

The Orphan Train Comes to Clarion

by Verlene McOllough



PHOTOGRAPH BY JACOB A. RIIS, JACOB A. RIIS COLLECTION, MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK

The homeless in the nineteenth century, photographed by Jacob Riis ("Street Arabs in sleeping quarters at night").

DURING THE SUMMER of 1892 some unusual cargo began arriving at the railroad depot in Clarion, Iowa. Unlike the usual deliveries of hardware and merchandise, a few train cars carried children from the Children's Aid Society of New York City.

The events were anticipated by the townspeople with the excitement usually afforded the arrival of Ringling Brothers' Circus, and they were almost as well publicized. On June 22, 1892, the *Wright County Monitor* advised, "BE ON HAND: If you wish to adopt one or more children be at the Opera House to-morrow (Thursday) afternoon immediately after the eastern passenger train arrives. E.E. Trott, of New York City, will be here at the time with a company of boys from the Children's Aid Society, of that city."

A holiday atmosphere prevailed as train time approached and citizens hurried to the one-room, wood-frame depot of the Burlington, Cedar Rapids and Northern Railroad. Businessmen stood expectantly at their doors. At the sound of clatter and whistle, many more people gathered to watch the children disembark.

As the children climbed down, their faces wore various expressions of bewilderment, fright, or surprise as they looked up into the faces of the crowd. Some in the crowd had traveled as far as thirty-five miles in the hopes of taking home a child. The children, with the same hope, had traveled a thousand miles.

AT LEAST one match of New York City orphan and Clarion citizen was made from that June orphan train. The newspaper reported that a "bright, manly appearing lad" about fourteen was given "a

good home and we hope the change will prove a beneficial one for him."

A beneficial change was the goal behind bringing destitute children to small towns — an idea that had been developed in the 1850s by a young minister/social worker named Charles Loring Brace. Brace had been shocked by the numbers of destitute children in New York City. By police estimates, at least ten thousand children in New York City were homeless. Youngsters slept in doorways and alleys and lived by their wits, which often meant begging and stealing — or worse. In 1852, four-fifths of the felony complaints were against minors. Too often, impoverished children ended up in overcrowded prisons, poorhouses, and other institutions that offered little correctional training.

In 1853 Brace founded the Children's Aid Society to help such children through schooling, jobs, and religious training. He established lodging houses and trade schools. Yet perhaps his most innovative approach was the large-scale "placing out program," which sent children west in orphan trains to small towns where they might find foster families.

Loring believed that through a wholesome environment and love, a child could be reclaimed, and that rural America could provide such homes. "For an outcast or homeless or orphan child, not tainted with bad habits," the *Annual Report* of the society maintained, "the best possible place of shelter and education, better than any prison or public institution, was the farmer's home." The orphan trains that stopped in Clarion in 1892 were among the hundreds that steamed into small midwestern communities beginning in 1854. (The earliest arrivals came in freight cars.) Eventually the Children's Aid Society placed out 100,000 children by way of orphan trains, and other child

welfare agencies in eastern cities sent another 50,000.

Willing families would sign placing-out agreements guaranteeing the child the same food, lodging, and education children born to them would receive. In return the child would become part of the family, which in the nineteenth century generally meant taking on a sizable share of the work. At any time, the agreement could be ended by parent or child.

Despite the name, children who rode the trains west were not all orphans. Many had one or both parents still living. But as the Children's Aid Society ferreted out neglected children from the poorer districts, they convinced many impoverished parents that a child's best chance lay in permitting the society to find the child a new home far beyond the urban slums and its miseries. The society obtained written consent from the parents, promising them that they could keep in touch with their child. (Unless the child was formally adopted, the

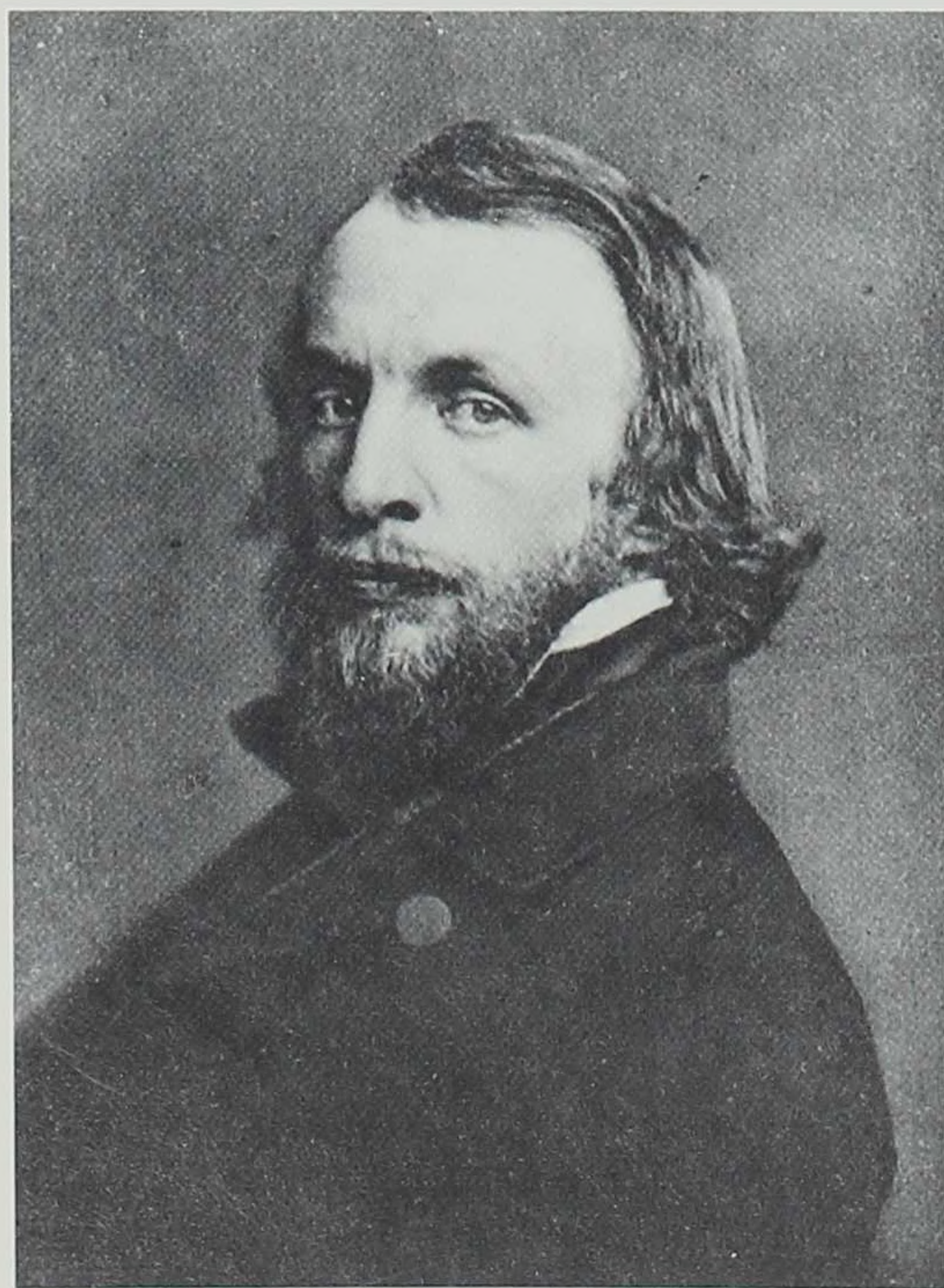
society or biological parents were guardians. Biological parents could reclaim their children.) Police and welfare workers also directed needy children to the society, as did orphanages and juvenile correctional institutions, eager to reduce their populations.

Meanwhile the society sent agents to small midwestern towns. Announcements were published in the newspapers, and local committees of community leaders were appointed to advertise for potential parents and to arrange temporary lodging for the children who were not chosen. As Clarion committee members, minister John E. Rowen (a state senator in 1894 and 1896) and attorney (and later mayor) James A. Rogers also screened local applicants and forwarded requests for children.

Apparently in June 1892 more children had been requested than arrived. The July 13 *Wright County Monitor* reported, "We hear that quite a number of our citizens who desired adopting one or more children from among the number sent here by the Children's Aid Society of New York City last month were disappointed, there not being a sufficient number to meet the demand. The agent of the society, E. Trott, Esq., desires us to say that if those who still wish to adopt children will leave their names at this office stating the number desired, age, sex, nationality, etc. he will do the best he can toward supplying the want, provided there are a sufficient number desired to justify him in making another trip to this place. If you wish to adopt one or more children please act upon the suggestions above outlined, furnishing us with the information called for on or before August 1st, which date the list will be forwarded to Mr. Trott."

Back in New York, the Children's Aid Society screened out children with certain physical or mental handicaps or serious crime records. Bathed, clothed, and given Bibles, they were loaded onto specific train cars with a Children's Aid Society agent as escort.

Although some children might have seen the train ride as an exciting adventure, it was hardly that for the agent who had to care for, keep track of, and find homes for a group of perhaps fifty children ranging from infancy to age fourteen — and making up to a dozen such trips a year. Aptly named Trott, the agent who



COURTESY OF AUTHOR AND CHILDREN'S AID SOCIETY

Charles Loring Brace founded the Children's Aid Society, which placed out thousands of destitute youth from the urban East Coast to rural homes farther west.

TERMS ON WHICH BOYS ARE PLACED IN HOMES.

ALL APPLICANTS MUST BE ENDORSED BY THE COMMITTEE

Boys fifteen years old are expected to work till they are eighteen for their board and clothes. At the end of that time they are at liberty to make their own arrangements.

Boys between twelve and fifteen are expected to work for their board and clothes till they are eighteen, but must be sent to school a part of each year, after that it is expected that they receive wages.

Boys under twelve are expected to remain till they are eighteen, and must be treated by the applicants as one of their own children in matters of schooling, clothing and training.

Should a removal be necessary it can be arranged through the committee or by writing to the Agent.

The Society reserves the right of removing a boy at any time for just cause.

We desire to hear from every child twice a year.

All Expenses of Transportation are Paid by the Society.

CHILDREN'S AID SOCIETY.
24 ST. MARKS PLACE, N.Y.

E. TROTT, AGENT.

With the help of community leaders, Children's Aid Society agents announced their arrivals through newspapers.

served Clarion and other midwestern towns announced through the August 17 *Monitor* that "another 'invoice' of children from the New York Aid Society will arrive here about the 15th of September. Those wishing to adopt one or more are requested to leave word with either J.E. Rowen or J.A. Rogers, of this place."

THE TENACIOUS LITTLE TROUPE that arrived in Clarion September 15 was herded north from the depot up the dirt and planking of the broad main street, past clapboard store fronts and gilt-lettered bank windows. They stopped at the wood-frame skating rink and opera house (also used by the Presbyterians as a meeting place).

Here they lined up on the wide porch. Agent Trott stepped forward and told about the work of the society and a little about each child, urging takers. Prospective parents walked among the children. The women talked to them as their skeptical farmer-husbands felt

young muscles and checked the size of arms and legs. Some were hoping for a child to love, and some wanted free farm labor. A few just wanted to see the goings-on. A few more wiped eyes bright with tears.

In the line-up stood six-year-old Joe Wall, sobbing. A little girl named Emma was there, too, probably a less-desirable candidate for placing out due to a lame leg. Ten-year-old Charles Merkle maintained a protective air as he stood with his three sisters, Lizzie, nine, Mary, six, and Minnie, four.

Minnie Ketchum, now 100, is the only Clarion arrival alive today, and one of only a few hundred still living who traveled the orphan trains in America. The following excerpts from a recent oral history interview yield a child's reaction to being part of the orphan-train phenomenon.

Ketchum's memory of early family life in New York City is hazy and relies somewhat on her oldest sister's memories: "Lizzie said she remembered our father bringing his shining tools home. He was a machinist and they carried their tools with them in those days. He

would put them down by the door instructing her to 'not touch them' and Lizzie said we never did." The father worked on ships and the children ran down to the docks every night to meet him.

Ketchum continues, "Lizzie said we lived not far from the Statue of Liberty. She said we played around the statue. My mother died when I was a year old. And that's when we were put into the Children's Home.

"There was a man who came to see us [at the children's home] before we left to go away to Iowa," Ketchum recalls. "I suppose it was my father. I thought I'd sat on Jesus' lap. I suppose we had had lessons on the Bible and my father probably had a beard.

"When we came on the train west we were in separate cars. One car for the boys and one for the girls," she says. "I remember one thing about the ride. Someone brought a tray of food into our car. There were two children on one bench and two on the other facing each other. The tray sat in the middle of us. I remember that because I suppose I was hungry."

Children and foster parents were not matched up before the arrival. "I think we just came," Ketchum says. "They dumped us out here. One child would step up and whoever wanted him took him.

"A family took me at first. . . . They didn't have any children and [the wife] wanted me but the husband didn't.

"There was a Dr. Merrietta [Marietta?] who was there that day and saw [that the family had brought me back] and he went over to Herbert Aldrich's at Galt and told Mrs. Aldrich, 'There's a little girl in Clarion who came in on the train. She looks like you. You ought to have her.'"

The Aldriches already had two boys. But they wanted a daughter, too, so they traveled to Clarion. Ketchum remembers sitting on Herbert Aldrich's lap, looking up into his face, and telling him, "You look just like my father." "And that did it," she says. "I guess I was a schemer."

Her eyes shine: "My [adoptive] brothers spoiled me. I couldn't even walk to school [because] my older brother, Ben, always carried me. We lived across the road from the church in Galt and Ben carried me over there

The frontispiece of the 1886 *Annual Report* of the Children's Aid Society depicts the transformation of an urban waif into a happy, productive member of a rural family through the society's placing-out system.

too, every Sunday. My brothers worshipped me. There wasn't anything I wanted that I didn't get."

As she grew up, Minnie Ketchum apparently forgot her father in New York amidst the love of her new family. "I didn't know I was adopted til I was about twelve years old," she says. "I found out when some kids got mad at me at school and one girl said, 'Well, blood is thicker than water.' I went home and asked my mother what she meant and my mother told me. I cried. It was a shock. It just didn't seem right."

Not all orphan-train children found homes as permanent and loving as Minnie Ketchum's. Sometimes the parents asked the Children's Aid Society to remove the child, who might then be placed in several different families before an appropriate one was found. Some youths claimed that society agents never made the yearly follow-up visits required. Occasionally a child would run away, only to be brought back and punished. Stories of abuse or ill treatment reached society headquarters.

Ketchum notes, "My brothers and sisters didn't get into such good homes. When Charles stepped out on the platform a family took him for a while. He stayed with them seven months when [the foster mother] wrote to the society requesting that he be removed at once. I don't know why." He was then placed with a Grundy County family. "The man who took my brother took him to work. That was all he wanted him for. The father wasn't good to him but the mother was." When Charles was eighteen he left home and worked in various states as a carpenter.

The oldest Merkle daughter, Lizzie, was taken by a family from Goodell who reportedly did not offer her the love and warmth Minnie received. Ketchum says, "They had a family of several children of their own. The other kids teased her except for one boy. He liked her and was good to her. He looked out for her and took her side."

Mary Merkle was taken by a Clarion family. She died of tuberculosis shortly after her high



school graduation. Emma, the physically handicapped child, was taken by a local family. Joe Wall was the last child to be chosen in the September line-up. Joe was thin and thought to be slow of mind. Finally a farming couple took him. Folks who remember say he was treated well. When his parents moved to Emmetsburg to dairy farm he moved with them. After the parents retired, Joe came back to Clarion and worked for various farmers.

A WEEK BEFORE Minnie, her siblings, Joe Wall, and Emma had found homes in Clarion, a child from an earlier train lost his. "One of the New York children, a little boy, died at the home of his adopted parents, Mr. and Mrs. J. L. Robson, on Friday evening of diphtheria," reported the September 7 *Monitor*. "Burial took place a short time after and the premises were thoroughly disinfected. A little granddaughter of the parties named also died from the same complaint on Sunday night. As soon as the nature of the disease was known a quarantine was promptly established and every effort possible taken to prevent the dread malady from spreading, hence it is not probable there will be any new cases."

When the September 15 train arrived agent Trott had said that he would be back with another group in four weeks. Yet no reports of other orphan arrivals were found in the 1892 *Monitor*. Perhaps fear of diphtheria or caution toward the approaching winter weather played some part. Perhaps no other parents requested children.

Nevertheless the Children's Aid Society continued to send orphan trains to the Midwest and West until 1929. As social welfare philosophy changed, so did the attitudes towards the practice of placing out, used by Charles Loring Brace and his successors at the Children's Aid Society and a handful of other eastern juvenile welfare institutions.

Welfare workers who favored institutionalization criticized placing out. At the 1882 National Conference of Charities and Corrections in Madison, Wisconsin, some delegates accused the Children's Aid Society of shipping "thieves, liars and vagabonds" and thereby

menacing western society. Some claimed that local screening committees hesitated to reject foster-parent applicants for fear of miffing their small-town neighbors and associates, and that faulty screening of families sometimes brought harm to the children. The society investigated such charges and stated in its annual reports that few children had turned out for the worse and that cases of abuse were rare. A survey in 1900 of all children placed out since 1854 found that 87 percent were "doing well."

Following the move to professionalize social work, the society initiated inspection of foster homes and more follow-up supervision by the turn of the century. It established a farm school where boys could first find out whether farm work was for them. Babies were adopted directly from the society's New York nursery rather than being shipped west.

The turn of the century also brought slum clearance, stricter child labor laws, and compulsory school attendance in the urban East. In the West there was less need for farm workers. Social legislation and new policies by government and private agencies emphasized keeping families together. The Children's Aid Society modified its own program to endorse services aimed at improving the quality of life in their homes.

Brace's idea to place out children by the orphan trains was not the perfect solution, but it was a bold, large-scale step towards resolving the plight of enormous numbers of homeless children in the East. In the peak years of the 1870s and 1880s, three to four thousand children a year were placed in new homes far beyond the poverty and crime in which they had been born. Minnie Ketchum has no regrets. "I couldn't have had a better family if I'd been born into it," she says. "They took me because they wanted me." □

NOTE ON SOURCES

Wright County histories and the *Wright County Monitor* yielded valuable information, as did interviews with Minnie Merkle Aldrich Ketchum and others familiar with Clarion orphan-train children. Secondary sources include Donald Dale Jackson, "It took trains to put street kids on the right track out of the slums," *Smithsonian* (Aug. 1986), 95-102; and Leslie Wheeler, "Orphan Trains," *American History Illustrated* (Dec. 1983), 10-23. The author thanks Anne Hines, Clarion, for her help in newspaper research.