Orphan train riders recall arrivals in Louisiana

By BOBBY ARDON
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OPELOUSAS — As young riders piled aboard destiny's train, they were too young to remember the trip. But on Saturday four Louisiana residents who left New York orphanages more than 80 years ago bound for adoptive families, said their lives were too unique to forget.

Frank McDermott, John Brown, Louis Mahfouz and Marie Darbonne were among thousands of urban children orphaned or abandoned between 1854 and 1929 and eventually adopted by foster families. Relocating agencies, mainly in New York City, interceded to find homes for the abandoned infants, some of them children of unwed mothers or unwanted by the overflowing families of first generation immigrants.

Brown, McDermott, Mahfouz and Darbonne said Saturday they were all "orphan train" riders, which transported the adoptees to their foster homes, located primarily in the South and West.

As the four recalled their trips from New York to Louisiana, each said they "remembered nothing" about their train rides.

"I don't remember anything about my train ride from New York to Lafayette," said John Brown, who was 4 years old in 1918 when he was adopted by Mr. and Mrs. Emile Doucet of the Grand Prairie community near Opelousas.

"They came and picked me up at the station in a horse and buggy and it took us a day to get to the country. That part of the trip I do remember," said Dupre as he recalled his moment of introduction with the couple who became his parents.

Brown, who was told several years ago that his biological mother was a 19-year-old New York City resident, said it took awhile to adjust to rural life in St. Landry Parish.

"There was a crowd of people at the house when we got there from Lafayette," Brown said.

"I never saw a chicken or a dog before and they put me up there on the table, just to make me feel safe," he said.

"The way it was then was If you wasn't speaking French around here, you was in trouble. But four years later when I started school, I forgot English altogether," Brown said.

Brown and the three other former orphans who reunited here Saturday with approximately 110 descendants of other train riders, had their adoptions arranged by the New York Foundling Hospital, operated under the wing of the Catholic Church.

McDermott, 86, formerly of Baton Rouge and now a Monroe resident, said he came to Louisiana in 1907 and just recently was introduced to his brother, Vincent, of White Plains, N.Y.

"I just know it was my first train ride and other than that, I don't recall a thing," McDermott said.

"My name was Frank Kelly when I arrived and I'm pretty sure I'm Irish. Other than my brother, I don't know anything of my original family," McDermott said.

He said he met Vincent for the first time "in a parking lot up in White Plains. He said he knew it was me the minute he saw me, we look so much alike.

Mary Ellen Johnson of Springdale, Ark., is executive director of the Orphan Train Society of America, which now has a membership of 700.

She said none of her ancestors were train riders, but as a historian, she became immersed in the story of the group while doing a county research project.

Orphan trains began rolling out of New York and Boston about 1854, she said, and stopped "around 1929 when the Depression struck and stricter child welfare reform laws were passed.

She estimated as many as 150,000 orphans were relocated to adoptive families.

"In Louisiana, Avoyelles Parish was a big center for arriving orphans and so was St. Landry Parish. Anywhere trains came was a good spot," Johnson said.

"I thought I was Irish until I saw the last names of my godparents and now I think I'm Austrian," from what people tell me, Darbonne said.

Her parents, Darbonne said, didn't tell her she was adopted until she reached the primary grades.

"The children at school knew and so did everyone else but me, I guess," Darbonne said.

Mahfouz, 85, of Berwick doesn't remember the day in 1910 when he was taken off the train in Morgan City.

He said that like other former orphans, he has had trouble obtaining records of his pre-adoptive years from the Foundling Hospital.

"I went up to New York in 1939 and a Father Connor did some checking and I did find out my name was originally Louis Ebister," Mahfouz said.

"It seemed to me back then they didn't want to give out too much information. But I can't complain. I've had a wonderful life.

Mahfouz said he coincidentally met another orphan while taking a public speaking course as a young man.

"This fellow got up and began speaking about riding down here on the orphan train. Afterward, we got to talking and we found out we were probably on that same train that stopped in Morgan City.

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