

PROLOGUE

The Friendship Train

Everyone wanted to be there. It was the kind of spectacle that only Hollywood could produce. Scores of searchlights crisscrossed the night sky, illuminating the fancy floats below. Ten live bands filled the grounds with music fit for the extravaganza. And the stars came out in force. John Wayne was there, and so was Mickey Rooney. The “Brazilian Bombshell” Carmen Miranda enchanted the crowd, while others swooned at the French-born actor Charles Boyer, still glowing from his performance in the hit film *Gaslight*. More than one hundred of the most renowned celebrities performed, mingled, and jockeyed to be seen. Half a million spectators braced the cold November chill, since most did not yet own a television.¹ In 1947, TV was just beginning to penetrate American homes as the long postwar economic boom began, and TV crews were there to capture the event. The comedian Danny Thomas got a raucous laugh by shivering on stage, reflecting what the crowds were feeling. He bowed in mock reverence at California’s Governor Earl Warren, who was seated with his wife on stage. The mood that night was ebullient, a striking contrast to the abject suffering that had brought them all there.

Across the Atlantic, Europeans were starving. The war had crippled food production. The massive bombing of roads, bridges, canals, and railway lines had shattered transportation routes, making the transit of food to cities that much harder. Drought had withered crops, further depleting what little food remained. More than two years had passed since Germany’s surrender, but the lives of average people had only worsened. Tens of millions of children were enduring

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malnutrition, stunted growth, and disease. Mothers jostled and shoved their way into the scrums surrounding canned food distribution sites. Others picked through garbage dumps, searching for any edible scraps.² With winter rapidly approaching, Europeans desperately needed nutrients or millions would soon die. The continent was facing a grim post-war apocalypse, and Americans were being asked to help. The half a million who gathered that night in Hollywood had come to launch a distinctly American solution: the newly minted Friendship Train.

It began as a publicity stunt, the brainchild of Drew Pearson, America's best-known syndicated columnist. Pearson had witnessed Soviet Army forces in France being lauded for supplying food aid while American shipments went unnoticed. Pearson wanted America to get credit for its own humanitarian efforts. Since early 1946, some Americans began eating less to make more food available for shipment to Europe. At President Truman's urging, Americans observed "meatless Tuesdays," cut down on bread consumption, and tried to reduce food waste. Exports rose, but it was not enough. By the fall of 1947, the situation had grown dire. The government intensified its efforts, but the public had to pitch in more. In one of Pearson's columns he proposed a Friendship Train that would race across America collecting food for Europe's hungry masses. He thought that if celebrities could accompany the train, the crowds would gather and donations would rise. Europeans would then see the true heart of the American people. But neither Pearson nor any others could have imagined just how ardently Americans would get on board with the idea of simple giving.

As the train prepared to leave Los Angeles, the nation's most celebrated songwriter, Irving Berlin, led the crowd in a round of "God Bless America," a song he had introduced less than a decade earlier.³ Hollywood's showstopping sendoff contained eight freight cars full of food, including 160,000 pounds of sugar given by Hawaii, whose governor of course attended the glamorous event.⁴ From Hollywood the train sped through California's bread basket. Bakersfield supplied 80,000 pounds of grain. Fresno donated crates of raisins. Merced gave more dried fruit and canned milk. In Stockton, people held up signs reading "Hunger is the enemy of peace," "Food for our Friends," and "Bonjour, vive La France." Oakland, San Francisco, and Bay Area cities provided even more, throwing in a \$10,000 cash donation.⁵

The train picked up more food in Reno, where both the mayor and governor came out to greet it.⁶ Omaha added 50,000 pounds of

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flour plus more cash contributions.⁷ Stunned by the extent of average Americans' generosity, French Foreign Minister Henri Bonnet flew to meet the train in Omaha and witnessed for himself the spontaneous outpouring of support. He called it "America's far-reaching gesture of amity."⁸ And that reach just kept extending.

It was not just white Americans who joined in giving. Black Americans donated across the country. A group of Black Americans in Los Angeles pooled their funds to purchase a truckload of groceries for the train.⁹ Native Americans gave as well. Sioux Chief Ed White Buffalo, his wife, and their three children, all in traditional dress, presented the train with seventy-eight ears of corn. Rich as well as poor folks gave. Henry Kaiser, a leading industrialist and future founder of the healthcare company Kaiser Permanente, made sure to be photographed loading boxes onto train cars as part of his contribution. A seventy-three-year-old small-town grocer, Frank Tessier, donated a sack of flour from his store. Even little children joined in the event. One four-year-old boy donated 400 pennies to the cause, providing perfect footage for the newsreels.¹⁰

Cities vied to give the most of whatever they had. The tiny town of Sidney was not even on the schedule for a visit, but the town's leaders convinced the train to stop and accept their contributions. One boy literally offered the shirt off his back, which was immediately auctioned for the cause. Though the town barely numbered 10,000 residents, it raised \$12,000. In Aurora, John Crumm made a special effort to gather food for the train. Crumm had been a prisoner of the Japanese during the war and knew the pain of hunger. He organized a group to pick the corn that still remained in the fields and that would otherwise have gone to waste. It was enough to sell for \$825 worth of flour.¹¹ By the time the train reached Council Bluffs, it stretched to fifty-seven cars. And that town added five more. The train then rumbled on through Iowa, picking up more food and money everywhere it went. But Kansas broke all records, adding eighty-three boxcars of wheat. Governor Frank Carlson addressed an audience of thousands saying, "We have so much, the need is so great, and it takes so little from the individual that we must not fail to do our duty."¹²

Try as they did, no city could top the fanfare that New Yorkers gave: forty cars of food plus a ticker tape parade. More than 100,000 New Yorkers lined the streets to celebrate this extraordinary act of giving. Even Hollywood's audacious send-off could not compare with

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Figure 0.1 The Friendship Train Cargo sets sail for Europe on November 17, 1947, in New York. Originally, it hoped to collect eighty train carloads of food, and the train ultimately collected over 700 cars (\$40 million value) of food, clothing, and fuel, paid in part by monetary donations. Photo by Irving Haberman/IH Images/Getty Images.

the show that New York put on. Two railway barges laden with food took victory laps around the Statue of Liberty as jets of water one hundred feet high arced across them in majestic streams. Then the Friendship Train's supplies were loaded onto the first of four ships that would cross the Atlantic to deliver its cargo to France. With the smashing of a champagne bottle on its bow, the USS *Leader* was rechristened the "Friend Ship" and sent on its way. Those shipments would go not just to the French but also to Italians, Germans, and Austrians, America's former foes.

Politicians of both parties attached themselves to the popular phenomenon. New York's Republican Governor Thomas E. Dewey, eyeing yet another run at the presidency, called the train "an important contribution to world peace."¹³ New York City's Democratic mayor, William O'Dwyer, convened a ceremony at City Hall, where thousands of children, released from school, were invited to participate in the festivities. The mayor proclaimed the episode "a material symbol of the desire of our people to relieve the hunger and suffering of our fellow humans in Italy and France."¹⁴ Warren Austin, America's ambassador to the United Nations, called it simply an act of "peace mongering."¹⁵

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New Yorkers gave an additional \$73,000 toward the purchase of food. And throughout the episode, every corporation and labor union – from teamsters to dock workers, from railways to shipping lines – provided its services entirely free of charge. The hope had been to deliver the food to France and Italy by Christmas. At the ceremony, the French consul general referred to the captain of the Friend Ship as “a real Santa Claus.”¹⁶

By the close of its journey, the Friendship Train had swelled to an astonishing 481 cars, with the first shipment of food to France weighing more than eight million pounds.¹⁷ The film producer Harry Warner, chairman of the train committee, declared that “No other humanitarian appeal in history ever had such a quick and tremendous response.” The committee had chosen Warner (of Warner Brothers Studio) to oversee the effort precisely because it wanted him to generate footage to play in movie theaters across Europe. The entire project was intended as a propaganda bonanza, a chance to showcase America’s goodness on film. It was as if Americans were desperate to show the world who they truly were. But why?

Looking back, this orgy of ostentatious giving, the mugging for the camera, the battles over who could donate more or whose sacrifice could be more noble, seemed to have a performative dimension. Was it all just generosity for show, a public relations ploy, or worse – a neo-imperialist plot to hook the world on US goods? Or did the Friendship Train stem from a deep-rooted sense of kindness, a virtue hardwired into the American psyche. Cynics and true-believers can debate, but most people harbor multiple motives for their acts. Whatever their intentions, the fact is that American giving saved lives. Years later, that was how it would be remembered, as Europeans made their gratitude known. And certainly, at the time, the donations were welcomed as a lifeline. Thank you letters arrived from overseas. From Vienna one man wrote to the Friendship Train Committee chair of Hartford, Connecticut, “We cannot fully measure what this noble help means.” He said that people like him could hardly have survived without the help that Americans so freely gave. A German man in Lüneburg described how much Germans looked forward to the many CARE packages Americans sent.¹⁸

Americans at the time did believe that they were especially good, exceptional in their behavior, a shining city on a hill. But this conviction did not square with their egregious actions of the past few years. During

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the war, America had engaged in many needlessly cruel acts against the innocent – actions that even the frenzy of wartime hatred could neither excuse nor explain. The triumphal postwar narrative declared that America had helped to rid the world of a vicious evil, and that was certainly true. But soon after victory, a number of influential Americans began reexamining some of the country's less charitable decisions toward its enemies, and they wanted to atone. They wanted to ensure that Americans lived up to the ideals they so often espoused. And above all, they wanted the world to see Americans the way they saw themselves, as a kind and decent people. This handful of leaders recognized that their notions of American goodness had at times been derailed, and even after the war, its occupation policies were exacerbating misery to no good end. But to climb aboard the Friendship Train, to reach a point of virtue, Americans first had to wrestle with their most recent vengeful acts.