

Orphan trains brought kids to western Kansas

By Margaret Bucholtz

Editor's note: Information for this article was gathered by the author from several web sites on the Orphan train movement and was the featured article at the 2007 Kansas Day Celebration held in Bird City.

Imagine for a few minutes what it would be like to be living all alone on the streets of New York City. Maybe you have brothers or sisters, but there are no parents. After days of the freezing weather someone found you and placed you in one of the orphanages. There you had some shelter and a little warm food to eat, but still you are alone and scared.

The orphanage fills up and the rooms are crowded. Finally someone tells you that you are going to get on a train and go to the Midwest, there people will give you a home. The feelings are many, feelings of happiness to have a home, feelings of panic wondering if you would have a good home, would your brothers or sisters still be with you.

Coming from the homes you had lived in there will certainly be feelings of "will someone love me, or even want me." "Will the home be better than what I had," or "will these parents die like my real parents did." Some of your had parents that just couldn't raise you and placed you on the streets for someone to find you.

The time comes to board that train, it was not a pullman but more like a cattle car that is filled with children. It will have some seats and make-shift bathroom facilities, but that is all. (In later years the trains used pullman cars.) After long days of riding, the train comes to a stop and you see lots of people standing there waiting for you to get off.

A big box is set up in the center, like a stage, and one by one each child is placed on the stage to be chosen. A rough, dirty man comes up to the little girl and pries her mouth open with his dirty hands to see if her teeth are in good shape.

A little boy is next and another smelly man walks up and asks him to flex his muscles to see if he will be a good farm hand. After all he is looking only for someone to work for him. The little boy tries to break away and run, yelling, crying and kicking. After that no one wants him as they can see he would be trouble. Not one time did anyone look beyond his actions and see that it was fear, fear of the unknown that the boy was rebelling against.

You stand and watch as your other siblings are chosen one by one, but no one wants the whole family. You wonder if you will ever see your brothers and sisters again.

Not all of the stories were like these as

about 50 percent of the children were placed in good homes, but very few brothers and sisters were kept together. They were lucky if their siblings were adopted in the same area, but if they were it didn't mean they would be able to keep in contact.

In 1852, over 175,000 immigrants arrived in America. In 1854, the number rose to over 250,000 with the Port of New York being the main arrival point.

New York City became a "boiling pot" of chaotic living conditions with widespread disease, crime, breakdown of family life and innocent children suffering.

In 1853 the New York Police estimated 10,000 children in the city were uncared for. By 1854, the first organize Children's Aid Society was formed by a young minister, Charles Loring Brace. Charles saw a dire need and felt a strong morally and Christian desire to help with these children. He gave up a "well to do" lifestyle to that of a poorly-paid social worker. He became the first secretary of the Children's Aid Society.

The first group of workable age children were sent to Michigan. There were 40 of them. It was very successful and was the start of the Free Home Placing Out that did not stop until the late 1920s or early 1930s. Between 1854 and 1929, an estimated 200,000 plus orphaned, abandoned, homeless children and poor families were placed out in what we today know as the Orphans Trains era.

In 1865, the New York Foundling Asylum was founded by the Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul with \$5 and an empty building. In the beginning, a basket was placed in the entryway of the building to receive unwanted infants with no questions asked. A nun on duty would quickly retrieve the child and take it to be cared for.

In 1872 they had "Baby Trains" that were sent out with infants and small children to be placed with families who would raise them in the Catholic faith. This group used an indenture form when placing the infants. This gave them legal authority to remove the child from a household at any time and the child could leave the home at the age of 18. Each child had a tag sewn inside a garment and the parent that were to adopt them would have a form with a number that matched the children.

The older children were between the ages of six and 15 (some were older) were placed by the stopping at towns and being chosen. This is where the phase came from as "Being put up for adoption."

The first Orphan Train that came to Kansas was in 1867. By 1893, 960 children had been

placed in the state. In 1901, Kansas passed legislation mandating that the State Board of Charities had authority to scrutinize all organizations or institution placing children. With the passing of that legislation, the board immediately ruled that no homeless children could be brought into Kansas without a certificate of good character and a \$5,000 security bond. William Stanley, governor of Kansas, (1899-1903) said, "We cannot afford to have the state made a dumping ground for the dependent children of other states, especially New York."

By 1910, over 4,100 children had been placed in the state of Kansas. New York had the highest count of 33,053 Children and the lowest state was New Mexico with only one. In 1927, there was a growing debate against indenture.

Twelve states: Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, Indiana, Pennsylvania, Arkansas, Maryland, Rhode Island, Virginia, West Virginia, Nebraska, and Kansas still allowed indenture of institutional charges and children who had been turned over to county authorities or poor farms.

In 1930, the last Orphan Trains arrived in Kansas. It was also the official end to Orphan Train movement.

Orphan Trains were needed at the time they happened. They were not the best answer, but they were the first attempts at finding a practical system. Many children that would have died lived and went on to have children and grandchildren. It has been calculated that over two million descendants have come from these children. The trains gave the children a fighting chance to grow up.

Two local Orphan Train boys

Editor's note: The following was taken from the writings of Simon Matson.

We believe it was the year 1888, and the place, Benkelman, Neb., when a number of orphan children were brought there for the purpose of finding some people who would be willing to provide a home for them. Anyone who would provide a home for one of more could have them.

One after another they were taken until only one boy remained. He was small and frail and his appearance revealed he was of foreign (Italian) parentage. When this boy saw one after another of his associates were taken, and he alone remained, he burst into tears and cried as though his little heart would break.

A man had stood back and watched the procedure, while various emotions surged through his being. When this little boy broke into tears and seemed heart broken

— this man could no longer hold back but stepped forth and said, "I'll take you my little boy and provide a home for you." This man was Marion Bowers from the Neville neighborhood, and the boy became Charlie Bowers.

Mr. and Mrs. Bowers had no children of their own; a few years later they also adopted a girl. Mr. Bowers had made a good move and a wise choice and Charlie got a good home.

Mr. Bowers told us a few years before he died, "Charlie and I have never said a harsh word to each other." A statement like that means a lot; too bad it cannot be truthfully said more often.

Charlie taught several successful terms of school. He was the life of the Neville Sunday school and a power in the church while in the community. He was talented and could lead in the playing and singing in school, Sunday school and church. He had a winning way and was liked by all his school pupils and all the children in Sunday school. To this day, we have not heard an uncomplimentary word said about him by any of his former pupils.

He was in Oklahoma a few years in school work. After returning to Cheyenne County, he was elected county treasurer in 1906, in which capacity he served for four years.

Some time after George Lawless' death in 1912, Charlie became editor of The Herald for awhile. At the conclusion of this responsibility, he moved out on his land holding in Section 29-5-41 and built a home, where he and his family lived until in the spring of 1929. When he had a sale and moved to Florida, it became home for him and his wife, Nan, and their two daughters. Charlie died in 1952, and Mrs. Bowers died about two years ago, if our memory serves us correctly.

What we have said about Charlie Bowers may sound like over statements, but it is the truth and comes from the depth of our heart, and is a tribute to a fine man, a former good neighbor and a true friend.

We might add Mrs. Bowers was an accomplished pianist and Charlie a good song leader, so the two were a wonderful help in Sunday school and church work.

Ewing Lawrence "Buck" White

Submitted by the grandchildren of Ewing "Buck" and Ruth Coreyell White: Shirley Dotterer Wadsworth; Kathy Dotterer Vahl; Thelma Dotterer Chowning; the late Sue Vallin Carpenter; Dwight Vallin; Marc Prochazka; Kent Prochazka.

Our grandfather Ewing Lawrence "Buck" White was born April 27, 1892, at Jollytown, W. Va. He was the son of Jacob

and Martha Bell White. His father, who was a coal miner, got the dreaded black lung disease and died when grandpa was 3 years old. The hard times were that his mother could no longer care for Grandpa and his two sisters.

The two girls were taken by relatives to raise and Grandpa somehow ended up in an orphanage in Kansas City, Mo. In 1899, Grandpa came west on an Orphan Train and was the last child left in Goodland when Jasper and Mary Katherine Berry took him to their homestead to raise.

The Berry's never adopted Grandpa however they did sign a contract that they would care for him until he was of legal age. That contract is on display in the White Museum at Jollytown. Grandpa grew to manhood on that farm and, in 1915, he married our grandmother Ruth Coreyell in Goodland. For the next 29 years they lived on that farm and raised their three daughters, Mildred, Inis and Twila. In 1944, they moved to St. Francis where Grandpa worked at the Co-op Service Station until he retired.

Grandpa Buck was a very unique and a one-of-a-kind individual with a fun-loving sense of humor. You see, our grandpa stuttered when he talked. But this never seemed to bother him when he was talking or telling a story. Our good family friend Kenny Krien, the St. Francis 1957 all-state wrestler, can imitate Grandpa to a T. Many people have told us that when Grandpa was younger he sang at weddings and funerals with a beautiful baritone voice and never stuttered when he did so. Grandpa loved playing cards, traveling, fishing and all the many Masonic and Elk Lodge activities of which he was a 50-year-plus member.

In his later years he made many trips back to West Virginia to visit his relatives.

We have many great stories about Grandpa and one of our favorites was the one about the great chicken kill. Company came to the farm to visit one Sunday afternoon and Grandma said "Buck go kill some young roosters and we will have fried chicken for supper." Grandpa threw out some grain and shot into them with both barrels of his shotgun. He killed 11 old hens and one young rooster and they were up half the night cleaning and cooking chickens.

We have many wonderful memories of our grandparents. The most amazing thing is what a wonderful sense of humor and positive attitude they possessed in spite of the hardships and tough times they encountered on life's highway.

Our grandparents are buried in the St. Francis Cemetery.

Nicodemus was black township in western Kansas history

TOWNSHIP, from Page 1

In 1877 W. R. Hill from Indiana and Rev. W.H. Smith, a black minister from Kentucky formed the Nicodemus Town Company. Smith was the company president and Hill the treasurer. Hill City is named after W. R. Hill.

She said they named the town Nicodemus after a legendary figure who came to America on a slave ship and was the first black man to buy his freedom.

The Rev. Simon Roundtree was the first settler on June 18, 1877. Zack Fletcher and his wife, Jenny Smith Fletcher, arrived in July and lived in houses dug into the ground called dug outs.

Roundtree actively promoted the town and worked with a man, Pap Singleton, to distribute fliers and handbills. They met in churches because group meetings were otherwise illegal due to Jim Crow Laws. Ex-slaves who decided to emigrate soon acquired the name Exodusters. The slaves were told the land was very fruitful and that all they had to

do to own it was to live on the ground and improve it.

A group of 350 decided to go and Roundtree said he would be back in September to get them. That gave them time to save money to buy train tickets to Ellis. Helping things was the fact that the railroad built a new spear line to Sadieville, Ky., only 70 to 80 miles the group had to walk to get on the train.

After they reached Ellis they were quarantined for two weeks because measles had broken out. Hill brought wagons to Ellis and led the group to Nicodemus. People walked 55 miles to get there. People expected to see a town but were disappointed when they found the people living in dug outs. Sixty of the group decided to go back to Kentucky.

The settlers had a hard time that first winter and ran out of food. Tompkins said Osage Indians were traveling through and shared supplies and are credited for helping the settlers survive that first winter.

In 1878 a second group came and the last group came in 1879 to 1880,

she said. When the railroad decided not to run track through Nicodemus and built up the neighboring town of Bogue, Nicodemus started to decline.

Tompkins said, the town currently has a population of 30, down from a high point of around 650, but is optimistic about its future. The National Park designation and the Emancipation Celebration held the last weekend of July keep the town going.

She said the celebration attracts tourists as well as many of the descendants of the original settlers.

Woman storyteller brings history to life

STORYTELLER, from Page 1

Fields killed him. The Bishop said he couldn't have anyone working for him that had killed someone.

In Cascade they were looking for someone to drive the stage-coach and Fields said she could do the job. When they figured out that she had been picking up supplies for the mission the job was hers. With pride she said she delivered the mail and people on time. Fields was in her sixties at the time.

After that she opened a laundry and made money on the side competing with men to see if they could knock her out with their fist before she knocked them out. She found she could make quite a chunk of change doing that. Fields died in 1918.

Tompkins is the president of the Nicodemus Historical Society and a descendant of some of the original settlers of the town. Her parents left Nicodemus in the 1950s and moved to Pasadena, Calif. She

moved back to the town in 1990 and helped to have it designated a National Park Site in 1996. Currently she lives in Bogue.

The program was sponsored by the library, Sherman County Historical Society, National Weather Service and High Plains Museum.

"I prefer rural versus urban where people are people not numbers," Tompkins said. "I live here on the high plains by choice."


matters of record

Goodland Police

The following incidents have been reported to the Goodland Police Department:

Jan. 9 — 11:54 a.m., 108 Aspen Rd., Aaron Thompson reported criminal damage.

Jan. 10 — 1:09 a.m., 1000 Main Ave., arrested Preston Lee Bornhoft and Erik Thane Russett for criminal use of weapons and minor in possession. Case referred to city attorney. 9:20 a.m., 1109 Sherman Ave., Sheri Hommes reported burglary and theft.



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Sherman County will receive sealed bids for the ROAD IMPROVEMENT-COUNTY ROAD 16-2008 project at the office of the Sherman County Clerk, 813 Broadway, Goodland, KS, 67735 until 9:00 AM (Mountain Time) on Thursday, February 28, 2008. Bids received after this time will not be accepted. Bids will be publicly opened and read aloud immediately after the specified closing time.

Major items of work include: 13015 cubic yards of Common Excavation, 532 square yards of Concrete Pavement (8" Uniform) (AE) (NRDJ), 17023 square yards of Manipulation (Subgrade Modification), 5475 tons of BM-2, Entrance and Cross Road Pipes, Seeding, and Traffic Control.

The CONTRACT DOCUMENTS may be examined at the following locations: Sherman County Public Works Department, 1004 West 8th, Goodland, Kansas 67735, or Penco Engineering, P.A., 711 NW 3rd St., Plainville, Kansas 67663.

Copies of the CONTRACT DOCUMENTS may be obtained at the office of PENCO ENGINEERING, P.A., P.O. Box 392, 711 N.W. 3rd Street, Plainville, Kansas 67663, upon payment of \$75.00 for each set. Document holders of record returning the documents in good condition within 30 days after the opening of bids will be refunded \$25.00 per set.

Sherman County reserves the right to reject any and all proposals and to waive any or all technicalities.

Date: January 18, 2008

Jerol J. DeBoer, Consultant



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