

Orphans Return to a City They Left on Sad Trains

By THOMAS MORGAN

When she remembers the Empire State Building, Alice Ayler, a 71-year-old psychologist from Oklahoma City, thinks about tears she shed 62 years ago. That was the day smiling, benevolent agents of the Children's Aid Society met her at the construction site of the skyscraper and separated her from the three younger brothers she had been raising alone in New York.

Arthur Smith, 72, a Trenton businessman, wants to know who was the woman who left him unattended, but well-dressed, in a wicker basket in the women's wear department of the old Gimbel's department store in Manhattan some 72 years ago.

Mr. Smith and Mrs. Ayler were among more than 100,000 orphaned or abandoned children from New York who were sent west by the Children's Aid Society and the New York Foundling Hospital as participants in a social experiment called the Orphan Train Movement, a forerunner of today's heavily burdened foster-care system.

Today, Mrs. Ayler, Mr. Smith and several hundred other Orphan Train children, all elderly, from Minnesota to Texas, will attend their first gathering in New York, a four-day meeting at the Penta Hotel in Manhattan, in an emotional search for their early roots. For many of them, the memories are bittersweet, and the assembly is a homecoming. 'Please Don't Go Away'

"The separation from my brothers was probably the worst time of my life," said Mrs. Ayler, who was later reunited with her surviving siblings. "Toots was my nickname, and when the agents took them away, the twins, who were 3 years old, cried, " 'Toot-toot, please don't go away.' "

Memories, particular odors, trees, scraps of old photographs, even chunks of concrete -- this is the grist that survivors say they use in a relentless search for records or evidence that can give them a clue to who they are and where they began.

"I have mixed emotions about coming back," said Lorraine Williams of Temple Hills, Md., who left New York City on the orphan train bound for Kirksville, Mo., 66 years ago. She and her husband, a retired Air Force pilot, are coming to the reunion by train.

"I will look outside the train, at the roadside, and I think I will have flashbacks," Mrs. Williams said. "I'll remember myself as a little girl in the white dress with blue embroidery at the bottom and around the neck, headed for Kirksville with nothing but a change of underwear and a sandwich in a brown paper bag."

A Discredited Policy

Mrs. Williams and many others consider themselves survivors of a policy that has been somewhat discredited. Dr. James Shenton, professor of history at Columbia University, said that social service experts now first try to help children find stable homes in their own environment rather than sending them away to a totally foreign one.

But during the time of the orphan trains, from 1853 to 1929, only orphanages or asylums offered care for children, and there were often too few of them.

During those 76 years, tens of thousands of New York City children roomed the streets uncared for, left to feed and clothe themselves. They were often illiterate, and they were often considered a menace to society.

Sanitation was nonexistent and diseases like typhoid, cholera and influenza took thousands of lives. "Often, whole families were wiped out and the occasional kid left surviving was left pretty much on his own," Dr. Shenton said.

Surviving on the Streets

Sometimes wearing rags and in poor health, the children of the streets slept in doorways, in hay barges, under stairways, anywhere they could, officials with the Children's Aid Society said.

For Charles Loring Brace, a wealthy minister and a founder of the Children's Aid Society, the notion of putting children who had done no wrong into any institution was anathema. His solution was to send the children to America's farmlands.

The notion was to match them with good homes and foster parents, who often became adoptive parents, said Philip Coltoff, Executive Director of the society. Hard work for the children was a part of the bargain. As often as possible, siblings would be placed in homes near each other.

Lee Nailing, of Atlanta, Tex., remembers being in a group of children taken off the orphan train in Clarksville, Tex., and the anguish he felt at being separated from his brother. "We were lined up in an auditorium or church," Mr. Nailing remembers, "and people would stare at us, sort of like buying a cow. We were sent down to this part of the world as child labor because the farm people needed help in the fields," he said. "The people would come up and feel your muscles to see if you were healthy."

Amid the stories the survivors hope to tell this week at the reunion are lessons of survival and self-reliance they hope to pass on to children living in foster care today.

"I don't care how good the country was or how good people are, you want to know who you were and to find out that you were not so bad," said Mrs. Ayler, who talks to children's groups about her experiences.

"I cannot help what my mother or father did," she said. "What matters is what I do. I tell children you can survive if somebody gives you a reason to."

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Name _____

Graphic Organizer

“Orphans Return to a City They Left on Sad Trains” Compare/Contrast the Life of an Orphan		
Urban	Similarities	Rural

Was it Worth it? Advantages and Disadvantages of Establishing the Orphan Trains	
Advantages of the Orphan Trains	Disadvantages of the Orphan Trains

Placement of Orphan Train Riders

1. On your railroad map, you will use an atlas to locate the 5 U.S. cities below. Mark them with dots on your map. Label the dots using the city names.
2. Create a legend on the map. Draw five boxes for the 5 travelers using a different color for each one.
3. Trace/draw the route from New York City in the corresponding color showing where each orphan would travel. Colors may overlap. If the city is not near a railroad track, assume the rest of the journey was made by another form of transportation.

<u>Traveler</u>	<u>Destination</u>
Alice Ayler	Kansas City, Kansas
Arthur Smith	Clarinda, Iowa
Lorraine Williams	Kirksville, Missouri
Lee Nailing	Clarksville, Texas
Arizona riders	Clifton, Arizona

And the Arizona Story...

- No children were placed by the Children's Aid Society in Arizona. However, an orphanage run by Catholic nuns placed their wards in Arizona. In 1904, Irish children traveled from New York City to the mining towns of Clifton and Morenci in Arizona.
- The nuns placed 40 children into Catholic families in Clifton/Morenci. Anglo residents noticed that the nuns were placing Anglo children with Mexican families, and they became very angry even though the Mexican families were the Catholics in the area.
- It didn't take long for the Anglo community to be in an uproar and the townspeople formed a vigilante group that kidnapped the children from their new homes and took them by force. The group placed the 40 children into Anglo families even though they were not of the same religion.
- The nuns later fought in court for the children to be returned to New York City because they felt responsible for the children. The U.S Supreme Court sided with the vigilantes.