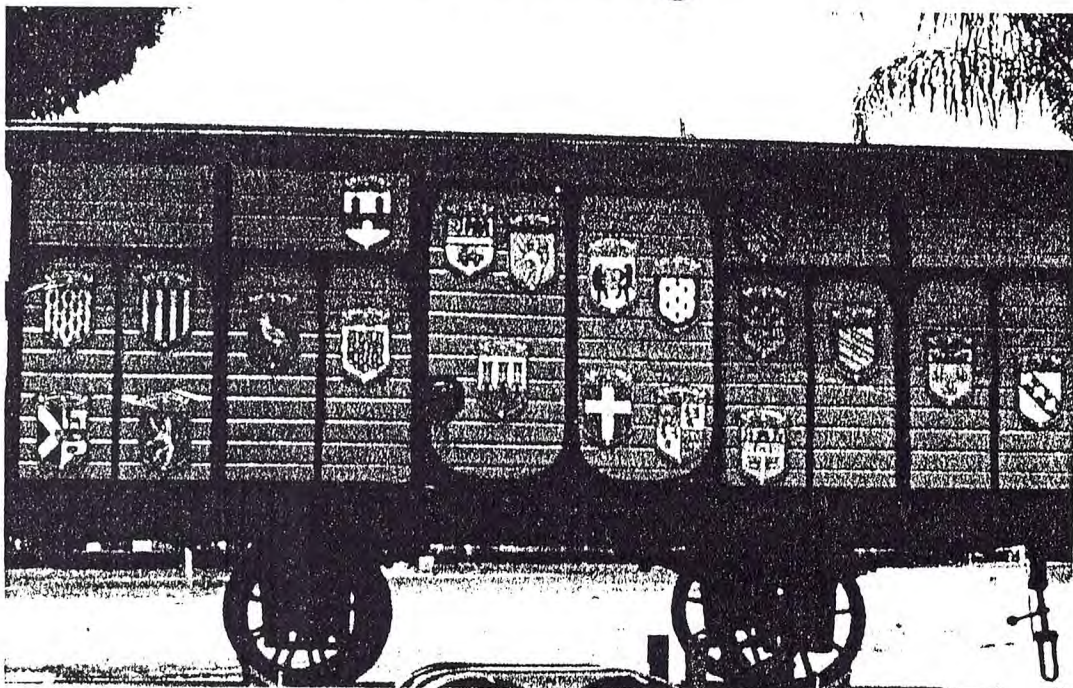




The FRENCH "Merci" Boxcar Story



They arrived in America chocked and chained, deep in the hold of a French merchant ship in February of 1949. During two years they served France as dual -purpose railroad boxcars hauling the military cargoes stenciled on their sides 'HOMMES 40 CHEVAUX 8.' But now the cars held neither men nor horses. All had been repaired, freshly painted, and decorated with plaques bearing the coats of arms of the forty provinces of France. Across their sides, upon tri-colored bans, was printed the name of the enterprise for which they stood---on one side "Train de la Reconnaisance Francaise and on the other "Gratitude Train."

The train was an expression of thanks from the citizens of France to the people of America for aid rendered during and after World War II, which had been delivered in a particularly compelling way in 1947 when the American Friendship Train carried some \$40,000,000 in relief supplies to France and Italy. Initiated by the Washington newspaper columnist Drew Pearson, this project, which resulted in the distribution of over seven hundred carloads of food, fuel, and clothing, was not an official government program; it was a grass roots effort that carried personal contributions from individuals in every part of America.

The American Friendship Train inspired a rail worker and war veteran named Andre Picard to suggest that France Reciprocate. His original idea was to present the United States with a decorated Forty and Eight Boxcar loaded with gifts representative of his country--wines from Alsace, Bordeaux, Burgundy, Champagne, and the Loire Valley; white lace headdresses from Paris; clay figures from Provence. A local veterans organization adopted the proposal, and a small committee was established to solicit gifts.

As the press and radio spread the story, however, the project gained national momentum. The Government announced its official approval; the French Academy issued an endorsement; and hundreds of professional, social, and fraternal organizations asked to participate. Clearly a single boxcar would not be enough. Superseding the local committee, the National Headquarters of the French War Veterans Association took control and decided to fill forty-nine cars with gifts. One to go to each of the forty-eight states, and the forty-ninth would be shared by the District of Columbia and the Territory of Hawaii. During the summer of 1948, trainmen scoured rail yards, sidings, and depots for the Forty and Eights.

These superannuated boxcars as merci carriers was a thoughtfully appropriate choice. Not only did their use allow an exchange of train for train, but the Forty and Eights themselves possessed symbolic significance. During World War I, millions of khaki-clad Yanks, carried by steel Pullman sleepers to Atlantic ports, landed in France to find awaiting them these rickety wooden cars. Built between 1872 and 1885, the 12 ton, 29 feet long and 9 feet wide, four-wheeled carriages were first used as general purpose freight haulers, then later converted to troop and animal transports for wartime service. With their protruding button-type buffers and chain link couplings, the antiquated conveyances appeared at once exotic and outlandish to their combat-bound passengers.

The Americans were alternately enchanted and disgusted, intrigued and infuriated by the little dual-purpose cars. Sometimes they were just confused. In *The Doughboys--The Story of the AEF*, Laurence Stallings tells of one Sergeant who reported to his leader:

"I got all my 40 artillerymen in this boxcar, lieutenant . But if you try to put eight of our horses in, somebody's gonna be trampled to death." A generation later, American Soldiers again were annoyed and intrigued by these durable relics, and many came home to join the Forty and Eight. Established as a subsidiary of the American Legion, La Societe Des Quarante Holmes et Huit Chevaux included thousands of Voyaguers Militaire organized at national, state, and local levels. Founded by their doughboy forbearers

While the trainmen assembled the 70 year old cars, gifts began to come to the collection centers throughout France. Although many in that war ravaged country had little but sentiment to offer, over 6,000,000 families gave up something of value to fill the cars. The 52,000 carefully packaged and crated gifts included childish drawings on rough yellowed paper; puzzles mounted on cardboard frames; ashtrays made of broken mirrors; worn down wooden shoes; hand-crocheted doilies; battered toys, the original bust of Benjamin Franklin by the great french sculptor, Jean Antoine Houdon; a jeweled Legion d'Plonneur once presented to Napoleon; the bugle which signaled the Armistice signing at Champagne in 1918, fifty rare paintings; the first motorcycle ever built; and a Louis XV carriage. The Society of Parisian Couturiers contributed an exquisite set of Forty-nine little mannequins dressed in fashions from 1706 to 1906. The President of France donated an equal number of delicate Severs cases. One of the Marquis de Lafayette's descendants presented his Ancestor's walking stick. A disabled veteran offered a wooden gavel he carved from a tree in Belleau wood. There were new bicycles and old bicycles and bicycle wheels. A church in LaCourtene surrendered its bell, the city of Lyon provided dozens of silk wedding dresses; and an anonymous donor shipped in a set of black lingerie intended " for a beautiful blonde."

By the end of 1948, the boxcars were filled to capacity. The train carrying over 250 tons of gratitude, was assembled at Paris and pulled to the port of La Harve for shipment to America. Even as the Forty and Eights were being loaded aboard the Magellan, more presents poured in. Over 9,000 gifts had to be left behind on the docks.

When the Magellan reached its destination, the New York Times reported. "a welcoming din surpassing that according the maiden arrival here of an ocean passenger queen." Greeted by a flotilla of small boats, the gaily beflagged freighter, emblazoned amid ships with the huge inscription "Merci America," steamed into New York harbor while waves of Air Force Planes roared overhead and fireboats sent columns of spray into the wintry sunlight.

The ship docked at Weehawken, New Jersey, and the following day, unloaded through the voluntary services of local stevedoring companies. Normal customs procedures were waived: President Truman had signed into law a special resolution permitting the train and its cargo to enter the United States duty-free. Since their wheels were about 8 inches wider than American rails, the Forty and Eights were hoisted onto flatcars for their overland journey. Trainmen then sorted them into three sections for shipment to the south, the west, and New England. In the meantime the New York Car was trundled up Broadway amid swirling ticker tape as 200,000 people roared a tumultuous "you're welcome" to the people of France. For the next several weeks, similar scenes were reported throughout the nation.

Each state established committees to catalog and distribute its share of the train cargo. In most cases the gifts went on state-wide exhibition tours. Afterward, they were distributed in a variety of ways.

In some states, the contents were sold at auction and the proceeds given to charities; elsewhere, selected items were turned over to the veterans hospitals, schools and churches. Articles suitable for permanent display generally went to museums and libraries.

Some of the gifts posed particular problems. For example, many of the cars contained young oak and beech trees intended to serve as "living reminders of the enduring friendship between the French and the Americans." But the Department of Agriculture experts, recalling Dutch elm disease and Japanese beetles, ordered the seedlings placed on state observation plots for at least 2 years.

The territory of Hawaii had no problem with the distribution of gifts. Its boxcar which was to be shared with the District of Columbia, first stopped at the nations capitol en route to the future island state. There before moving on, the Forty and Eight was emptied of everything. Hawaii got a carload of packing straw.

When the dock workers, who had volunteered to unload the Magellan without pay, had finished their task, the Association of American Railroads oversaw delivery of the cars without charge. Because their wheels were wider than the American rails could accommodate, the "40 ans 8s" were loaded on flatcars for their journey to the various state capitols. Everywhere Americans went all out to welcome the "Merci Train" and hear the words of a young Frenchman whose accompanying letter reflected its spirit

Writing from a Paris hospital, Louis Brenel, a 24 year-old veteran, paralyzed by wounds, spoke for his countrymen:

".....I feel the need to tell you what the French people want to express to your great country by this symbolic train."

"To you Americans who have done so much, given so much to our children, the aged, and the people of France, it is an affectionate thanks, the sincere gratitude of my country. This train, made of cars that your GI's know well, is a token of our affection, of our friendship to all of your 48 states. Each one of these cars.....will tell those of you who know us, that we do not forget. And to those of you who never come to our land, may it bring a message from the people of France to all the people of the U.S.A. In dawn of 1949, I see this gesture of friendship more than an omen, more than a message, I see in it a pledge that men can love and understand each other when they silence their self interest and only listen to their hearts."

The following information was found in New Mexico's Merci Boxcar: Many of the items had personal notes attached. On one hand made wedding dress was to "give it to some Catholic bride in New Mexico." On a large tan colored stuffed dog was this message:

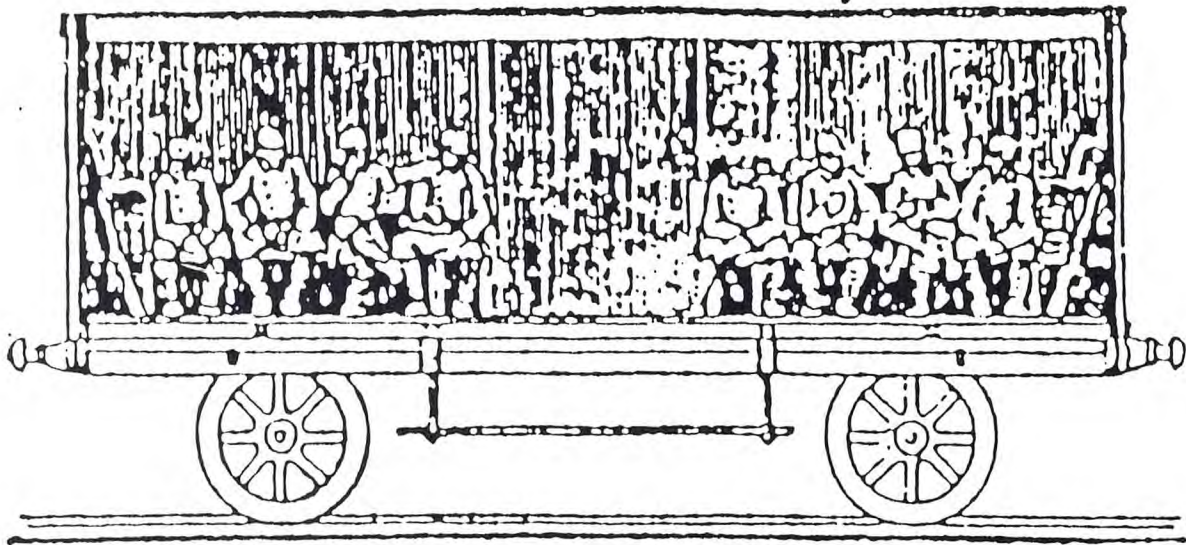
Little known friend:

I am sending you one of my preferred children, my big Loulou. It seems that I was one year old when Meme offered it to me for my father who was a prisoner in Germany. I love my Loulou very much, but I offer it to you in gratitude for all that the Americans have done for my country and also because the dog represents fidelity. I thought that I would keep it all my life, so it is with sorrow that I embrace Loulou for the last time. You will take good care of him and speak to him sometime of his little French mistress. I am sending you a picture of myself so that you can see me and show me to my Loulou. I know you will take my place near him. Without knowing you, I love you and embrace you with all my heart.

Helen Petit, 10 years-71 Rue Massena-Lyon (Rhone), France.

As for the boxcars themselves, most of them were entrusted to veterans organizations, some were placed in museums; some were incorporated into memorials; others found homes in fair grounds and city parks.

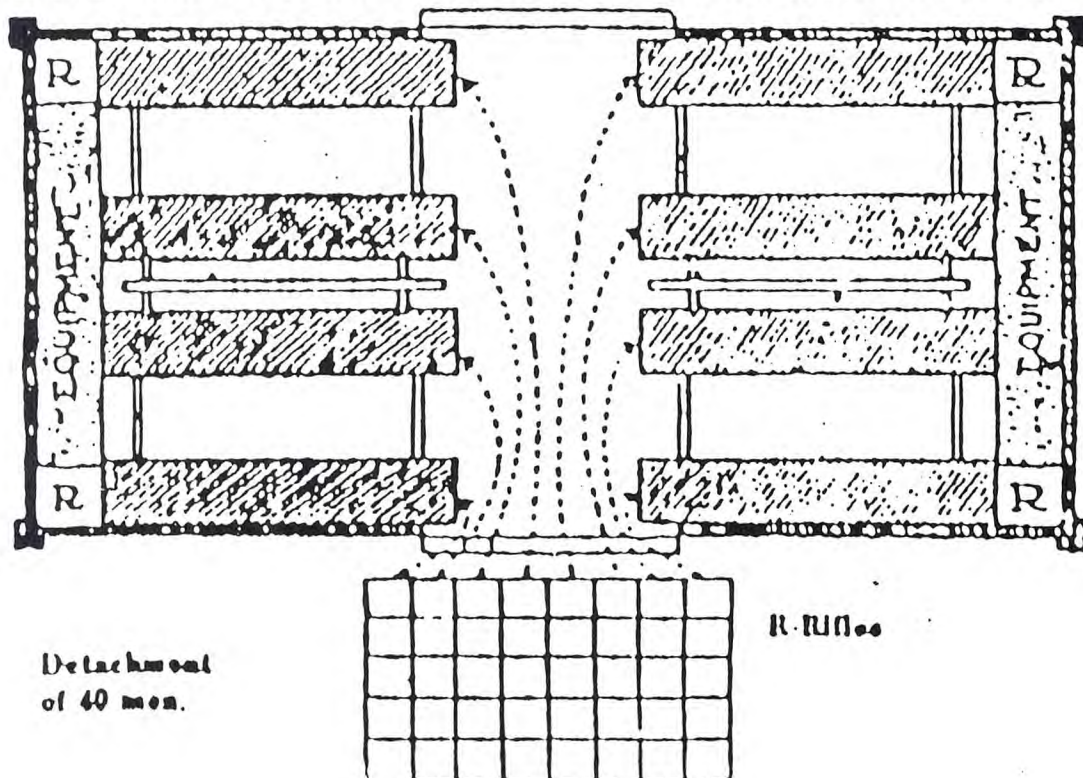
In all, some of the boxcars are handsomely displayed, others stand neglected, plaques gone, paint peeling, weeds growing through their rotted floors. The gifts they held, scattered to a thousand places, are impossible to trace, and most young trees shipped in the train failed to survive the rigors of the North American climate. Scores of museums and libraries around the country still exhibit, or at least store, items sent in the train. But for the most part, time has blurred the connection between these artifacts and the splendid gesture which brought them to our shores some half a century ago.....

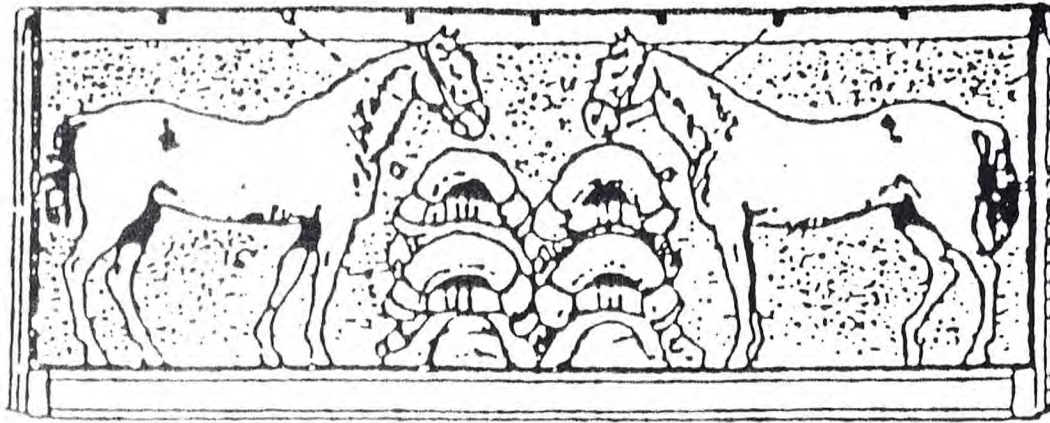


French Box-Car Fitted Up for the Transportation of Troops.

American troops arriving in France travel from the port of debarkation to the training camps in French military trains, usually made up of about 50 cars to conform to a fixed standard for transporting an infantry batallion, a battery of artillery or a squadron of cavalry. Each train is composed of box-cars, flat-cars and a passenger car for officers.

The box-cars generally bear the painted sign, "Hommes, 40; Chevaux, 8." (Men, 40; Horses, 8), designating the capacity of the cars for French military transportation. These French cars, about one-third the length of the American box-car, are provided with benches, which may be taken down, but under no circumstances are the boards to be removed from the cars.



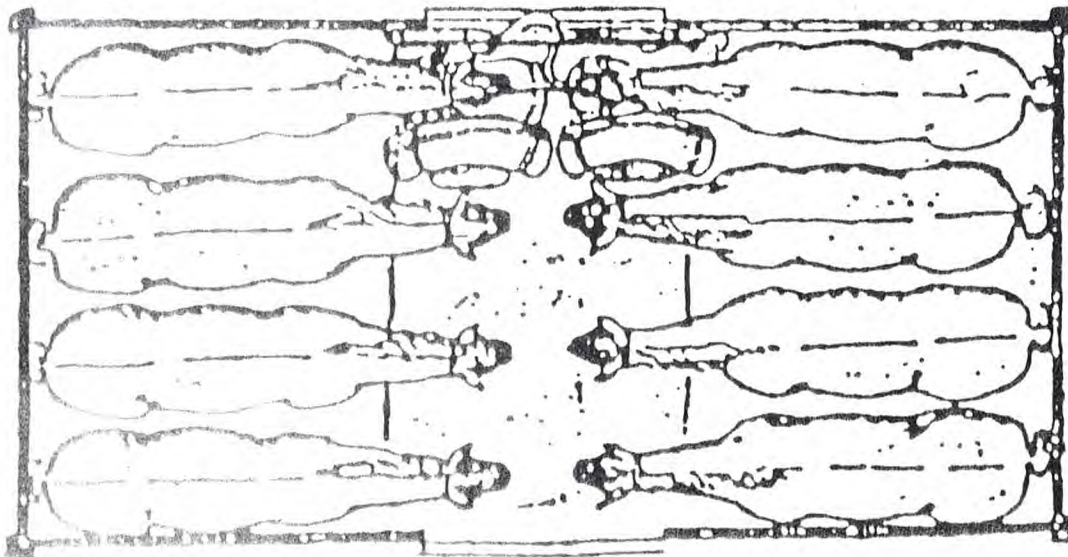


Side View of Horses and Equipment in a French Box-Car.

Since there is no possibility of communication between the different box-cars while the train is in motion, it is necessary to distribute rations in quantities sufficient for the length of time required for the journey. The rations should consist largely of canned goods, for meals cannot be cooked on the trains. The American Red Cross maintains canteens at certain stations along the route.

Most of the passenger cars in France are small in comparison with our American cars, and, as everywhere else in Europe, they are divided into compartments, each with a door through which passengers may enter direct from the platform.

On most of the express trains the cars have corridors. The seat you select in a compartment is yours for the trip, provided you keep a bag, parcel or something in the rack above your place when you leave it. If you do not take this precaution, you may return after looking about at a station to find your seat taken. Smokers are supposed to take a place in compartments marked "Fumeurs" (Smokers). However, smoking is allowed in any compartment if all the occupants consent.



Tracking the mysterious history of the Merci Boxcars

If you have a question about the history and current location of a Merci Boxcar, chances are that Voyageur Andy Dolak may have your answer. For you see, Dolak has led a personal search to discover what happened to every French boxcar presented to the United States.

Dolak, a retired US Army Sergeant First Class, began his search for the individual history of each boxcar in 1980. When working on the restoration of the South Carolina Merci boxcar he discovered that there was no single source listing the whereabouts of the original box cars. In fact, many box cars were thought to have been lost or destroyed - but their fate was unknown. Voyageur Dolak had no idea his initial interest would eventually become a 14 year pursuit in history.

When asked why he has an interest in the boxcars, Dolak is quick to respond that he is one of just a few Forty and Eighters who actually rode in a French boxcar during war time. During World War II Dolak rode the French boxcars from France through Germany and into Czechoslovakia. Later he took another 14 day journey on the rails back to France.

In the United States he has personally visited the site of 27 Merci boxcars, and has amassed a large amount of information and photographs regarding the current locations and local histories of the original boxcars.

Andy Dolak believes preserving the Merci Boxcars, is in a way, saving a portion of history for our children and grandchildren. The story of the little French boxcars cannot be told, without realizing the lessons of war and peace and the men and women who fought in those wars.

Andy Dolak would appreciate any updates to the information contained in this article, especially if any of the boxcars have moved or been refurbished.

Additionally, if you have an interest in the history of your state's boxcar, you can begin your research by visiting your newspaper library and searching microfilms during February 1949 to discover articles concerning the presentation of the Merci Boxcars and the Gratitude Train.

Andy Dolak would appreciate receiving copies of any materials you gather in your research, and may be reached by writing: Andrew J. Dolak, PO Box 41, Lamar, SC 29069.

Where are the boxcars today?

compiled by Andrew J. Dolak

AL	Huntsville Depot Transportation Museum	NB	Sold for junk
AR	American Legion Post, Helena	NC	Railroad Museum, Spencer
AZ	Pioneer Park, Phoenix	ND	Capitol Grounds, Bismark
CA	Roedun Park, Fresno	NH	Reed & Beemer Streets, Manchester
CO	Mysteriously disappeared	NJ	Destroyed by fire
CT	Destroyed by fire	NM	State Fairgrounds, Albuquerque
DE	American Legion Post, Seaford	NV	Nevada State Railroad Museum, Carson City
FL	City Hall, Hollyhill	NY	Oneida County, Whitestown
GA	Chateau, Voiture 217, Atlanta	OH	Camp Perry, OH
HA	Ewe Railroad Yard, Ewe	OK	Cerebral Palsy Center, Norman
IA*	Voiture 82 Black Hawk County, Antique Acres Hwy 218 between Cedar Falls & Janesville	OR	Flavel House lawn, Astoria
ID	State Penitentiary, Boise	PA*	Fort Indiantown Gap
IL	Mysteriously disappeared	RI	Southern Rhode Island - exact location unknown
IN	Veteran's Memorial Shrine, Fort Wayne	SC	American Legion Post 6, Columbia
KA*	American Legion Post, Hays	SD	State Fairground, Huron
KY	Kentucky Railway Museum, New Haven	TN	Briston, TN
LA	Old State Capitol Grounds, Baton Rouge	TX	American Legion Post 76, Austin
MA	Mysteriously disappeared	UT	Veteran's Memorial Grove, Salt Lake
MD*	Baltimore & Ohio Railroad Museum, Baltimore	VA	War Memorial Museum, Newport News
ME*	Boothbay Railway Museum, Route 27	VT*	Downtown on railroad tracks, St. Albans
MI	Voiture 946, Lansing	WA	Located on city property, Moxee
MN	Minnesota Military Museum, Camp Ripley	WI	Mid-Continent Railway Museum, North Freedom
MO	State Fairground, Sedalia	WV	Located on Union Carbide Property, S. Charleston
MS	Capitol Building parking lot, Jackson	WY	American Legion Post 6, Cheyenne
MT	Near Pioneer's and Veterans Building, Helena		