

Orphan Train Background Information (for Teachers)

During the 19th century, waves of European immigrants arrived in cities on the east coast of the United States. Some were able to move on to rural areas of the Midwest and West. Most stayed in the cities to work until they could earn enough money to move on. They lived in squalid, crowded tenements and slums. In time, these cities became overcrowded. As a result, thousands of children were abandoned by their parents or given over to orphanages. Also, because the living conditions were so bad, many parents died of disease, from childbirth, or in workplace accidents; this, too, contributed to the number of homeless children. Because the majority of these immigrants had no extended family in the United States, children had no one to take them in, so, they turned to the streets to survive. Lastly, some parents simply abandoned or gave up their children because they could no longer afford to take care of them.

At the time, there were no laws or government programs to protect or care for homeless or abandoned children. Society, as a whole, felt that people down on their luck should either help themselves achieve a better situation or suffer the consequences. Charitable organizations, usually run by churches and religious orders, would accept children. Street children had no one to care for them. There were no shelters or soup kitchens. They slept where they could, ate scrapes of food they found, and sometimes resorted to criminal activities to earn money. In 1853, Reverend Charles Loring Brace decided this needed to change. These children needed to be saved and given a chance to live a better life. In that year, he and a group of benefactors founded the Children's Aid Society of New York City.

Brace and his supporters took in children and sent them to either the Brace Farm School or a Children's Aid Society industrial school. They were given room and board, clothes, healthcare, and attended school so they could learn to read and write. In addition, they were taught agricultural skills and trade job skills. His hope was to send the children to rural areas and farms where they could work and live a better life. He chose these areas because he felt they had cleaner air, healthier food, and a more Godly atmosphere than the city. The first group of riders left New York City in 1854 bound for Michigan.

Riders were accompanied by agents, usually two (a man and a woman), on their journey. Stops were carefully selected. Prior to each stop, flyers and newspaper ads advertised the arrival so interested families could come and select a child. The riders themselves were given an identification tag with their name and date of birth, a Bible with their name and date of birth in it, and a suitcase with one set of new clothes. The trains continued to travel west until all the children on board were taken in. Families who took riders in signed a contract agreeing to provide the child with room, board, clothing, and healthcare, to send them to school and Church, to pay them a reasonable wage if they worked, and to send progress reports at least once a year. Adoption was not required, but encouraged. They were also told the agents would return to visit at least once a year to check on the children.

After the initial success of the program, charitable organizations in other cities began placing out children. They followed the model that had been created by Brace. The Children's Aid Society placed out children for 75 years, until 1929. Other organizations ran shorter term programs. Placing out ended due to the Great Depression and the creation of laws and government programs to care for homeless and abandoned children. During its time of

operation, the Orphan Trains was an example of a social movement that changed how America looked at its poor and underprivileged.

As with any program, there were positives and negatives. On the positive side, many children were placed with loving families who cared for them and considered them their own. Some were adopted. There were numerous success stories, such as John Brady who became a governor of Alaska, Eden Ahbez who was a songwriter, and Andrew Burke who was a governor of North Dakota. On the negative side, many siblings were separated when placed out. Agents did not do follow-up visits. Some riders were considered no more than a servant or cheap source of farm labor. There are even reports of riders who ran away from families who took them in rather than to continue to live there. There are even riders who said that the townspeople and their classmates looked down on them and even shunned them for being orphans. In one case, the Arizona towns of Clifton and Morenci actually reacted negatively to Anglo children being taken in by Hispanic families, forcing half of the children to be returned to New York City for replacement. In spite of it all, this experiment did result in a raised public awareness of the plight of homeless and orphaned children, and government action to provide services to care for them.

Questions to Guide Your Viewing

NAME _____

Directions: While viewing the PowerPoint on Orphan Trains, write your answers to the following questions in the space provided.

1. Why were there so many homeless and orphaned children in 1853?
2. Who came up with the idea of Orphan Trains?
3. Why were rural areas and farms chosen as destinations for riders?
4. During what years did Orphan Trains operate?
5. How did people find out an Orphan Train was arriving?
6. What were riders given for their journey?
7. What did families agree to when they took in a rider?

Answer Key for Questions to Guide Your Viewing

1. over population
death of parents
lack of extended family
abandonment by parents
2. Charles Loring Brace
3. clean air
healthy food
Godly atmosphere
4. 1854-1929
5. flyers and newspaper ads
6. identification tags
new set of clothes
Bible
7. provide room, board, and clothes
send to school and Church
healthcare
send progress reports

Placing Out Table

These figures are for the New York Children's Aid Society only. Other organizations may have placed as many as 100,000 more orphans.

Name of State and Number of Riders Placed

Alabama 39	Nevada 59
Arkansas 136	New Jersey 4,977
California 168	New York 33,053
Colorado 1,563	New Mexico 1
Connecticut 1,588	New Hampshire 136
Delaware 833	North Carolina 144
Florida 400	North Dakota 975
Georgia 317	Ohio 7,272
Idaho 52	Oklahoma 154
Illinois 9,172	Oregon 90
Indiana 3,955	Pennsylvania 2,679
Iowa 6,675	Rhode Island 340
Kansas 4,150	South Carolina 191
Kentucky 212	South Dakota 43
Louisiana 79	Tennessee 233
Maine 43	Texas 1,327
Maryland 563	Utah 31
Massachusetts 375	Vermont 262
Michigan 5,326	Virginia 1,806
Minnesota 3,258	Washington 231
Mississippi 240	West Virginia 149
Missouri 6,088	Wisconsin 2,750
Montana 83	Wyoming 19
Nebraska 3,442	

Name _____

Map Table

States with 1-500 riders	
States with 501-1000 riders	
States with 1001-2000 riders	
States with over 2001 riders	

Answer Key for Map Table

States with 1-500 riders	Alabama, Arkansas, California, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, South Dakota, Tennessee, Vermont, West Virginia, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Utah, Washington, Wyoming
States with 501-1000 riders	Delaware, Maryland, North Dakota
States with 1001-2000 riders	Colorado, Connecticut, Texas, Virginia
States with over 2001 riders	Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Ohio

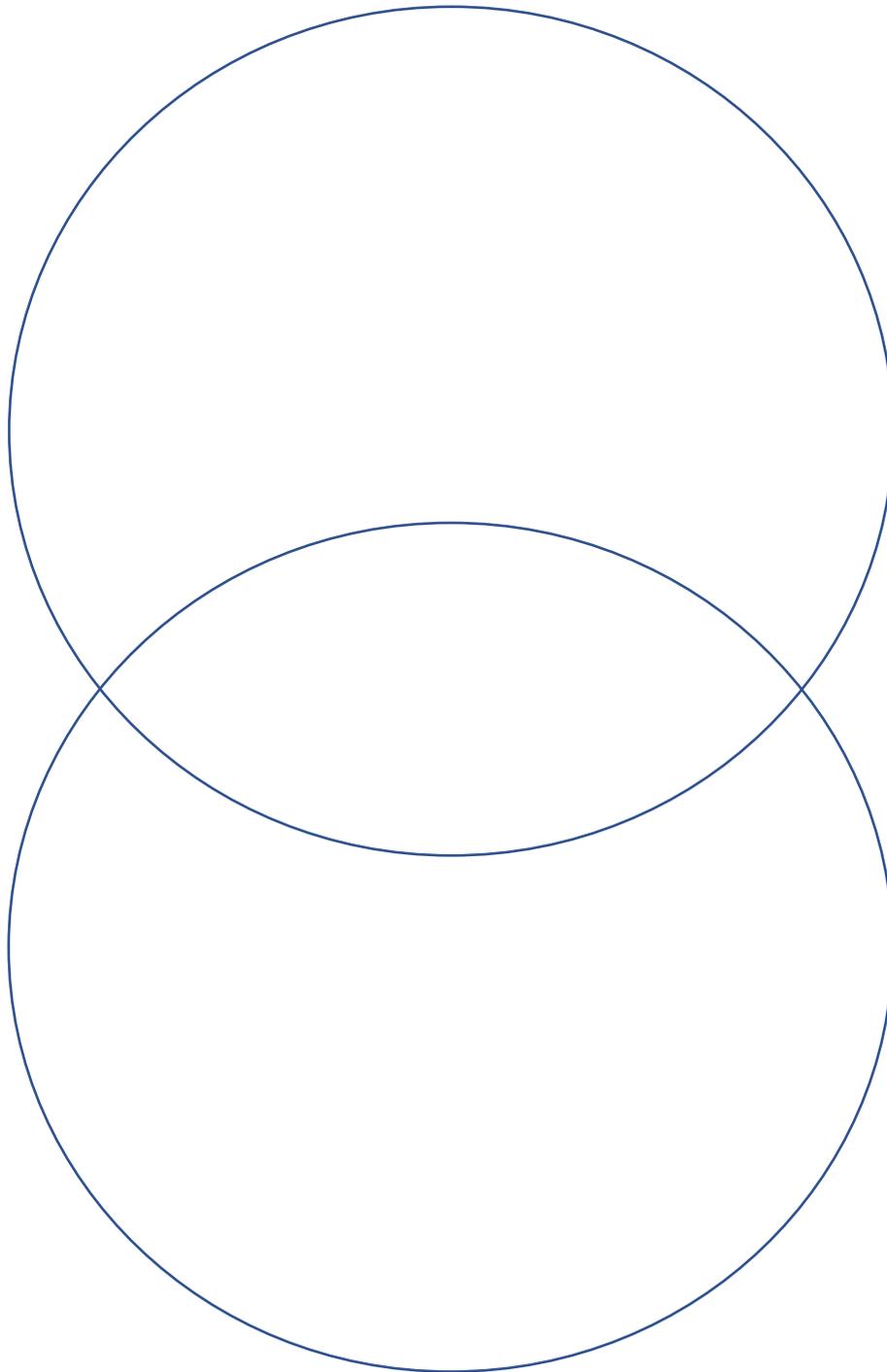
Answer Key for Orphan Train Assessment

1. C
2. D
3. D
4. D
5. B
6. B
7. B
8. B
9. C
10. D

Venn Diagram

NAME _____

For use with <https://orphantraindepot.org/history/orphan-train-rider-stories/>



Orphan Train Assessment

Name _____

Directions: Circle the letter of the best answer for each question.

1. Orphan Trains were begun by
 - a. the U.S. government.
 - b. train companies.
 - c. Charles Loring Brace.
 - d. Farm organizations.

2. Orphans were sent to
 - a. rural communities.
 - b. farms.
 - c. the Midwest.
 - d. all of the above

3. Parents who accepted orphans
 - a. signed a contract.
 - b. were supposed to be visited by agents.
 - c. were supposed to send progress reports.
 - d. all of the above

4. Orphan Trains were started because
 - a. some families had too many children to support.
 - b. of child neglect.
 - c. there was no family to care for the orphans.
 - d. all of the above

5. According to your map, the majority of orphans were placed in which region of the United States?
 - a. The South
 - b. The Midwest
 - c. The West
 - d. The Northeast

6. According to your map, which state had no riders?
 - a. Ohio
 - b. Arizona
 - c. Virginia
 - d. Iowa

7. According to your Map Table, which category had the fewest states?
 - a. 1-500 riders
 - b. 501-1000 riders
 - c. 1001-2000 riders
 - d. Over 2001 riders

8. Canada received approximately 566 Orphan Train riders. What color on the map should Canada be?
 - a. Yellow
 - b. Green
 - c. Blue
 - d. Red

9. Charles Loring Brace sent orphans to rural communities and farms because he believed
 - a. very few children lived there.
 - b. urban families would not take orphans.
 - c. rural areas had clean air, healthy food, and a Godly atmosphere.
 - d. rural areas were the cheapest place to send orphans.

10. Most of the orphans sent on the trains were
 - a. abandoned by their birth parents.
 - b. given a numbered identification tag.
 - c. from New York City.
 - d. all of the above