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American soldiers depart for the battlefield in freight train cars in France during World War I. The cars had no seats, no toilets, no comforts. Each man and his 39 traveling companions had barely enough space to sit down and they had to fit their bodies in rows to have enough room to lie down for sleep.

## Boxcar

Continued from 1A

The local “voitures” vow to take their military experiences and transform them into projects promoting good will to others. “Chef de gare” George Murphy said his Killeen/Harker Heights “voiture” has been active in outreach to hospitalized veterans at the Olin E. Teague Veterans’ Medical Center in Temple. They provide gifts, recreation and other assistance as needed.

This past holiday season, they collected gifts for the Harker Heights Fire Department to distribute to needy children.

Donald Taylor has been a member of his Copperas Cove “voiture” for 10 years.

“I became involved because they were doing more than any other organization I belonged to,” he said. “We work for child welfare — buying school supplies for poor schools, furnishing flags on Veterans Day, raising \$3,000 nurses’ scholarships and assisting in soup kitchens. There’s no drama; everybody helps.”

Members are not required to be experts on military history, although some are well read on certain conflicts, including World War I. They just have to

be willing to roll up their sleeves and help others. As long as U.S. blood and treasure are on battlefields, their journey and their work will not end.

The “merci” boxcar on display at the Capitol is an actual World War I French boxcar used to transport American doughboys to the battlefield. The cars could hold either 40 men or eight horses. Thus, the freight cars were emblazoned with the numbers “40/8” on the sides. For those heading to the trenches, the ride was uncomfortable. Nevertheless, it helped these young U.S. soldiers bond in their common misery.

In 1949, the “Merci” Train included 49 French boxcars transported to the U.S. across the Atlantic in a large tanker. Each boxcar held thousands of gifts of gratitude from thousands of French citizens. These were small tokens to the United States for the more than 700 American boxcars of relief goods sent to them by Americans in 1947.

The “Merci” Train arrived in New York harbor in early February 1949, and each of the 48 American states at that time received one of the gift-laden boxcars. Texas’ car arrived in

mid-February with stops along the way for ceremonies and viewings. The 49th “merci” car was shared by Washington, D.C., and the then Territory of Hawaii.

The cars carried a total of about 52,000 gifts from French citizens. Among the hundreds of gifts to Texans were dolls, vintage clothing, bells, champagne buckets, coins, embroidered handkerchiefs, ornamental swords, intricately carved clocks and artwork. Although the gifts seemed great, they represented great personal sacrifice from the French who had suffered through two cataclysmic wars on their soil in 30 years.

A placard at the Texas Military Forces Museum at Camp Mabry states the gifts signified the French were “thankful not only for American aid but the sacrifice of American soldiers, sailors, Marines and airmen in two World Wars.”

The exhibit at the Capitol will be a special occasion.

“It’s very rare for the gifts to be on display and probably the only time the boxcar will be out of the museum ever,” said David Knutson of Austin, active on “La Société” state and national offices.

The ceremony on the Capitol

grounds gives the public a chance to see up close what soldiers endured in the two World Wars. The cars had no seats, no windows, no toilets and certainly no sleeping or eating accommodations.

“Each man and his 39 traveling companions had barely enough space to sit down and they had to fit their bodies in rows to have enough room to lie down for sleep. Most of the veterans who survived had memories of those final rides and conversations with buddies, including some who were killed and never made it back to the United States,” according to a 90-page history written by Earl Bennett Sr. (1932-2013).

The boxcars were again deployed during World War II.

Afterward, the veterans found “40/8” a lighthearted symbol of the deeper service, sacrifice and unspoken horrors of war.

For “voyageurs” of the two local “voitures” of “La Société des Quarante Hommes et Huit Chevaux,” theirs is a sacred journey begun during the Great War to honor compatriots of 20th-century wars. They find that service to others is the way to lasting peace.

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## School

Continued from 1A

There was a tailgate party in the cafeteria, and St. Mary’s students attending the open house wore their favorite jerseys. St. Mary’s covers pre-K through the eighth grade.

Nita Bigon, athletic director, met visitors at the school gym. She saw all of her regular students, she said, but not too many new ones. “Parents were bringing their children to see what they’re doing in school,” she said.

Sophia Howell-Dancer, a seventh-grader at St. Mary’s, was one of the cheerleaders guiding people on the tour.

“Each classroom at St. Mary’s has at least three computers,” she said. “Pre-K through the fifth grade have iPads.

“Sixth through eighth



Larry Causey/Telegram

Patricia McMichael, left, and Susie Rockford, a second-grade teacher at St. Mary’s Catholic School, share a laugh with Sister Theresa of Nigeria during the school’s Super Bowl Sunday Open House.

grades have Chromebooks,” she said. “We do most of our work on Chromebooks.

“We write papers and do some of our homework on Google Docs,” she said. “Our

most recent project on Google Docs is our science fair research paper. We also use the Chromebooks for reviews and tests.”

Angie Stolp, pre-K teacher, said five outside people visited the pre-K classrooms.

Sophia said the pre-K children watch learning movies, and the teachers read books to them. She pointed to three computers. “They have programs for every age,” she said.

“This year St. Mary’s started a robotics class,” she said. “You build robots with Legos. They move. They have wiring, and you program them to go forward, backward, move.”

When she finishes at St. Mary’s, Sophia said, she’ll go to Holy Trinity Catholic High School.

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## Teacher

Continued from 1A

The Statesman said of 686 teachers between 2010 and 2016 who surrendered their licenses or whose licenses were revoked amid investigations for possible improper student relationships, 53 percent never were criminally charged. The allegations ranged from sending flirtatious text messages to kissing or having sex in classrooms.

Forty percent were charged and convicted or given a deferred sentence. Eighty-four of those teachers were sentenced to prison or jail, 160 were given deferred adjudication similar to probation, and 27 had charges dismissed or weren’t indicted.

“We now have a bar that shows that, in slightly (more) than half of these cases, nothing happens,”

state Sen. Paul Bettencourt, R-Houston, said of the newspaper’s findings. “You also have to remember that they’re innocent until proven guilty. But I think statistics show right now that, either through admission or omission, we’re not getting to the root of what is happening.”

In his State of the State address last week, Gov. Greg Abbott called on lawmakers to crack down on improper teacher-student relationships.

The State Board for Education Certification maintains a website of teacher licenses, but listings for misconduct are not specific. The misconduct mentioned on the site also could include sanctions for stealing money from a district or helping a student cheat on tests.

In addition, while Texas law bars teachers who surrender their

licenses or lose them from taking teaching jobs at a traditional public school, they can be hired by charter or private schools.

Prosecutors said teachers initially suspected by school officials of engaging in improper behavior with students aren’t charged in some instances because school districts mishandle the cases before law enforcement gets involved, victims are unwilling to cooperate or there’s not enough evidence to prove that crimes have been committed. In other cases, the teachers’ alleged behavior doesn’t rise to

a criminal level.

Beverly Mathews, director of the special victims division at the Travis County District Attorney’s Office, said persuading victims to cooperate is among the biggest hurdles.

“It’s always difficult for a child of any age to talk about something so private, that had been so secret,” she said.

And even when a victim does come forward, prosecutors told the newspaper they typically need other evidence or another witness. Otherwise, it’s the teacher’s word against the student’s.

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## BISD

Continued from 1A

But Carothers also emphasized that the growth and improvement of the school district benefits everyone in the community.

“Every citizen in Belton ISD benefits from the construction of new schools,” he said. “Good schools that are not overcrowded benefit the students’ learning environment, which enhances the quality of life of our community.”

Board president Randy Pittenger said Carothers followed correct procedure in submitting an affidavit explaining his connection to the neighborhood.

“I think it showed good judgment to not participate in the discussion,” Pittenger said.

The BISD trustee chose the location is suitable because its location is suitable for reducing overcrowding in other elementary schools and because the availability of existing utility connections make it cheaper to develop than other potential sites.

“The two big questions that the board was asking was cost to build and disruption of current and future attendance zones,” said Pittenger. “Using those two criteria drove the decision for that being the best available site.”

When it is built, the new school will be accessible from Salt Mill Hollow Road, Carriage House Drive and Surrey Drive in addition to Poison Oak Road. Carriage House Drive runs between Poison Oak and Oak Hills Drive.

Poison Oak Road, a narrow lane, is slated for road improvements in the city of Temple’s transportation capital improvement program. However, Nicole Torralva, Temple

Public Works director, said the school will probably be opened before the new road is built.

“(Poison Oak) was never intended to be built early in the program,” Torralva said.

Kyle DeBeer, communications director for BISD, said that if the board calls for a bond election in May and the bond passes, the new elementary will probably open in the fall of 2019.

Pittenger said the board was aware the district cannot count on any improvements to Poison Oak Road happening soon, so the trustees asked their architects to evaluate the site with only existing roads in mind. They concluded that Ridgeway Drive, which connects to Surrey Drive, and Hogan Road, which connects to Ridgeway, would provide adequate space for buses and parents.

“We have a good history, good examples, of working together (with Temple),” Pittenger said. “So we will work with the city to make it work.”

Torralva said Temple re-evaluates the priority of transportation projects periodically, so the timing of the Poison Oak project could change. At present, the project is in the early planning stages and the city does not have a timeline for beginning construction.

Monday’s board meeting will be held at 5 p.m. in the BISD administration building at 400 N. Wall St., Belton. Pittenger said the board is pleased to have an elementary site selected and a plan to present before voters.

“We’re pretty excited about it,” Pittenger said. “We’re officially going to take action Monday.”

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## Juveniles

Continued from 1A

Temple Police Chief Floyd Mitchell said he and his investigators identified the main group of juveniles involved in the pricey destruction. That group caused between \$1.5 million to \$2 million in damage to local property in just a few months, Mitchell said.

The 9-year-old boy was too young to be punished under juvenile law, Gauntt previously said. Children must be at least 10 years old to be put on probation or prosecuted.

Two boys were 12 years old at the time of their sentencing in Judge Rebecca DePew’s court.

One of those boys was given four years probation, partial restitution for other cases in which he was found guilty and was ordered to perform 500 hours of community service. That juvenile was involved in the Emerson school vandalism, Gauntt said.

The second 12-year-old boy was sentenced in connection with the Emerson vandalism and one other case. He was given two years probation, ordered to pay \$10,000 restitution and to do 500 hours of community service.

The next two boys, ages 13 and 14 at the time they were sentenced, set the June 29 Wilson Park playground equipment on fire, Gauntt said.

One boy was 13 years old when he went before DePew for his criminal involvement, Gauntt said. In return for his guilty plea for his participation in the Wilson Park fire and the damage at Emerson, that boy was put on probation for four years and ordered to pay \$5,000 restitution. The \$5,000 figure is what the city of Tem-

ple must pay as its insurance deductible for the playground, Gauntt said.

A 14-year-old boy admitted involvement in both the Wilson Park fire and the damage done to the old Emerson school, plus he also admitted guilt in other cases. That boy was put on probation until his 18th birthday and must pay partial restitution.

Two juveniles were sentenced to probation and other consequences in October.

One “lesser-involved boy” was guilty of one offense and was sentenced to two years probation and community service. The second boy, much more involved in the criminal actions, was given four years probation, ordered to pay partial restitution and was ordered to do 500 hours of community service.

The most recent playground equipment fire at Jefferson Neighborhood Park wasn’t labeled arson by press time Sunday, and Temple Fire & Rescue spokesman Thomas Pechal wasn’t able to say if juveniles were involved in the Jan. 29 fire that destroyed the \$147,000 playground.

Gauntt addressed what the consequences could be if any of the juveniles responsible for the Wilson Park fire or the Emerson school vandalism are involved in the recent playground fire.

If a juvenile already is on probation and commits a new offense, the new offense could be filed as an entire new case or their probation could be modified, Gauntt said. Probation could be revoked or extended. If the new offense is a felony, a new case probably would be filed.

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