

**SEARCHING FOR
A NEW HOME**



THE STORY OF A BOY

THE **ORPHAN**

ADAPTED FROM *ORPHAN TRAIN RIDER* BY ANDREA WARREN, BY PERMISSION OF HOUGHTON MIFFLIN HARCOURT. COPYRIGHT © 1996 BY ANDREA WARREN. PHOTOS: THE CHILDREN'S AID SOCIETY; NATIONAL ORPHAN TRAIN COMPLEX (INSET)

**NARRATIVE
NONFICTION**
Reads like fiction—
but it's all true

**ON A TERRIFYING
JOURNEY ABOARD**

V TRAIN

BY KIM HILL

**AS YOU READ,
THINK ABOUT:**

You are about to read the stories of two extraordinary young people. Think about how their lives are similar and different as you read.

TURN THE PAGE →
to read more.

It was March 1926, and 8-year-old Lee was on a train heading west. His two younger brothers, Gerald and Leo, were with him. So were 47 other orphaned or abandoned children and one matron, a large, stern-voiced woman whose job it was to watch over them during the long journey.



Lee's mother was dead, and his father was out of work, unable—or unwilling—to care for his children. For two years, Lee had lived in a crowded New York City orphanage, a horrifying place where there was never enough to eat and fights broke out every day. Indeed, Lee had a scar on his arm where, as he was reaching for a biscuit, another boy had stabbed him with a fork.

Now, Lee and his brothers were being sent west to find new families. “This is an opportunity for you,” the matron told Lee. “This is an orphan train, and you’re very lucky to be on it.”

Lee didn't think so. The other children might be ready to find new homes, but he intended to return to his father, who had come to the train station to see them off. With tears in his eyes, his father had given Lee a pink envelope with his address on it and told him to write. Lee was sure his father wanted them back.

As the train chugged and swayed, Lee thought of how wonderfully surprised his father would be when the boys showed up on his doorstep again one day.

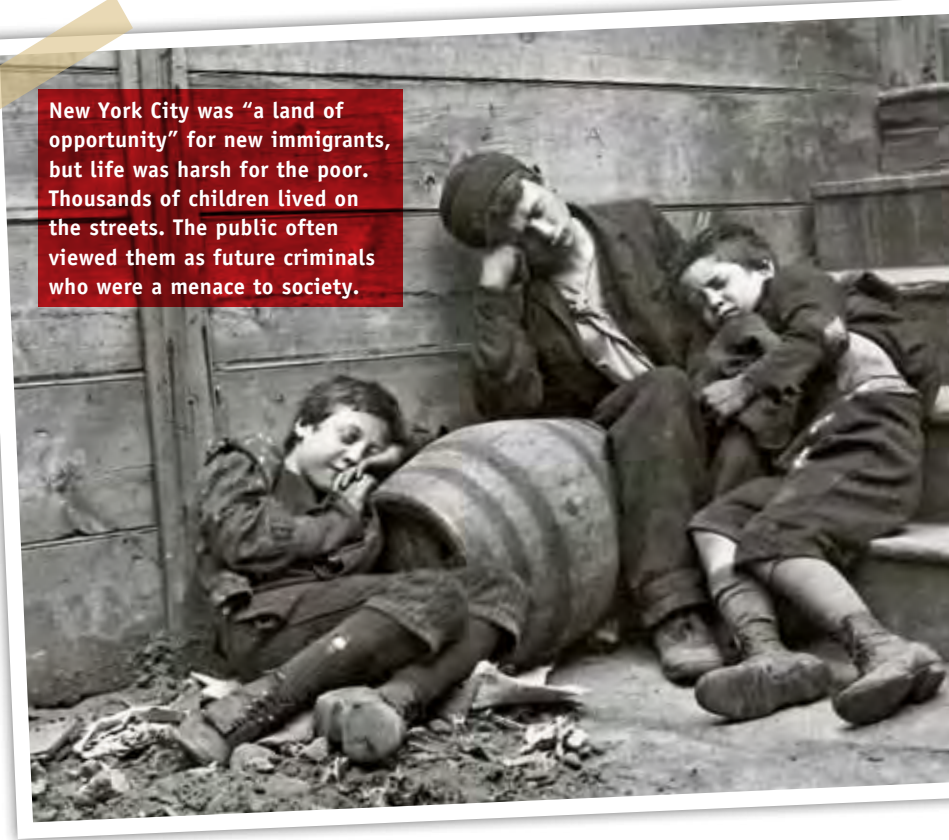
Children on the Streets

The orphan-train program began in 1854 as a way to help the thousands of children who lived in orphanages and on the streets in New York and other Eastern cities. Like Lee, many of these children were not, in fact, orphans. They had one or even two parents who were alive but unable to care for them.

Life in the cities was extremely difficult for the poor. Many were recent immigrants from Europe who worked long hours in low-paying jobs. When misfortune struck, as it had in Lee's family, there was often nowhere for a family to turn to for help. Some children ended up in dreary orphanages, where meals were as scarce as love and attention. Others ended up on the streets, begging or stealing to survive. The public considered these “street urchins” dangerous pests.

But some people wanted to help, including a young minister named Charles Loring Brace. In 1853, Brace founded the Children's Aid Society to provide food, shelter, and schooling to New York

New York City was “a land of opportunity” for new immigrants, but life was harsh for the poor. Thousands of children lived on the streets. The public often viewed them as future criminals who were a menace to society.



BETTMANN/CORBIS

City's abandoned children. Very quickly, Brace came to believe that the dirt and chaos of city life were unhealthy for the very young. He had read of a program in Europe in which poor children were sent to the countryside to find good homes. He thought a similar idea might work in the U.S., where scores of people were heading west to start new lives on the frontier.

Surely, Brace believed, America's frontier families had room in their hearts, in their new homes, and on their farms for needy children. And what better way to bring children to new towns than on America's new cross-country railroad system?

Brace called his plan "placing out." Trains would carry groups of kids to towns in the West. Residents would be told in advance where they could gather to pick a child.

In 1854, Brace tested his plan with 46 children aged 10 to 12. They traveled to Michigan with two chaperones. By the end of the trip, every child was placed with a family.

Brace's plan was considered a success. Soon, thousands of kids were riding the orphan trains every year.

Pink Envelope

Typically, children were told only a night or two in advance that they would be going west. They



Some abandoned or orphaned kids lived in orphanages like this one, where food (and love) was often scarce.

were given a bath and new clothes. Lee and his brothers were dressed up in **knickers**, neckties, and suit jackets. Girls wore new dresses and **pinafores**. Matrons warned the kids to keep their new clothes tidy—not easy on a train journey that could stretch out for a week or more.

That first night, Lee took off his jacket and laid it out neatly where he could see it. He checked to make sure the pink envelope was safe in the pocket. When he woke up, however, the envelope was gone. He searched for the missing envelope frantically. When he called the matron for help, she told him to get back in his seat. "Where you're going, you won't be needing that envelope," she said firmly. "You must forget it."

Lee knew she had taken it, but he was helpless. First his mother had died, then he'd spent two sad years at an orphanage. Now he'd

lost his only connection to his father. "Nights on that train, I'd lie there with tears rolling down my cheeks," Lee later recalled, "my heart breaking again and again. How had I lost so much?"

Finding a Home

Even before children boarded an orphan train, the Children's Aid Society was working to line up families in towns along the route. Notices of "homes wanted for children" ran in newspapers. Town officials interviewed potential families and made arrangements.

When the train stopped in a town, the matrons led the children to a gathering place, such as a church or hotel. Sometimes, the kids were given a chance to eat, wash, and rest. Then, that day or the next morning, people would line up to meet the "poor city **foundlings**." Even in



small towns, a thousand onlookers might show up to **gawk**. Interested families would talk with the children and make their choices. (One newspaper editor compared it to picking out cattle.) When it was over, the children who weren't chosen continued down the train line, repeating the process until someone picked them.

Many of these journeys ended happily. Needy children found loving homes, and families embraced them as their own. Some families, however, weren't interested in welcoming a child into their home. What they wanted was free labor for their farm or a servant for the house. Agents for the Children's Aid Society were supposed to keep track of every child, visit once a year, and remove kids from bad situations. But the system failed sometimes. Some kids were physically abused. Others ran away.

The Journey Ends

At first, Lee's journey seemed to be heading in that direction. After several stops, half the children had been picked—but not Lee. In one town, a farmer felt Lee's muscles and stuck his hand in Lee's mouth to feel his teeth. Lee wanted to bite him. Instead, he glared until the farmer moved away.



New York children with their matron and a male chaperone prepare to go west (above). The orphan trains, started by Charles Loring Brace (left), led to the creation of today's foster-care system.

At the end of a grueling week, the train stopped in Clarksville, Texas. One couple chose Gerald. Another chose Leo. At first, that couple took Lee as well, but after a few days, they decided one boy was all they could handle. Lee lasted only a few days with his next family, an elderly farm couple.

Finally, he arrived at the home of Ben and Ollie Nailling. That first day, Lee refused to speak to them, though he was astonished to be given his own bedroom. The next morning, he woke up to the smell of breakfast: biscuits, ham, bacon, eggs, and potatoes. It was the most food he had ever seen at one time.

After breakfast, the Naillings walked to town with Lee. Along the way, they stopped at each house, where they introduced Lee as their "new son." Lee's plans to run away started to fade.

Riding the Train

The last orphan train left New York in 1929. New programs were available to help poor families, so fewer children ended up on the streets. The country was facing difficult economic times, making it harder for families to take in kids. And people had begun to question the wisdom of sending children across the country and into the

homes of strangers.

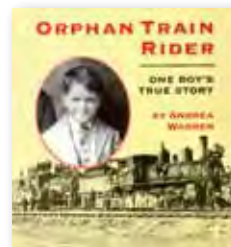
There are no reliable statistics about what happened to the nearly 200,000 children who rode the orphan trains. Certainly, many went on to lead happy lives. Others suffered cruelly. As for Lee, he

never did find his biological father—but he considered himself lucky. His childhood with the Naillings was happy. They made sure he spent time with his brothers, Gerald and Leo, who lived nearby. Lee went to college and served in World War II. He married

and became a father, a grandfather, and a great-grandfather.

"I've always felt that I had a guardian angel watching over me," said Lee, who died in 2001. "When I got off that train in Texas, I was a bitterly unhappy little boy. The good Lord saw to it that I ended up with the Naillings. That was where I belonged." ●

To read more of Lee's story, check out this amazing book by Andrea Warren!



Michaela, Triumphant

Orphaned by a war, abandoned by her family, despised by her caregivers—this amazing teenager overcame it all to become the ballerina she dreamed of being.

BY KATHY SATTERFIELD



It was a windy day in Sierra Leone, where 3-year-old Michaela was standing by the fence of the orphanage.

Like so many other children in this war-torn country in West Africa, Michaela had lost everything. Her father had been shot. Her mother had died of starvation. And although the orphanage where she was living provided shelter, it didn't provide much love.

A magazine blew against the fence. The cover showed a beautiful, smiling dancer in pointe shoes. **Mesmerized**, Michaela ripped off the cover and hid it under her clothes.

That photograph became her most treasured possession.



Life in the Orphanage

Civil war ravaged Sierra Leone from 1991 to 2002. Tens of thousands of people died. (The country is still **plagued** by violence today.) One of those victims was Michaela's father. After her mother died as well, an uncle took Michaela to the orphanage, which offered little comfort. The "aunties and uncles" charged with caring for the children despised her. They called her "devil child" because she suffers from a rare skin condition called *vitiligo*, which had caused white freckles on her neck and chest. They told her that no one would ever want her.

Of the 27 children at the orphanage, Michaela was known as "No. 27"—the least favorite. She received the smallest amount of food and the fewest pieces of clothing. She



was forced to share a sleeping mat with another girl, Mia, who ultimately became her best friend. Michaela and the other children lived in fear. Their lives were surrounded by violence. The only teacher who ever showed Michaela kindness was murdered in front of her.

Through it all Michaela clung to the photograph of that dancer, which soon grew tattered and dirty. She would later say that the photograph saved her from giving up.

A New Life

In 1999, a kind American couple named Elaine and Charles DePrince came to the orphanage. They had traveled all the way from New Jersey to adopt a little girl. They chose Mia, but when they heard about Michaela's plight, they decided to adopt her too.

Michaela was in bad shape—she had tonsillitis, swollen joints, and a disease called *mononucleosis*,

which makes you extremely tired—but her spirit was strong. “She arrived in the U.S. with attitude,” Elaine says. “She had this expression on her face that said she wasn’t going to take any nonsense.”

Once Michaela was healthy, Elaine enrolled her in ballet classes. It was clear right away that Michaela was extremely gifted. Still, the memories of her ordeal in Sierra Leone haunted her.

“It took a long time to get it out of my memory,”

she says. “But my mom helped me, and I wrote a lot of stuff down so I could recover from it. Dance helped me a lot.”

Today, Michaela, now 17, has blossomed into a confident, skilled dancer. She

has starred in a

documentary, performed on ABC's *Dancing With the Stars*, and appeared in *Teen*

Vogue. She was recently hired by

Dance Theatre of Harlem, a famous ballet company in New York City. One day, she hopes to return to Sierra Leone and start a ballet school for girls.

“My life is proof that no matter what situation you're in,” says Michaela, “as long as you have a supportive family, you can achieve anything.” ●



“She had this expression on her face that said she wasn’t going to take any nonsense.”

—Michaela’s adoptive mom, Elaine

CONTEST

Compare and Contrast In the stories you just read, Lee Nailling and Michaela DePrince each held on to an item that meant a lot to them. Explain what the pink envelope symbolized to Lee and what the magazine cover symbolized to Michaela. Compare and contrast the role these objects played in their lives. Send your answer to **ORPHAN TRAIN CONTEST**. Five winners will each receive a copy of *Runaway* by Wendelin Van Draanen. See page 2 for details.

**GET THIS
ACTIVITY
ONLINE**

