

French Gratitude Train ^[1]

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French Gratitude Train



North Carolina French Gratitude Train; North Carolina Museum

by Clare R. Arthur Bass, 2006of Transportation, Spencer, NC.

^[2]

The French Gratitude Train ^[3] was sent to the United States by the citizens of France in appreciation for U.S. military involvement in World War II ^[4] and American postwar relief efforts. An ocean freighter arrived in New York harbor on 3 Feb. 1949 carrying 49 small French boxcars filled with gifts. These cars, "Hommes 40-Chevaux 8," were French military boxcars designed to carry 40 men or 8 horses. Built between 1872 and 1885, the boxcars had been used in both World Wars as troop and animal carriers. Each car was 29 feet long and weighed approximately 12 tons. They now made up the French "Gratitude Train" and carried gifts from the 40 French provinces. The cars were designated for each of the U.S. state capitals, with one to be shared by the District of Columbia and the Territory of Hawaii.

The tremendous outpouring of U.S. relief sent to the French in the years immediately following World War II culminated with approximately \$40 million in relief supplies in the American Friendship Train ^[5] in 1947. This effort inspired a French rail worker and war veteran named André Picard to suggest that France reciprocate. His original idea was to present one boxcar loaded with gifts representing the country. A local veterans' organization adopted the proposal, and a committee was established to solicit gifts. The response was astounding, and the effort gained national momentum. The National Headquarters of the French War Veterans Association took control and decided to fill 49 cars with gifts. Each car was decorated with the shields of the 40 provinces and other designs.

The boxcar intended for North Carolina arrived in Raleigh ^[6] on 8 Feb. 1949 and was officially received by Governor W. Kerr Scott ^[7]. Following the reception ceremony and a parade, the boxcar and the gifts were moved to the state Museum of History ^[8] for display. Many of the gifts remained with the North Carolina Museum of History, but others were distributed to libraries, schools, and other museums across the state. The car itself was given to the Forty and Eight Society of the American Legion ^[9].

In 1981 the Forty and Eight Society loaned the boxcar to the North Carolina Transportation Museum in Spencer ^[10]. In 1996 the car was repaired and painted, and missing shields were replaced. The car is on exhibit at the museum. Although many of the cars of the French Gratitude Train have been lost, more than half remain on exhibit throughout the United States.

Image Credit:

North Carolina French Gratitude Train; North Carolina Museum of Transportation, Spencer, NC. Image available from Mercitrain.org ^[11] (accessed July 20, 2012).

Update from N.C. Government & Heritage Library staff:

Andre Picard, a French veteran of World War II, was one of the originators of the idea of the Gratitude Train.

Resources:

[Gratitude Train and officials at Union Station in Los Angeles. Andre Picard shown first in from the right.] Photograph. 1949. Los Angeles Public Library. <http://photos.lapl.org/carlweb/jsp/DoSearch?index=z&databaseID=968&terms...> [12]

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Authors:

[Bass, Clare R. Arthur](#) [17]

Origin - location:

[Spencer](#) [18]

From:

[Encyclopedia of North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press](#). [19]

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[5] <http://www.themetrains.com/merci-train-main.htm>

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