

On that March day in 1926, I was standing in line with my six-year-old brother, Leo, and my three-year-old brother, Gerald, at a train station in New York City. We were waiting to board the train that was supposed to start us on our way to what had been described to us as "wonderful new lives." Back then I was Alton Lou Clement. I was almost nine, and as much as I'd hated living in an orphanage, I hated taking this trip even more.

Leo and I had been living at the Jefferson County Orphan Home in Watertown, New York, for two years, and Gerald had been living in a foster home. Three other brothers and one sister, all in their teens, were living in other foster homes. I hadn't seen them since being admitted to the orphanage and I didn't know where they were.

Papa had struggled to keep us together after Mama died, but unemployment had forced him to separate

Between 1854 and 1929, approximately 150,000 orphans and disadvantaged children living in the streets, crowded orphanages and poverty-stricken homes of eastern cities were transported by rail to rural towns in the Midwest to begin new lives with adoptive families. Here is the story of one reluctant eight-year-old passenger.

Orphan Train

by Lee Nailling, Atlanta, Texas

us. Now, since I was the oldest, I'd been instructed to look after my brothers. As we moved closer to the steps, I wanted to grab them by the hands and run away, but I knew I couldn't.

Instead, I reached into my coat pocket. The pink, stamped envelope with Papa's name and address on it made a crackling sound as I touched it. He'd given it to me the day before, when he'd visited the orphanage to say good-bye. "Write me when you get settled," he'd said. Then tears began running down his face.

Now I proudly choked back tears as we boarded. We began threading our way down the aisle of a crowded, noisy car filled with girls in dark dresses with white pinafores and boys dressed like us, in knickers, suit coats, dress shirts and ties. A tall, thin woman with bobbed hair escorted us to our assigned seats.

"Choochoo, brovers!" An excited Gerald quickly wiggled from my grasp and crawled across the seat to Leo so that he could look out the window. The fierce, protective love I felt as I looked at them was quickly replaced by fear. *What's going to happen to us?* I raised my chin in defiance. *Nothing. I'll take care of us.*

That evening, except for an occasional cough and a muffled sobbing, the car began to quiet. I placed my coat across the back of the seat, cheered by the sight of the pink envelope sticking out of the pocket. Soon Leo and Gerald began to sag against me. I leaned back against the seat, lulled by the rhythm of the clacking wheels. As I began composing a mental letter to Papa, the whistle gave a long, mournful wail across the rushing darkness.

The next thing I knew it was

The author traveled on an "orphan train" very similar to this one, shown with its charges just before the trip west in the early 1900s.

