Orphan Train: A Novel

Christina Baker Kline, 2013
HarperCollins
278 pp.

Summary
Between 1854 and 1929, so-called orphan trains ran regularly from the cities of the East Coast to the farmlands of the Midwest, carrying thousands of abandoned children whose fates would be determined by pure luck. Would they be adopted by a kind and loving family, or would they face a childhood and adolescence of hard labor and servitude?

As a young Irish immigrant, Vivian Daly was one such child, sent by rail from New York City to an uncertain future a world away. Returning east later in life, Vivian leads a quiet, peaceful existence on the coast of Maine, the memories of her upbringing rendered a hazy blur. But in her attic, hidden in trunks, are vestiges of a turbulent past.

Seventeen-year-old Molly Ayer knows that a community-service position helping an elderly widow clean out her attic is the only thing keeping her out of juvenile hall. But as Molly helps Vivian sort through her keepsakes and possessions, she discovers that she and Vivian aren't as different as they appear. A Penobscot Indian who has spent her youth in and out of foster homes, Molly is also an outsider being raised by strangers, and she, too, has unanswered questions about the past.

Moving between contemporary Maine and Depression-era Minnesota, Orphan Train is a powerful tale of upheaval and resilience, second chances, and unexpected friendship. (From the publisher.)

Author Bio
- Birth—1964
- Raised—in Maine and Tennessee, USA, and the UK
- Education—B.A., Yale University; M.B., Cambridge University; M.F.A., University of Virginia
- Currently—lives in Montclair, New Jersey

Christina Baker Kline is a novelist, nonfiction writer, and editor. In addition to Orphan Train, her novels include Bird in Hand, The Way Life Should Be, Desire Lines, and Sweet Water.

Kline also commissioned and edited two widely praised collections of original essays on the first year of parenthood and raising young children, Child of Mine and Room
to Grow. She coauthored a book on feminist mothers and daughters, The Conversation Begins, with her mother, Christina L. Baker, and she coedited About Face: Women Write About What They See When They Look in the Mirror with Anne Burt.

Kline grew up in Maine, England, and Tennessee, and has spent a lot of time in Minnesota and North Dakota, where her husband grew up. She is a graduate of Yale, Cambridge, and the University of Virginia, where she was a Hoyts Fellow in Fiction Writing. She has taught creative writing and literature at Fordham and Yale, among other places, and is a recent recipient of a Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation fellowship. She lives in Montclair, New Jersey, with her family. (From the publisher.)

**Book Reviews**

This superbly composed novel tells two parallel stories of suffering and perseverance, capturing the heart and mind equally and remaining mesmerizing through the intensely heart-wrenching conclusion.

**RT Times Review**

Kline’s absorbing new novel (after Bird in the Hand) is a heartfelt page-turner.... Seventeen-year-old Penobsct Indian Molly Ayer has spent most of her life in foster care. When...she ends up cleaning out elderly Vivian Daly’s attic[,] Molly learns that Vivian was herself an orphan...put on the Orphan Train in the late 1920s and tossed from home to home in Minnesota. The growing connection leads Molly to dig deeper into Vivian’s life, which allows Molly to discover her own potential and helps Vivian rediscover someone she believed had been lost to her forever.... Kline lets us live the characters’ experiences vividly through their skin, and...[t]he growth from instinct to conscious understanding to partnership between the two is the foundation for a moving tale.

**Publishers Weekly**

[A] compelling story about loss, adaptability, and courage. Molly is a rebellious 17-year-old foster child sentenced to community service for stealing a copy of Jane Eyre. She finds a position cleaning out the attic of Vivian, an elderly woman in their coastal Maine town. As Molly sorts through old trunks and boxes, Vivian begins to share stories from her past.... [when] she was packed off on one of the many orphan trains intended to bring children to Midwestern families who would care for them. Each orphan’s lot was largely dependent on the luck of the draw. In this, Vivian’s life parallels Molly’s, and an unlikely friendship blossoms. —Christine Perkins, Bellingham P.L., WA

**Library Journal**

[A] dramatic, emotional story from a neglected corner of American history. Molly is a troubled teen, a foster child bounced from one unsuitable home to another. Vivian is a wealthy 91-year-old widow, settled in a Victorian mansion on the Maine seashore. But Vivian’s story has much in common with Molly’s.... Vivian’s journey west was aboard an "Orphan Train," a bit of misguided 1900s-era social engineering moving homeless, destitute city children, mostly immigrants, into Midwest families.... Kline does a superb job in connecting goth-girl Molly...to Vivian, who sees her troubled childhood reflected in angry Molly.... A deeply emotional story drawn from the
shadows.

Kirkus Reviews

Discussion Questions
1. On the surface, Vivian's and Molly's lives couldn't be more different. In what ways are their stories similar?

2. In the prologue Vivian mentions that her "true love" died when she was 23, but she doesn't mention the other big secret in the book. Why not?

3. Why hasn't Vivian ever shared her story with anyone? Why does she tell it now?

4. What role does Vivian's grandmother play in her life? How does the reader's perception of her shift as the story unfolds?

5. Why does Vivian seem unable to get rid of the boxes in her attic?

6. In Women of the Dawn, a nonfiction book about the lives of four Wabanaki Indians excerpted in the epigraph, Bunny McBride writes:

   In portaging from one river to another, Wabanakis had to carry their canoes and all other possessions. Everyone knew the value of traveling light and understood that it required leaving some things behind. Nothing encumbered movement more than fear, which was often the most difficult burden to surrender.

   How does the concept of portaging reverberate throughout this novel? What fears hamper Vivian's progress? Molly's?

7. Vivian's name changes several times over the course of the novel: from Niamh Power to Dorothy Nielsen to Vivian Daly. How are these changes significant for her? How does each name represent a different phase of her life?

8. What significance, if any, does Molly Ayer's name have?

9. How did Vivian's first-person account of her youth and the present-day story from Molly's third-person-limited perspective work together? Did you prefer one story to the other? Did the juxtaposition reveal things that might not have emerged in a traditional narrative?

10. In what ways, large and small, does Molly have an impact on Vivian's life? How does Vivian have an impact on Molly's?

11. What does Vivian mean when she says, "I believe in ghosts"?

12. When Vivian finally shares the truth about the birth of her daughter and her decision to put May up for adoption she tells Molly that she was "selfish" and "afraid." Molly defends her and affirms Vivian's choice. How did you perceive Vivian's decision? Were you surprised she sent her child to be adopted after her own experiences with the Children's Aid Society?

13. When the children are presented to audiences of potential caretakers, the Children's Aid Society explains adoptive families are responsible for the child's
religious upbringing. What role does religion play in this novel? How do Molly and Vivian each view God?

14. When Vivian and Dutchy are reunited she remarks, "However hard I try, I will always feel alien and strange. And now I've stumbled on a fellow outsider, one who speaks my language without saying a word." How is this also true for her friendship with Molly?

15. When Vivian goes to live with the Byrnes Fanny offers her food and advises, "You got to learn to take what people are willing to give." In what ways is this good advice for Vivian and Molly? What are some instances when their independence helped them?

16. Molly is enthusiastic about Vivian’s reunion with her daughter, but makes no further efforts to see her own mother. Why is she unwilling or unable to effect a reunion in her own family? Do you think she will someday?

17. Vivian’s Claddagh cross is mentioned often throughout the story. What is its significance? How does its meaning change or deepen over the course of Vivian’s life?

(Questions issued by publisher.)

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About the Author

Full text biography:

Christina Baker Kline

Birth Date: 1964

Known As: Baker, Christina

Place of Birth: United Kingdom, Cambridge

Nationality: American

Occupation: Writer

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Awards

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Related Information

Awards:

Several Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation Fellowships; Henry Hoyns fellow in fiction writing, Yale University; Fordham research grant, 2009.

Personal Information:

Born January 4, 1964, in Cambridge, England; daughter of William J. (a history professor) and Christina (an English professor) Baker; married David Kline (works in television); children: Hayden, Will, and Eli. Education: Yale University, B.A.; Cambridge University, M.A.; University of Virginia, M.F.A. Addresses: Home: Montclair, NJ. Agent: Beth Vesel Literary Agency, 80 5th Ave., Ste. 1101, New York, NY 10011. E-mail: bakerkline@aol.com.

Career Information:

Writer and editor. Fordham University, New York, NY, writer in residence and fiction teacher; also teaches in the Fordham-in-London program at the University of London, Heythrop College, London, England. Previously taught literature and creative writing at Yale University, New Haven, CT; New York University, New York; the University of Virginia, Charlottesville; and Drew University, Madison, NJ. Has also worked as a caterer, cook, and personal chef on the Maine coast, Martha’s Vineyard, and in Charlottesville, VA. Has been a writer-in-residence fellow at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, Amherst; Penrose Writers’ Colony, and Haystack Writers’ Symposium, Maine.

Writings:

NOVELS


OTHER

- (With mother, Christina Looper Baker) The Conversation Begins: Mothers and Daughters Talk about Living
Feminism, Bantam (New York, NY), 1996.

- (Editor) Room to Grow: Twenty-Two Writers Encounter the Pleasures and Paradoxes of Raising Young Children, St. Martin's Griffin (New York, NY), 2000.
- (Editor, with Allison Gilbert) Always Too Soon: Voices of Support for Those Who Have Lost Both Parents, Seal Press (Emeryville, CA), 2006.
- (Editor, with Anne Burt) About Face: Women Write about What They See When They Look in the Mirror, foreword by Bobbi Brown, Seal Press (Berkeley, CA), 2008.


Sidelights:

Christina Baker Kline is the author of short stories and novels. Her nonfiction includes The Conversation Begins: Mothers and Daughters Talk about Living Feminism, a collection of first-person narratives she wrote with her mother, Christina Looper Baker. Kline's novel Sweet Water revolves around the decision of twenty-five-year-old artist Cassandra Simon to move from New York City to Sweetwater, Tennessee. Although since age three she had been raised by her widowed father in Boston, she now finds herself compelled to live with the maternal grandmother she has never known on the sixty-acre farm that her grandfather bequeathed to Cassie. In chapters that alternate between the first-person narration of Cassie and her Grandmother Constance, the two women try to deal with each other and the past, in particular the shattering death of Cassie's mother in a car accident two decades earlier.

A Publishers Weekly contributor praised Sweet Water for its suspenseful plot, "often beautiful and always lucid" text, and Kline's abilities as she "perfectly renders each woman's voice." The reviewer also wrote that Kline has produced a "powerful, immensely readable tale." Andrea Higbie, writing for the New York Times Book Review, faulted Sweet Water for its flat characters and not living up to its promise; she praised the novel, however, for its "intriguing structure ... and some clear, evocative writing." In School Library Journal, Carolyn E. Gecan predicted: "Young adults who like a little romance and mystery mixed together will enjoy this gentle story."

The Conversation Begins is a collection of first-person narratives based on interviews with twenty-three significant second-wave feminists and their daughters. Some sixty women who have made public contributions to the women's movement were invited to participate in this project, though some declined. Included in the published collection are pieces by Eleanor Smeal, Letty Cottin Pogrebin, Clarissa Pinkola Estes, Alix Kates Shulman, Tillie Olsen, Patsy Mink, Barbara Seaman, Barbara Ehrenreich, Naomi Wolf, Paula Gunn Allen, and Joy Harjo, among others.

In The Conversation Begins, Kline and Baker focus on how feminism has affected the family and been passed from one generation to the next. They discover that there has been somewhat of a backlash by daughters who too keenly suffered their mothers' absences--physical, mental, and emotional. While Beverly A. Miller complained in Library Journal that "the results are curiously bland," Leora Tanenbaum, writing in Women's Review of Books, found that the personal stories "alone make fascinating reading." "Their conversations reveal as much about the mother-daughter dynamic as they do about feminism," remarked Donna Seaman in Booklist. "There is a voyeuristic pleasure to reading about their private lives," Tanenbaum added. Though feeling that the book offers only partial insight into feminism's impact and inadequate delving into the future of feminism, a Kirkus Reviews contributor wrote: "As a collection of discrete stories of a social movement and of the eternal bond of mother and child, this is an impressive book."

Kline is editor with Allison Gilbert of Always Too Soon: Voices of Support for Those Who Have Lost Both Parents, a collection of twenty interviews. The contributions come from ordinary people, as well as celebrities like Ehrenreich, Ice-T, Rosanne Cash, and Yogi Berra. In some cases, the deaths were premature, as was the case of the deaths of singer Shelby Lynne's parents. Her father shot her mother and then killed himself when Lynne was just a teen. Many were the result of tragedies like the Holocaust, 9/11, or the crash of TWA Flight 800.

Library Journal contributor Elizabeth Brinkley described Always Too Soon as being an "often heart-wrenching collection
of voices."

Kline's novel *The Way Life Should Be* is narrated by Angela Russo, who hopes to leave Manhattan to live a simpler life. She makes an online connection with a man whose screen name is "MaineCatch," and distracted by the possibilities, Angela becomes neglectful at her job as a museum event planner, which leads to her dismissal. Angela is now free to head to the Maine coast and Mount Desert Island, where she finds Rich, the sailing instructor, to be something of a disappointment, living in a subdivision condo, not in the seaside cottage she had imagined.

Friendless, Angela nevertheless begins to rebuild her life, renewing her passion for cooking (recipes are included), meeting people, and eventually finding another chance at love. A Publishers Weekly contributor commented that Kline "has a perfect sense of character and timing."

Kline's next novel, *Bird in Hand*, grew out of the author's move from New York City to Montclair, New Jersey. Noting that she was "suddenly ... driving on unfamiliar (and confusing) highways with not only my own precious human cargo in the backseat but other mothers' as well," Kline went on to remark in her interview with Curled Up with a Good Book website contributor Michael Leonard: "Late at night, I'd terrify myself with 'What if?' questions, such as: What if something happens to one of these children—my own or someone else's? What if somehow I'm responsible? As I turned these kinds of questions over in my mind, I realized—with the writer part of my brain—it would be a lot more useful and less neurotic to use them as material than to keep pointlessly obsessing."

*Bird in Hand* opens with Alison Gray on her way home from a book release party for her friend Claire when another driver disregards a stop sign, causing Alison to crash into the car. A little boy in the other car is killed, and Alison cannot get over her guilt feelings even though she was not legally responsible for the accident or the boy's death. In addition, the accident places even more stress on a marriage that is not going well. Alison's husband, Charlie, can't seem to stop blaming Alison for the accident because she had a couple of martinis at the party. He has also begun an affair with their friend Claire. The novel flashes back on the ten-year friendship of Alison, Charlie, Claire, and Ben, Claire's husband, as the couples' marriages fall apart.

"Kline's unflinching gaze and lovely prose sets Kline's novel apart from the herd of infidelity/marital ennui novels," wrote a Publishers Weekly contributor. Ardeana Hamlin, writing for the Bangor Daily News, commented that the author "creates characters that evoke the reader's sympathy for the frailty and strength they display as they come to terms with what is, what must be and how they must adjust to harsh new realities."

*Orphan Train* was released by Kline in 2013. In the beginning of the twentieth century it was a common practice for urban orphans on the east coast to send their numbers by train to families in the Midwest and beyond. Vivian, now a ninety-one-year-old widow, was once a part of the population of an orphan train headed west. Born in Ireland, Vivian came to New York in the early 1900s. She is loaded up into a train and shipped west. The first family she finds a home with is the Byrnes. But the Byrnes are looking only for free labor for their dressmaking enterprise in Vivian. As the Great Depression begins the Byrnes cannot support Vivian, who is dumped back into the system. Vivian's next foster family is the Grotes. Vivian's situation goes quickly sour. The Grotes abuse and neglect her. Eventually a kindhearted teacher intervenes and Vivian finally finds a home with a good family who will care for her.

In present day, Molly is, like Vivian, an orphan who has been bounced from family to family. Molly's father died in an accident. Her mother succumbed to a criminal lifestyle. After being caught stealing, Molly is made to perform community service helping clear out Vivian's attic. The two orphans are linked by common experience. Their life stories unfold in parallel in *Orphan Train*.

Critics praised *Orphan Train*. In Kirkus Reviews a contributor remarked: "The realistic narrative follows characters as they change and grow, making a poignant revelation from Vivian entirely believable, as is Molly's response to Vivian's dark secret. A deeply emotional story drawn from the shadows." A contributor to Publishers Weekly commented: "The growth from instinct to conscious understanding to partnership between the two is the foundation for a moving tale." Bridget Thorsen, writing in Booklist wrote: "Kline illuminates a largely hidden chapter of American history, while portraying the coming-of-age of two resilient young women." In Library Journal, Christine Perkins concluded: "With compassion and delicacy Kline presents a little-known chapter of American history."
National Orphan Train Complex

Preserving the Past for the Future

History

From 1854 to 1929 an estimated 250,000 orphaned, abandoned, and homeless children were placed throughout the United States and Canada during the Orphan Train Movement.

When the orphan train movement began, it was estimated that 30,000 abandoned children were living on the streets of New York City.

Charles Loring Brace founded the Children's Aid Society in order to help these children.

The aid institutions developed a program that placed homeless children into homes throughout the country. The children were transported to their new homes on trains which were eventually labeled “orphan trains.”

This period of mass relocation of children in the United States is widely recognized as the beginning of documented foster care in America.

The Need for the Orphan Trains

The Children's Aid Society

The New York Foundling Hospital
National Orphan Train Complex

Preserving the Past for the Future

Need for the Orphan Trains

In 1853, the United States began surveying railroad lines to the Pacific, mapping four different routes. Posters, flyers and advertisements were sent to Europe and the rest of the world extolling the virtues of coming to America and getting “free land.” Many were led to believe America was the “land of milk
and honey” they so desperately wanted for themselves and their children. As a result the United States received a larger number of immigrants than any other country in history. Between 1841 and 1860, America welcomed 4,311,465 newcomers. Many left their homelands because of poor harvests, famines, political unrest and revolutions. Agents of steamship lines along with the railroad companies attracted thousands to the United States with words such as “the land of opportunity” and “land of a second chance.” This brought laborers for the factories, tenants for western lands, and often chaos to young families when housing became a problem.

It wasn’t until 1882 that congress passed the first general immigration statute.

As early as 1830, some states passed immigration laws of their own but in 1872 the Supreme Court decided these state laws violated the constitution.

Ellis Island, located in New York Harbor, opened in 1892 as property of the United States Bureau of Immigration (later the Immigration and Naturalization Service) but the main structure was gutted by fire in 1897, reopening in 1900 processing 2,251 immigrants the first day.

In 1907, a record number (1,285,349) of immigrants were admitted to the United States. Ten years later, Congress passed a law that required an immigrant to prove that he could read and write at least one language. Physically handicapped and children under 16 did not have to meet this requirement.

The 1921 quota law allowed up to 357,000 aliens from countries outside the Western Hemisphere to enter the United States and by 1924, the total was down to 150,000.

Ellis Island closed in 1954 but became part of the Statue of Liberty National Monument in 1965.

**Insufficient Living Conditions Added Problems**

Port cities were overcrowded for even temporary housing. Tenements often housed ten or more persons to the room. Jobs became scarce and labor was cheap.

Without the extended family (grandparents, aunts, uncles) to rely upon in times of need, young families fell apart. Children as young as six years old were working to help support the family. Food became scarce. Job safety was not a priority causing many men to be killed in accidents at sea and in other work places. This left women and children to make their own way living as best they could.
Diseases from living in unsanitary quarters led to early deaths of overworked mothers. Orphanages were built to care for as many children as could possibly be taken in. Adults could pay for the care on a weekly or monthly basis but if the payments stopped, the child became a ward of the court and was “disposed” of as the social workers saw fit.

Back to History
In 1853, Charles Loring Brace and a group of businessmen formed a new organization to help care for the neglected children of New York City. They called it the Children’s Aid Society (CAS) with Mr. Brace as the first Secretary. This care led to the “free-home-placing-out” of over 200,000 children between 1854 and the early 1930s. You can find a list of Agents and their biographies here.

**The Program**

Children were taken in groups of 10 to 40 under the supervision of at least one “western” agent and traveled on trains to selected stops along the way where they were taken by families in that area. Today, many consider the Orphan Train Movement as the precursor to modern foster care.

Agents would plan a route, send flyers to towns along the way, and arrange for a “screening committee” in towns where the children might get new homes.

The towns where they stopped had to be along a railroad line. The screening committee (mostly men) was often made up of a town doctor, clergyman, newspaper editor, store owner and/or teacher.

The agent asked the committee to select possible parents for the children and approve or disapprove on the day the children arrived. They helped the agent(s) in the placement process.

When a child was placed, a contract was signed between the Children’s Aid Society and the guardians taking the child. A typical contract stated:

**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 between 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, the party agreeing to retain the boy 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 their own expense. It cost the new family nothing.

The first group of children went to Dowagiac, Michigan, in 1854, and the last official train ran to Texas in 1929.

Annual reports of the Children’s Aid Society printed selected letters from the children. Glowing reports of a good life with a caring family often closes with a wistful, “If you should see my brother, please tell him where I am.”

By 1860, 30,500 miles of tracks had been laid and eleven railroads met in Chicago, enabling the Children’s Aid Society to place children throughout the country. Railroads were the most inexpensive way to move children westward from poverty filled homes, orphanages, poor houses, and off the streets. In the west and mid-west Brace believed, solid, God-fearing homes could be found for the children. Food would be plentiful with pure air to breathe and a good work ethic developed by living on a farm would help them grow into mature responsible adults able to care for themselves.

Back to History
National Orphan Train Complex

Preserving the Past for the Future

Newspaper Articles and Documents

Articles about Orphans in New York City:
The New York Daily News – Deserted in Subway – no date

Orphan Train Advertising:
Orphan Train Announcement – Illinois – 1888

Newspaper Articles Describing Placements in Different States:
New York Daily Tribune – New York boys sent to Virginia – 1880
The New York Daily Tribune – Thirty-five poor boys and girls sent to Iowa – 1880
Bonham, Texas – The Orphan Boys – 1898
Princeton (Missouri) Telegraph – Twelve Orphan Children Brought to Princeton Thursday – 1906
The Minneapolis Journal – Sixty-Seven Little Ones Shipped West from New York – 1908
The Minneapolis Journal – 1909
The Peabody Gazette Article – 1911
Wilson County (Kansas) Citizen – New York Youngsters Have Joined a Dozen Families – Two Are Left – 1916
Maquoketa, Iowa Newspaper – Make A Choice of an Orphan – 1919

Back to History
What was it like to ride the Orphan Trains?

What it was like to ride the orphan trains depends upon when you rode them. Some of he first were little better than cattle cars with seats and make-shift bathroom facilities. Later, as more money became available, the riders were able to ride in better cars. The last riders, like my mother, was able to ride in Pullman cars [sleeping cars].
Picture 30 to 40 very young children traveling with two or three adults. These children varied from babies to children in their teenage years. Most of these children had no idea of what was happening to them. They may have been told that they were going out west, but they really had no idea what that meant. Most of them had never been outside of New York City. The children, that were older than babies, often were frightened, sometimes excited over the new views outside the train windows, and often were very confused over what would happen next.

They lost any means of contacting their relatives back in New York. They were never to speak, or think of their families again. They were to completely start over with new families. The older children would remember their old life. The babies would have no memory of life in New York.

When the trains pulled into the stations, the caretakers would get the children cleaned up ready for inspection. The children would climb down the tall train car steps onto the platform, and march to the meeting place. Sometimes this meeting place would be a baggage wagon on the train platform – sometimes it was the local church – sometimes it was the local opera house [what we would call the movie house now]. Almost always, the children were up on a stage of some kind. This because known as being Put Up for Adoption.

Many times the children were inspected like they were livestock. Muscles were felt. Teeth were checked. Sometimes the children would sing or dance trying to attract the attention of new mothers and fathers. It was frightening to have complete strangers looking them over and touching them. If they were lucky, someone chose them. Papers were signed and they went home with their new parents. While a local committee made sure that the new parents were fit to be parents, it was not much of an inspection compared to today.

One of the saddest parts of this procedure was often the new parents could not take more than one child. If brothers and sisters were lucky, they were taken by families in the same area so they could visit. If they were not lucky, brother, or sister, would get back on the train without them and go many miles further down the track. It was not uncommon for brothers and sisters to lose track of each other completely.

**Was life better because of riding the Orphan Trains?**

For the most part, yes. Back in New York City, these children were either living in orphanages, which were little better than military schools, or they were living on the streets trying to support themselves. There was no welfare to help them out. There was little in the way of foster care. Most of their relatives were back in the old country [France, England, Germany, etc.]. As a result, most of the grandparents and uncles and aunts were not here in America to help take care of these children. Many of the children turned to minor crimes in order to get food and shelter. They had no medical help when they were sick. They had little opportunity to make something out of themselves. Most would have either died, or have been put in prison, work houses, etc. While separating the children like this was not the best idea in the world, it was much better than leaving them to their fates in New York City.

On the farms, and towns of the United States, there was room, food, parents, and safety. There was a chance to go to school. They could grow up and become someone of which America could be proud. Many of these children obtained loving homes and parents. I wish I could say that they all did. That simply is not the truth. In some cases, the children were taken in to be farm hands and mothers helpers. Some were taken in to
help out in the shops. These children provided cheap labor.

**Would the riders encourage this kind of placing out now?**

Most would not. The Orphan Train Movement was the beginning of children's rights. From the trains came the children's protection laws, school lunches, medical treatments, and the beginnings of the welfare system.

Today's system tries to keep the children with their birth parents. If that is not possible, local foster parents are provided. Where possible, brothers and sisters are kept together. There is now a safety net to help protect the children. Would the riders prefer to go back to the old system? No! They realize that the new system is not perfect – that it needs fixing – but it is better than breaking up families.

The Orphan Trains were needed at the time they happened. They were not the best answer, but they were the first attempts at finding a practical system. Many children that would have died, lived to have children and grandchildren. It has been calculated that over two million descendants have come from these children. The trains gave the children a fighting chance to grow up.

Written by D. Bruce Ayler
Orphan Train Rider Descendant

[Back to Orphan Train History]
Cleveland Morning Leader
April 2, 1857 (page 2, col. 3)
Five Points Mission, New York, Arrest of Rev. W.C. Van Meter

We publish, by request, the following letter, for which as a matter of justice to the writer, we solicit a perusal. We believe him to be a good man, and engaged in a good work. The kind of contemptible persecution practiced against him, deserves public condemnation:
Mr. Editor;

Since notice of my arrest in Illinois, on the charge of taking paupers from New York into that state has been so extensively circulated, and the statements often so unjust, will you have the kindness to publish this communication?

For a few years past, I have been called to labor among the most wretched and degraded people on earth. The saddest procession we ever witnessed, composed of the children of poverty, vice, crime and degradation, passes daily before us.

These neglected, suffering, crushed little ones appeal to us as no others can. Their cry, the wail of perishing infancy and neglected childhood—has been heard and hearts, and arms, and homes, have been opened, and daily, the invitation comes to us send us one, and we will take it and bring it up in the fear of the Lord. It shall be tenderly, cared for and share with us what God gives us. Those to whom the children are given, are well recommended, and assume all the responsibility in reference to their future. The Mission exercises a constant watch care over them, and should the party prove unfaithful, would at once remove the child.

Near twenty years ago, when starting West, in behalf of this Mission, I was requested by C.L. Brace, Esq., Secretary of the Children's Aid Society, to take some of their children [Note-the society sends more children to homes, than any other similar society in the world. I often take children from there when I go West.] This I cheerfully did; but had no more responsibility in the matter than would any stranger of whom the same favor might have been asked. I was merely morally and honorably bound to be faithful. I took them and placed each in a good Christian home. I do not know of one of that number that is not doing well.

With one of them (a boy about 17 years old) there has been some trouble; but a letter recently received, informs me that he is doing well. He had been in an excellent home more than one year, when through the influence of mischief-makers, he became dissatisfied and left. He spent several weeks working, hunting, loafing—staying a few days in one place and then changing to another. When he was told that if he continued in that way he would be arrested for vagrancy, he made arrangement to live with a farmer, with whom he still dwells.

During the severe weather of the past winter, I went West to place in homes another lot of children, and to visit those I had previously taken there. Upon my arrival in Washington, Tazewell Co., Ill I met at the depot, the proprietor of one of the hotels, who is also Overseer of the Poor. He has one that I had taken West of whom he speaks in the highest terms. He inquired after children in that region. He told me that he feared that the boy first alluded to would some day come on the county, as he was unwilling to work and would not remain long in place. I said, “if I can find him, I will remove him.” He told me he was with a farmer several miles off in the country. As he was Overseer of the Poor, I told him that should anyone I had brought become a tax to the county, or to any one not under obligation to take care of it, to inform me of it, and I would at once remove it and pay the bill.

I found the children in that region doing well, except one boy, who in consequence of death in the family, had been three days with another family. Upon consultation with some of the citizens, I regarded it as an unsuitable place, and therefore felt it my duty to remove him. The man having learned my intention, had so prepared the boy's mind, that he said he would rather remain than go and risk getting a better place.
I had thus given offense and two days after, when passing through with some of the children, I was, through his influence, arrested for bringing paupers into Illinois. The officer was commanded to bring my body at once before the Judge. He obeyed only when my body was taken before the Judge (Justice of the Peace). The Judge was not there. I must wait until next day, and be tried at eight o'clock, A.M. I went, but for no particular reason, it was delayed until near eleven o'clock.

[Note: I learned the cause of the delay after the trial was over; a messenger had been privately sent in great haste, to the other county, to find the boy and bring him back. He was brought, dressed in such a manner as to make him look as badly as possible.]

The gentleman who first took the boy testified that he had been willing to keep him—that he studied geography, read books and papers like other boys and that he considered him mentally and physically competent to earn his living and that he was still willing to keep him.

The Overseer of the Poor testified that he had not paid a cent for him or any other one I had brought to the State. He said a bill of $5 had been presented to him since I was arrested, but he refused to pay it.

[Note:—this was presented by the man who went in such haste after the boy. It said “for taking care of the boy, Tom, for one month,” yet, when put under oath admitted that the boy assisted in cutting wood, doing chores and etc., and was absent three weeks of the time!!! I offered to pay any bills against the boy and remove him.]

This testimony and these offers were of no avail. “If these children are provided with good homes out here, they were paupers in New York, and you must be punished for bringing them,” seemed to be the Judge’s view of the law. I was fined one hundred dollars and the costs. I appealed and gave bonds for my return to the State in April to be tried again.

Not one ever taken by me has been in a poor house or in any wise a tax to any, county in Illinois!!

Last Monday, we sent twelve to good homes in that state, and I am preparing to take another lot with me when I go back to stand my trial. It is said in some of the anonymous communications that I preach persecution this is not so. I seldom allude to it and would not now if it were not that my silence might cause some to think that it is because of conscious guilt.

It is said I do not appeal for sympathy. I ask none for myself. I am not in distress. But I do ask for sympathy in behalf of thousands of neglected children in this city. I do beg for help for the hundreds of those poor, little perishing ones under our care. At an expense of about $500 a week, I do beg that 500 persons would for the next five weeks send us one dollar each week, then our pressure would be over.

It is gravely charged that this is abolition movement. I admit it. It has abolished the degradation, drunkenness, hunger, rags, sorrow, tears, and poverty of thousands, and by God’s help will abolish it in ten thousand cases more. But that this work of saving children is under any particular political or religious creed, is not true.
But this last, lowest, and meanest effort to injure the noblest work ever attempted in behalf of the poor, and needy, and helpless by the cry of Baptist minister abolition, kidnapping white children in New York and selling them like beasts etc., I need not notice.

The Children's Aid Society is alone responsible for the sending of this boy, and they do not shrink from that responsibility. The boy having gone under my care, causes me to be legally responsible, which responsibility I promptly and cheerfully meet.

The Five Points Mission has had nothing whatever to do in the matter.

In conclusion, permit me to present our thanks to the press all over the land for their kind aid from time to time in noticing this work, and to beg the favor of a place for this. Also, to gratefully acknowledge the noble liberality of Mr. W.H. Adams, a Banker of Chicago, who says "draw on me for the amount of your fine."

In behalf of the poor,

W.C. Van Meter

Five Points Mission

March 24, 1857

P.S. We do not intend to wrong or violate any law, but what ought we to do in cases like the following:

A beautiful little Yankee girl, sixteen months old has just been given to us. A bright little German boy eight years old was brought yesterday by his brother, an orphan. Today two unusually handsome intelligent little American boys, five and seven years old, were given to us. They are for adoption. If good men in Illinois send to us for them, will it be wrong to send them? Shall I risk the $100 fine, for taking "paupers" into the State, or shall I leave them to live in the Five Points, or go to the Alms house! What answer do you give, Mr. Editor-Reader! So far as I am concerned I ahve but one answer to make—"When a poor homeless, friendless, child comes to us for sympathy and protection, and a kind home is offered to it in Illinois, or any other place, may God do so to me and my children, and much more, if I do not send it."

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National Orphan Train Complex

Preserving the Past for the Future

End of an Era

State Laws Help Stop Trains

The number of Orphan Trains began to decline dramatically in the 1920's. Many factors contributed to the decline and eventual ending of the placing out programs.

Perhaps the most significant road block for the orphan trains was the growing number of state legislatures that began passing laws to restrict or forbid the interstate placement of children.
In 1887, Michigan passed the first law in the United States regulating the placement of children within the state. Again in 1895, Michigan passed a state law requiring out-of-state, child-placement agencies to post a bond for each child the agency brought into the state of Michigan.

In 1899, Indiana, Illinois and Minnesota enacted similar but stricter laws which had the effect of prohibiting the placement of incorrigible, diseased, insane or criminal children within their state boundaries.

Using these state laws as models, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Missouri, North Dakota, Ohio, and South Dakota passed similar laws within five years.


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National Orphan Train Complex

Preserving the Past for the Future

Orphan Train Rider Stories

Click on the names below to view a story of an Orphan Train Rider.

Charles Frederick – Illinois – 1888
Irma Craig – Missouri – 1901
John J. Callahan – West Virginia – 1903
Ellen Broderick – North Dakota – 1908
Ann Harrison – Colorado – 1911
Marguerite Thompson – Nebraska – 1911
Mary Jane Baade – Nebraska – 1912
Clifton and Myrtle Jennings – Arkansas – 1912
Edith Peterson (Sister Justina Bieganek) – Minnesota – 1913
Jean Sexton – Missouri – 1914
Anna Miller Bassett – Texas – 1918
Mike Francesce – Texas – 1919
Bill Oser – Michigan – 1922

Fred Engert Swedenburg – Nebraska – 1925

Lee Nailing – Texas – 1926

Alice Bullis Ayler – Kansas 1930

More Orphan Train Riders Stories can be found in “Orphan Train Riders: Their Own Stories” Volumes 1-6 published by the Orphan Train Heritage Society of America and available through our bookstore.

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3 thoughts on “Orphan Train Rider Stories”

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