

Discovering Your Orphan Train Ancestors

Introductions (2 min.)

- Kaily Carson, Curator
- Lori Halfhide, Head Researcher
- National Orphan Train Complex
 - Founded in 2003 as the national museum and research center for the orphan train movement
 - Located in Concordia, Kansas

A Brief introduction to Orphan Train History (10 min.)

- When and why?
 - 1854: The first orphan train travels to Dowagiac, MI as a trial program for the Children's Aid Society. It expanded on existing foster placement systems.
 - Goals of the orphan train movement: find homes for orphaned, abandoned, or otherwise needy children from NYC out West, where they could learn practical skills and grow up in Christian homes
 - The movement quickly spread from one organization to as many as 30
 - Between 1854 and 1929, about 250,000 children moved west as part of this movement
- How did it work?
 - For most organizations...
 - Groups of 5-20 children left NYC, bound for a pre-selected destination
 - Perspective foster families applied through local community members
 - Families and children gathered in a public space for selection
 - Agents traveled with the children, made home visits, and checked up on the kids after placement.
 - For other organizations...
 - Children were pre-matched with families, who applied by mail
 - Families were approved by their local priests
 - Children traveled in larger groups, making multiple stops to drop children off with their pre-selected families
- Outcomes and Legacy
 - The processes of placing, the experiences of the children, and the outcomes of the movement were and are incredibly varied.
 - 80% success rate. 20% ended up in bad homes, were poorly treated, or were returned to NY for poor behavior.

Researching Orphan Train Riders (20 min.)

- Clues your ancestor might be an orphan train rider....
 - Census clues
 - Name
 - Different last name than other family members
 - Birth place
 - Born in NY

- Different birth place than anyone else in the family
 - Relation to head
 - Listed as boarder, orphan, servant, ‘taken in’, foster or adopted son/daughter
 - Parent’s birth place
 - Different than other children in the home
 - Listed as “unknown”
 - Other
 - Woman in household reports 0 children living, but there is a child living in the home
- Family stories
 - Tales of someone arriving on the farm as a child? Or being picked off a train? A family member who has a different name, but how they came to be part of the family is unknown?
- Conclusive evidence
 - Documents from the Children’s Aid Society, New York Foundling Hospital, New York Juvenile Asylum showing an indenture/adoption/foster placement
 - Newspaper articles recounting a placement and listing children’s names
- How to begin researching...
 - Start with what you know
 - Sometimes this means starting at the end of their life and working backwards
 - Sometimes it means starting in the middle with just the names of the people who fostered them
 - Sometimes it means starting with a birth name and nothing else
 - Like any other genealogy resources, look for censuses, birth and death records, marriages, military records, etc. and try to create a general life sketch
- Utilize all your resources
 - National Orphan Train Complex database and files (largest list of orphan train riders)
 - Children’s Aid Society, New York Foundling Hospital, New York Juvenile Asylum, and American Female Guardian Society (original orphanage records, essential for finding birth families)
 - NYC Birth Certificates on Ancestry
 - Louisiana Orphan Train Museum (for Catholic orphan train riders to Louisiana)
 - Newspapers - Newspapers.com, local historical societies (for finding orphan train arrival dates)
 - John Shontz and the Orphan Train Project (for re-creating orphan train routes)
 - Facebook Groups
- Helpful Tips and Things to Remember
 - Consider researching other family members too – especially foster parents or birth siblings. While researching them, you may find information about the person you initially started with.
 - Many orphan train riders changed their names during their life – you may have to search using a few different combinations of first and last names.

- Remember, many orphan train children did not know their birth names, exact birth dates, or the names of their birth parents, so this information may not be consistent. Spellings, dates, and locations may change depending on the record.
- Be flexible and don't give up! More records are digitized each year, so if you don't have much luck this time around, take a break, and come back in a couple months.
- For many riders, there is no absolutely conclusive evidence they were riders, just clues. You may never find absolute "proof" that someone rode an orphan train.
- Call us – we are happy to help!

A Research Success (7 min.)

Resources:

National Orphan Train Complex: www.orphantraindepot.org, info@orphantraindepot.org, (785)243-4471

Louisiana Orphan Train Museum: <https://www.laorphantrainmuseum.com/>

Children's Aid Society: www.childrensaidnyc.org/contact

New York Foundling: www.nyfoundling.org/connect-to-your-foundling-roots/

New York Juvenile Asylum: www.newyorkjuvenileasylum.com

American Female Guardian Society: <https://orphantraindepot.org/research-and-registration/>

The Orphan Train Project (John Shontz): <https://orphantraindepot.org/research-and-registration/orphan-train-itineraries/>

Orphan Train DNA Group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/233578090777700>