Orphan Train Riders:
Many children brought here in early 1900's

By BERNICE ARDOIN
Lifestyles Editor

(Editor's Note: This is part one of a two-part series on the Orphan Train Riders. Part two will be published next week.)

Many of us have heard stories about the Orphan Trains before, but Kathleen Soileau's story is very unique.

Kathleen's mother, Helen Klein Ardoin, was among the first group of orphans brought here in 1907 on an Orphan Train from New York.

The Orphan Train period in America's history spanned approximately 75 years - from 1854-1929.

Early orphans were farmed out to Eastern states only because the railroad lines had not yet been laid in the mid-west. Children were not put on the trains during the Civil War and all Orphan Train children did not come from New York City, Boston or Chicago. Some were picked up along the way to be placed in other towns.

There are several children that rode the Orphan Trains that were placed around Evangeline Parish. One of those children was Helen Klein Ardoin, Kathleen Soileau's mother.

The Ville Platte resident has told the story of her mother's life many times. Kathleen's mother's story was published, along with other orphans' stories, in a book published by the Orphan Train Heritage Society of America. The story, sub-titled "The Nuns Gave Me Banana Curls," was called Helen Eastin - Orphan Train Rider 1907.

How it began

Before we get into the story of Kathleen's mother's life as an Orphan Train Rider, let's

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have a little background on how the Orphan Trains began.

In 1852, over 175,000 German immigrants arrived in America. In 1854, the number rose to 250,000 with New York City being the main port of arrival. Other nationalities came to America as well. For a time, before they could move on, New York City suffered conditions of overcrowding, disease and breakdown of families. There were no foster homes, so many of the orphans were left on the streets.

By 1853, conditions were appalling in New York City. That same year, Charles Loring Brace and his friends founded the Children's Aid Society (CAS) of New York City. Unable to care for all children needing care, a plan was devised to send children on trains to live with farm families. Brace's idea was a good one, but "placing out" was not totally satisfactory in all cases.

Children who came under the guardianship of CAS were often sent to the Brace Farm School for training. From the schools and institutions, children were taken to the west and mid-west by train.

During the 75-year period of the Orphan Trains, it is estimated that about 150,000 children and poor families were re-located. Stops along the way were selected in advance and flyers were mailed to the towns announcing the children's arrival. Also, advertisements were placed in newspapers.

Upon arrival to the towns, people were asked to choose a child and sign a contract agreeing to certain conditions. The CAS reserved the right to remove a child at any time from the family it was given to. Agents were sent out periodically to check on the children and new parents were asked to write to the Society to report on the child. Annual reports of CAS were made public.

The New York Foundling Asylum was established in 1865 by Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul. The intent of this establishment was to save lives of infants being abandoned on the streets of New York City.

In 1872, the New York Foundling Hospital (note the name change) was placing children on the Orphan Trains as well. Another institution, located in Boston, Mass., cared for children and placed them out as well.

Reunions are hosted by New York Foundling Hospital orphans in Minnesota and Nebraska each year. Other reunions and gatherings are held in other parts of the country, too.

Next week, you will read the story of Kathleen's mother and how she came to Ville Platte.