

## Orphan Trains

*“They put us all on a big platform in some big building while people came from all around the countryside to pick out those of us they wished to take home. I was four years old, and my sister was only two...”*



This is how one woman remembered her 1914 orphan train experience. Between 1854 and 1929, an estimated quarter-million children from social agencies in New York, Boston and other eastern cities, were sent by train to mostly rural destinations in the western, Midwestern and southern states. Known as the Orphan Train movement, this ambitious and controversial project began as a way to place needy children in homes away from the already-overburdened eastern cities. In many cases, it also served to boost the much-needed labor pool for the Midwest farming communities and the emerging economies out west.

The name Orphan Train, however, is somewhat misleading, as the majority of children involved in the project were not true orphans. Parents turned their children over to the “placing out” system – sometimes temporarily, sometimes permanently – for a variety of reasons, including destitution, widowhood, domestic abuse, illegitimate birth, etc. Upon arrival at the destination, the children were put on display for the local families or “employers” to choose whom they wanted to take home and the accompanying agents were supposed to ensure that the homes were suitable. Some children found themselves in homes where they were treated as members of the family; some discovered that they were to be a new farmhand or housekeeper. There were good experiences and bad.



The time span of The New England Home for Little Wanderers’ involvement with orphan trains does not coincide exactly with the movement as it is generally recognized. The Home opened its doors in 1865, 11 years after the practice of moving children west was started by the Reverend Charles Loring Brace of the New York Children’s Aid Society. The Home’s orphan trains ceased operations in 1906, while other agencies

continued until 1929. In the beginning, most of The Home's wards were the orphans of soldiers and sailors who had died in the Civil War. In its first year, The Home placed 178 children. More than half went to families in Massachusetts while the rest went out of state, with the largest group – 26 – going to Michigan. One child was placed in Canada, and one in California. Every senior administrator of The Home between 1865 and 1906 personally took one or more companies of children west.

The Reverend Edward C. Winslow, missionary agent, left descriptions of the way it was:

“From the very first The Home began placing children in families, but never as servants or hired help. By September 1865, three companies of children had gone west, and for forty years, from one to four companies went out each year. Great effort was made to keep brothers and sisters near together, so ...families ... were not broken up. There in the Middle West it was not difficult to find homes for them where they would keep in touch with each other as they grew up. Homes for many children were more readily found there than here.”

While orphan train programs have been criticized for “auctioning off” children, for elitism, for failing to follow up after placement, there is every evidence that The New England Home for Little Wanderers knew better and tried to avoid poor practices. The orphan train stories combine Horace Greeley's theme of “Go West Young Man!” with the image of the friendless but triumphant orphan. They are irresistible tales, full of pathos. Sometimes the children were victims: the foster families could be cruel. On the whole, though, the children did well, and children from The New England Home for Little Wanderers did better than most.

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Sources:

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Annette R. Fry, “The Orphan Trains” (New York: New Discovery Books, 1994)

Ancestry.com: Ancestry Magazine, January/February 1995