Orphan trains of past are recalled

By Bill Decker
Staff Writer

OPELOUSAS — Frank McDermott of Monroe was only a year old when he first saw the man and woman who would raise him. They selected him from among 107 children.

"The people who adopted me said they picked me because my eyes were blue," McDermott said.

But if that doesn’t sound like the best way to raise a family, consider the story of John Brown of Plaisance, whose adoptive mother worked in the fields and chopped wood to raise money for school books and clothes.

"She worked like a man so I could go to school," Brown said. "I owe my education to her."

McDermott and Brown both rode orphan trains from New York City's slums to a new life in a Louisiana more than seven decades ago. Now they’re in the Orphan Train Heritage Society of America, which met Saturday at the Opelousas Quality Inn.

McDermott, Brown, Marie Darbonne of Opelousas and Louis Mahfouz of Berwick were the honored guests. They were riders, orphans sent via train from the New York Foundling Home to families in Louisiana. Orphan trains carried children to states in the South and West from the mid-19th century through 1929.

The others in Saturday’s gathering of more than 70 were the children, grandchildren and even great-grandchildren of orphans whom the trains carried to Louisi-
siana. Among the stops were Opelousas, Lafayette, Avoyelles Parish and Baton Rouge.

Most are descendents of the European immigrants who poured into New York City in search of new lives. Too often, what they found was unemployment, poverty and teeming tenements. The Foundling Home and the Order of the Sisters of Charity were the last resort for the women who were alone or too poor to raise their children.

And when the Foundling Home became overcrowded, the orphans were sent across the country to waiting families. Some carried numbered tags that their adoptive parents used to identify them; others were selected McDermott says he was left in a basket at the Foundling Home's door on Dec. 27, 1905. The basket contained a note bearing the name “Frank Kelly.”

In 1907, he says, he rode the train to Baton Rouge and was adopted by a family that didn’t talk about his background. “They never talked to me about it, and I never talked to them about it,” McDermott said.

He says he learned he was adopted when the other kids at school teased him about it.

Brown, who came to Acadiana as a pre-schooler on an orphan train in 1918, says he remembers nothing of the journey from New York. But he remembers the buggy ride from the train station in Lafayette to his new home in St. Landry Parish.

“I couldn’t speak a word of French,” Brown told the gathering. “And 70 some years ago in this part of the country, if you couldn’t speak French you were in trouble.”

By the time he started school at age 8, he spoke French. But he had forgotten his English. Brown learned again, and he learned farming, too, even though he never saw a pig or a chicken before he came to Acadiana.

OTHSA leader Mary Ellen Johnson, a northwest Arkansas librarian, says the stories of the orphans are important not just to them and their families, but to social workers as well. She said some of the orphans have been asked to speak at gatherings devoted to the study of foster care; the orphan train riders were the first distinct, well-documented group of foster children in the nation’s history.

“When you come right down to it, they’re the only ones who knew what it was like,” Johnson said.

But their voices are growing faint. Of the 150,000 orphans who left New York, only 400 or 500 are known to be alive, Johnson said.

Some family members carry on the search for information about their parents and grandparents. At meetings they swap information, like how to find turn-of-the-century census records from New York City and how to obtain old Foundling Home records. Johnson said the keepers of those records are sometimes reluctant to release some information.

But the facts are sometimes available. Seven years ago, a Mrs. Vincent Ayotelle of White Plains, N.Y., began looking for information about her husband’s past. He was also adopted after a stay at the Foundling Home.

The woman had trouble obtaining old records. So she talked to a monsignor, who talked to some nuns, who turned over some information. The information linked the White Plains resident to a man living in Monroe, La.

“That’s how I discovered I had a brother,” McDermott said.