Siblings Agnes and Otto Harriet spent their early years on the mean streets of nineteenth century New York City. Orphaned by the time Agnes was in first grade, the brother and sister were packed onto a train and sent west, where they were taken in by complete strangers, Thomas and Katherine Kinsella of Heyworth.

These two children came to McLean County in the early 1880s by way of an orphan train. During this era, tens of thousands of orphans living in big city tenement squalor were sent via rail to rural America. It was social experiment writ large, and it forever altered both slum and countryside, sometimes for better and sometimes for worse.

Agnes and Otto Harriet took the surname of their adoptive parents, and both their obituaries make no mention of their lives before Illinois. Agnes, however, after her marriage to John F. McGraw in 1902, named her first child Harriet. She also had four sons, and Robert, who served as Bloomington mayor from 1957 to 1969, later recalled that his mother “never talked about” her early childhood in New York City. “I was 21 years old before I ever heard about it,” he said in a 1988 interview.

The Children’s Aid Society and its founder Charles Loring Brace were in the forefront of the orphan train movement. In the fall of 1854, Loring’s society organized the first orphan train from New York City to communities in rural Michigan and Iowa. Other reform-minded institutions participated in this movement, including the New England Home for Little Wanderers and the New York Foundling Hospital, with the latter matching Catholic children with Catholic households.

There was more to the orphan train phenomenon than mere altruism, though. For leaders of New York and other major cities, the removal of tens of thousands of poor residents, albeit children, eased the strain of overburdened municipal budgets coping with a myriad of intractable problems, including immigration, industrialization, and overcrowding.
Furthermore, once sent west, these children helped relieve the labor shortage on the farms of the Midwest and Great Plains.

By 1929, an estimated 250,000 children had made the journey westward on orphan trains. Oftentimes, the orphan “trains” were actually no more than one or two passenger cars on trains making regularly scheduled runs. Furthermore, many of the “orphans” were not technically orphans but rather children of destitute parents unable or unwilling to care for them.

It appears that the New York Juvenile Asylum was the most active orphan train organization in central Illinois. Ebenezer Wright, who lived in Normal for about ten years, served as the western placing agent for this asylum. From 1855 to 1898, the New York Juvenile Asylum relocated almost 6,000 orphans to Illinois. Some of these children were taken in by families in more than a dozen McLean County communities, including Bellflower, Cooksville, and Towanda.


The orphan train movement has come under criticism—then and now—for failing to adequately screen prospective families to ensure orphans were not abused or neglected in their new homes. And although Agnes and Otto Harriet were raised in the same household, many siblings were separated, never to be reunited.

In 1857, eight-year-old Alexander Lemon became one of the first orphan train riders to live in McLean County. He spent his entire adult life as a LeRoy-area farm laborer, passing away in 1926 at the age of 77. In a front-page obituary, *The LeRoy Journal* referred to the lifelong bachelor as a “well known and highly respected citizen.” Lemon’s obituary, like those of Agnes and Otto Harriet, made no mention of his orphan train roots.

Though some of these children were deeply scarred, both emotionally and physically, others thrived in their new surroundings. For instance, Andrew Burke, who served as governor of North Dakota from 1870 to 1873, was a child of the orphan trains.

The repertoire of acclaimed vagabond singer-songwriter Utah Phillips includes “Orphan Train,” a song he says was inspired by a research foray at the McLean County Museum of History. The plaintive song ends on a hopeful note:

*Now there’s many a fine doctor or a teacher in your school*
*There’s many a good preacher who can teach the Golden Rule*
*Who started out an orphan sleeping in the freezing rain*
*Whose life began out on the orphan train.*