevres vases donated by French President Vincent Auriol. A French couple gave the uniform worn by their son who had been killed in World War I. Two men donated their eyes, upon their death, to the American Eye Bank. A little girl, who gave her doll, cut off her own hair and pasted it on the doll's head. A descendant of Gen. Lafayette donated the general's walking stick. The list is endless.

A boxcar for Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania's Merci car, filled with 10,000 gifts, made only two stops before reaching Harrisburg, its final destination. In Philadelphia, 2,000 people greeted the bright red boxcar when it arrived at the Broad Street Station at 11:45 a.m. that cold, clear day. Legionnaires from the 40 & 8s were among the spectators, plus 1,000 schoolchildren waving French and American flags. The Police and Firemen's Band played, and the Breen-McCracken Post of the American Legion provided the color guard. Speaking from a special open car of the train were French Ambassador Henri Bonnet, and Michel Junet, head of the French delegation and representative of the Prime Minister. The February 6 Sunday Bulletin reported that the French speakers credited the American assistance with aiding France's recovery, and helping their country resist Communism. The Philadelphia Inquirer of the same day stated that Drew Pearson commented that the mayor and "his friends have made Philadelphia the most hospitable, brotherly and progressive city in the country." Mayor Bernard Samuel proudly told the spectators that
Philadelphia had donated more than any other city to the Friendship Train.

The next morning — Sunday, February 6 — the Merci Train stopped in Lancaster, Pa. The city's half-hour celebration began at 9:30 a.m. Two hundred people heard thank you declarations from local officials; Commandant Guy de la Vassel, Mayor of Saint-Symphorian; and Mlle. Petit, secretary to the French Consul in Boston.

As in most states, the largest celebration was in the Capitol and began with a parade, in which the boxcar was the highlight. On that beautiful day in Harrisburg, the parade wound through the downtown streets, ending at the State Museum. A ceremony began there at 3 p.m. Francois Puaux, assistant French Consul General in New York, presented the boxcar to Gov. Duff. The governor broke the seal of the car and presented its 40 cases to the public. Books, ashtrays, pictures, dolls, seeds, and countless other items comprised Pennsylvania's gifts. Most noteworthy was an automobile, one of the first petroleum-operated vehicles ever made in France, given by an electrician in Rouen.

Into obscurity

Unfortunately, the whereabouts of that car are unknown. Perhaps it is under wraps in a garage or museum, the owner unaware of its dual importance as a rare auto and an artifact from the Merci Train. All of Pennsylvania's gifts, in fact, shared this fate until recently. Despite having a complete inventory of the gifts, the State Museum has no record of their disposition, nor of their current whereabouts. However, some small items have surfaced in two counties. Blair County Historical Society has 20 Merci gifts, mostly booklets and personal effects, and Lycoming County Historical Society has about 30, mostly postcards. To date, these are the only known gifts in the state.

Most likely, the institutions which received the Merci Train gifts tagged and displayed them, but as time passed, their importance and significance faded. Eventually the gifts became nondescript knickknacks relegated to attics, basements, and storage rooms. In all likelihood, many gifts are still there, obscured under the dust of time. Searching most certainly would bring results.

The loss of the Merci gifts is not limited to Pennsylvania. Many states, mostly in the eastern U.S., have no idea of the location of the French treasures. Others, Arizona and Idaho for example, have many gifts displayed in their museums, along with the tags bearing the names and addresses of the donors.

Like the gifts themselves, Pennsylvania's Merci car drifted into obscurity. It was eventually rescued by the 40 & 8s Preservation Committee and the Pennsylvania National Guard, and funds were raised to restore it. A dedication ceremony was held in November 1986. The boxcar, looking brand new and bearing shields of the French provinces on the sides, is on display at Fort Indiantown Gap, a National Guard training site in Annville, Pa., under a protective canopy.

This boxcar not only symbolizes the literal train that February a half century ago, but is a profound link between France and the United States. The connection is historical — the shared humanity between two peoples who helped and appreciated each other — and it is personal; every gift has a handwritten note from its sender.

A web site www.rypn.org/merci has a picture of each state's boxcar, with the exception of the six which are still missing. In some cases, there are pictures of some of the gifts belonging to each state. Dolls, vases, shoes, dresses, oak saplings, dishes, statues, wallpaper, sleds, paintings.... Who could resist such gifts? 

Dorothy Scheele is a free-lance writer living in Philadelphia. She has graduate degrees from Penn State and Beaver College, and has been researching and writing about the Friendship and Merci Trains for several years.

Thanks to Carla Rosen Vacher for her translations.
Bibliography

"Altoona Lions Give $100 to Relief Train," Altoona Mirror, 11 Nov. 1947: 16.
"Car of Gratitude Accepted From France by Governor," Columbus Citizen, Feb. 12, 1949: 1.
"Friendship Promotion Here Goes Over Top," Johnstown Tribune, 13 Nov. 1947: 34.
"Friendship Train Promotion Here Up to $6,000," Johnstown Tribune, 14 Nov. 1947: 8.
"Types of Food For Friendship Train Listed," Altoona Mirror, 7 Nov. 1947: 1.

"Among the artifacts at the Blair County Historical Society is this comb and glasses case set."