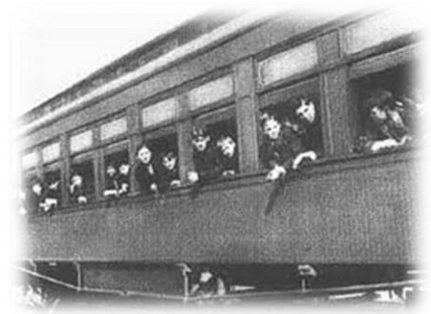




## *Orphan Trains and the Children Who Rode Them*

The story of the orphan trains that took young orphans from the big cities in the East to new homes in the rural West has become part of American popular culture. However, just as with many other true stories, the reality of the events is more complex than it first appears. For each of the tales of success in which a child is happily adopted into a loving home, there are others which show the limitations of the system and the heartbreak of children torn away from their families and everything they were familiar with.



From 1853-1929, approximately 250,000 children were relocated through what was called the emigration or placing-out system. The various sources differ on the total number and, due to limited or spotty recordkeeping, we will probably never know the true number or what happened to all of them.

Unlike the picture portrayed in popular books and movies, many of the children were not what we would consider today “orphans.” Many, possibly even most, had one or both parents still living at the time they were sent away. During a period of high poverty rates and overcrowding in the eastern cities, thousands of children found themselves placed in orphanages and other institutions due to circumstances such as parents unable to care for them, homelessness, and petty crimes. With few alternatives in place, these children became wards of cities, counties, and charities that had limited resources to care for them.

One “solution” that gained support was to relocate the institutionalized children of the “dangerous classes” to rural areas in need of cheap labor. Although some of the children were eventually adopted, particularly in the later period, many were treated as little more than indentured servants. The charities, which sponsored and placed the children, usually did so with the honest intention of helping them find a better life. However, their idealized view of rural life and lack of proper screening and follow-up undoubtedly led to some cases of mistreatment and abuse. Despite this, the story was not all grim. Whether they found permanent, loving homes or not, many of these children did find opportunities that would not have been possible had they remained on the streets of large urban cities or in crowded asylums.

By 1929, society had changed significantly. The West (what we consider the Midwest today) was becoming more urbanized, the number of small farms was shrinking, and attitudes regarding the treatment and needs of children were evolving. At the same time, a new group of professionally trained social service workers began looking for ways to help children within the context of their own families and local neighborhoods, leading to our modern system of foster care and adoption.

The story of the orphan trains has become part of the American social fabric. Neither all good nor all bad, revealing both triumphs and tragedies, it is one that has woven itself indelibly into our nation’s history.

## Selected Resources on Orphan Trains

### Books and Videos

- American Experience [PBS Home Video]. *The Orphan Trains*.
- Gordon, Linda. *The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction*.
- Holt, Marilyn Irvin. *The Orphan Trains: Placing Out in America*.
- Inskip, Carolee R. *The Children's Aid Society of New York: An Index to the Federal, State, and Local Census Records of Its Lodging Houses and The New York Foundling Hospital: An Index to Federal, State, and Local Census Records*.
- Johnson, Mary Ellen. *Orphan Train Riders: Their Own Stories*. (6 vols.)
- Kidder, Clark. *Orphan Trains and Their Precious Cargo: The Life's Work of Rev. H.D. Clarke*.
- O'Connor, Stephen. *Orphan Trains: The Story of Charles Loring Brace and the Children He Saved and Failed*.
- Patrick, Michael. *Orphan Trains to Missouri*.
- Riley, Tom. *Orphan Train Riders: A Brief History of the Orphan Train Era (1853-1929), with Entrance Records from the American Female Guardian Society's Home for Friendless in New York*.
- Riley, Tom. *Orphan Train Riders: Entrance Records from the American Female Guardian Society's Home for the Friendless in New York, Volume 2*.

### Online Resources

- The Adoption History Project (Department of History, University of Oregon) [<https://pages.uoregon.edu/adoption>]
- The Children's Aid Society – the Orphan Trains [<https://www.childrensaidsociety.org/about/history/orphan-trains>]
- Family Search Wiki – New York Orphans and Orphanages [[https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/New\\_York\\_Orphans\\_and\\_Orphanages](https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/New_York_Orphans_and_Orphanages)]
- Old Fulton New York Post Cards: Historical Newspapers Archive [<https://fultonhistory.com>] – This site has an extensive and searchable archive of digitized newspapers. Many of them are from locations throughout New York State.
- National Orphan Train Complex [<https://orphantraindepot.org>]
- New York Foundling Hospital [<https://www.nyfoundling.org>]
- New York Historical Society – Children's Aid Society Images [<https://www.nyhistory.org/library/digital-collections/childrens-aid-society-images>]
- New York Historical Society – Guide to the Records of the New York Foundling Hospital [<http://dlib.nyu.edu/findingaids/html/nyhs/foundling/>]
- Orphan Train Heritage Society of America [<https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/orphan-train-heritage-society-of-america-inc-2400/>]
- Orphan Train Riders to Iowa [<http://iagenweb.org/history/orphans>]
- Orphan Train Riders of New York (Midwest) [<http://www.orphantrainridersofminnesota.com>]
- Orphan Trains of Nebraska [<http://www.usgennet.org/usa/ne/topic/trains/Orphan.htm>]
- Orphan Trains to Kansas [<http://www.kancoll.org/articles/orphans>]
- Researching Orphans in Genealogy [<https://nypl.org/blog/2013/11/07/researching-orphans-genealogy>]
- Riders on the Orphan Train [<http://www.ridersontheorphantrain.org>]
- Social Welfare History Project (Virginia Commonwealth University) – Orphan Trains [<https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/programs/child-welfarechild-labor/orphan-trains>]

Be sure to check for state, county, and local reports online through ebook sites such as Google Books, Internet Archives, and HathiTrust. Examples: *Annual Report of the State Board of Charities of the State of New York* and *Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors of the County of Chemung, For the Year 1880*. Try searching newspapers and census records. Also, try searching newspaper archives and online for terms such as “orphan train riders”; the word “orphan,” “orphanage,” or “foundling” and the location where they entered the orphanage or where they ended up; the name of the child or the parents and where they lived; or “overseer of the poor” and the location or name of the orphanage. There are many online message boards and websites dedicated to researching and identifying orphan train riders. While these orphans often “fell through the cracks” when it comes to records, you may get lucky so keep digging!