**Vocabulary**

**orphans**: children whose mother and father are dead

**chaperone**: an adult who takes care of young people at an event or on a trip, and who makes sure they behave

**era**: a period of time in history

**poverty**: the state of being poor

**grueling**: very difficult and tiring
Orphan Train

From 1854 to 1929, trains carried thousands of poor kids away from their families to unknown new lives. This is one boy’s story.

Lee was 8 years old when he boarded a train in March 1926. “It was taking us to find something I didn’t want—a new family,” Lee said later.

Lee, his younger brothers Gerald and Leo, and 47 other kids traveled together that day. Some of the kids were orphans. Some were homeless. Others were simply poor.

None of them had any idea where that train would take them.

“You’re on your way to a new life,” a chaperone said. “You’re lucky.”

Lee didn’t feel lucky. He wanted his old life back. But that would never happen.

Big Changes

Two years earlier, Lee’s life had been different. He lived with his parents and siblings in upstate New York. They didn’t have a lot. But Lee was happy.

Then Lee’s mother died. Lee’s father didn’t earn much money. So he gave his seven children away. Four of Lee’s siblings went to foster homes. Lee never saw two of them again.

Lee and Leo went to a crowded orphanage. It was a terrible place. There was never enough food. Fights broke out every day.

One day, the boys were told they were going on a train ride. When they got to the station, their father was there with Gerald. Lee’s dad left Gerald with Lee and Leo and walked away. They never saw him again.

Life in the City

From 1854 to 1929, about 200,000 kids made a trip like the one Lee went on. The trains they rode were called orphan trains.

Most of the kids came from New York or other cities in the East. During
that era, people flocked to these cities. They hoped to find work in factories.

But there were not enough jobs. Many families lived in poverty. There was no welfare system to help them.

Kids were expected to make money. Thousands begged in the streets. Some ate out of the trash or stole food to survive.

A minister named Charles Loring Brace wanted to help. In 1854, he started the orphan-train program. The trains would take poor kids out West. Brace hoped farmers would give the kids jobs and good homes.

So, with very little notice, kids were forever ripped away from the only life they had known.

New Families

When the train stopped in a western town, the orphans lined up on a stage. People talked to the kids and chose the child they wanted.

Some people wanted a child just for free labor. They inspected the kids to make sure they were healthy. At one stop, a farmer stuck his hand in Lee’s mouth to feel his teeth. Lee had to force himself not to bite the man.

Kids who weren’t chosen got back on the train. They repeated the process from town to town, until someone picked them.

Half the children on Lee’s train were picked before him. After a grueling week, the train stopped in Clarksville, Texas. One couple chose Gerald. Another picked Leo.

Ben and Ollie Nailling finally chose Lee. Lee planned to run away. But the Naillings were good to him. For the first time in his life, Lee had his own bedroom and enough food.

Soon, the Naillings were calling Lee their “new son.” Lee no longer wanted to run away.

Last Stop

The last orphan train left New York in 1929. The trains weren’t needed anymore. The government had created new programs to help poor families.

Some of the orphan-train riders found good homes and led happy lives. Others didn’t, though. Many of those kids ran away.

Lee was lucky. His brothers lived nearby. He saw them often. His new life was happy.

“When I got off that train in Texas, I was unhappy,” said Lee, who died in 2001. “But I ended up where I belonged.”

—Nicole Tocco
Saying Goodbye

In his own words, Lee Nailling talks about how he almost lost all hope the day his father put him on an orphan train.

I asked my father where the train was taking us. He said to find a family that could care for us. I begged him to keep us, but he couldn’t.

He thrust a pink envelope into my hands. It had an address on it. He said I was to write to him when we got settled and let him know where we were.

I put the envelope in my coat pocket. Leo and Gerald and I had a family, and I had the envelope to prove it. We didn’t belong on any orphan train. Somehow, no matter where that train ended, I’d get us back.

A Frantic Search

I went to sleep happy for the first time since my mother died. The next morning, the first thing I thought of was my envelope. I reached in my pocket—and it was gone!

I still remember the panic I felt. I began a frantic search. I went through my jacket again. Nothing!

One of the caretakers told me to get in my seat. Where I was going I wouldn’t need the envelope. The truth struck me. She had taken the envelope. There was nothing I could do.

Another Loss

That pink envelope had given me hope. I can’t explain how defeated I felt with it gone. I’d lie there with tears rolling down my cheeks. First my mother, then my other brothers and my sister, and now my father. How could I have lost so much?

Compare and Contrast

Use the text on this page and the article “Orphan Train” to answer the questions. Write your answers on a separate piece of paper.

1. Which of the texts gives more information about the orphan-train program? Which tells more about Lee’s feelings? Circle two examples in each text that support your answers.

2. What is the point of view (first person or third person) used in each text? What is the author’s purpose for each text? How does the point of view help you understand each author’s purpose? (For an explanation of point of view, turn to page 19.)

Answers are in the Teacher’s Guide.