Riding the Rails to Hope

Between 1854 and 1929 thousands of children were sent by train to parts of the United States far from where they lived. They rode what were called the orphan trains. Many of these children no longer had parents, or had parents who were too poor or otherwise unable to take care of them. Some were the children of immigrant parents who were unable to find work in a new land. As a result, many of these children were living on the streets.

**Good Homes**

The goal of the orphan trains was to save the growing number of these children from the streets of New York City and place them with loving, caring families in the Midwest who could take good care of them.

During the seventy-five years that the orphan trains ran, between 150,000 and 200,000 children were placed in homes in Kansas, Illinois, Nebraska, and many other states. Some were even placed in homes in Canada and Mexico.

The orphan trains brought many of these children to good, loving homes where they were legally adopted and treated very well. Two governors, a United States congressman, and many lawyers and bankers were once riders of the orphan trains.

**Bad Homes**

Unfortunately, many other children found that their new life was not very good. Many farmers made them work long hours on their farms. There are stories of children who were treated badly and abused. Some even ran away from their new homes, never to be heard from again. Famous teenage outlaw Billy the Kid rode the orphan train as a child.

**New Options**

Public reaction to the orphan trains was mixed. Some people thought it was a wonderful way of helping poor children. Other people thought it was a terrible way of turning children into workers. The government responded by creating new child labor laws during the 1920s. Then, in the late 1920s, new government programs were created to help children who were orphaned or from poor homes. This put an end to the orphan trains.

Today, there are foster-care agencies in every state that help abandoned or abused children find foster homes and sometimes adoptive families.