Orphan Train Riders: ‘There is so much we still don’t know’

By BERNICE ARDOIN
Lifestyles Editor

(Editor's Note: This is the second part of a two-part series on the Orphan Train Riders. The following is Kathleen Soileau’s story about her mother, who was brought here on an Orphan Train.)

On December 1, 1904 at Metropolitan Hospital in New York City, located on Welfare Island (now called Roosevelt Island), Helen Klein was born to William Stern and Sadie Klein of New York City. Both of her parents were 19-years-old.

On December 13, 1904 in the hospital chapel, the baby girl was baptized by Rev. Francis Barnum, S.J. and given the name, Helen. Two days later, she was taken to New York Foundling Hospital by her mother and was surrendered. She was placed in one of the nurseries and given good care.

In April, 1907, an event occurred that would forever change Helen's life. She rode an Orphan Train to Louisiana. Father Engerbrink, a Catholic priest stationed in Opelousas made arrangements with the Sisters at NYC and many of his parishioners and those from surrounding towns, agreed to take a child into their home. Helen's future parents, Guillaume and Lizo Ardoin, were living in Eunice at this time.

The Orphan Train's arrival was a happy day for the Ardoin couple because they had lost a baby and could not have any more children. Helen's new mother always wanted a golden-haired, curly-lock baby girl and although she was not naturally endowed with curls, the Nuns accommodated by using soap and gave her banana curls.

On April 29, 1910, Helen was indentured to Mr. and Mrs. Ardoin. This was an early form adoption and protection used during this period.

In 1910, the Ardoin family moved back to Ville Platte. They lived next door to the E.A. Plauche family. They had several children, one Helen's age - Antonia, better known as "Toney".

As Helen grew older, she and Toney became best friends and visited each other every day. Since Toney had many brothers and sisters and I was the only one, she accompanied Helen on many

DOOR PRIZE PAINTING - Kathleen Soileau, left, and her two grandchildren, Stephan and Helen, hold up a painting that Helen did of a New York City scene depicting a Nun and an infant. The painting will be used as a door prize at the Orphan Train Heritage Society of America meeting this year.

(Gazette Photo by Bernice Ardoin)
Kathleen was the couple's first born in September, 1928. Burke was born in February, 1930. In July, 1935, Helen's father went on a fishing trip with some of his friends. He returned about 8 p.m. and found the family sitting on the screened porch waiting for him. The family had a nice visit before going to bed. During the night, Helen's father suffered a heart attack and died. Kathleen was six years old and Burke was five.

Two weeks later, Helen and Willie's third child, Francis John, was born. We could since that something was wrong, and we later learned that he had rickets (a deficiency of Vitamin D) and other complications.

In May 1958, Helen became ill with the flu, or so everyone thought. When she wouldn't get better, she went to the hospital to have exploratory surgery. She found out she had uterine cancer. Willie chartered a plane and went to M.D. Anderson Cancer Clinic in Houston, Texas. He stayed there with her constantly and they remained there for 13 weeks.

Helen was a very private person. She never told any of her children she was adopted and after she passed away, Willie respected her wishes and did not talk about it. About two years before he died, he made photo copies of the name card, papers, and baptism certificate that she had brought with her when she rode the Orphan Train.

Kathleen is married to Willis Soileau of Ville Platte. They have two children: Patrick and Paula.

In September, 1990, the furniture store (old Opera House), located across the street from G. Ardoin's, caught on fire and spread to their store. In a matter of a few hours, both stores burned to the ground. This business (G. Ardoin's and Co.) had been in existence for over 80 years and was in Kathleen's brother, Burke's hands. This trauma was like losing part of the family.

Kathleen was the couple's first born in September, 1928. Burke was born in February, 1930. In July, 1935, Helen's father went on a fishing trip with some of his friends. He returned about 8 p.m. and found the family sitting on the screened porch waiting for him. The family had a nice visit before going to bed. During the night, Helen's father suffered a heart attack and died. Kathleen was six years old and Burke was five.

Two weeks later, Helen and Willie's third child, Francis John, was born. We could since that something was wrong, and we later learned that he had rickets (a deficiency of Vitamin D) and other complications.

In May 1958, Helen became ill with the flu, or so everyone thought. When she wouldn't get better, she went to the hospital to have exploratory surgery. She found out she had uterine cancer. Willie chartered a plane and went to M.D. Anderson Cancer Clinic in Houston, Texas. He stayed there with her constantly and they remained there for 13 weeks.

Helen was a very private person. She never told any of her children she was adopted and after she passed away, Willie respected her wishes and did not talk about it. About two years before he died, he made photo copies of the name card, papers, and baptism certificate that she had brought with her when she rode the Orphan Train.

Since Helen's daughter, Kathleen, joined the Orphan Train Heritage Society of America six years ago, she has learned many things. Kathleen learned that the Orphan Train her mother rode to Opelousas in 1907 was believed to have from 60-80 children on it. Ville Platte received many of these orphans.

In September, 1990, the furniture store (old Opera House), located across the street from G. Ardoin's, caught on fire and spread to their store. In a matter of a few hours, both stores burned to the ground. This business (G. Ardoin's and Co.) had been in existence for over 80 years and was in Kathleen's brother, Burke's hands. This trauma was like losing part of the family.

Kathleen is married to Willis Soileau of Ville Platte. They have two children: Patrick and Paula.

Thanksgiving week, 1990, Kathleen and her daughter, Paula, attended Homecoming in New York City with guests of the Children's Aid Society. It was a wonderful experience for them and CAS was a great host.

"Since that time, I am consumed with a desire to find out as much as I can about Mother's past," Kathleen said. "There is so much we don't know."

In 1992, Kathleen received the Sister Irene Award in the organization.

Helen Kristin Soileau, Kathleen's oldest grandchild, is very interested in the Orphan Train Movement. When she was a fourth grader in 1990-91, Helen (named after her great grandmother) did her social studies fair project on the Orphan Train. She placed first in her division at her school, third in the parish, and competed in regional. In July, 1991, she displayed her project at the Louisiana Gathering in Opelousas. She is now a member of the Orphan Train Heritage Society of America.

"Mother was placed in a great family. But there are still unanswered questions like: What did the future hold for Mother's parents? Did she have any brothers or sisters?"

"I don't know that anyone is as interested or curious as I am about his great mystery, but unless you are in this position (most people don't understand) in one way or another, you want to know 'your roots' " Kathleen said. "At least I do."

In August, 1921, Helen was legally adopted by the Ardoin family. Her father was a merchant, owned and operated G. Ardoin and Company (an all-purpose store).

After completing two years of college, Helen received her teaching certificate. She returned to Ville Platte and applied for a teaching job in the parish. Toney became a Catholic nun.

In September 1925, when school opened, Helen taught the third grade in Chataignier. Although commuting was a rarity and roads were dirt and gravel, Mr. Ardoin bought a Model T Ford for Helen to make the daily trip to Chataignier.

Cataignier is where Helen met her future husband, Willie J. Eastin, a native of St. Martinville. He had graduated from Southwestern Louisiana Institute (now known as USL) and was teaching high school business and was the boys' basketball coach.

On December 27, 1926, Helen and Willie were married in Ville Platte. At that time, a married woman was not allowed to teach school in Louisiana, so Helen decided to become a housewife. They built their home next to her Mother and Father. Before too long, Willie became the bookkeeper for the store and began to learn the business from Helen's father.

In 1927, the big flood came and there was water everywhere. Although Ville Platte itself did not flood, St. Martinville was in really bad shape. When Willie went to check on his family there, he saw they were struggling to get their belongings to higher ground. He offered his help and they agreed to have him take his 12-year-old sister, Hazel, back to Ville Platte to stay for a while.