The story of a boy searching for a new home on a

From 1854 to 1929, about 200,000 kids were sent west to find new families. Lee was one of them.
It was March 1926. Eight-year-old Lee was on a train. His two younger brothers—Gerald and Leo—were with him. So were 47 other children. All of these children were orphaned or abandoned. A matron watched over them as the train headed west across the United States.

Lee’s mother was dead. His father could not care for his kids on his own. For two years, Lee had lived in an orphanage in New York.

Now, Lee and his brothers were being sent west to find new families. “This is an opportunity for you,” the matron told Lee. “This is an orphan train, and you’re very lucky to be on it.”

Lee didn’t think so. He wanted to go back home. At the train station, Lee’s father had given him a pink envelope. It had his father’s address on it. He told Lee to write to him.

As the train chugged and swayed, Lee dreamed of the day he’d see his dad again. He was sure his father wanted his sons back.
A HARD LIFE
Life in New York City was difficult for the poor. Thousands of orphaned children ended up living on the streets.

Children on the Streets
The orphan-train program began in 1854. Back then, thousands of kids like Lee lived in orphanages in big cities.

Life in these cities was hard for the poor. When parents couldn’t find work—or died—kids often ended up alone. Some lived in orphanages. Others lived on the streets, begging and stealing to survive.

Many people considered these children dangerous pests. But some people wanted to help them. A man named Charles Loring Brace started a group called the Children's Aid Society. It provided food, shelter, and schooling to New York City's abandoned kids.

Very quickly, Brace came to believe that living in the city was unhealthy for children. He had heard of a program in Europe that sent poor kids to the countryside to find new homes. He thought a similar idea could work in the U.S.

In 1854, Brace tested his plan with 46 children ages 10 to 12. By the end of the trip, every child had a new family. Brace's plan was a success. Soon, thousands of kids were riding the orphan trains every year.

VOCABULARY
orphaned: left with no parents
matron: woman whose job is to be in charge of children
orphanage: place where children who have lost their parents live
routine: regular way of doing things
abused: treated in a cruel or harmful way

PAUSE AND THINK: What did Charles Loring Brace do in 1854? Why?

Pink Envelope
Before boarding the orphan train, kids were given a bath and fancy new clothes. Matrons
FORGOTTEN CHILDREN
Orphanages like this one were filled with abandoned kids. There wasn’t much food or love to go around.

warned them to keep those clothes tidy. That wasn’t easy to do on a train journey—especially a trip that could last a week or more.

Still, Lee tried his best. That first night on the train, he took off his suit jacket and laid it out neatly. He made sure the pink envelope with his father’s address was tucked safely in the pocket.

In the morning, the envelope was gone. Lee looked everywhere. When he asked the matron for help, she told him to get back in his seat.

“Where you’re going, you won’t be needing that envelope,” she said.

Lee knew she had taken it—but he felt helpless. First his mother had died. Then he’d spent two sad years at an orphanage. Now he’d lost his only connection to his father.

At night, Lee lay there with tears rolling down his cheeks. “How have I lost so much?” he wondered.

PAUSE AND THINK: Why was the pink envelope so important to Lee?

Finding a Home
Before long, the children on the orphan train learned the routine. When the train stopped in a town, the matrons led them to a meeting place. Usually it was a church or hotel.

Interested families would line up to meet the children. They would talk to them and pick one to take home. The children who weren’t chosen got back on the train. They kept going from town to town until all of them were picked.

Many of these journeys ended happily. Needy children found loving homes. But some kids ended up in bad situations. Their new families wanted them only so they could work as servants or farmhands.

The Children’s Aid Society was supposed to make sure that every child was safe—but the group failed sometimes. Many kids were abused. Others ran away.

PAUSE AND THINK: What happened when the train stopped in a town?
The Journey Ends

After a week’s journey, the train stopped in Clarksville, Texas. There, one couple chose Gerald. Another chose Leo and Lee.

But Lee stayed with that family for only a few days. He didn’t last much longer with the next one. Finally, he went to live with Ben and Ollie Nailling.

That first day, Lee refused to speak to the Naillings. He still planned on running away to find his father. But the next morning, Lee woke up to the smell of biscuits, ham, bacon, and eggs. Lee had never seen so much food.

After breakfast, the Naillings walked to town with Lee. They told neighbors that Lee was their “new son.” Soon, Lee stopped thinking about running away. He was starting to feel at home.

PAUSE AND THINK: How did the Naillings treat Lee?

Riding the Train

The last of the orphan trains left New York in 1929. There’s no way to know for sure what became of the 200,000 kids who rode them over the years. Many went on to lead happy lives. Others suffered from cruel treatment.

Lee never found his father, but he knew he was lucky. He was happy with the Naillings. His brothers lived nearby—and the Naillings made sure he saw them often. Lee later went to college and served in World War II. He married and raised a family.

“I’ve always felt that I had a guardian angel watching over me,” said Lee. He had gotten off the train in Texas as a bitter, unhappy boy—and ended up with a loving family.

“That was where I belonged,” he said.

PAUSE AND THINK: In what ways were kids affected by the orphan trains?
You've just read "The Orphan Train." Now do this activity to help you better understand the article.

HEADING WEST
A group of children prepare to board the orphan train with their matron. Kids were often given fancy new clothes before the long journey.

TIP Text evidence means details in a story that support an answer or show that it is true.

WHAT TO DO: Use text evidence—or details from the article—to answer the questions below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer Using Text Evidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How did Lee end up in an orphanage?</td>
<td>Lee's mother died, and his dad could no longer care for him and his brothers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Why did Lee cry at night on the orphan train?</td>
<td>HINT: Look for the answer in the section &quot;Pink Envelope.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What was Lee's life like with the Naillings?</td>
<td>HINT: Look for the answer in the sections &quot;The Journey Ends&quot; and &quot;Riding the Train.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. What did Lee do later in life?</td>
<td>HINT: Look for the answer in the section &quot;Riding the Train.&quot;</td>
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</tbody>
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Think About It! What do your answers tell you about how the orphan train changed Lee's life?

Answers are in the Teacher's Guide.
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