

Fred Teague and the “Merci Boxcar”

Fred Teague, Sr., rarely stops smiling. He’s soft spoken and a real fan of history. A resident of the New Hampshire Veterans Home (NHVH) since May 2007, Fred served in the US Navy from 1944 to 1946. He was a Seaman Second Class in Puerto Rico, Cuba, and Panama after training in Sampson, New York. His brother also served in the Navy and was stationed in the Pacific. Fred drove a truck in the Navy, worked in the carpenter shop, and was Master at Arms for his barracks.

Fred reveals himself slowly. There are many layers to this man—like the rings of a tree. You ask him how he learned cabinetmaking and he shares his memories of working in the woods when he was sixteen: portable sawmills, horse drawn scoots that transported huge logs, two-man saws, steam engines, and his father—the tallyman who could just look at a log and estimate the number of board feet you’d get from it.

Fred came to the New Hampshire Veterans Home after he’d been at the VA Hospital in West Roxbury, Massachusetts. “My wife, Edith, died almost three years ago, and I realized I couldn’t live alone at home anymore, so I sent in my application,” he says. But Fred was no stranger to the Veterans Home. More than thirty years ago he discovered that the residents were sleeping on straw-filled beds, and his American Legion Post raised money to buy some real mattresses.

Fred is a 49-year member of the American Legion Carl G. Davis Post #34 in Plaistow, and a lifetime American Legion (AL) member. He and Edith, who was a member of the American Legion Auxiliary, often came to the NHVH with fellow AL members to cook lasagna dinners or host barbecues for the residents. They also enjoyed coming to the Home to participate in special entertainment sponsored by the District and Department and to visit with residents. Fred served as the Post Commander twice, a District Commander, and the Department Vice Commander.



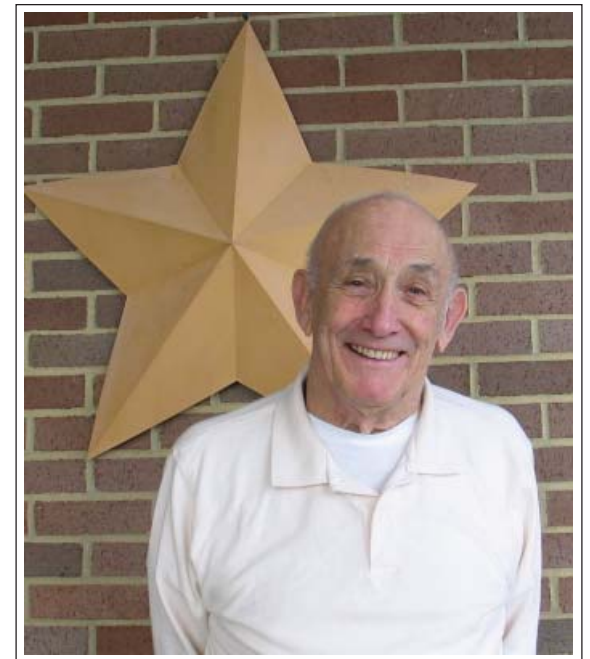
Fred Teague Sr., served in the US Navy in Panama in the mid 1940s.

In the 1960s he heard about a piece of history that was beginning to fall apart. It was called “The Merci Boxcar,” and was located in Manchester. “It’s a wonderful story,” he explains, “but it’s not in the history books.”

During World War I, young American soldiers in France were transported to and from the battlefield in small boxcars, nicknamed “40 & 8.” The cars were designed to hold either forty soldiers or eight horses.

In 1920 a fraternity formed within the American Legion, named in honor of the boxcars: *La Société des Quarante Hommes et Huit Chevaux*. During World War II the boxcars were used again to transport troops, and although the cars were far from comfortable, they held many memories for the veterans. After the end of World War II, much of Europe

remained in ruins and in 1947, American newspaper columnist Drew Pearson inspired a campaign that collected food and clothing for the people of France and Italy. \$40 million in food and supplies were collected and shipped to Europe aboard the 700-car American “Friendship Train.” In appreciation for the generosity of the Americans, the citizens of France responded by sending 49 boxcars—one for each state at the time—full of gifts to America. All of the items were loaded in “40 & 8” boxcars, and each car was decorated with the coats of arms of all of the provinces of France.



Fred Teague at the New Hampshire Veterans Home, February 2008.

Years later, when Fred realized that New Hampshire's Merci Boxcar had fallen into disrepair, he decided to help. He was a cabinet maker by trade. He did trim work and was a finish carpenter; he worked in many buildings, including post offices and banks in Hampstead, Plaistow, and Sandown.

He and his fellow members of Le Grande Voiture 40 & 8 pledged to preserve the boxcar. He refurbished the inside, putting in sheetrock, paneling, and a new ceiling. His daughter-in-law, Patricia, repainted the coats of arms on the outside. With the help of a committee he renovated and enlarged the building that housed the boxcar, which is still on display today at the corner of Bremer and Reed Streets in Manchester.

Born in Derry, Fred lived in Deerfield, Salem, Kingston, Brentwood, and—for 50 years—in Plaistow. His son, Frederick "Freddie," lives in Sandown and visits every week. His daughter, Louise, lives in Maryland. Fred visited her at Christmas and plans to go see her again in March or April. Fred has six grandchildren and nine great grandchildren. He has pictures of all of them in his room—and loves to show visitors a slide show of his family in his digital photo frame.

About the Veterans Home, he says, "It's a good place. I get along with everybody." He loves going on trips and recently went to the Disney on Ice show at the Verizon Center. He enjoys his computer, staying in touch by e-mail with family and friends. And of course, he enjoys history.

*Fred Teague with New Hampshire's "Merci Boxcar" in Manchester.
(Photo by Bob LaPree/New Hampshire Union Leader.)*

