

The Orphan Trains

Over 250,000 children were transported from New York to the Midwest over a 75-year period (1854-1929) in the largest mass migration of children in American history. As many as one in four were Irish. **By Tom Riley**



Life in the 19th century in New York City could be brutal for a child. A magnet to immigrants in search of work, it was also a haven for alcoholics, drug addicts, thieves and murderers. The loss of a job, addiction, injury or death of a parent, and the absence of a social safety net often meant it was the children who suffered the most.

In the pre-Civil War era when 12,000-15,000 orphans slept in alleyways and sewer pipes, the American Female Guardian Society (AFGS) was the first to come to the aid of these children, establishing schools, dormitories, and an infirmary.

Contrary to the depiction of AFGS workers as saloon-bashing hysterical women, they gave aid and comfort when there was no welfare, food stamps or other government assistance.

The women established both orphanages and homes for unwed mothers and battered women. Some of the children in the homes were orphans, and some were surrendered by parents who were unable to care for them.

A report in the *New York Times* dated May 10, 1860, on the 26th anniversary of the AFGS, cited the four distinct classes of needy they served: "First – Friendless and deserving young women. Second – Destitute children between the ages of 3 and 14 years. Third – Motherless and orphan infants. Fourth. – Dependent mothers with children who should not be separated."

Over twenty years ago, I discovered



TOP: A train bound for the Midwest. ABOVE: Mealtime at the Children's Aid Society.

26 milk crates with hundreds of record books belonging to the AFGS in a hayloft. The names, dates and dispositions of 35,000 children – at least 10,000 of whom had Irish names – were listed.

Dating back to 1832, the books record a history of the efforts of the AFGS to aid destitute children inhabiting the Five Points area of Manhattan – then the most notorious urban slum of the western world.

Already densely populated, the Five Points swarmed during the Famine years, when an estimated 75 percent of the Irish immigrating to America landed in New York. Overcrowded tenements with no running water were breeding grounds for

disease and infant and child mortality, and the area was rife with prostitution, unemployment, and crime.

When Charles Loring Brace, a Connecticut minister, came to NYC he was appalled at the conditions the children were living under, so with Theodore Roosevelt Sr., and other philanthropists, he established the Children's Aid Society, which worked with the AFGS.

Sending children by rail across America was Loring Brace's answer to solving the crisis. As the author of *The Dangerous Classes*, he believed that revolutionary fever could overtake New York City if something wasn't done, and that the answer to homelessness "was the



Charles Loring Brace

clean air, industriousness of the American farmer and their Christian values."

This led to the "free-home-placing-out" of over 200,000 children between 1854 and 1929. The first Orphan Trains left Grand Central Station in late 1853 for Dowagiac, Michigan. The trains continued to run for 75 years. The last official train ran to Texas in 1929.

Ideally, the children were to be taken in groups of 10 to 40 under the supervision of at least one agent who would plan a route and send flyers to towns along the railroad line where screening committees were set up to help the agent(s) in the placement process.

The agent asked the committee, which

usually included the town doctor, clergyman, newspaper editor, store owner and/or teacher, to select possible parents for the children and approve or disapprove them when the children arrived.

When a child was placed, a contract was signed between the Children's Aid Society and the guardians taking the child. A typical contract read as follows:

Terms on Which Boys are Placed in Homes

Applications must be endorsed by the Local Committee.

Boys under 15 years of age, if not legally adopted, must be retained as members of the family and sent to school according to the Educational Laws of the State, until they are 18 years old. Suitable provision must then be made for their future.

Boys 15 years of age must be retained as members of the family and sent to school during the winter months until they are 17 years old, when a mutual arrangement may be made.

Boys over 16 years of age must be retained as members of the family for one year after which a mutual arrangement may be made.

Parties taking boys agree to write to the Society at least once a year, or to have the boys do so.

Removals of boys proving unsatisfactory can be arranged through the Local Committee or an Agent of the Society, with the party agreeing to retain the boy for a reasonable length of time after notifying the Society of the desired change.

If the child had to be removed from the household for any reason, the Children's Aid Society did so at its own expense. It cost the new family nothing.

Despite the best intentions of the agen-

Letters left with children at New York Foundling Hospital

Dear Sister,
Alone and deserted, I need to put my little one with you for a time. I would willingly work and take care of her but no one will have me and her too. All say they would take me if she was 2 or 3 years old, so not knowing what to do with her and not being able to pay her board, I bring her to you knowing you will be as kind to her as to the many others who are under your care, and I will get work and try hard to be able to relieve you of the care when I can take her to work with me. She is only 3 weeks old and I have not had her christened or anything.

No one knows how awful it is to separate from their child but a mother, but I trust you will be kind.

The only consolation I have is if I am spared and I lead an honest life that the father of us all will permit us to be united.

*A Mother, Brooklyn,
Nov. 23, 1869*

cies involved, the placement process often resembled a cattle auction, children were paraded across a stage or in some cases a railroad platform and farmers would pick the hardest as farmhands.

One of the saddest aspects of the selection process was when children from one family were separated from their brothers and sisters. The siblings of the selected child would get back on the train for the next stop, possibly in another state, and the children often never saw their brothers and sisters again. This happened countless times and in my research I was only able to verify four of the hundreds of requests I received as to the whereabouts of family members.

In the 1870's, the Catholic Church became concerned that many Catholic children were being sent to Protestant

homes and were being inculcated with Protestant values. They began operating their own Placing Out program via the railroad sponsored by the New York Foundling Hospital. Priests in towns along the railroad routes were notified that the Foundling Hospital had children

in need of homes. The priest would make an announcement at Sunday Mass and adults could sign up for a child, specifying gender and preferred hair and eye color. The Foundling Hospital board believed that if a family received a child that "fit in," everyone would be better



Children line up to board an orphan train, c. 1920.

served. One such request was for a boy with red hair because the farmer had five red-haired daughters and no sons. The boy was not only delivered, he later inherited the family farm.

An "Indenture" form was used to place the children. It was a legal document that gave the founding legal recourse without going to court, should the placement not be satisfactory and the child had to be removed.

Often called an early form of adoption, it was not adoption as we know it today, because the indentured children that were not thereafter legally adopted were ineligible to inherit unless the adults left a



Brothers William and Thomas

will specifying the child be given an inheritance.

Despite the best intentions of those involved, things did not always work out for the best.

"Many children fell through the cracks; they were mistreated, malnourished, and overworked," says writer and researcher Marilyn Holt, author of the book, *The Orphan Trains: Placing Out in America*. "On the other hand, for at least half, it was a good experience. They had opportunities they would not have had if they stayed where they were. They may not even have survived childhood."

Brothers William and Thomas, ages eleven and nine, were put on the Orphan

Dear Sisters,
By the love of God be so kind as to take this poor orphan child in and if she should die, please do bury her for me and I will be very happy. You must not think that I have neglected her. I have worked very hard to pay her board but I can't afford to bury her.

So, by the love of God, take this little child in. May God Bless you all for your kindness to all the little sufferers. This little child has suffered since she was born and I have paid debts but I have not paid all but I shall. My husband is dead and I have nobody to help me. Be kind to my little lamb. May the great God receive her into Heaven where she will be loved by God.

Unsigned

Orphan Train Rider Stories

I rode the train to Missouri and lived a happily ever after life.

By Jean Sexton

In Brooklyn, New York in 1912, an Irish carpenter, who was the father of five children, died as the result of an industrial accident. Six months later, a sixth child was born to the thirty-five-year-old widow who was working hard to keep her family together. When the baby boy was eleven months old, his mother died. The grandparents were unable to care for the six orphans, so they were taken to the Children's Aid Society.

In 1914, along with other homeless children, they boarded an Orphan Train to find new homes in the Midwest. I was the fifth child, three years old, and was separated from my sister and brothers when I was adopted in southwest Missouri.

My foster parents were Walter and Margaret Landreth, a childless couple who lived twelve miles east of Neosho, Missouri. They soon became Mama and Daddy because I did not remember my biological parents.

Daddy was a farmer and I was a tomboy. I loved going with Daddy whether it was to feed the cattle or gather walnuts. Daddy wanted me to have a pony, but Mama objected, saying that she was afraid I would get hurt. They finally compromised and I was soon riding a beautiful new bicycle. I would have had fewer black and blue marks had I had been riding a pony.

In 1918, one of Daddy's nieces, Mary, came to live with us after her mother died during the flu epidemic leaving behind ten children. Mary was six months younger than I was and we grew up together as sisters, sometimes mistaken for twins. With Mama's help, we had many parties for our friends with taffy pulls and parlor games. An aunt and uncle joined in the fun by



Jean Sexton

helping with decorations and entertainment.

Mr. J. W. Swan of Sedalia, Missouri, a very kind and considerate agent for the Children's Aid Society, visited often, but Daddy did not appreciate his visits. He did not want anyone doubting his care for his little girl. Once, when Mr. Swan arrived during a rainstorm, Daddy remarked, "Hump! Fine weather for swans."

When I was sixteen, Mr. Swan came for his last visit and gave me the address of my brother, who lived in Colorado. My brother and I soon found our sister and baby brother, who had been adopted by Mr. and Mrs. Stoneberger of Auburn, Nebraska. The following summer, the three of them came to Missouri and we had a wonderful reunion. After that, we kept in touch and had many good times together.

After graduating from high school, I attended business college in Tulsa, Oklahoma, finishing there in the height of the Great Depression. Then I met and married the tall, handsome man of my dreams. We struggled through the depression with few luxuries, but high hopes. During the thirties we bought our first home for eight hundred dollars, and had two sons. We worked at many different jobs, until the economy finally improved, and we were able to secure permanent positions. My husband worked for city and county government, and I went to work for Skelly Oil Company, retiring in 1973.

My older son, Harold, is retired from state government and my younger son, Clark, has been in the ministry since 1965. They are both upstanding citizens and have been a blessing to me, always showing their love and respect in every way. I have also been blessed with four grandchildren and five great grandchildren.

Mama died after a stroke in 1981 at the age of 97. Daddy suffered a fatal heart attack in 1952.

A Not so Happy Ending

By Marguerite Thompson

My new Papa was a big man with a moustache and a kind face. The Larsons were of the upper class in that area. They had a lady that came and washed the clothes on a wash board. Another lady made all of our clothes except for our underwear. Mrs. Larson (Mama) would make all of our underwear. They already had two sons other than my brother Teddy.

Our new home was a big two story house with 10 rooms, but we didn't have any electricity. The house was beautiful inside. I didn't have a bedroom of my own; I slept on the couch in the front room on a feather mattress Mama would take out of her closet every night.

After a few weeks, she said I could do it myself. The boys had bedrooms upstairs. Teddy and I were not permitted to use the bathroom. We had to use the outside toilet, and on Saturday we would drag a galvanized bathtub from the back porch and put it by the cook stove.

Mama didn't like my New York accent at all. She wanted me to talk like they did, so I was slapped quite often in the mouth. Sometimes I would wonder what I had done wrong.

I had only been there a few weeks when Teddy brought out a china doll to play with. He said it was his and I couldn't play with it. Well one day I found it and took it outside and broke it. I got my first whipping.

They rented out three of the bedrooms to salesmen. When I was six, Teddy and I started school. When we came home from school, we had to wash the dinner dishes from noon.

Then we had to go upstairs and make the beds, dust mop the floors and clean the bathroom. We didn't dare use the toilet, she said it took too much water. By the time we got through with that,

it was time to set the table for supper. I always only had one helping put on my plate. Teddy and Charles always had milk to drink with their dinner, but she said I couldn't have any.

They had two cows and a lot of milk, and Teddy and I would deliver it both morning and night. Charles (age 14) went with us a few times until we could do it on our own. Sometimes I went by myself, especially if it was cold. One morning on my way to school, it was so cold that the sidewalks were very icy, and I slipped and fell. One bucket of milk hit the sidewalk, the lid blew off, and half of the milk spilled out. Well, I got up, put the lid back on, and set it on the porch where it was supposed to go. The lady called my foster mother and wanted to know why she didn't get a full quart of milk. When I went home at noon, my foster mother told me about it and wanted to know if I drank some of it. I told her what had happened, and she said I was lying. Then she got the rawhide whip and didn't even care where she hit me.

Between the ages of six and eleven I got many whippings. I can truthfully say I never got enough to eat. When I would come home from school and go to the pantry to get a piece of bread and butter, she said I was stealing it, because I didn't ask for it.

Once a year, Mr. McPhealy would come from the New York Foundling Home to see how I was getting along. I had to tell him fine. I would have to speak a piece for him, or poetry as it is called now. The name of it was "Looking on the

Bright Side." Then I had to dance the Irish jig for him, and when I was through, I was excused. I would go outside and cry and wish he would take me back with him. I wanted to tell him the truth about how I was treated, but I couldn't. Still, she would whip me if she thought I was lying. I often wondered why Papa Larson didn't ever have anything to say about the way she treated me, but it seemed to me like she ruled the house.



Marguerite and Teddy

Train in 1880 by the New York House of Refuge. William found a good home. Thomas was exploited for labor, abused and desperate. The brothers returned to New York in their adult years and reunited.

While some were overworked, ran away or resorted to crime, seventy-five percent of Orphan Train Riders became productive American citizens.

Two became governors, 20 were elected to Congress, and tens of thousands served in the U.S. Armed Forces.

A judge in Indiana took in a young boy called John Brady, who later went to Yale and became Governor of Alaska. Andrew Burke was sent to Indiana, ran away from a farm and joined the Civil War. He later became Governor of North Dakota.

Michael Jordon, who was born in Ireland and was orphaned when both his parents died on the voyage to America, was sent to Indiana on an Orphan Train. He became a doctor and willed the Children's Aid Society five thousand dollars upon his death. Dr. Michael

Flynn taught at Indiana University. He was an Orphan Train Rider.

So many children were sent to the Midwest that it is estimated one in four Iowans can trace their ancestry to an Orphan Train Rider.

Approximately only 200-300 of those who rode the rails as children are alive today. We owe them an opportunity to tell their story. As the 160th anniversary of the first Orphan Train approaches, it is time for New York State to commemorate the children's journey. Kansas, Louisiana, Missouri, Iowa, and Minnesota have all established museums to keep the story alive. Louisiana's legislature has even set aside almost a quarter of a million dollars to erect a museum. New York State, where the the era of the Orphan Trains began and from where 273,000 children were transported by rail, has yet to memorialize the children's journey.

It is said that 2,000,000 Americans are descended from Orphan Train Riders. Are you one of them? IA



In 1962, Nebraska Orphan Train Riders held their first annual reunion in Grand Island. Two nuns and a priest from the New York Foundling Hospital attended.

Dear Sister,
I now sit down to write to you a few lines but I hardly know what to say, for when I inform you that I am the mother of the child left on Thanksgiving night between the hours of 8 and 9 o'clock without even a slip of paper to tell you the name of the child left in your care, my heart aches so much I cannot tell, but I knew that I was leaving her in good hands.

Although I have been unfortunate, I am neither low nor degraded and am in hopes of one day claiming my child. Her name is Jane ... born on 5 of October 1869 between the hours of 3 and 4 o'clock in the morning ... she had a piece of canton – flannel tied around her head and a little blue and white cloud around and little red and white socks on her feet – and if the prayers of an unfortunate creature like myself will do any good, offered to – the mercy of God in heaven – for you know that every night on my bended knees I pray for you.

I am very sorry that I have nothing to send you this time but I am in hopes there will be a day when I shall be able to pay you for all your trouble.

This two Dollars is to have this child christened Willie. Do not be afraid of the sores on its face; it is nothing but a ringworm. You'll remember this badge.

Unsigned

[Included with cloth badge that reads, "General Grant our Next President."]

Credits: Quote from Marilyn Holt is from an article in *The Register Star* by Julie Snively. "Terms on Which Boys are Placed in Homes"; letters from the archives of the Foundling Hospital, and also the letters from the orphans, are courtesy of the National Orphan Train Complex based in Concordia, Kansas. This organization is dedicated to keeping the story of the Orphan Trains alive by hosting events, exhibitions, reunions and aiding in genealogical research. The record books that Tom Riley found in the hay loft are now part of the complex's archive.

For more information on the National Orphan Train Complex visit: orphantraindepot.org.

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To learn more about author Tom Riley visit: tomrileybooksandart.com



From the archives of The Children's Aid Society.