For some train orphans, THE LAST STOP WAS DESPAIR

Some orphan train stories are classic American successes; others are as lonely as an orphan on a train.

Such stories were shared last Saturday at the annual meeting of Louisiana Orphan Train Riders at the Louisiana Orphan Train Museum. July is Orphan Train Rider Month.

The Orphan Train, a prequel to the foster care movement, carried an estimated 150,000 orphans primarily from New York to the Midwest and the South from 1854-1929. Most were placed by the New York Foundling Hospital and New York City’s Children’s Aid Society. During that time, Louisiana welcomed more than 2,000 orphans. The train’s route included New Orleans, Morgan City, Lafayette, Opelousas and Mansura. About 150 orphans ended up in the Acadiana area.

Harold Dupré and Ryan Bernard are children of Orphan Train riders. Dupré lives in Grand Prairie, and Bernard lives in Houston. While president of the National Orphan Train Society in the late 1980s, Dupré learned some descendants didn’t know their parents were orphans until after their death.

“Kids would not talk about it. It was universal throughout the nation,” said Dupré, current president of the Louisiana Orphan Train Society and a guide at the Lafayette Orphan Train Museum in Opelousas. “They didn’t want to talk about it.” Reasons for their silence in-

James Douget speaks in character as an adoptive parent of an orphan train rider during an annual gathering of orphan train survivors at the Louisiana Orphan Train Museum in Opelousas.

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Orphan Train Museum
- Where: Le Vieux Village, 828 E. Landry St., Opelousas
- When: 10 a.m.-3 p.m. Tuesday-Friday, 10 a.m.-2 p.m. Saturday
- Cost: $5 for adults, $3 for seniors and children
- Info: 337-945-4691

Watch it online

See video from Louisiana Orphan Train Riders annual meeting at theadvertiser.com.

Orphan Train facts
- Operated from 1854-1929.
- Overall, some 150,000 orphans boarded trains to new homes from New York City, to the Midwest and the South.
- 2,000-plus orphans came to Louisiana.
- The train’s stops were New Orleans, Morgan City, Lafayette, Opelousas and Mansura; many to St. Landry and Evangeline parishes.
- Acadiana adopted orphans with dark hair and dark eyes.
- Orphans became educators, nurses, politicians, coaches, runaways, gamblers, doctors, and farmers.

End of an era

The Orphan Train slowed to a stop at the beginning of the depression in 1930; it was extremely hard for families to consider “adding another mouth to feed”.

New laws and new programs being instituted that were designed specifically to help children. These laws made it harder for the trains to continue bringing children into states, and new foster care homes were beginning to replace the large institution/orphanages of the past.

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cluded the stigma of possibly being an illegitimate child, of being an orphan itself, dealing with parental rejection and even for being a "Yankee" in the South because it was less than 50 years since the Civil War ended.

In 1907, Dupre's father, George Thomson Dupre, arrived in Opelousas. Bernard's mother, Alice Kearns, would end up in Erath in 1919.


By all accounts, Alice Kearns Geoffrey Bernard was the last living Louisiana orphan train rider before her death.

Overall, a majority of the rural Cajun families wanted children who looked like them.

"Naturally, they wanted somebody with black hair and brown eyes, which is typical of this area," said Harold Dupre. And because "98 percent" of the orphans came from the Sisters of Charity-run Foundling Hospital, Dupre said, they were already baptized Catholic.

On May 6, 1907, the Orphan Train arrived in Opelousas with 45 children, including George, 3, and his sister, Agnes, 6. They were slated to be taken in as a pair by Achille Dupre and Azima "Emily" Vidrine Dupre, but somehow, they were separated.

"The people who took Agnes in wanted a brother and sister," said Harold Dupre. "They gave her the wrong George — they gave them George Murphy. When they came down, they would hand them out and apparently he handed out the wrong boy. They handed out George Murphy instead of George Thomson, my father."

Agnes was old enough to understand the situation and tried to explain the mix-up, but her adopters spoke only French.

The mistake was eventually realized, but by then, the boys had settled in with their respective families and the issue was left alone.

"They were raised not very far apart from each other," Harold Dupre said. "But back then, there was no telephone in the horse-and-buggy days."

There is a story of the
two meeting at a wedding not too long after the separation, but when Agnes tried to talk to George he was frightened and ran home.

They would not see each other until so years later.

"The way it happened, my wife worked with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and she worked with this woman called Justine Elder and they started talking about my father being an orphan. She said, 'Well, I have an aunt who was orphan also,'" George Dupré related. "So she goes back and talks to the aunt. The aunt asks her, 'What's his name?' And she said, 'Well, his name is George Dupré.' And she said, 'That's my brother.'"

So the two came face-to-face at Dupré's home in 1969.

"And she says, 'Well, George,' and he says, 'Well, Agnes.' And they never shut up from that point on."

Still, Dupré said his dad's sister was never too thrilled about her fate.

"My aunt Agnes, she was very out-done. She said, 'How can a mother do this to me - give me away,'" Harold Dupré said, recalling the conversation and his explanation. "She came over here from Ireland and she had you and she had my father. She didn't have no mother, no siblings, no aunts and uncles.

"She was by herself over here. And she could hardly make ends meet, so she brought you to an orphanage for a better life," he said. "So I said, 'You ought to thank her, instead. She gave you a better life. You were raised in a good family. I think she died happy.'"

Bernard's mother, according to her son, likewise was none too happy.

"She was a very complex person. Mom, because of the way that she grew up and because of the way her life unfolded, she was always unsure of whether she was loved," said Bernard. "And because of that, I don't think she ever knew if her own children loved her; that was always a source of doubt for her. And it was a source of doubt for us. It kind of rubbed off on us.

"I don't think any of us ever felt truly loved as children of her, because in a way, she was cold," he said. "‘You have to figure for the first three years of her life, she was not hugged and kissed and encouraged. She lived in a bed in an orphanage for the first three years of her life. She found herself at the age of 3 being a servant to a couple of people in Delcambre who had adopted her.'"

Alice Bernard was adopted by farmer who'd remarried after he lost his wife and daughter to yellow fever. Although her foster father was fond of her, Bernard's foster mother wasn't and treated her poorly.

Bernard was adopted at 14 and eventually married Reuben Bernard. Her husband worked the 160-acre sugar cane farm she inherited at her foster parent's passing and the couple put their children through college. In her later life, she was feted as the last living Louisiana Legend by the Acadian Museum in Erath.

But it seemed her childhood left a mark on her.

"So, yeah, I felt that mom was, to a certain extent, for much of her life, there was almost a feeling of cold natured-ness," said Ryan Bernard. "She was not a warm person. She was hard to get to know. She was very reserved.

"That's what I'm trying to explain to myself right now," he said. "I'm trying to figure it all out. Now that mom is gone, I'm trying to figure what was that all about."