

# THE NEWSLETTER OF THE RED RIVER VALLEY RAILROAD HISTORICAL SOCIETY, INC.

*April, 2011*

SHREVEPORT, LA

*Our 30<sup>th</sup> Year*

## A Very Patriotic Train



Claude “Sonny” Pearson and Richard “Rick” Larned pose with the train of the local 40 & 8 organization on January 22, 2011 after it returned to Shreveport from a lengthy engine overhaul in Meridian, MS. Sonny was the longtime train engineer of Voiture Locale 137 and passed away a week after this photo was taken from injuries suffered in a motorcycle accident on a ride sponsored by the American Legion Riders. As you may know, the 40 & 8 is an independent, by invitation only, honor society of U.S. veterans committed to charitable and patriotic aims. The local “chapter” (called a Voiture or boxcar) was founded on October 25, 1921. Many prominent Shreveport veterans have been members such as Mayor Calhoun Allen, Congressman Overton Brooks, Sheriff J. Howell Flournoy, Fire Chief Dallas Greene and businessman Aaron Selber, Sr. Their clubhouse and grounds on Cross Lake have been the site of many events over the years.

This train was built in 1953 at the Frymaster Corp. on a 1 ½ ton truck chassis and is powered by a gasoline burning, 8-cylinder International 392 engine with a 3-speed Allison automatic transmission. The builders only had an artist’s drawing of a French train to guide them. Many of the parts were made by workers at Frymaster. Construction required 14 months and about \$10,000 in cash. (Photo and information provided by Shawn Bohannon, Voiture 137 Historien)



This is their original train in 1934. Note that it contains a boxcar representing their namesake. This train was used until the 1940's and its disposition is unknown to current members. If any of the RRVHHS Newsletter readers know what happened to it, please let your editor know. (LSUS Archives & Special Collections)

### **Forty and Eight Boxcar**

The “Forty and Eight” draws its origin from World War I, when the United States had young Americans in France to fight “The War To End All Wars.” About the first thing they ran into was a droll bit of French humor known as a Voiture boxcar. The narrow gauge railroads of France had box cars that carried little more than half the capacity of American boxcars and these were used to transport the soldiers to and from the fighting fronts. Each boxcar carried carried 40 men or 8 horses (40 hommes et 8 chevaux). The cars were stubby, only 20.5 feet long and 8.5 feet wide. Although memories of riding in them were not always pleasant, the cars nonetheless gave their name to a fraternity formed within the American Legion — La Société des Quarante Hommes et Huit Chevaux — in 1920. These infamous boxcars were also used during WW II to transport troops to and from the front. In 1945, many American troops (including POWs) were transported from Germany to France for return to the States in a rough-riding 40 and 8, especially in November and December. Veterans'



memories of travel in the rickety, unheated cars are pretty vivid; some men even resorted to building fires inside them to keep warm on the long, slow trips. For years after the end of World War II, much of Europe remained in ruins. In 1947, an American newspaper columnist named Drew Pearson began

asking for donations of food and clothing that could be sent to help the people of France and Italy. Public response was overwhelming and \$40 million in food and supplies were collected and shipped to Europe aboard the 700-car American Friendship Train. A French veteran of WW I and rail worker named André Picard suggested that France respond by sending a single boxcar full of gifts to America as a way of saying thank you. Tens of thousands of French citizens donated objects to be sent to the United States and it was decided, after the French War Veterans Association got involved, that since the outpouring of goods was so great, that one boxcar would be sent to each state with one being shared between the District of Columbia and the Territory of Hawaii. All of the items were to be loaded in "Forty and Eight"-type boxcars, named after the sign painted on them which stated that 40

men or 8 horses could be loaded inside. Each car was to be adorned with the coats of arms of all of the provinces of France.

In all, 52,000 gifts were collected, ranging from worn wooden shoes to a jeweled Legion of Honor medal that belonged to Napoleon. The collection also included a Louis XV carriage, children's drawings, and tree seedlings. They were gathered throughout 1948 and crammed



into the railroad cars. The 50-car train (at that time, there were only 49 states in the Union, plus one car to be shared between Washington, D.C and Hawaii, which was not yet a state) was shipped to America from the port of LeHavre aboard an ore carrier, the *Magellan*, which sailed into New York Harbor on February 3, 1949 amidst a fleet of small boats with Air Force planes flying overhead while thousands of New Yorkers watched from the shore. A huge sign on the side of the *Magellan* read simply "Thank You, America." Congress had passed a resolution allowing the gifts to enter the country duty-free, and longshoremen volunteered their services to bring the cars ashore. Of too narrow a gauge for American rails, the cars were loaded onto flatcars in New Jersey for delivery, at no charge, by the nation's railroads to state capitals across the country. On reaching their destinations, the cars were greeted by dignitaries at special ceremonies. Their contents, after being displayed for a time, were distributed in a variety of ways. Many were sold at auction, with the proceeds going to charity, while some especially significant items went to public institutions.

Today, there are 39 cars from the "Merci" ("Gratitude") Train still on display nationwide. However, the train's mission is now largely forgotten, a curious relic of two incredible displays of goodwill which followed the horrors of World War II. Unfortunately, few of the gifts lovingly placed in the cars by the citizens of France can be traced today. But, those cars that have survived vandalism and the ravages of time testify to a great expression of friendship and caring between the peoples of France and the United States who fought side by side for a common goal half a century ago.

(Editor's note: The above article was taken from the *World War II Encyclopedia* at [www.skylighters.org/encyclopedia/fortyandeight.html](http://www.skylighters.org/encyclopedia/fortyandeight.html) Information on the 1949 Merci Train and the current status of Merci Train boxcars can be found at [www.mercitrain.org](http://www.mercitrain.org) )

### **Next RRVRS Meeting on April 15 at the Glen**

The meeting will be held on Friday, **April 15** at **7 p.m.** in the auditorium at the Glen Retirement Village, 403 East Flournoy Lucas Road. **Please be on time** for the beginning of the meeting so you won't miss anything. An interesting 35mm slide show will be presented by Russell Pedro. The Glen Retirement Village is located on the south side of Flournoy Lucas Road between Ellerbe Road and Youree Drive (Highway 1). For information or directions call Dave Bland at (318) 470-5933.

## Upcoming Events

April 12	T&P Depot Museum in Marshall – 6 p.m. – “Boogie Woogie and the T&P Railway”
April 15	RRVRHS Meeting at the Glen – 7 p.m.
Apr 30	Southern Forest Heritage Museum Heritage Day – Longleaf, LA
May 21	RRVRHS Fish Fry at McNeill Street Pumping Station – 3 to 7 p.m.
June 17	RRVRHS Meeting at the Glen – 7 p.m.

## The President’s Message – April 2011

Hello Railfans:

You will not believe what time I am writing this article. It’s 5:03 a.m. Monday morning. Dave called me last night to remind me about writing and I promised him I would have it to him this morning.

Winter is about over and with warm weather arriving we have started work on the electrical wiring at the museum. Over the last three weekends we traced all of the wires in the building, removed all wiring that was not to be used and have now begun replacing conduit and new wires. We still have a long way to go but we are making progress.

Gary Fox and I talked with Dale Ward last Saturday and Dale said that Cliff Deal, the man that was in charge of our project from the state museum office has resigned his position and we don’t know who the new person will be. We certainly hope that person will support our project.

With the coming of spring we have several events coming up that will be of interest to most of you. Our Spring Fish Fry will be on May 21, so plan to come out and join us for lots of good food and friendship. This year the event will be at the McNeill Street Pumping Station from 3 to 7 p.m..

Another event that a lot of you will be interested in is the annual Heritage Day at the Southern Forest Heritage Museum in Longleaf, LA. I hope you will plan on attending this wonderful event and riding in their restored Railcar on April 30<sup>th</sup>.

Last Friday at the monthly First Friday meeting I visited with Randy James, one of our founding members. He said he may be moving back to this area.

Gary Fox informed me that Bobby Joe Miller has been in the hospital. We hope he is recovering well and can be at our next meeting.

Well, I don’t know any more news so I will say good-bye for now and see you at the next meeting.

Happy Railroading!

Russell

## **RED RIVER VALLEY RAILROAD HISTORICAL SOCIETY, INC. Shreveport, LA**

[www.rrvrhs.org](http://www.rrvrhs.org)

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