JOHN MURPHY, NEW YORK ORPHAN

By Alvin Y. Bethard

In the 1850's Charles Loring Brace, a pioneer New York social worker and a founder of the Children's Aid Society, had a deep concern for the many cast-off, homeless, needy children that could be seen on the streets of New York City. He hit upon a novel idea: Send children to the wholesome environments of rural areas and the Western frontier to be taken in by foster families.1

In 1853 the Society began sending children individually to farm families in nearby states and the following year dispatched the first "orphan train" west to Michigan. Other child care agencies started similar programs. By the 1920's, when new philosophies in child care and new child welfare laws made the orphan trains obsolete, as many as 150,000 children had been sent out from cities in the East.2

The New York Foundling Hospital, a Catholic charity, began sending out orphan trains about 1875. Before the trains departed, representatives of the Hospital would recruit prospective foster parents along the route.3 Catholic South Louisiana became a regular destination for these trains beginning around the turn of the Twentieth Century.

Most of the children were accepted as members of their new families and were happy in their new homes. Some foster parents, however, viewed their charges as nothing more than farm laborers to be furnished room and board.4 Martial Hebert, a farmer in the First Ward of Lafayette Parish, apparently fell into this category.5

In June of 1918 John Murphy, a thirteen-year-old orphan from the New York Foundling Hospital, ran away from the Hebert farm. He was picked up by the authorities in Crowley and returned to Lafayette. Lafayette Chief of Police J. Cas Chargois subsequently charged Hebert with violating the state law relative
to beating a child. It was alleged that Hebert "used a heavy rope in unmercifully striking" Murphy. In the course of his investigation Chief Chargois learned that Murphy had never been sent to school in the four years he had been at the Hebert farm.  

Mrs. Hattie W. Hart, General Secretary of the Home Relief Association of Lafayette, placed Murphy in a temporary home in Lafayette until further arrangements could be made. Murphy was described as a "bright little chap" and a "smart, polite boy."  

Later the boy was placed in the care of Reverend L. E. Cenas of New Orleans, Southern Representative of the New York Foundling Hospital.  

There are no further newspaper reports about Murphy or about the disposition of the criminal charges against Hebert. We can hope that both of them received fair treatment.

NOTES:


2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.


6. Ibid.

7. The Home Relief Association of Lafayette was a public welfare organization active in Lafayette during the First World War. It was administered by a board of directors and frequently mentioned in the Daily Advertiser during the war years.
