By ANDY CRAWFORD
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When Betty Obee was a child, her grandmother told her a secret — that Betty's mother was adopted and "MaMa" wasn't Betty's real grandmother. The little girl kept that secret until 1976 when her mother, Mae Kornbacker DePaoli, fessed up.

"When my third child was born, I was doing a family tree . . . and my mother looked at me and said 'Don't look further than me, because you won't find anything,'" Obee said.

DePaoli then began to cry as she told her daughter that she was adopted after having been sent to New Orleans on an "Orphan Train" in 1909.

"I said, 'Guess what. I knew that, but I couldn't tell you because I thought you didn't know,'" Obee told her mother.

DePaoli was very relieved because she thought being an orphan was something of which she should be ashamed.

DePaoli, whose birth name was Mary Burns, was one of many children who were put on so-called orphan trains in the late 1800s and early 1900s and sent to live in families in

other parts of the country.

Most of these children were given up by immigrant parents who could not afford to raise them. The last orphan train rolled in 1929.

The Orphan Train Heritage Society of America Inc. is holding a reunion here Saturday at the Holiday Inn South. Obee, a Baton Rouge resident, said she began trying to find out who her mother really was after her mother told her of her adoption.

However, she and her mother met with no success when they went to the New York Foundling Hospital, where DePaoli was housed until she boarded the train to New Orleans.

About five years ago, they went to New York and were told there were no records about DePaoli's adoption, Obee said.

DePaoli received a letter from the organization that revealed the names and nationalities of her real grandparents: Katie Burns of Ireland and William Robinson of England.

However, DePaoli died shortly before the letter arrived.

"All her life she never knew who she was," Obee said.

Obee said that is what is distressing about the whole affair — the train riders usually died without knowing anything about their lineage and those who still survive do not always get quick results when they inquire about their parents.

As an example, Obee told of one survivor who said she used to make up different stories about who her mother was because she wanted so badly to have a real mother.

"It's so important to let them know — just to satisfy them," Obee said.

However, other descendants of train riders started out looking for records about their parents with other goals in mind.

Dot Hernandez, who also lives in Baton Rouge, wanted to know her father's medical history. Her father, George Boudreaux, was sent to Morgan City on an orphan train in 1921.

"After we had our children, we didn't really know what to expect from that side of the coin," Hernandez said.

However, the search for medical background soon turned to a search for her father's past.

"I've met people who have taken me from day one and treated me like family," Hernandez said.

The story of Boudreaux's known life is told in a book published by the society called "Orphan Train Riders, Their Own Stories."