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*Resource for Reading:*

# The Orphan Trains: Michigan and Beyond

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The Orphan Trains of America's past may seem an unusual topic of study for elementary classrooms. However, the popularity of various children's books on the topic suggests that there is more than casual interest among young readers. The Orphan Trains have also become a topic of interest for a number of historical researchers. Their research is currently being disseminated through numerous web sites, which are useful for studying the Orphan Trains from a variety of academic perspectives. In addition, filmmakers have produced videos, which provide insights into the plight of the Orphan Train children and the families with whom they lived. As a consequence of the readily available books and media, the Orphan Trains have become a topic of interest to teachers for elementary classroom study.

The Orphan Trains movement is a topic which offers several options for multidisciplinary study in literature, art, history, and geography. First, it offers the opportunity for children to read or listen to the teacher's oral reading of some outstanding books and literature. Secondly, the topic can allow study the history of the Orphan Trains as well as the times surrounding them that led to the Orphan Train movement. In addition, children may study the geographical locations to which the trains traveled. Finally, children might study the illustrations in the children's books for how they extend and enhance the stories, reveal the characters and their plight, and portray the Orphan Train movement over a significant historical period.

**Popularity of the Orphan Train Books**

It is difficult, of course, to say exactly why readers find books and films about orphans appealing, but there are some possible explanations. The topic of orphans is universal. They exist in any time and place. When we meet with real orphans in our daily lives, it may occur to us that "there but for the Grace of God ...". It is normal to feel either empathy or sympathy for the child who has been deprived of a family. Beyond that, it is significant to learn that there were many thousands of children who were orphaned during a particular period of our country's history. Thus, the fictional and the biographical stories of their lives carry an inherent quality of interest for some readers, young and old.

**Historical Background**

The idea for the Orphan Trains was first conceived in 1853 by Charles Loring Brace, a young Methodist minister in New York City. He had noted many neglected and orphaned on the streets of New York and immediately wanted to find ways to help them. But, as he was soon to learn, the numbers of children in dire straits, orphaned, neglected, abandoned, was far beyond his ability to help them on his own. But he did not give up and his compassion for the needy children would shape the rest of his life. He founded the New York City Children's Aid Society and then spent most of his time finding the means to fund the work of that organization. He appealed to the wealthy families of New York for donations. He spoke to many public and private groups as a paid speaker on behalf of the society and the children it served. Then, as the numbers of children in orphanages in New York City and elsewhere in New York State continued to increase beyond the orphanages means to care for them, he conceived a "placing out" program which sought to find permanent homes for orphaned and neglected children. Andrea Warren, author of Orphan Train Rider and We Rode the Orphan Trains, has written that Brace first placed 207 children (164 boys and 43 girls) with farm families in New York and adjacent states in 1853. Because the initial program was successful, Brace believed he could extend the program to other states and thus, place many more orphans from the severely overcrowded orphanages in New York

**The Michigan Connection**

The first orphan train departed from New York City in September1854 and ended its journey on October1st in Dowagiac, Michigan. Stories vary on who was aboard the train. Some reports say there were forty-six boys, between the ages of 10 and 12. Other reports indicate that the children were both boys and girls between the ages of 6 and 14. Most reports indicate that the children were placed with families in and around Dowagiac within about a week. We know that descendants of those first orphan train riders still live in Dowagiac and other parts of Michigan, as well as other parts of the United States. During Labor Day weekend 2004, Dowagiac celebrated the 150th anniversary of that first Orphan Train and the children who rode it to their town. Descendants of those first Orphan Train riders returned to Dowagiac to remember their ancestors and told the stories that surrounded their lives. The family stories and histories of some of them are available online and can be searched by those who may wonder what happened to those first "train kids."

**Trains to Other States**

With the arrival of the first orphan train in Dowagiac, Michigan in 1854 and the placement of those children with Michigan families, the "placing-out" program of the Orphan Train Movement had begun. Over the next 75 years (1854-1929) in which the Orphan Train Movement operated, hundreds of trains would take thousands of children to other locations throughout the United States. By 1930, the program would place orphans in nearly every state in the country.

Records vary on the number of children who rode the trains, but the number of riders may have been as high as 250,000. As with many social programs, this one came with a stigma attached. Children did not want to be known as "train kids" and thus, many never discussed their past. But some of those children would one day overcome the stigma. They would find the courage to tell their stories and provide a record of the movement.

**Fiction and Literature Study**

Among the outstanding books on this topic is Eve Bunting's Train to Somewhere. Illustrated by Ronald Himler, the book provides an evocative portrayal of fourteen fictional orphan children who are taken from New York City to various fictional towns in the Midwest to be placed with new families. The narrator is Marianne who gives her sometimes childlike, sometimes quite mature, view of each of the other thirteen orphans who are chosen by families as the train moves westward. As Bunting indicates in her introduction to the book, some of the orphans will do well and some will not. Some are chosen to be field hands or house servants, but some of the younger children are chosen by married couples seeking children to adopt as a part of their families. Marianne is the last to be chosen, but as the book ends, the reader will find that Marianne has found a place to belong and perhaps, the best home of any of her traveling companions.

The book is especially well written. Bunting's descriptive language provides capsule insights into the thoughts, feelings, and particular personalities of each of the orphans. Ronald Himler's episodic illustrations offer a realistic historical view of selected events from the story while revealing a glimpse into the children's lives and fortunes—past, present, and future as the train makes its journey.

Joan Lowery Nixon is another children's author who has written about the Orphan Train children. She has created an extensive series of books under the umbrella label of The Orphan Train Adventures. The series began with a series of four books known as The Orphan Train Quartet. Those first four books were so popular that the series was extended. Nixon's books continue to be very popular with upper elementary children – so popular in fact that several of the books that were out of print for a while have been reprinted and are currently available. The books approach the Orphan Train topic through portrayals of the lives of several fictional orphans who find themselves in situations such as the real Orphan Train riders would have found. Book by book Nixon portrays their

individual struggles for acceptance, respect, and love.

One of the recent books for children on the topic is Verla Kay's Orphan Train. Illustrated by Ken Stark, the book was published in 2003. It is written in simple verse to portray its orphan story. Although it has received mixed reviews, children who are interested in the topic itself will probably respond well to the book's use of simple language and verse. It is, in fact, the book's simple language which may evoke an emotional response for some young readers. The story also has memorable visual images of the orphans' experiences traveling west in search of new homes and lives.

Another new orphan train novel for young readers, Worth, written by A. LaFaye, was published in 2004. It is the story of a poor farm family whose only son, Nate, is seriously injured in a farm accident. As a result of his injury, he is bedridden for a while, unable to walk and thus, unable to help his father with the daily farm chores and seasonal planting and harvest. The father needs help on the farm and decides that the only solution the family can afford is to take in an orphan train boy named John Worth. John's arrival is met with resentment from both Nate and Nate's mother. John is not allowed to eat or sleep in the house. As the months pass, the family experiences many changes. The two boys, Nate and John, grow in their care, concern, and respect for each other. One of the unusual aspects of this novel is that it explores Nate's feelings of helplessness at being replaced by an adopted orphan, a stranger.

**Non-Fiction**

Another outstanding book for study of the Orphan Trains is Andrea Warren's Orphan Train Rider: One Boy's True Story. This non-fiction publication offers the true story of Lee Nailing, who was one of the many children who rode the Orphan Trains. Warren recounts his real-life adventure of growing up as an orphan and how after many years, he was able to find his biological family and reunite with all of them who were still alive. The book also includes information about the history of the Orphan Train movement. It provides insight into the lives of several other children who rode the orphan trains from New York City between 1854 and 1929.

**Web Sites**

If teachers wish to research this topic online, the internet provides several excellent sites for additional information that may be used in an elementary or middle school classroom. Among the most outstanding web sites are the following:

**The Orphan Train Collection**
**http://www.orphantrainriders.com/**
This site is probably the newest one on the web devoted to this topic. It was established in July 2004 by Bruce Ayler to provide a collective site for those who wish to research the topic. It provides extensive information about the original New York City Children's Aid Society and its founder Charles Loring Brace.

**The Orphan Trains**
**http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/orphan/**
PBS offers an outstanding Orphan Train web site based on the television program aired as part of its American Experience series. The TV program chronicled the history of the Orphan Trains and presented interviews with some surviving orphan train riders. The program video continues to be available and thus provides a chance for children to see the original program in the classroom. The video is moving and could provide for stimulating classroom discussion as children respond to its content and explore relevant issues of bringing history to life.

**The Orphan Trains of Kansas**
**http://www.kancoll.org/articles/orphans/**
This is one of the original web sites devoted to the topic of the Orphan Trains and their riders. Developed originally by Connie DiPasquale and Susan Stafford, the site was well researched to provide significant information based on historical

fact. It includes a history of the orphan trains, and a timeline of the orphan train movement. There are also several newspaper articles from the 1880's to the1930's detailing significant events related to the trains and their riders.

**The Orphan Trains of Nebraska**
http://www.nebraskahistory.org/sites/mnh/orphans/
As the title suggests, this site focuses on the children who rode the trains to destinations in Kansas. The page is sponsored by the Nebraska State Historical Society

**New Homes, New Lives: The Era of the Orphan Trains**
http://www.americaspast.com/document.php?id=9
This page written by Michelle Pearson is found at AmericasPast.com. Other pages at the site may be found by following the "Orphan Trains" sidebar link.

**The Orphan Trains – a site at Kids Konnect.com**
http://www.kidskonnect.com/OrphanTrains/Home.html
This is another relatively new site with material from Connie DiPasquale who continues to research the Orphan Trains. It provides significant historical documents and commentary on the 75-year history of the Orphan Train movement. DiPasquale's original site (listed above) focused on Kansas, but this wide-ranging site at Kids Konnect.com extends the geographic area to offer information on state-level Orphan Train projects in Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, and Missouri. The site remains under development and thus, offers possibilities for on-going classroom research.

**GeneaLinks**
http://www.genealinks.com/orphantrain.htm
This site is primarily intended to help those researching a family ancestral history and genealogy. It provides information resources about those known to have been a part of the orphan train movement and "placing-out" program. Thus, for those who wish to find further information about a direct ancestor, the links to Federal Census Records and New York orphanage records may be especially helpful Beyond that, the site is useful for the information it provides in simply understanding the enormous numbers of children who were orphaned in the 75 year period of the Orphan Train movement.

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**Books for Older Readers and Adults**

Fry, Annette R. *The Orphan Trains.* New York: New Discovery Books, 1994. (Includes historical photographs)

Holt, Marilyn Irvin. *The Orphan Trains: Placing Out in America.* Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1992. (Reprinted 1994).

O'Connor, Stephen. *Orphan Trains: The Story of Charles Loring Brace and the Children He Saved and Failed.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001 (Reprinted in paperback in 2004).

**Media Resources**

" The Orphan Trains" from PBS Home Video series " The American Experience" Narrated by Stacy Keach. © 1995 by Janet Graham and Edward Gray. The video was first marketed by PBS after its initial airing in 1995, but has been reintroduced in 2004 and remains available at PBS.org. The video is in color and has a running time of about 60 minutes.

" Orphan Train" a film starring Jill Eikenberry, Kevin Dobson, originally released in 1997 and available on VHS. Directed by William A. Graham, the film was originally endorsed by the National Education Association. A cautionary note: The film includes a stark fictional scene about the hanging of a fifteen-year-old boy and thus, should probably not be used with younger children. Classroom teachers will need to view and evaluate the film and determine its suitability for their classrooms.

**Articles Available Online**

Shellenbarger, Pat. "Trains Once Carried Orphans for Adoption in the Midwest and West." TheGrand Rapids Press, August 17, 2004. Available online at http://www.mlive.com/ entertainment/ grpress/index.ssf?/base/features-0/ 1092773701284920.xml

(This article carries information about the first Orphan Train and some of the children who rode it to Dowagiac, Michigan in 1854. A celebration of the 150th anniversary of the event was held in Dowagiac in September 2004 and the article also provides details about some of the Michigan families who are descended from those first orphan train riders.)

Eby, John. "Orphan Train Celebration Getting Under Way." The Dowagiac Daily News, September 2, 2004. Available online @ http://www.dowagiacnews.com/articles/ 2004/09/02/news/dnnews1.txt

"Orphan Train's 1854 Arrival Re-enactment Starting Sept. 3" Niles Daily Star and Dowagiac Daily News, August 26, 2004

(This article provides an event schedule of the celebration held in Dowagiac, Michigan. The celebration took place throughout Labor Day weekend 2004 to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the first Orphan Train. The article is available online at:

http://www.dowagiacnews.com/articles/ 2004/08/26/news/dnnews3.txt

A Google search using the key words " Orphan Trains Dowagiac" will locate links to several additional newspaper articles written for local Michigan papers about the 2004 Dowagiac commemoration of the first Orphan Train.

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