

DO YOU KNOW about the ORPHAN TRAINS? Are you aware that some 100,000 children, an estimated number, were sent to the mid-West by train and taken into homes in this area? Because these trains contained cars filled with these abandoned children the trains came to be known as ORPHAN TRAINS, or even BABY TRAINS. These children were sometimes adopted legally, others were simply absorbed into the population and no record of their presence is to be found.

For those of us tracing family trees in these parts, are we not apt to find a forebear among these orphans? Though one of these children grew to maturity, married, had a family, and so on, we may not be able to find his birthplace. His certificate of birth would not appear in the Vital records here in the mid-West. What then? Although thousands of these names have been lost to posterity, Eloise Thomsen of the Greater Omaha Genealogical Society, is at present preparing a register of names of these orphans. This list will be filed for reference with the Nebraska Historical Library. It should be helpful to someone who happens to reach a standstill in his tracing because of this particular situation. If your forebear appears on this listing you will know the reason for the missing birth record. The orphan possibly could receive information from the foundling home in New York; it is doubtful that a searcher would have any success.

If you are one of these orphans, if you have a relative, now deceased, who was one of these orphans, or, if you have a friend or neighbor who came west on the ORPHAN TRAINS, please contact:

ORPHAN REGISTER
Eloise Thomsen (Mrs. Armand)
5843 Grant Street
Omaha, Ne 68104

Tele: 1-402-558-4393

ORPHAN REGISTER

TO THE WEST

--Eloise Thomsen

And still they come...on these
Rolling, rolling trains heading west
Stranded children
Lonesome children surely blest
To be on this train, heading west!
Sound no bell,
Sound no whistle
Soon enough they scatter
As down from a thistle,
To the West!

This project took form in 1977, the idea evolving from the questions, "Where to I turn in the event that I find one of the orphans who came from New York grafted onto my family tree? Is there a listing of the children in the State Archives? Should a listing of these children be made that would be helpful to family tracers?" From the answers came the "new growth" known as the ORPHAN REGISTER.

With a few queries placed in newspapers, the early response was rather slow, yet as time went on, more people became aware of the migration. The novel, "Orphan Train" was published by Dorothea Petrie, and the project as a whole gathered momentum. There is genuine interest in the "in-gathering" of as many names as possible, the listing to be filed with the State Historical Library. It is entirely possible that this type of listing has already been done, but to date, not one has been uncovered.

The REGISTER does not trace the lineage of the orphan...if a tracer finds the name he is searching on the register, he knows the reason for the difficulty in locating records.

At first, the REGISTER did not encourage any further search but a few responses indicate that a tracer can find the immigrant ancestor and would encourage others to try. In certain cases that can be done, but from the estimates made at this writing, the average of success runs very low. About one out of ten of those responding do not know the original surname, having been taken into a home in the west at an early age. Many times the child was not legally adopted. There were several orphanages that sent children to the West. The Children's Aid Society began the program. When the catholics decided that catholic children should not go to protestant homes, the New York Foundling Hospital began their plan of first finding a home for the child, then sending the child on the train. The greater number were sent out with agents, hoping to find a parent willing to take a child or two when the children were unloaded at the railway station.

Very little has been published regarding this migration of children--perhaps some publications have been lost just as many of these children, and records, have been lost in the shuffle. One printed article found to be helpful was written by Annette Fry in the "American Heritage Magazine", December, 1974. If you know of a publication concerning the Orphan Trains, please advise the REGISTER.

At present, the REGISTER continues to record responses from any state, however, the one man, one-assistant operation feels that it should be done by states. Perhaps that can be accomplished later. Many of the orphans respond personally, although the numbers of living orphans are fast diminishing. However, descendants have been very willing to supply information they happen to have concerning their orphan.

If you know about even one of these orphans who came west by train from New York City, or Boston, between 1863 and 1929, please contact:

ORPHAN REGISTER
Eloise Thomsen
5843 Grant Street
Omaha, Ne 68104

Member:
Greater Omaha Genealogy Society
Box 4011
Omaha, Ne 68104

Charles Loring Brace,
THE DANGEROUS CLASSES OF NEW YORK (1880)

There seemed to be a society of irreclaimable little vagabonds. They hated school with an inextinguishable hatred; they had a constitutional love for smashing windows and pilfering apple-stands. They could dodge an "M.P." as a fox dodges a hound; they disliked anything so civilized as a bed-chamber, but preferred old boxes and empty barns, and when they were caught it required a very wide-awake policeman, and such an Asylum-yard as hardly exists in New York, to keep them.

I have sometimes stopped, admiringly, to watch the skill and cunning with which the little rascals, some not more than ten years old, would diminish a load of wood left on the docks; the sticks were passed from one to another, and the lad nearest the pile was apparently engaged eagerly in playing marbles. If the woodman's attention was called to his loss, they were off like a swarm of cockroaches....

Jacob Riis of New York wrote many treatises regarding the plight of these youngsters, and urged that something be done to remedy the situation.

Theodore Roosevelt was a firm believer that these families should not be broken up, and did a great deal to keep families intact, encouraging help within the city of New York.

Reply to:
Eloise Thomsen (Mrs. Armand)
5843 Grant Street
Omaha, Ne 68104

_____, an orphan, arrived in _____ (State) from
New York City (or Boston) as a passenger
on one of the "Orphan Trains."

Date of birth _____ Birthplace, if known _____

Date, or year, arrived by train _____

Name of Foster parent _____

Address of Foster parent _____

This orphan was adopted? ___yes ___No

If there were brothers and sisters (if known) who came on the trains,
please list their names, plus the families who took them in...

The above orphan married: _____, from _____

Date of this marriage: _____ Where married _____

Please list children of this marriage :

_____ born (date) _____ Where _____

_____ born (date) _____ Where _____

Occupation of orphan:

General Information:

Please add any other pertinent, or interesting information,
If it is easier to write a letter, please feel free to do so.
Do you know another orphan, or two?

Orphan's Signature _____

or, person sending this information

Orphan Train Carried 200 From New York

Charles Deermer still keeps the small red coat and cap he wore one cold November week in 1912 when he was placed on an orphan train carrying orphaned children to new homes.

Deermer, 69, doesn't remember any part of the trip. He was 1½ years old at that time. Nor does he remember his life at the New York Foundling Home in New York City where he was sent shortly after his birth. Records show his father was accidentally killed just prior to his birth and his mother was not able to care for him. She did visit the home for six months but became ill and it is assumed she died, he said.

Deermer, a retired Atkinson businessman, said the fondling home's policy was to keep the children one year, following desertion, before putting them up for adoption.

He said his trip on the orphan train was not the trip described in the popular book, "Orphan Train" by Omaha native, Dortha G. Petrie, who wrote about unfavorable conditions the children were subjected to during the long train ride. She also said there were no homes waiting for the orphans.

When the train carrying Deermer and 200 other small children left New York there was a home waiting for each of them. Deermer said the number twenty two, was pinned to his coat throughout the trip and when the train stopped at Stuart his number was matched with the number of his new parents, Mr. and Mrs. Carl Deermer. Their number had been sent to them by the Roman Catholic Order of the Sisters of Charity St. Vincent De Paul which were in charge of the New York Foundling home and financed the orphan train.

The orphans were accompanied on the trip by several nuns. They were given plenty to eat and each had a change of clothing. Deermer said some of

the children even wore new clothing.

Another child on the train was Mary Kramer Tenopir, 2, whose first word to her adoptive mother, Mrs. Mary Kramer, was, "New Shoes." She was wearing a new pair.

Deermer said the train zigzagged through parts of Iowa, Illinois, Minnesota, South Dakota, North Dakota, Missouri, Kansas, Colorado and Nebraska where the small children were placed with their new parents.

He said the train also brought children to the Seger, Gartner, Bahl and Gallagher families in Atkinson and the Kramer, Laible, Hamik and Timmerman homes in Stuart.

He said although most of the children on the train were under two years, some were older. "In some cases these children couldn't adapt to their new life and they ran away from home looking for their real parents," he said.

Life in Stuart, with his parents, Deermer said, "could never have been better. That's why I would never have hurt them by trying to find out about my real parents."

The former produce man and farmer said he must have brought good luck to his adopted parents. "Before I came they were childless but after they adopted me they had six children," he laughed.

Deermer and his wife, Kathryn, are the parents of six children: Richard, Atkinson's mayor; Mrs. Bob (Marian) Cook, Newport; Larry, at home; Ronald, serving with the armed forces in Germany; Mrs. Joe (Linda) Baker, Chambers; and Joanne, deceased.

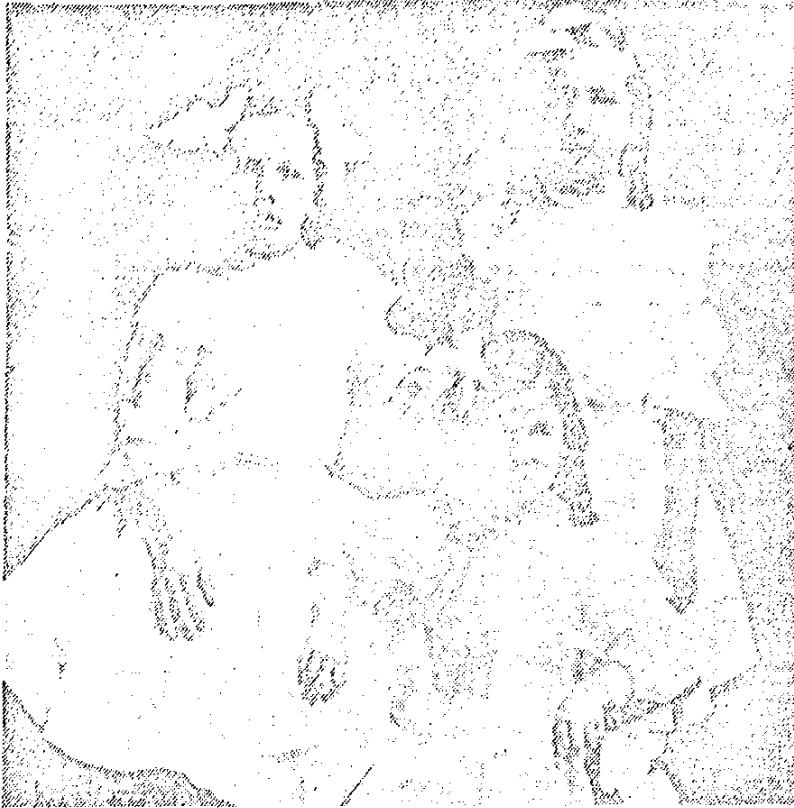
Several weeks ago a reunion of four of the children on that orphan train was held at the Joe Kramer home in Stuart.



Charles Deermer with cap he wore on Orphan Train.

In newspaper sent to:

George Woolstrum
520 North 70th St.
Lincoln, Nb, 68505



In 1904 photo at left, sisters Nellie (left), Jennie and Maggie after their arrival in Iowa . . . In 1921 photo at right, Maggie sits on steps of Jennie Edmundson nursing school.

'Orphan Trains' Were Bound for New Lives

Atlantic, Iowa (AP) — On a summer day in 1904, a group of children stepped off the train at a town in western Iowa. Many were raised either as adopted or foster children.

Their stories are part of one of the least-known episodes in American history — the "orphan trains."

A young theologian named Charles Brace in 1853 founded the Children's Aid Society, which helps children even today.

The society conceived the idea of "orphan trains" to carry these children out of New York City to small towns and farms.

By Boxcar

The first train carried the children by boxcar as far as Michigan. In later years, trains came into Illinois, Ohio, Indiana, Nebraska and Iowa.

Many children came to Iowa between 1900 and 1906, following the money panic of 1896.

Maggie James is now 80 years old. But she remembers the trip that brought her and two sisters to Griswold in 1904, and her days in a country school near Lewis.

Mrs. James included some of those memories in a letter after a newspaper re-

porter placed an advertisement seeking information on the era.

"How my father sat and cried as he held Jennie, the youngest, on his lap. I didn't understand then why he was crying. There were even times in my growing-up years when I felt a deep resentment toward him for giving us away.

"But now after a little mature wisdom and years of experience with children of my own and three foster children, I understand.

"As we came out west, I remember sitting by a window on the train and watching the endless landscape pass and wondering why the houses weren't closer together — and what 'dose tings' were (cows and horses) in the field."

At Griswold, the society tried to find homes for the orphans.

"I remember sitting on a platform and 'performing' for the people. I even remember two of the songs we sang: 'Sidewalks of New York' and 'If I only had a home, sweet home, someone to care for me.'

"That must have touched some tender hearts — as it was here a number of us found foster homes. Uncle Jim and Aunt Lucy Gardner adopted Jennie. She told me years later that she (Lucy) wanted all

three of us, but he felt they could not afford it.

"Nellie and I were finally taken out to Grandma and Grandpa (Tom) Ellis' home-south of Lewis. It was their son and his wife who a short time later adopted me.

"I shall never forget while I was at Grandpa and Grandma's I thought I was in paradise. The trees, the birds, the animals, that clear cold water coming out of an iron pipe which flowed into a wooden trough where two large cans of milk were always kept cold.

"A short time later when I went to live with the folks I can remember wondering why, why someone hadn't given Nellie a home.

Learned by Experience

"I have learned by experience, older children are often harder to cope with. But many times when they say, "You've been like a mother to me," you realize it was all so worthwhile."

Mrs. James entered nurse's training in 1920 at Jennie Edmundson Hospital in Council Bluffs. She married Carl James, another orphan who was born and raised in southeast Iowa. They were married for 50 years.