

# VERMONT HISTORY

*Volume 87, No. 2 • Summer/Fall 2019*



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The journal of the  
VERMONT HISTORICAL SOCIETY



# About the Covers

## Merci Train Collection

In February 1949, an antique boxcar secured on a railroad flatcar, trundled north toward Montpelier carrying a cargo of gifts for Vermonters from France. The vase on the cover of this issue of *Vermont History* was one of hundreds of presents in the boxcar, tokens of gratitude for food, medicine, and clothes shipped from the United States in 1947 aboard the Friendship Train. To say thanks for the post-war aid, the French people sent to the United States the “Merci Train,” with a car for each of the 48 states, plus one to be split between Washington D.C. and the territory of Hawaii.

The Vermont Historical Society holds a portion of the cargo that arrived in that antique boxcar—nearly 200 objects ranging from a battered tin tank and crocheted doll clothes to paintings, a chunk of cement said to be a piece of the Arc de Triomphe blasted off during the war, and vases made from artillery shells.

The Merci Train arrived on a ship from France at the beginning of February 1949. The boxcars, known as “40 & 8 cars” because they carried 40 soldiers or 8 horses during World War I and World War II, were divided into regional groups to continue their journeys to the various states. Vermont’s car arrived in Montpelier on February 10 (see back cover), where Gov. Ernest W. Gibson Jr. and Count Max de Montalembert, French vice consul in Boston, took part in a welcoming ceremony. The train car, repainted and restored, can now be seen at the Vermont Military Museum in Colchester.

The bounty in the boxcar was put on display at the state museum for the remainder of the winter, after which the Vermont Historical Society coordinated the distribution of many objects to legislators to take back .....

*Vermont History* Vol. 87, No. 2 (Summer/Fall 2019): v-vi.

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to their communities. Some art was conveyed to the Fleming Museum in Burlington and records show books were sent to the French department at Middlebury College. The rest of the objects, more than twenty cartons, reside at the Vermont Historical Society.



Since the beginning of 2019, the entire Merci Train collection has been revisited, photographed, entered into the collection database, and repackaged. The objects represent a communal display of good feelings for a distant country that may be hard to imagine today. For example, twelve white, blue, and peach-colored handkerchiefs with painted or embroidered pictures were sent by the Communauté des Soeurs de la Charité de Jesus et Marie, a religious order, with the message in English, “Thank very much American friends.” There are brass candlesticks, a clock, a wool blanket, dozens of dolls dressed in hand-stitched regional costumes, several ornate fans, a red umbrella, beaded hats from several provincial traditions, and a comic puppet in traditional dress.

Some gift-givers shared important personal items such as a medal from World War I and a huge medical tome from the 1500s. The Collège Moderne et Technique sent dozens of objects made by boys and girls ages 11 and 12, according to notes affixed to papier-maché vases, metal trivets, and wooden trays. There are seventeen wind-up toy Renault cars in a rainbow of colors, still in their original boxes. Pieces from the collection have been displayed twice since they arrived in that boxcar seventy years ago—in the 1950s and in 1988. Now they are fully catalogued, described, and photographed in the VHS museum collections database.



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