THE STORY OF A BOY
SEARCHING FOR A NEW HOME
ON A PAINFUL JOURNEY ABOARD
THE ORPHAN
Compare and contrast in “The Orphan Train” and “Magnificent Michaela,” you will read about the extraordinary journeys of two young people. As you read, look for similarities and differences in their experiences.
It was March 1926, and 8-year-old Lee was on a train heading west. His two younger brothers, Gerald and Leo, were with him. So were 47 other children who didn't have parents or whose families could not care for them. In charge of the children was a matron, a strict woman whose job it was to watch over them during the long journey.

Lee's mother had died. His father was out of work and unable to care for his children. For two years, Lee had lived in a crowded New York City orphanage. This was a horrifying place. There was never enough to eat. Fights broke out. Indeed, Lee had a scar on his arm where a boy had stabbed him with a fork. They had both wanted the same biscuit.

Now, Lee and his brothers were being sent west to find new families. "This is an orphan train," the matron told Lee. "You're very lucky to be on it."

Lee didn't think so. Maybe the other children were ready to find new homes. But Lee wanted to return to his father, who had come to the train station to see them off. With tears in his eyes, his father had given Lee a pink envelope with his address on it and told him to write. Lee was sure his father wanted them back.

As the train chugged along, Lee thought of how happy his father would be when the boys showed up on his doorstep again one day.

**Children on the Streets**

The orphan-train program began in 1854. At the time, thousands of children lived in orphanages and on the streets in New York and other Eastern cities. Like Lee, many of these children were not, in fact, orphans. They had one or even two parents who were alive but unable to care for them.

Life in the cities was extremely difficult for the poor. Many were recent immigrants from Europe. They worked long hours in low-paying jobs. When a parent lost a job or became sick, there was often nowhere for the family to turn for help. Some children ended up in dreary orphanages. Others ended up on the streets, begging or stealing to survive. Many people considered these “street urchins” dangerous pests.

But others wanted to help, including a man named Charles Loring Brace. In 1853, Brace founded the Children’s Aid Society to provide food, shelter, and schooling to New York City’s abandoned children. Very quickly, Brace came to believe that the dirt and crowds of city life were unhealthy for the very young. He had read of a program in Europe in which poor children were sent to the countryside to find good homes. He thought a similar idea might work in the U.S. At the time, thousands of Americans were heading to the frontier to start new lives as farmers and ranchers. Surely, Brace believed,
America's frontier families had room in their hearts for needy children. And what better way to bring children to new towns than on America's new cross-country railroad system?

Brace called his plan “placing out.” Trains would carry groups of kids to towns in the West. Residents would be told in advance where they could gather to pick a child.

In 1854, Brace tested his plan with 46 children. They traveled to Michigan with two chaperones. By the end of the trip, every child had been placed with a family. Soon, thousands of kids were riding the orphan trains every year.

**Pink Envelope**

Typically, children were told only a night or two in advance that they would be going west.

They were given a bath and new clothes. Lee and his brothers were dressed up in knickers, neckties, and suit jackets. Girls wore new dresses. Matrons warned the kids to keep their new clothes tidy—not easy on a train journey that could stretch out for a week or more.

That first night, Lee took off his jacket and laid it out neatly where he could see it. He checked to make sure the pink envelope his father had given him was safe in the pocket. When he woke up, however, the envelope was gone. He searched frantically for the missing envelope. When he called 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 firmly. “You must forget it.”

Lee knew she had taken it; she wanted him to forget about his father. Lee felt completely 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. “Nights on that train, I’d lie there with tears rolling down my cheeks,” Lee later recalled, “my heart breaking again and again. How had I lost so much?”

**Finding a Home**

Even before children boarded an orphan train, the Children’s Aid Society was working to line up families in towns along the route. Notices of “homes wanted for children” ran in newspapers. When the train stopped in a town, the matrons led the children to a gathering place, such as a church or hotel. Then, that day or the next morning, people would line up to meet the “poor city foundlings.” Even in small towns, a thousand onlookers might show up to stare. Interested families would make their choices. When it was over, the
children who weren't chosen continued the train trip until someone picked them. Many of these journeys ended happily. Needy children found loving homes. But some families were only looking for free farm labor or someone to do housework. Agents for the Children's Aid Society were supposed to keep track of every child and remove kids from bad situations. But the system failed sometimes. Some kids were treated poorly. Others ran away.

**The Journey Ends**

At first, Lee's journey seemed to be heading in that direction. After several stops, half the children had been picked—but not Lee. In one town, a farmer felt Lee's muscles and stuck his hand in Lee's mouth to feel his teeth. Lee glared until the farmer moved away.

At the end of a grueling week, the train stopped in Clarksville, Texas. One couple chose Gerald. Another chose Leo. They took Lee as well, but after a few days, they decided Leo was all they could handle. Lee lasted only a few days with his next family, an elderly farm couple.

Finally, he arrived at the home of Ben and Ollie Nailling. That first day, Lee refused to speak to them, though he was astonished to be given his own bedroom. The next morning, he woke up to the smell of breakfast: biscuits, ham, bacon, eggs, and potatoes. It was the most food he had seen at one time.

After breakfast, Naillings took Lee to town. Along the way, they stopped at each house, where they introduced Lee as "new son". Lee's parents tried to run away but were caught by the authorities.

**Riding the Train**

The last orphan train left New York in 1929. New programs were available to help poor families, so fewer children ended up on streets. And people had begun to question the wisdom of sending children across the country and into the homes of strangers.

There are no studies showing what happened to the nearly 200,000 children who rode the orphan trains. Many did go on to happy lives. Others suffered.

As for Lee, he never reunited with his father. But life with the Naillings was happy. He spent time with his brothers, who lived nearby. Lee went to college. He married and became a father, a grandfather, and a great-grandfather.

"I've always felt that I had a guardian watching over me," said Lee, who died in 1945. "When I got off that train in Texas, I was a bitterly unhappy little boy. The good Lord took it to where I belonged."
The photo is in black and white. What might that suggest to you?

Where does it look like the boys are sleeping? Why might they be sleeping there?

Look at the boys' faces as they sleep. What do they tell you?

Look at the boys' clothing. What does it suggest about the time period of the photo? Which specific details help you figure it out?
Let's practice by making inferences from a historical photograph. This picture appeared in the Storyworks article “The Orphan Train.” The article explains how poor children from New York City, whose parents had died or couldn't take care of them, were moved by train to live with families in the Midwest.

Think about the questions that appear on the photo.

Write two inferences you can make from the picture.

Now use your inferences to write a caption:

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MAKING INFERENCES 35